

Weighing in on Wikipedia

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Warning: this article contains information verified through Wikipedia, and has been edited by online collaboration.

Full disclosure: I am a dinosaur. I did my undergraduate research with books, and sometimes cutting-edge microfiche. I produced my written work with a typewriter, with footnotes—the Waterloo of many an error-free page. I remember the technological advancement brought with the IBM Selectric: a typewriter with the ability to change fonts by substituting a different mechanical “type ball” and, miracle of miracles, correction tape!

I became a computer user through word processing. Imagine being able to correct typing errors without any visible evidence, and make copies without carbon paper or onionskin. Files were somehow kept—although sometimes lost—right inside the machine. It was true progress.

At about this time, my pioneering colleagues were experimenting with the Internet. Remember the “freenet”—Internet service without an Internet provider? Free! And when researching, you would type in predictive URLs. For example, a search for Gordie Howe probably began by typing www.gordiehowe.com. If that didn't work, you substituted various extensions.

Then along came Yahoo! The exclamation mark indicated the relief that someone had finally brought order to the Wild West. Yahoo! was technically an indexed site, not a search engine. An index: sort of like a library catalogue. Now, we were talking! I recall being proudly informed that librarians even had their own Librarians' Internet Index, at www.lii.org—“websites you can trust”.

But Google has evolved as the big player. Although we used to encourage that a variety of search engines be used for more complete results, Google has become the undisputed market leader. At my school, Google is a quick link on the Internet home page. It is an indispensable tool for accessing information quickly and effectively.

Evolution is a slow and passive process, but eventually the quickest and most effective survive. My own technological expertise has gradually evolved. I am definitely not an early adopter; I still don't text, Facebook, or use Web 2.0. When—or if—I need to, I will adopt those technologies. Meanwhile, like many of our students, I am a passive consumer, waiting until the most user-friendly products have emerged from the

primordial sludge.

And from that sludge, Wikipedia has crawled. It is now the 800-pound gorilla in the academic research room. As with so many technological shifts, it has enthusiastic supporters and wrath-of-God naysayers. As with so many technological shifts, I think evolution will eventually determine Wikipedia's fate. But in the meantime, what is its role in school libraries and research?

I have heard teacher-librarians say that it should be de-listed from student access. I have heard teachers threaten classes that it had better not appear on their monitors during research time. Academics bemoan the laziness of the Wikipedia generation. However, when I am researching basic information, I often use it. Yes, my name is Pat Jermey, and I use Wikipedia.

As teachers, we are often reluctant to welcome change. This sometimes begins as a fear of the unknown, and then evolves into a concern for academic rigor. We are justified in that reluctance. The public education system acts for society as weight on a pendulum: by slowing down extreme or rapid motion, we create the opportunity for more thoughtful reaction. Looking back, I remember the panic when students dared to transfer files on floppy disks brought from home. Now we encourage flash drives and e-mail to improve learning opportunities. Teachers reference YouTube and post assignments on websites. Our pedagogy has evolved to stay current with students' interests and experiences.

So, as with cell phones and iPods, Wikipedia is technology we must learn to live with by informing ourselves, and developing appropriate guidelines and restrictions. When I was a student, encyclopedias were considered an invaluable beginning, but you would never submit a formal paper with a mere encyclopedia in the bibliography. Today, Wikipedia is often a useful starting point for research, but should never be the finish. The old rule of multiple sources still applies, and Wikipedia can provide excellent sources through its references and external links. For research requiring popular culture analysis or really current information, Wikipedia is certainly the source to check. Of course it can contain inaccuracies, but so can print material. Of course, content can change, so it must be accurately cited with date. Of course there can be bias in entries, which is what we teach in media studies. Students need to understand the wiki editing process, and to decode the revision history of a site. Just as we teach our students Internet awareness skills when using Google to select research sites, we need to teach Wikipedia skills.

In evolutionary terms, you ignore the 800-pound gorilla at your peril. ■