

Chapter 17

Wikipedia in Academic Studies: Corrupting or Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning?

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ABSTRACT

Although Wikipedia has carved its way into the common vernacular, it faces resentments, particularly in higher education institutions, and many professors say students should think twice before turning to the free online encyclopedia for their academic work. “According to the criterion of scholarly standards, Wikipedia is citable on no account since authorship is not verifiable, and therefore an authentication of information is impossible.” (Haber, 2007, p. 500). In spite of perceived quality deficits, Wikipedia is a popular information resource among students. Instructors increasingly take advantage of this student attitude through actively integrating Wikipedia as a learning tool into university courses in accordance with a constructivist teaching and learning paradigm. The chapter raises the question if Wikipedia is suited to make complex research, editing and bibliographic processes through which scholarship is produced transparent to students, and effectively improve their research and writing skills.

A WEB 2.0 PROJECT CHALLENGES UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS

Wikipedia as a Popular Information Resource

The founder of the free multilingual encyclopedia project Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, anticipates considerable changes of the academic learning

culture. He presumes that “teaching at universities will change, that professors will become mentors accompanying the development of their students” and that students will “discover the world for themselves following their own interest.” (Wales, 2008). Since 2001, Wikipedia has become one of the most popular websites and Web 2.0 applications worldwide. While the use of open contents and encyclopedic information as provided by Wikipedia has caused considerable problems within the academic community (e.g. the plagiarism problem and

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the declining use of reliable published sources in term papers), Wikipedia has evolved into a general reference website. It has increasingly facilitated and contributed to processes of self-contained learning and knowledge construction inside and outside of universities as propagated by the online encyclopedia's founder.

The open content, multilingual encyclopedia project was launched in early 2001. The project is operated by the Wikimedia Foundation, a US-based non-profit organisation aiming at the free distribution of knowledge. As of early 2009, the English-language Wikipedia edition contained more than 2.8 million articles, while the German-language version, the second largest among more than 260 language editions, comprises some 900,000 articles (Wikipedia, 2009a). Despite criticism, Wikipedia has become one of the most frequented information resources on the web. A recent survey performed by the Allensbach Institute on the use of computer and technology showed that Wikipedia ranked third among the most popular German-language websites with 13.6 million users per week after Google and Ebay (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2008; Meyer-Lucht, 2008). With regard to its growing popularity, Wikipedia is sometimes considered a trend-setting medium even among a growing number of academic professionals (Lorenz, 2006, p. 84).

While academic research on Wikipedia has been focused on aspects such as collaborative processes of knowledge construction and knowledge management, community building and coordination processes, Wikipedia as a lexical semantic resource, or its quality management procedures (e.g. Grotjahn 2007; Jaschniok, 2007; Martin, 2006; Pentzold, 2007; Wolf, 2007), little research has been done on the potentials of utilising Wikipedia within university teaching. In a short field report Bendel (2006) describes seminar experiences with editing Wikipedia articles using tiered forms of online collaboration. Ebner (2007) analyses Wikipedia's use in seminars pointing out the de-

cisive difference between voluntary communities of practise driven by corresponding interests and 'forced' learning communities using Wikipedia at universities. Hodel & Haber (2007) outline different phases of student experience occurring during a seminar using Wikipedia assignments from enthusiasm through outrage to disillusionment. Konieczny (2007) describes a range of approved Wikipedia assignment forms that have successfully been applied at US universities.

Linking to these earlier analyses, this chapter examines the students' perspective on Wikipedia based on results of a representative survey carried out in 2008. The survey documents how students use Wikipedia and other encyclopedic applications for self-study purposes. The chapter furthermore aggregates and interprets different types of Wikipedia in teaching projects and their contributions to the online encyclopedia based upon a comprehensive list of some 92 Wikipedia university projects that have been carried out worldwide since 2002. Finally, the potential of extending the use of shared knowledge portals for teaching purposes to several sister projects of Wikipedia will be discussed on the basis of initial seminar experiences.

Professional Scepticism Against Wikipedia

Within the university context Wikipedia is met with scepticism due to perceived conflicts with fundamental scientific standards. A serious value of Wikipedia is regularly negated for reasons of scientific validity: "According to the criterion of scholarly standards, Wikipedia is citable on no account since authorship is not verifiable, and therefore an authentication of information is impossible." (Haber, 2007, p. 500). By contrast, the online encyclopedia claims to exclusively compile material that is verifiable (Wikipedia, 2009b). For reasons of verification, Wikipedia authors are committed to using "reliable, third-party published sources with a reputation for fact-checking and ac-

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