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Posing the Wikipedia “Problem”: Information Literacy and the Praxis of Problem-Posing in Library Instruction

Heidi LM Jacobs

“So... is *Wikipedia* a good thing or not? I really need to know.” An English Education Student (January 2009)

“The task of knowing is no longer to see the simple. It is to swim in the complex.” David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous* (p. 198, 2007)

“If we remain too long recalcitrant Mr. Everyman will ignore us, shelving our recalcitrant works behind glass doors rarely opened.” Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian” (p. 235, 1932)

Introduction

In my job as an Information Literacy Librarian, I am struck by how often I hear “problem” and “*Wikipedia*” in the same sentence: “the problem with *Wikipedia* is...” or “what can we do about the *Wikipedia* problem?” The recurrence of these two words—*Wikipedia* and problem—has led me to consider the two main questions addressed in this article: one, how might *Wikipedia* be considered an information literacy “problem” and two, how might we think about this *Wikipedia* “problem” as an opportunity for developing a problem-posing information literacy praxis. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, a problem can either be “a difficult or demanding question” or “a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome, harmful, or wrong and needing to be overcome” (Problem, 2009). This article contrasts what is at stake when we think about *Wikipedia* as an “unwelcome, harmful or wrong” problem to be “fixed” versus what is possible when we consider *Wikipedia* as a difficult or demanding question to be considered. Viewing *Wikipedia* as a difficult information literacy question allows us to consider how knowledge is created, produced, and disseminated, and to interrogate our current understanding of scholarship, scholarly authority, and the academy.

If we approach *Wikipedia* as something “unwelcome, harmful, or wrong and needing to be overcome,” we run the risk of turning information

literacy education into the kind of banking education that Paulo Freire (2000) cautions against in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (p. 72)

In talking with students about *Wikipedia*, it is clear to me that most of them have only been presented with rules about *Wikipedia* rather than open-ended questions. They have been told not to use it in their research and not to cite it in their papers: these are instructions they have patiently received, memorized, and repeated. By insisting that students “bank” a particular perspective on *Wikipedia*, we ask them to be passive consumers of knowledge rather than active participants. In my conversations with students about *Wikipedia*, I see that *Wikipedia* is a topic many of them are excited to talk about and eager to engage with on a range of levels. To forbid *Wikipedia* without discussing it critically and creatively is, I believe, a missed opportunity within our classrooms to foster precisely the kind of critical thinking we demand of our students and a missed opportunity to engage students’ thinking about information literacy.

Approaching *Wikipedia* as a difficult or demanding question to be considered more closely aligns information literacy with the kind of problem-posing education Freire (2000) advocates:

Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. . . . Problem-posing education bases itself on dialogue, creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. (p. 81)¹

¹ When we read Freire, it is important to keep in mind what Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly (2001) observe in their article “Untested Feasibility: Imagining the Pragmatic Possibility of Paulo Freire”: “As teachers struggle to connect world and word for ourselves, we need to remember and take heart from Freire’s warning: ‘To read is to rewrite, not memorize the content of what is being read’ (*Critical Consciousness*, 100). Recognizing his popularity among educators in the United States, Freire cautioned: ‘It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please, tell your fellow Americans not to import me. Ask them to

Freire's summoning of reflection and action reminds us of the importance of praxis—the interplay between theory and practice. As I (Jacobs, 2008) have argued elsewhere, reflective praxis is “vital to information literacy since it simultaneously strives to ground theoretical ideas into practicable activities and use experiential knowledge to rethink and re-envision theoretical concepts” (p. 260). Praxis is vital to the work we do since, as Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano and Rudolfo D. Torres (2003) have described, “Cut off from practice, theory becomes abstraction or ‘simple verbalism.’ Separated from theory, practice becomes ungrounded activity or ‘blind activism’” (p. 15). Further, as literacy scholar Rebecca Powell (1999) argues, “it is only through conscious reflection and critique, or what cultural theorists refer to as *praxis*, that genuine transformation is able to occur” (p. 4). Thinking about *Wikipedia* in terms of theories and practices allows us to see its potentials for developing a reflective information literacy praxis. This article argues that framing the “*Wikipedia* problem” as a difficult or demanding question is one way of working toward developing an iteration of such a praxis.

