We bet that you’re seeing what we’re seeing in our elementary schools. Despite easy access to expert resources and extensive in-school modeling, our students—even our youngest—are relying heavily upon Wikipedia, especially when they do research away from school. On one hand, we’re glad our students are learning to navigate sources without our intervention. On the other hand, we’re concerned that our students struggle with this resource, even as we struggle ourselves with its utility in an elementary setting.

We know that students are going to be led (and drawn) to Wikipedia. It’s a cultural resource that almost everyone has heard of and used. Rather than telling students they can’t use it, we need to take the lead in showing them how they can use it.

Helping Students Navigate

Knapp points out that many older students like Wikipedia because it is the “path of least resistance.” (2009). Wikipedia requires no login or formal search strategy. In fact, Wikipedia is likely one of the top results in a Google search. We agree that Wikipedia can be a great jumping off place for student research, especially for topics that are new or unfamiliar. Reading an entry or article can give students a general understanding, key words, and names of people to use when searching print and nonprint resources. It also provides a way to teach students the importance of verifying facts and ideas in more than one source. Lastly, the links at the bottom of the Wikipedia article can lead to other viable resources and help launch deeper research.

Wikipedia articles have consistent organizational structures that can help students gain understanding.

Can They Read What They’re Reading?

Sometimes, we fail to recognize that many Wikipedia entries are written at a level that far exceeds our students’ understanding. Article length can also be daunting. For example, when we ran the “giraffe” entry through readability analysis overview. After the initial information, a clickable outline helps students jump to a particular section. Often, a text box of fast facts (e.g., a country’s capital, currency, and language) appears in the right margin. Some articles, however, have uncited facts or a header that identifies an article as incomplete or unverified. Students can recognize these as signs that they need to be diligent in verifying that information.

Our experience shows that young learners believe, “If it’s on the Internet, it’s true,” and Wikipedia’s clues can help convince them otherwise. Let’s borrow from the advice of a college professor: “Wikipedia is a great place to start, but a horrible place to end” (Head and Eisenberg 2010).
Building Learning Projects with Resources in Mind

We need to make teachers aware of other resources that may be more appropriate for young users. We also need to make sure that when designing projects, these resources are available for students. For example, one project was problematic because the only source, print or non-print, we could find was Wikipedia, and even it lacked the depth of information our students needed. As a result, the project was not appropriate for the user. Some planning ahead with the school librarian could have helped the teacher design a project that the students would have found more purposeful.

Connect School to Home

Lastly, consider that sometimes Wikipedia issues arise when students work on their projects at home. School librarians need to take the lead in helping parents. They can send home a reminder about the school library’s Web resources, along with a sentence or two about the effective use strategies their students have learned in the library. These tips and resources can help parents when they are helping their young researchers.

We know that students are going to be led (and drawn) to Wikipedia. It’s a cultural resource that almost everyone has heard of and used. Rather than telling students they can’t use it, we need to take the lead in showing them how they can use it. School librarians have at times gotten a little wrapped up in providing only one option or tool (“Use databases, not Google,” for example), when it may have been more efficient to identify our students’ preferred tools and discuss appropriate ways to use them. If we meet students where they are, we have a much better chance of transitioning them to other resources. And we keep school librarians in the center of our students’ work instead of the fringes.

References:

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