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WIKIS: WHY AND WHY NOT?

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There is a strong sea-change in academia----an admission that an anti-wiki or "we've always done it 'the other' way" attitude is both limited and limiting. "Our existing practices were formulated during an era of paper-based exchange; wikis and other Web 2.0 tools may enable processes that could be substantively better" (Kane & Fichman, 2009). Using wiki examples and ideas from several educators and researchers, this article shows that this huge part of New Media can serve as a viable research and teaching tool. Wikis can launch solid undergraduate student research and can facilitate student and professional collaboration (Greenberg & Klas, 2008; Kimmerle, Moskaliuk, & Cress, 2011). Since "the popularity of wikis has skyrocketed" (Bejune, 2007), many academics welcome the opportunities that wikis offer. This article also acknowledges and examines the risks of wiki use, including student use of *Wikipedia* as a shortcut that can undermine their learning processes as well as the academic rigor of coursework.

Keywords: Wikis, Collaboration, Undergraduate research**.**

Introduction

Wikis are here to stay and are a viable means of undergraduate research and classroom instruction as well as student and professional collaboration (Bejune, 2007). Academics and professionals from many fields have been using wikis for years and acknowledging their viability for synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. Today, as *Wikimedia* oversees increasingly viable wikis, especially *Wikpedia*, and as other wikis thrive under companies such as *WikiSpaces* and *Wikia*, we see more and more opportunities for high quality academic research and collaboration, even as we concede to the risks of careless research in a cyber-sea of factoids.

In 2013, most academics and students know that a wiki is "a website or database developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content." However, allowing wikis for use in academia has received mixed reactions for several years. Many departments at accredited American colleges and universities disallow them as research tools. Yet we continue to read journal articles addressing wikis as places of profound and vital exchanges and repositories of information. This paper offers an overview of wikis to date and a persuasion that wikis can and should be allowed, at least for undergraduate research, and for ongoing collaboration in many academic areas.

The origin of wikis is simple and rather charming; the term was first used for the "*WikiWikiWeb*, the name of the first website of this kind, from Hawaiian *wiki wiki,* 'very quick'" (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2013). The creator, Ward Cunningham (born in 1949 in Michigan City, Indiana), remembering his trip to Hawaii, thought the term suited the professional need for rapid but asynchronous collaboration.

Cunningham, as a computer programmer, created "the software *WikiWikiWeb* in 1994 and installed it on the website of his software consultancy, Cunningham & Cunningham (commonly known by its domain name, c2.com), on March 25, 1995, as an add-on to the Portland Pattern Repository" ("Ward Cunningham," 2013). His 2001 book with Bo Leuf, *The Wiki Way: Quick Collaboration on the Web,* broke ground for those in many career fields, already looking to the infant Internet and its possibilities for collaboration as well as sharing and utilizing knowledge.

Even before Cunningham's seminal wiki, the explosive growth of *Wikipedia*, and the dazzling wikis largely devoted to exchanges on entertainment, many academics in all levels of education have regarded anything quick (i.e. *wiki wiki*) with a jaundiced eye. In a recent and informal survey of high school teachers, community college instructors, and university professors I know, the majority still regard *Wikipedia* as a site that encourages, even facilitates, hasty, sloppy, and inaccurate research:

- "It's not rigorous enough."
- "*Wikipedia* is just a short-cut. Period."
- "I don't permit them as sources in my course."
- "We have too many students who are literal thinkers, who still tend to believe everything they read."

For me, the cherry-on-the-sundae of Poor Richard's observation that "The Golden Age was never the Present Age" was this dim praise from a colleague: "I can see how *Wikipedia* can be a launching pad for student research." Since our younger students see the space shuttles' using runways for take-offs and landings, even using the antiquated term "launching pad" told me that it is time for us to embrace the Internet for more than entertainment and "news, sports, and weather."

While academic reluctance continues in places, however, we are wise to heed the words of those who have looked at wikis all along as potentially viable in myriad fields, including education (O'Bannon, 2012). The following visionary ideas are from the abstract to *Metadata for Semantic and Social Applications:*

> Metadata is a key aspect of our evolving infrastructure for information management, social computing, and scientific collaboration. . . . Metadata is part of the fabric of social computing, which includes the use of wikis, blogs, and tagging for collaboration and participation. . . . [A]uthors collectively create structured information that can be extracted and used to enhance access to and use of information sources (Greenberg & Klas, 2008).