***Wikipedia*, the Miscellaneous and Information Literacy**

For almost all of the twentieth century, university teachers could feel confident that students conducting research in their university's library would find information that had been, for the most part, vetted, evaluated, and approved. Before finding its way to library shelves, most resources in a college or university library had been evaluated by a series of trained experts such as peer reviewers, editors, editorial boards, book reviewers, and subject librarians. Since the rise of the Internet, university teachers can no longer assume that their students will be using materials that have already been extensively vetted. Instead, we have what David Weinberger (2007) calls “the miscellaneous.” As Weinberger describes, “Authorities have long filtered and organized information for us, protecting us from what isn't worth our time and helping us find what we need to give our beliefs a sturdy foundation. But with the miscellaneous, it's all available to us, unfiltered” (p. 132). At the risk of over-simplifying matters, it seems to me that the unfiltered information universe can be approached in the university curriculum in one of two ways: either instructors and librarians can

recreate and rewrite my ideas’ (*Politics of Education* xii-xix)” (p. 612). In LIS, it is important that we do not simply import his ideas but rewrite and recreate them.

continue to filter information for students by providing lists, rules, and guidelines related to information use, or they can learn about “the miscellaneous” alongside students and approach it through dialogue and problem-posing. As Freire reminds us, “Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers” (p. 83). When seen through a lens of problem-posing, there are significant connections to be explored between *Wikipedia* and current discussions about critical thinking within information literacy.

Before proceeding, it is important to articulate some of the key concepts I see within current discussions of information literacy. Within the definitional writings on information literacy, I see two recurrent and mutually informing impulses. Both of these, I would argue, can be applied to using *Wikipedia* in the classroom. The first impulse is primarily centripetal and local: it generally focuses inquiries about information inward and is concerned with immediate tasks such as a particular assignment, information source, topic, or course. This first impulse is well-articulated in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) document from 2000, “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education.” Here information literacy is described as: “a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (p. 4). The ACRL document goes on to describe how an information literate individual is able to determine the extent of information needed; locate and access needed information; evaluate information and information sources critically; incorporate information into one’s knowledge base; use information for a specific purpose; and use information ethically and legally (p. 4-5). In regard to *Wikipedia*, the most crucial outcomes and indicators are found in Standard Three: “The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system” (p. 13). Of the performance indicators listed in this standard, I would argue that the second indicator is most crucial for thinking about *Wikipedia*: “The information literate student articulates and applies initial criteria for evaluating both the

information and its sources” (p. 13).² In this context, thinking about *Wikipedia* is very much an information literacy concern.

The second impulse I see within information literacy is more centrifugal and global. Here, the focus is on information’s outward movement and on how individuals can use information in their multiple locations in the world and, by extension, how information can have an impact on the world and its citizens. This impulse is best articulated in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] and International Federation of Library Association’s [IFLA] document “The Alexandria Proclamation On Information Literacy And Lifelong Learning” (IFLA, 2005). The democratizing and social justice elements inherent in information literacy are foregrounded:

Information Literacy lies at the core of lifelong learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion of all nations. (para. 2)

Combined, the centripetal and centrifugal impulses within information literacy have the potential to help students think carefully, creatively, and critically about scholarly and historical information and how information is produced and reproduced.

