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How to Use Wikipedia to Teach Jewish Studies

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How to Use Wikipedia to Teach Jewish Studies

Shira Klein, Chapman University

With 35 million articles, Wikipedia has become the largest encyclopedia in human history. We all, students and teachers alike, use Wikipedia on a regular basis. Yet academia has been slow to respond to this exciting source of knowledge. True, the online encyclopedia can't replace professional scholarship. But instructors have a lot to gain from using it as a teaching tool.

How? Here are three ways you could use Wikipedia to further your students' learning. I tried out all three successfully in my introductory Jewish studies course – “3000 Years of Jewish History” – at Chapman University.

Method #1: You select a Wikipedia article for students to critique.

As you plan your syllabus, find a “bad” article related to your course material. Wikipedia is full of articles that promote popular but mistaken views, in other words, views that scholars have challenged. Have students read the article along with one or two scholarly readings that provide a more accurate picture. In class or as homework, ask students: “If you were editing this Wikipedia article, what changes would you make and why?” This exercise promotes critical analysis. Rather than take for granted what the online encyclopedia says, students juxtapose contrasting claims and challenge unproven assumptions.

Method #2: Students find a Wikipedia article on their own and critique it.

This assignment is best given well into the semester, after students have learned a fair amount and have the knowledge and confidence to critique sources on their own. Ask students to hunt around Wikipedia for an article related to the course, which – when examined in the light of course readings on that topic – has a major weakness. It could be an article lacking key information, an article that is biased, simplistic, or wrong, or an article that lacks references. Have students submit a short paper explaining the article's weaknesses and how they would use readings from the syllabus to fix it. This exercise, like the first, advances critical analysis skills, but also independent thinking, as students themselves judge whether and why an article is wanting.

Method #3: Students edit the Wikipedia article they found.

This assignment builds off the previous one. Your students have found a weak article, identified the course readings necessary to correct it, and persuasively explained how they will improve it. Now they need to act to improve it. For a start, students will need to create a username (this takes five minutes) and experiment with the basics of adding and changing content in Wikipedia (this takes about an hour, using a tutorial Wikipedia provides). You could require students to add a set number of words to the article, say, 100 to 300 words. If several students have chosen the same article, they could work collaboratively. Students can write as many drafts as they want in a designated practice space (known among Wikipedians as a “Sandbox”). Once they change the article itself, the edits go online immediately. You could hand out a grading rubric to let students know how they will be evaluated. What do you expect from an A+ assignment? You'll have to

think of what you want students to focus on – a substantial change in content? Thoughtful use of secondary sources? Footnoted evidence? Error-free writing? When it's time to evaluate students' edits, Wikipedia enables you to compare two versions of the same article, so you will easily be able to see the changes each student made.

This assignment gives students a valuable insider view of Wikipedia, far more than the first two exercises. When I asked my class to reflect at the end of term on the process of editing Wikipedia, students admitted their shock at the encyclopedia's weaknesses. "I can't believe just anyone can edit Wikipedia," exclaimed one student. "I knew people could make edits," said another, "but I thought there's a committee that goes over them to make sure they're ok."

In short, Wikipedia can be used to teach critical analysis, independent thinking, and the shakiness of online information. Writing for a wider audience is also fun and engaging, and some students will find they get instant feedback from other Wikipedia users. Finally, the wider community benefits as well. By providing guidance to students and making sure their contributions rely on scholarly literature, instructors help to make Wikipedia a more accurate well of knowledge. In an encyclopedia with 470 million unique visitors a month, that means making a real difference.

*Interested in using Wikipedia in **your** classroom? Go to the [Wiki Education Foundation](#), a non-profit that builds connections between academics and Wikipedia. The [page for instructors](#) highlights steps for getting started, resources, and a contact form.*