I have been struck by the dates of these sources; in our rapidly-paced world, 2008 is quite a while back. Then, in 2009, Kane & Fichman declared, "Computer-supported learning and knowledge building play an increasing role in online collaboration." They also nod to "theories concerning the interplay between individual processes of learning and collaborative processes of knowledge building." For years now, visionaries in academia and researchers in various fields have looked to New Media with hope and an eye on potential while many of us who are plowing the fields of young minds and sowing seeds of knowledge have been balky in allowing New Media into our pedagogies.

What I have seen "trending," to use a New Media term, is that wikis are becoming more acceptable in academia because of peer pressure. As Will Rogers said, "People are ignorant, only on different subjects," and with the Internet's spurring our world on faster and faster, it seems that to disallow wikis, at least for undergraduate research, is to disempower our students. In my composition classes, my prosy reminiscences of pre-Internet research are tantamount to "I had to walk five miles in the snow to get to school." (My adult students add to this theme by chiming in, "Yes! Uphill, both ways!"). When I speak on the rich hours in my university's library, browsing through the stacks and thumbing through the big, green volumes of *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* (while hoping that the library had those articles I tracked down in either hard copy, microfilm, or microfiche), I am failing my undergrads when I do not tie-in articles in online databases and in e-books to some prudent, additional use of wikis.

Today, the Internet has professional journals as well as mainstream newspapers and magazines, most with archives. For example, we have Google Scholar at our fingertips, a prodigious search-engine tapped

into several databases which house innumerable e-articles and e-books. Why do some of us continue to disallow wikis as our students move into their research?

Yes, many professional groups hail and use wikis today for the "Three C's" so vital today: for collaboration, communication, and community . . . virtually. Yet, for hard facts and ongoing research, a wiki functioning in a fully referenced, encyclopedic mode still tends to be seen as a lightweight site, or worse, as an unreliable, even dangerous, site.

Wikis work with current pedagogical movements and priorities (Kimmerle, Moskaliuk, & Cress, 2011; Clinebell, Thomas, & Sedbrook, 2012). We teachers have always tried to implement the finest teaching methods in vogue. In our practices, we have always sought creative strategies and examples to engage our students. Funding permitted, we have always taught using the latest technology, and as we move along into the twenty-first century, we face contemporary challenges, including bringing new trends into education (Kaplan University, 2013). While I won't repeat all the verbs which put into action the key elements of Bloom's Taxonomy, I will at least state here that allowing wikis for research does tap into these key points of learning: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Evaluation, and Creation (*Bloom's Digital Taxonomy*, 2013).

Concessio fits in here well. Yes, wikis can be unreliable. We educators have always had to teach our students that we can't believe everything we read. A helpful lecture to any undergraduate class could feature a review of critical thinking skills, common logical fallacies, and some screenshots of biased wikis such as *Metapedia: The Alternative Encyclopedia* (2013). The actual Google hit shows the site as "*Metapedia*: Countering Semantic Distortion Worldwide." In my research for this paper and May 2013 presentation to the International Conference of the IJAS, this wiki has emerged as the most devious. *Metapedia* is white-supremacist site that uses colors, font style, and page design similar to *Wikipedia*. Their call for entries includes the following:

Examples on topics suitable for *Metapedia*

- Ideology and philosophy
- Pro-European people, parties, movements, literature, events, web pages, etc.
- Historical events relevant to the pro-European struggle . . .
- Mass media: Foreign control, anti-white bias, left wing orientation.
- Alternative music – Neofolk, ambient, dark wave, folk metal, black metal, nationalist rock. . . . (2013)

As obviously slanted as this text appears, the site could be seen by uninformed, literal thinkers as a viable source of information. Depending on the assignment, course, department, or institution, the educator may need to consider how much guidance her or his undergraduates need in determining what constitutes a viable source. Samples of sites such as *Metapedia* could actually make excellent material for class discussions on free speech issues, viable research, and critical thinking.

Furthermore, some wikis are multilingual. The first page of *Wikipedia* shows the multilingual approach and numbers of entries in each language. While this is largely wonderful news in our increasingly international business world and for our international students attending American schools, we also have to admit that with translations can come mistranslations and misinformation. Careful screening by the admins ("admin" is the term used for the person who is a wiki's founder and administrator) and quality control must remain high priorities.

Let me now move into some useful information for my colleagues who teach undergraduate courses, who may remain unconvinced thus far. A key reassurance is this: one can't just post anything on *Wikipedia*. One has to register. Again, peer pressure in all fields is keeping quality high, here and on other wikis. Also, submitting entries to *Wikipedia* is not a *wiki* process; there are detailed guidelines:

> [U]sers are expected to be civil and neutral, respecting all points of view, and only add verifiable and factual information rather than personal views and opinions. "The five pillars of Wikipedia" cover this approach and are recommended reading before editing. (Vandals are reported via the Administrator Notice Board and may be temporarily blocked from editing Wikipedia.) ("Wikipedia: About," 2013).