Teaching “the *Wikipedia* Problem”

Students are extremely well-versed in the unofficial “rules” of using *Wikipedia* at university. Based on what students have told me, I expect many students follow this sort of usage guideline: use it as a starting place but never, ever cite it your papers.³ When I ask them why they think their

² Outcomes of this indicator include: “Examines and compares information from various sources in order to evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias; analyzes the structure and logic of supporting arguments or methods; recognizes prejudice, deception, or manipulation; recognizes the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information.” (p. 13)

³ My teaching in information literacy is primarily in the areas of History and English and thus the examples I provide in this article come from History and English. The arguments made in this article could be applied to other disciplines and modified to better connect with their discipline-specific ways of knowing.

professors do not want them to use *Wikipedia*, they are usually very quick to give these three reasons: *Wikipedia* can be full of errors, anyone can write, edit, or change entries at any time, and it is not a suitable scholarly resource. Students have learned—presumably from those of us who teach them—that *Wikipedia* is a resource that should not be trusted or used. Nevertheless, when I ask students how many of them have consulted *Wikipedia* in the past 24 hours, invariably 85-95% of them raise their hands. Almost always, my hand goes up too, as does that of their professor. When I ask why they use *Wikipedia*, they talk about the ease of access, the speed at which they can get information, the ability to get up-to-date information on just about any topic, and the ability of *Wikipedia* to give them the information they want as well as citations for where else to look. Occasionally a student will note that in contrast to our university's digital resources, which are guarded by password and available only to current faculty, students, and staff, *Wikipedia* is free to anyone with Internet access.

When we talk with students about *Wikipedia*'s place in universities, we are often unequivocal: we should not trust it; it is not scholarly. Indeed, *Wikipedia* has intrinsic limitations: it is an encyclopedia, it aims for a neutral point of view, it does not attempt to break new ground or convey new research, and its quality is uneven. Even *Wikipedia* (2009) says of itself, "We do not expect you to trust us" and admits "while some articles are of the highest quality of scholarship, others are admittedly complete rubbish. We are fully aware of this" (Ten Things).⁴ However, as Margaret Conrad (2007) observes, "What is most remarkable about *Wikipedia* [is not] the number of errors in its entries, what is missing from the site, or even the vandalism that mars its reputation, but the sheer volume of reasonably good material that is available in multiple languages and how quickly errors and omissions get spotted" (p. 23). Clearly, within the academic setting *Wikipedia* is a resource that some love to hate and others hate to love.

The debates surrounding *Wikipedia* are both old and new. In many ways, the edicts against using *Wikipedia* in scholarly research are not unlike

⁴ *Wikipedia* (2009) further notes, "We work hard to keep the ratio of the greatest to the worst as high as possible, of course, and to find helpful ways to tell you in what state an article currently is. Even at its best, *Wikipedia* is an encyclopedia, with all the limitations that entails. It is not a primary source. We ask you not to criticize *Wikipedia* indiscriminately for its content model but to use it with an informed understanding of what it is and what it isn't. Also, because some articles may contain errors, please do not use *Wikipedia* to make critical decisions." (Ten Things)

those that had long been made against reputable print encyclopedias like *Britannica* or *World Book*. The resistance against using these tools was not related to the authority or reputation of the publishers or authors, but instead emerged from the fact that general encyclopedias are general sources of knowledge.⁵ More specific kinds of research require more in-depth sources of information with more specialized kinds of knowledge. In talking about the *Wikipedia* “problem,” we need to articulate to ourselves and to our students precisely which elements we find problematic. As scholars and students have pointed out, one of the greatest limitations with *Wikipedia* is that it is—above all else—an encyclopedia. In this way it has the same intrinsic limitations as other encyclopedias, esteemed, reputable, or otherwise. As Roy Rosenzweig (2006) reminds us, “should we blame *Wikipedia* for the appetite for predigested and prepared information or the tendency to believe that anything you read is true? That problem existed back in the days of the family encyclopedia” (p. 137). The most contentious issue (and from my perspective the most interesting) is not that our students are using an encyclopedia but that our students are using a resource that is written, rewritten, and overwritten by unknown writers with unknown credentials. It is only when we articulate what is problematic about *Wikipedia* that we can think critically and creatively about the questions and problems it raises.

