

Chapter 7

Wikipedia as Training Resource for Developing Digital Competences

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ABSTRACT

It seems improbable that Wikipedia could be considered a valid resource for educational institutions like schools and universities because of the risk of incurring mistakes, inaccuracies, and plagiarism. The bad reputation of the free encyclopedia is false, Wikipedia is reliable and can be used in the curriculum as a new approach for social and collaborative construction of knowledge. It can enter fully into educational contexts, which will represent an opportunity to reflect on the verification of information, the ethical use of technology, and the role of democratic participation of people that use social software. In fact, the creation and maintenance of the articles of Wikipedia as classroom activities offer higher processes of cognitive development and on-line relationships, allowing the development of essential digital competences for life-long learning, like Information Literacy, Participation Literacy, and Ethical Literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Today social software and instruments of Web 2.0, allow the sharing and construction of knowledge by using a complex network of social interaction. A particular example of constructive collaboration

is the Wikipedia project, the “Free Encyclopedia” that gives anyone the possibility to contribute to the writing of articles. From a typical point of view of social software and Web 2.0, it doesn’t represent an innovation, looking as practically all the applications of this type which are open to editing, comments and mash up by the users. From the epistemological point of view, instead,

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it represents a real and true breaking point (Fallis, 2008).

Indeed, Wikipedia has caused a crisis within the concept of authoring and the “principle of authority”, concepts on which the traditional encyclopedia has always been based on, since the eighteenth century’s famous *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* of Diderot and Alembert. In Wikipedia, in fact, contributions are spontaneous, anonymous and/or are the result of modifications by many people: their identity and competence with regards to the subject, remaining unknown.

When we consult a traditional encyclopedia, it goes without saying, that we rely implicitly on the authors and the processes of updating and editing the articles. Wikipedia doesn’t have a true editing process. It doesn’t possess a classification system which attempts to give a significance to the world (Eco, 1990). It doesn’t highlight and prioritize certain opinions rather than others; it is based mainly on the concept of emergent semantics. No one can establish priority on its worthiness, in being an encyclopedic article or not, and how in depth it could be developed.

IS WIKIPEDIA A RELIABLE RESOURCE FOR SCHOOLS?

From the introduction, it seems improbable that Wikipedia could be considered a valid resource for Educational institutions like schools and Universities. Indeed, they need to guarantee, within their teaching and learning processes, the access to a body of organized knowledge. Knowledge that is reliable and relevant, and respects the principles of accuracy, completeness, and that of being updated and comprehensive (Fox, 1994). This therefore explains the wariness that teachers expressed initially, with regard to Wikipedia. Wariness aggravated from the fact, that the students used it as a resource for their homework, copying and pasting their text, without verifying the

contents, and thereby running the risk of incurring mistakes and inaccuracies. An example of this is the History Department of the Middlebury College, which banned students from citing Wikipedia (Cohen, 2007).

Nevertheless, contrary to what may be seen as unreliable in its contents, further studies illustrate the real problem of Wikipedia (Giles, 2005; Magnus, 2006; Bragues, 2007). The problem doesn’t lie in the inaccuracy and comprehensiveness of its articles, but rather in the completeness of its entries. In certain areas of knowledge it seems to be more profound (Mathematics, Physics, Medicine and science in general) than in others, where it’s feasible there is a “stub”. This is a rough draft of a few lines, which no-one has developed yet, and in which there aren’t quotations of the source yet.

In fact in Wikipedia reliability/verification of an argument dealt with, is related to the concept of a secondary source. In its own rights it is itself a secondary source, which must anyway quote in each of its articles the primary influential source, in which it refers to. From this point of view, the necessity to validate the source is however not only a problem of Wikipedia, but of all the resources found on the Internet.

Wikipedia has also a bad reputation because of “vandalism”. That is to say the cancelling and modifying not relevant to the entries. Actually, these problems are in most cases solved in a short time span. A more subtle and interesting problem, on the contrary, is that of the continual changing of entries. This occurs with regard to a non-neutral point of view, (NNPOV) from political and social groups, opposing contributors which are the cause of heated arguments or “edit wars”. In this case, the administrators invite the participants to choose the compromised route. In extreme cases the entries become blocked waiting for reconciliation.

However, Wikipedia doesn’t give a guarantee of absolute neutrality, like all other resources, no resource – digital or paper can. The reason being that every encyclopedic entry is however

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