

Chapter 2

Wikipedia: Educational and Learning Laboratory

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ABSTRACT

Is it possible to exploit the potentialities of Web 2.0 tools and the advantages of knowledge sharing to guide students towards effective learning competence and autonomy? This chapter is aimed at pointing out the achievements and the drawbacks of the use of Wikipedia, integrated with traditional classroom teaching through the illustration of some practical examples from all grades of school and university. A direct experience in an Italian secondary high school is described as well, whose aim has been to promote critical thinking, stimulate cooperative e-learning, and the respect of the intellectual property, giving more efficacy to autonomous studying.

INTRODUCTION

Wikipedia is only one aspect of a broader phenomenon that has involved the development of the Web in the last years. New forms of communication and free sharing webtools have been growing rapidly, changing the characteristics of the Internet. Among these innovative social webtools, Wikipedia has achieved a particular

position because, with its 90 thousand voluntary active contributors and 365 million readers, it is steadily among the ten most visited websites in the world and definitely the first “non-profit”. Its greatest achievement is in that it gives the Internet users the opportunity of becoming protagonists on the Web with the instant publication of their own texts. Everybody can freely look up, update, edit or write new articles. Nowadays there are more than 19 million headwords in 282 different languages.

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By means of peer interaction, inside a conception of learning traditionally regarded as an individual and passive fruition of contents, with Wikipedia we moved on to a new notion of learning environment. In other words, the individual who learns changes and creates the knowledge materials by himself contributing to determine the collective educational experience and making both the traditional learning poles (author-reader) coincide.

However, this extraordinarily great strength is, at the same time, its weakness. The absence of an editorial committee who take on responsibility of what is being published on the free encyclopedia has given rise to the accusation of Wikipedia articles to be inconsistent, superficial and biased. All this notwithstanding the well-known research published on the magazine *Nature* in 2005 that, after a comparison of about one hundred science articles from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* with the same ones from Wikipedia, proved that the number of serious errors was similar.

The school where the author's direct Wikipedia experience has been carried on is a Secondary High School (Liceo Scientifico Quadri in Vicenza, an industrial town near Venice, Northeast of Italy), with a large population of students between 14 and 19 made up of a great number of commuters, where many face-to-face activities have been developed to help students in their learning process. The school has high quality standards and is well equipped with such facilities as IWBs (interactive whiteboards) and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) laboratories. Almost all the students can rely on a computer and an Internet connection available at home. As teenagers, they have gained good linguistic-communicative skills and an appropriate level of cognitive autonomy.

The objectives to attain have been concerned with the recognition of the importance of cooperative learning in the development of one's own personality, the acquisition of new learning tools

for cooperative writing, the activation of the students' participation in group work, the stimulation of peer mutual help and scaffolding, the promotion of critical thinking, the awareness of the various aspects connected to copyright.

The idea of using Wikipedia during the English as a foreign language classes was born to solve the problem of an unsatisfactory textbook for some students aged between 16 and 18 in the Liceo during the school year 2009/10. The project was aimed at involving the students in the editing or the creation of Wikipedia entries in the Italian language after the critical research and study of the same subjects in English from various Internet resources and several textbooks through the practice of cooperative group work. The project was situated in a complementary position among the other face-to-face activities and cultural opportunities offered in the Liceo; it was developed to help students in their learning process and improve their meta-cognitive skills, therefore it should be considered as a sort of integration, not an alternative, to ordinary teaching practice.

The activities were developed with a pragmatic approach, starting from the students' needs and suggestions. The technology and resources already available at school were used together with tools and materials freely available on the Internet: LAN, Internet broadband connection and open source e-mail program, with software and web tools freely available on the Web. Then, it was necessary to create an individual account to give each student the opportunity to contribute actively and responsibly to the editing or creation of the various Wikipedia articles. The following step was the preparation of various documents:

- Detailed drafting of the project for approval in the school formative offer plan (POF);
- Letter of allowance to use the Internet and about the respect of privacy from the students' parents.

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