When we talk about *Wikipedia* creatively and critically, the binaries begin to fall apart and we begin to see that, as Weinberger (2007) has argued, “The task of knowing is no longer to see the simple. It is to swim in the complex” (p. 198). The more we are able to move discussions of *Wikipedia* away from simplistic rules, the more we and our students will be able to swim in the complex issues *Wikipedia* raises. Thus, rather than having our conversations about *Wikipedia* be about rules or absolutes, I want to argue for our conversations to be question-based and centered around problem-posing. Through this approach, both teachers and students can collaboratively learn much about this “new old” resource and what it offers to our thinking about scholarship, teaching, and learning both today and in the future.

Wikipedia is a comparatively new resource that is continually evolving and one that both teachers and students can watch evolve. In this way,

⁵ ODLIS (2007) defines an encyclopedia as “A book or numbered set of books containing authoritative summary information about a variety of topics in the form of short essays.” (Encyclopedia)

Wikipedia can potentially help us resolve what Freire (2000) called the “teacher-student contradiction”:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (pp. 79-80).

Further, as Freire notes, the teacher

does not regard recognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. (pp. 80-81)

Because most of our students have a pre-existing relationship with *Wikipedia* before they enter the classroom, many of them feel more than willing and able to be “critical co-investigators” of the “*Wikipedia* problem.” *Wikipedia* thus is a topic replete with opportunities to engage students as active participants within evolving discussions and debates related to information literacy and the production and dissemination of scholarly information and knowledge.

Teaching the Conflicts

When asked what we can do about the *Wikipedia* problem, I almost always summon Gerald Graff (1992) who, in writing about English literary studies, insists that educators need to teach the conflicts. More recently, Graff (2007) has argued that “controversial ideas are not tangential to academic knowledge, but part of that knowledge. That is, controversy is internal to the subjects or disciplines—it is the object of knowledge or is inseparable from it” (p. xv). Such an approach turns “problems” into sites of critical inquiry and reminds us of why thinking carefully and critically about *Wikipedia* is a rich locus for inquiry and engagement.

What intrigues me most about what students say about *Wikipedia* is that once we ask them to question *Wikipedia* as an information source, they are quick to ask these same salient questions of sources long thought reputable and “safe.” Many of us have become complacent in our thinking about

information sources we have grown accustomed to trust or see as authoritative. However, if we want students to engage in the critical thinking that information literacy demands, we cannot limit our parameters of critical inquiry to sources we distrust, like *Wikipedia*. As Weinberger (2007) daringly notes, “*Wikipedia* and *Britannica* derive their authority from different sources . . . the trust we place in the *Britannica* enables us to be passive knowers . . . *Wikipedia* expects the reader to be actively involved, alert to the signs” (p. 142). Being information literate requires that we be “actively involved, alert to the signs.” In this way, teaching the “problems” of *Wikipedia* opens doors of active inquiry that are vital to the development of information literacy and critical thinking skills. *Wikipedia* also demands that we as librarians and professors model these processes when we approach information in our teaching and thinking. When we say “use this scholarly source over *Wikipedia*,” have we ourselves undergone the critical analysis of both sources, or are we, too, relying on an inherited and passive trust of a long-respected tool or resource? Telling students not to use *Wikipedia* and to accept our judgments unquestioningly does not model or encourage the kinds of critical thinking we want our students to learn and practice. This is not to say that librarians and professors need to encourage or allow the use of *Wikipedia*. Rather, we need to allow room in our classes and curriculum for critical inquiry into our information sources be they subscription databases, university press monographs, librarian-selected websites or *Wikipedia*.

One way that this critical inquiry could be brought into classes is to have students compare a *Wikipedia* entry with an entry from a reputable scholarly reference work and discuss the differences between the two articles in terms of content, reliability, authority, and accuracy. When I teach a class on reference works for History courses, I bring in a topical *Wikipedia* entry and ask students to discuss and analyze it as a source of information. In the winter of 2008, for example, a first-year History class and I looked at the *Wikipedia* (2009) entry on Benazir Bhutto as a way of exploring *Wikipedia*. We compared the *Wikipedia* entry on Bhutto (who had been assassinated the previous month) with the entry found in the *Oxford Reference Online* (2009).⁶ On that day, the information on *Wikipedia* was updated and edited