Wikipedia offers extensive information on plagiarism, Fair Use, copyright violations and investigations, "mirrors and forks" on the site, and more ("Wikipedia: Copyright violations," 2013).

As part of my persuasion, let us now look at a hypothetical, worst-case scenario of an undergraduate who tries to write a research paper in a hurry:

1. Using some key terms for her topic, she copies and pastes material from *Wikipedia* onto a Word document.
2. She will possibly attempt to paraphrase some of the information; she may or may not try to cite it.
3. She will possibly place quotation marks around exact text or may try to block-quote longer passages; she may or may not place internal citations for these.
4. She fails to see the source lists at the bottom of each *Wikipedia* page, therefore not finding more linked sources and perhaps primary or secondary sources.
5. She fails to look up linked terms within the initial *Wikipedia article*, terms that may help her research further.
6. She fails to heed any notation,"[citation needed]," and does not check the suspect information elsewhere.
7. She uses virtually no critical thinking skills.

While this illustrates the most abysmal of undergraduate research papers, many of us have read papers seemingly this thrown-together. However, we have tools to catch the plagiarists, such as *Turnitin.com* and by Googling phrases that don't sound like our students' voices.   We can also become shrewd in crafting any project's directions: we can require print-outs of one or more sources (for papers written for on-site courses). For online instruction, we can require attached articles in Adobe's PDF.   We can also build-in the requirement for varied sources; for example, directions for a five-page research paper could contain source restrictions such as "No more than two encyclopedias may be used for no more than two defined terms or subtopics, and at least one book must be used, whether electronic or hard copy."

Additionally, if we haven't yet in our current positions, we should empower our students in their online research skills earlier-on in their studies. In high school college-preparatory courses, in freshman core courses (such as freshman composition), and in student service centers (again, on-site or online), we educators can offer the following set of steps for viable *Wikipedia* research:

1. Scroll to the bottom of any main entry on *Wikipedia*.
2. Note the sources; many are linked. Some are primary and secondary sources.
3. Note that *Wikipedia* itself does not have to be used as a source for the final paper; one can use the source list to launch deeper research.
4. Upon seeing any "[citation needed]" item, the student should know this is not information backed by a source and should therefore seek that information elsewhere.
5. A student can join or start a wiki for course collaboration or any on-campus activity.

Similar guidelines can be tailored for other wikis, too, depending on the subject matter.   For example, *Logopedia* is a burgeoning wiki under the *Wikia* domain (2013); in this highly commercial age, one can see how handy that site would be for those in advertising and various business ventures. Not surprisingly, at least one "wiki within a wiki" now offers citations for other sources, even while drawing from *Wikipedia* material. *The FullWiki* (2013) is one such website, where a student can find fast facts while getting primary and secondary sources for assignments without even going into *Wikipedia* itself.   It will be interesting over time to see if such sites will serve a purpose as wikis continue to grow and maintain quality control.

Undergraduate students should also be reminded that *Wikipedia* and other wikis can serve as access to quick facts for background knowledge as students prepare for research, projects, interviews, travel, and for grasping current events. As with any encyclopedia, *Wikipedia* has concise biographies and summaries on world history, branches of science, inventions, current political movements----all for *wiki wiki* knowledge that may provide a more solid foundation for any new venture.

Of course, department heads should emphasize the wisdom of any instructor or student's adding a disclaimer when creating a wiki. For a course-building or study wiki, admins should state they are solely responsible for the content and not a part of the college or university's official websites.   There are no doubt already edicts in place at many American schools, colleges, and universities that forbid the creation of wikis in connection with courses, official department websites, and the like.

I am not claiming that wikis are the best way to approach undergraduate research for online or on-site college courses.   I plainly see the risk for "one stop shopping" by students who seek shortcuts that can undercut the rigor needed to earn a college degree.   Yet I think we can do both: we can be firm yet realistic. We need to acknowledge and pass on how wikis can serve as viable forms of research for our students.

As we move into the newer era of New Media, some of us Baby Boomers will continue to mutter, "No good deed goes unpunished." We will keep reading about plagiarists of all ages, in every field, about cybercrimes of every stripe, about lazy thinkers everywhere. We will also keep finding information everyday by furtively tapping words into a Google search bar or while anonymously sidling onto *Wikipedia* as a "reader."   Wikis will continue to panic some people.

We will have to keep looking hard at the real risks: plagiarism, copyright violations, bias, censorship, and in the words of Mark Twain,"lies, damned lies, and statistics."   However, let us not worry, if by looking in a *wiki wiki* way, we are less scholarly for the quickness.

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