

How Elementary Is *Wikipedia*?

by Kristin Fontichiaro and Carl A. Harvey II

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.

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.

With *Wikipedia* holding steady as one of the top ten Web sites worldwide (Rainie and Tancer 2007; Shapiro 2010; Angwin and Fowler 2009), it is no wonder our students are flocking there. For teachers, parents, and students, *Wikipedia* is often the first site they try; it's a recognizable "brand." *Wikipedia*'s length, reading level, and uncertain editorship give us pause; however, banning students' favorite site can marginalize school librarians. Instead, what we school librarians need

to do is show our students, parents, and staff members how to be effective users of *Wikipedia*. Let's help them get real value out of this popular resource.

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. Typically, entries begin with basic information or an

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).

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

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

tools, reading levels ranged from the 10th to 12th grade. The article exceeded twelve single-spaced pages! As a result of these dual factors, we observe that students seem to hop around, looking for sentences they can read. This, unfortunately, leads to disjointed or flawed understanding. Asking, “Is this something you feel confident reading?” and using links as pathfinders to alternate content are effective strategies to help students recognize their comprehension limitations.

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



Wikipedia can be a great jumping off place for student research, especially for topics that are new or unfamiliar.

www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2830/2476 (accessed August 24, 2010).

Knapp, Jeffrey. “Google and Wikipedia: Friends or Foes?” In *Teaching Generation M: A Handbook for Educators and Librarians*, edited by Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic and Robert J. Lackie, 157-178. Neal-Schuman, 2009.

Rainie, Lee, and Bill Tancer. “Wikipedia Users.” *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, 2007. <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Wikipedia-users.aspx> (accessed August 24, 2010).

Shapiro, Matthew. “Embracing Wikipedia.” *Education Week* [online], 7 May 2007. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/05/07/31shapiro.h29.html> (accessed August 24, 2010).

“Study: Wikipedia Pretty Accurate, but Hard to Read.” *Live Science* [online] (June 1). <http://www.livescience.com/technology/Wikipedia-Accurate-Hard-Read-100601.html>. (accessed August 24, 2010). ◀

Carl A. Harvey II is the school librarian at North Elementary School in Noblesville, IN. He is the author of two books—*The 21st Century Elementary Library Media Program* (Linworth, 2010) and *No School Library Left Behind* (Linworth, 2008)—and co-author of *The Library Media Specialist in the Writing Process* (Linworth, 2007). He blogs at <http://www.carl-harvey.com/libraryties/>. Email: carl@carl-harvey.com



Kristin Fontichiaro coordinates the school library program at the University of Michigan. Her most recent books are *21st-Century Learning in School Libraries* (Libraries Unlimited, 2009), and *Story Starters and Science Notebooking: Developing Student Thinking Through Literacy and Inquiry* (Libraries Unlimited, 2009), co-authored with Sandy Buczynski. She blogs at <http://blog.schoollibrarymedia.com>. Email: font@umich.edu



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:

Angwin, Julia, and Geoffrey A. Fowler. “Volunteers Log Off as Wikipedia Ages.” *Wall Street Journal*, 23 November 2009. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/> (accessed January 4, 2010).

Head, Alison, and Michael Eisenberg. “How Today’s College Students Use Wikipedia for Course-Related Research.” *First Monday* [online] 15, no. 3 (February 26, 2009). <http://>

Copyright of School Library Monthly is the property of Greenwood Publishing Group Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.