⁶ Due to time constraints, I generally project the entries on a screen and we look at them as a class. One could also print off entries or have students find entries of their own to discuss. One could also use this exercise as a short class activity, an in-class group activity, or even develop it to be a larger out-of-class assignment.

numerous times within our class period while the *Oxford Reference Online* entries still listed Bhuttoas living. Students talked about why *Wikipedia* might not be the best source of information for them: contributors might not be experts, entries can be sabotaged, and sources for cited information are not provided. They also came up with instances when *Wikipedia* might actually be a very useful source: *Wikipedia* cannot be beat for its immediacy on current events, and on some topics, scholars may not be the most suitable experts to consult. Further, students noted that when we looked at the *Wikipedia* entry's history, we could see what changes were being made, undone, and redone. Often *Wikipedia* editors posted rationale as to why some changes were made and others overruled.

In class, we contrasted *Wikipedia*'s ability to be corrected, updated, and amended on an almost second-by-second basis with Oxford's (2009) policy: "If you notice an error in an entry, please contact us. We cannot usually correct errors in entries immediately. However, we will load the corrected text the next time we publish an update to the *Oxford Reference Online* website" (Oxford Digital Reference Shelf FAQs, para. 2). Significantly, after interrogating *Wikipedia*'s authority and accuracy so cogently, the students began to apply these same questions to more reputable publishers and resources, including those upon which many of us have grown to comfortably rely. After critiquing the relative anonymity of *Wikipedia*'s contributors and editors, several students noted that it is also not clear who actually wrote and approved the *Oxford Reference Online* entry on Bhutto. Another student pointed out that—no matter how carefully written and edited—there had to be errors in highly reputable reference works like the *Dictionary of National Biography*. How and when, one student asked, do these errors get caught and corrected? Asking critical information literacy questions of *Wikipedia*—a resource most students use and feel comfortable with—opens a door to asking other probing questions about other information sources, be it an Oxford University Press reference work or an open access digital archive.⁷ These kinds of questions remind us not to be

⁷ In 2008, *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* (Academic Edition) launched a new format. It still has a number of features of the highly reputable print edition (attention drawn to its long-standing authority, a staff of respected and authoritative contributors and editors, and a clearly stated editorial ethos) yet some features of the 2008 edition are decidedly *Wikipedian*: users can easily link to sections where they may comment on entries, suggest revisions, and notify editors of corrections, typos, or factual errors. Unlike *Wikipedia*, where users may (with some exceptions) go in and directly edit the entries themselves, *Britannica*'s Editorial Mission states: "All

passive consumers of scholarly information and demand that we think critically about all kinds of information resources. Such a shift will help to illustrate to students that the production and dissemination of scholarly information is an active and evolving venture involving numerous decisions and choices, qualities that are often obscured by the fixed appearance of the printed page.

The Lessons of *Wikipedia*

The more we explore the idea of authorship in *Wikipedia*, the more questions we unearth about the production and dissemination of scholarly knowledge. In its inclusion of “history” and “talk” pages, *Wikipedia* shows students a rare “behind the scenes” look at the writing process.⁸ Published scholars know first-hand that scholarly writing involves conversations, drafts, revisions, fact-checking, rewrites, editorial suggestions, agreements, and disagreements. When reading traditional print sources, students rarely get the opportunity to see the vital intellectual activities behind the fixed façade of a published piece. Good scholarly writers acknowledge or synthesize disagreements over interpretation or of the validity of source information, but they rarely devote valuable print space to alternative views they do not value. The seemingly limitless space of *Wikipedia* means that disagreements (both friendly and vituperative) over facts, sources, or interpretations can be made available and thus put into dialogue with the

comments are welcome; all suggestions will be read and taken seriously; all suggested text changes submitted through this system will be thoroughly evaluated and fact-checked; all approved changes will be published; and all readers using this system will receive a reply from our editorial department” (para. 2). It is not altogether surprising that *Britannica* now offers this interaction with its users since much was made of *Britannica*’s “static” qualities in Giles’ article in *Nature* contrasting it and *Wikipedia* published in *Nature* (2005).

⁸ Andrew Lih (2009) describes the *Wikipedia* talk pages as “a bulletin and discussion board for each individual page. . . . Talk pages are simply regular wiki pages that anyone can edit, but people quickly adapted them to act like ‘threaded’ discussion boards where comments and responses were posted to make up full-fledged conversation and debate” (pp. 75-76). The history pages are, as Lih describes, “the running log of all changes to a page. Every change is saved in *Wikipedia*— every addition, deletion or modification. For each page, there is a button that’s labeled ‘History’ that reveals the complete lineage of an article” (p. 92-93).

entry itself. *Wikipedia* is, as Cass R. Sunstein (2006) writes, “in part a deliberative forum, with reason-giving by those who disagree and with deliberative ‘places’ to accompany disagreement” (p. 152). When looking at the talk pages of various entries, we see living examples of why writing, rewriting, editing, conversations, agreements, and disagreements are all a vital part of the processes whereby scholarly knowledge is created. For example, in the class where we looked at the *Wikipedia* entry on Benazir Bhutto, we scrolled back through the edit history to December 27, 2007, when news of her assassination first broke. Moments after the news was released, we could see the frenzied exchange between editors on whether there had been an assassination or an attempted assassination. Editors debated the merits of news sources and the accuracy of their information. Viewed as a whole, these editorial debates reveal these editors’ deep commitment to accuracy and legitimacy of information, and underscores the importance of conversation within the production of scholarly knowledge.

As Weinberger (2007) asserts, “One of the lessons of *Wikipedia* is that conversation improves expertise by exposing weaknesses, introducing new viewpoints, and pushing ideas into accessible form” (p. 145). Nowhere is this lesson better illustrated than in the talk pages of many *Wikipedia* entries. Factual debates do not only happen about details concerning late-breaking news like the assassination of Bhutto, but also surrounding long-standing historical issues and topics. In the talk pages of the Sally Hemings entry⁹, there is an energetic debate about the validity of cited sources. One Wikipedian called Moomot (2007) writes, “Has anyone bothered to read the article used for reference 2? This is not a legitimate source. The article is a diatribe that is not published anywhere except on some blog.” There are also questions on the Hemings talk page about specific historical sources. Another Wikipedian, Welsh4ever76 (2006), writes, “I changed this entry to five children. Going by Thomas Jefferson’s farm books there is not an entry

⁹ Sally Hemings is an interesting and controversial historical figure. The Sally Hemings entry (2009) in *Wikipedia* offers this overview of her life: Sally Hemings “was an American slave owned by Thomas Jefferson. She is said to have been the half-sister of Jefferson’s wife Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson. Journalists and others alleged during the administration of President Jefferson that he had fathered several children with Hemings after his wife’s death. Late 20th century DNA tests indicated that a male in Jefferson’s line, likely Thomas Jefferson himself, was the father of at least one of Sally Hemings’s children.”

for a son born in 1789 or 1790. He only records five children ever being born to Sally Hemings.” And elsewhere another Wikipedian, bww1, (nd) asks, “Do you ever wonder why Jeffersonian historians keep changing their minds, what is the real story? What are they dodging? And since they keep changing their story how do they retain any credibility?” These kinds of edits, readings, and comments are what Conrad (2007) calls “academic notions of team research and peer-review . . . carried to extreme levels” (p. 23). Being able to see the kinds of debates and discussions happening behind a *Wikipedia* entry and, indeed, behind pressing historical questions, allows students to see the vibrancy of historical and scholarly inquiry in ways that are often masked by the crisp, type-set pages of scholarly writing published in traditional print formats. *Wikipedia*’s talk pages make visible the often-invisible elements of scholarly debate, discussion, conversation, and exchange. The history and talk pages illustrate what we tell students about scholarly research: scholarly inquiry and the production of scholarly knowledge is iterative, collaborative, communal, and alive. As scholars, we get our bearings through others’ cartographies, we chart new courses and others build on our explorations. The wiki model makes visible those long-standing ideals of scholarly communities.

Wikipedia has sparked a paradigm shift in the ways that we think about information resources. Furthermore, the presence of a resource like *Wikipedia* asks us to think critically about the parameters of scholarly knowledge and scholarly resources with an immediate and concrete example, the likes of which we have not quite seen. *Wikipedia* also demands that we consider difficult questions such as whether universities, scholars, and libraries are needed in the age of a resource like *Wikipedia*, when anyone with an internet connection can “be a historian” or access all the information one might need. Of course, librarians could easily enumerate the reasons why libraries are still urgently needed, and scholars could cogently articulate the limitations of *Wikipedia*, and historians could (and do) explain why writing *Wikipedia* entries on historical subjects and being a historian are hardly the same.¹⁰ Although Rosenzweig (2006) notes that a “historical work without owners and with multiple, anonymous authors is . . . almost unimaginable in our professional [academic] culture” (p. 117), *Wikipedia* does ask us to consider what could happen if we apply 2.0 technologies to our own research and scholarly writings. For teaching

¹⁰ Conrad (2007), for example, writes “The view that anyone can be a historian nevertheless sits awkwardly with those of us who have spent a decade or more mastering a discipline that has standards for practitioners” (p. 9).

faculty, what might the wiki model offer our scholarship and teaching? Might a scholarly subject-based wiki be a more useful and flexible option than a reference work or a textbook? For librarians, *Wikipedia* has shown us that open access resources might be potentially viable options to the incredibly expensive and highly restrictive scholarly resources we purchase, renew, and support. *Wikipedia* also has a number of connections with some of the core values of librarianship (ALA 2004) such as commitment to education and life-long learning, the public good, social responsibility and, most obvious, access to information. As Rosenzweig (2006) has noted,

American National Biography Online may be a significantly better historical resource than *Wikipedia* but its impact is much smaller because it is available to so few people. . . The limited audience for subscription-based historical resources such as *American National Biography Online* becomes an even larger issue when we move outside the borders of the United States and especially into poorer parts of the world, where subscription fees pose major problems even for libraries. (p. 138)

In these ways, *Wikipedia* raises questions that have long simmered below the surface for decades about academia, librarianship, the work we do, and the ways in which we do that work.

Wikipedia's presence and ubiquity demands that we think critically and creatively about the work we do, how we do it, and how we might do it in the future. As Rosenzweig also notes,

a much broader question about academic culture is whether the methods and approaches that have proven so successful in *Wikipedia* can also affect how scholarly work is produced, shared, and debated. *Wikipedia* embodies an optimistic view of community and collaboration that already informs the best of the academic enterprise. (p. 143)

“Could we,” Rosenzweig goes on to muse, “write a collaborative U.S. History textbook that would be free to all our students?” (p. 145). Or,

Should those who write history for a living join such popular history makers in writing history in *Wikipedia*? My own tentative answer is yes. If *Wikipedia* is becoming the family encyclopedia for the twenty-first century, historians probably have a professional obligation to make it as good as possible. And if every member of the Organization of American Historians devoted just one day to improving entries in his or her areas of expertise, it would not only significantly raise the quality of *Wikipedia*, it would also enhance popular historical literacy. (p. 140)

In these ways, *Wikipedia* recasts problems that have long lingered in the peripheries of our professional lives and repositions them in more urgent

and concrete ways. Further, asking our students and our selves to think about scholarly information in broader ways is a tremendous opportunity for critical thinking about our information literacy theories and practices. In short, *Wikipedia* demands that we think creatively, critically, and reflectively about praxis.

Conclusions

Whatever its limitations, it is imperative that we as educators pay attention to *Wikipedia* for a number of reasons. As Rosenzweig (2006) states: “One reason professional historians need to pay attention to *Wikipedia* is because our students do” (p. 136). Whether we like it or not, *Wikipedia* is here to stay. As the quotation from the English Education student at the beginning of this piece reveals, many of our students know they will need to negotiate questions related to *Wikipedia* and other similar resources in their lives outside of school. We are doing them a disservice if we ignore the complexities of *Wikipedia* and sidestep some of the vital objectives cited in the Alexandria Proclamation (IFLA, 2005) in our classrooms. Further, we need to think about the message we send to students when we banish, forbid, or ignore a resource in our classes that is firmly of their generation in favor of promoting resources of previous generations.

Asking specific questions about information sources, the structures behind them, and our assumptions about these information sources is a vital part of information literacy. As *Wikipedia* itself acknowledges, it does have limitations. However, unlike other more fixed resources, *Wikipedia* supplies us with the means to redress the limitations we see in it. Is there an absence of articles on a particular subject? We can write an entry. Is there a factual error? We can correct it. Limited or cursory information in an entry? We can rewrite the entry. Problematic resource for the academy? Invent a better model. Even if we don’t use *Wikipedia* itself to redress the limitations of *Wikipedia*, we could, as *Britannica* appears to have done, use the *Wikipedia* model to recreate or revise an existing resource, or, perhaps, we could develop a new resource better suited to our purposes. As Conrad (2007) notes,

It is our job to make sure that the Internet offers a little more comfort to historians. Ranting against Wikiality or even the likely eventual demise of *Wikipedia*, will not make the issues it raises about knowledge in the twenty-first century go away. (pp. 23-24)

Indeed, as Rosenzweig so cogently asserts, the “problems” associated with *Wikipedia* can be traced back to “the days of the family encyclopedia. And one key solution remains the same: spend more time teaching about the limitations of all information sources, including *Wikipedia*, and emphasizing the skills of critical analysis of primary and secondary sources” (p. 137). Whether or not we agree on *Wikipedia*’s various strengths and limitations is not the pressing issue. As Gerald Graff (2007) reminds us, “The real point we need to agree on is that good education is about helping students enter the culture of ideas and arguments” (p. xvii). In order for students to fully enter the culture of ideas and arguments related to information literacy, we need to provide means for them to become active participants in the debates and offer them opportunities for dialogues about the creation and dissemination of scholarly knowledge.

In thinking of *Wikipedia* (as well as other 2.0 technologies that encourage participation), I am often reminded of Walt Whitman’s observation “That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse” (p. 410). *Wikipedia* is a resource that allows its readers an opportunity to “contribute a verse” to broader scholarly discussions and to participate in discussions that have been until fairly recently the sole purview of scholars and credentialed experts. What is most interesting and important to me about *Wikipedia* is that it foregrounds the importance of participation in relation to the creation of scholarly knowledge and information. Talking about *Wikipedia* in critical ways can help students to see that they can contribute a verse and be active participants rather than passive consumers within scholarly discussions and beyond.

As James Elmborg (2006) has noted, participation, action, and education should be vital parts of information literacy. In his article “The Other Dewey: John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* and Information Literacy,” Elmborg notes that at the heart of Dewey’s vision for public education is “the democratic citizen, educated for participation in a democratic society. Dewey envisioned these citizens as intellectually and physically engaged in creating a better world through intelligent action, and he imagined an education that could teach students to be such citizens” (p. 2). Could *Wikipedia* be part of that democratic participation? Could working with *Wikipedia* help students become intellectually “engaged in creating a better world through intelligent action”? Whether *Wikipedia* (or other wiki models) could actually achieve all of these things is certainly debatable. The possibilities, however, do exist and are thus worth considering. Talking creatively and critically about *Wikipedia* in our classrooms provides an excellent forum for students and teachers to actively work through a range

of issues related to information literacy, education, and scholarly information.

Approaching the “problems” of *Wikipedia* as a series of difficult or demanding questions is an opportunity for us to develop a problem-posing information literacy praxis and for students to enter and participate in the larger culture of ideas and arguments related to information in the twenty first century. Just as bell hooks (1994) has noted, “Theory is not inherently healing, liberating or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (p. 61). *Wikipedia* is not healing, liberating or revolutionary unless we ask of it the questions that might make it so.

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