

Wikiality in My Classroom

By Jacqueline Hicks Grazette
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It's another Monday morning, and I click online and scroll through my e-mail for the take-home exams my high school students finished over the weekend. I am delighted that most look good, but as I read one I notice an answer that ends with a footnote, something I have never seen on a take-home test.

The footnote directed me to Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia to which anyone can contribute articles and information. My high school student was letting me know that he had used it to help him answer this exam question. What was not clear was how he had used it. What part of the answer relied on Wikipedia? Had he just lifted something verbatim and pasted it in? Had he been caught up in comedian Stephen Colbert's infamous "Wikiality" -- an online world made up of collections of untruths that are widely accepted?

In the online world in which teachers and students navigate, ambiguity of this kind is daily fare. For young people who have grown up with instant access to information, it seems like no big deal. But to educators, trained in accurate sourcing and correct attribution, deciding what the limits should be often poses a dilemma.

Wikipedia use has become a hot issue on high school and college campuses. The history department of Middlebury College has declared that Wikipedia "is not an appropriate source for citation," though it can be useful in pointing students to sources of more reliable information.

But Wikipedia isn't the only online source kids use, and teachers' concerns are broader. Googling has made even graduate students more apt to click online before they click "on-mind" to complete assignments. I had a graduate intern who wasted hours trying to find a phone number through Google even though it was readily available in the local phone book. That tells me that online search engines may be taking a toll on students' ability to take initiative and be resourceful problem solvers.

A few clicks on the computer and today's students find data that might have taken my 1980s college generation days or weeks to track down in a library. That may not necessarily be a good thing, because we may be developing the same kind of dependence that leads some to blame calculators for declining math skills.

Are we creating a generation of kids who can neither formulate a research plan nor analyze their findings? Jumping from page to page and source to source for quick "fact bites" on the Internet may weaken a student's ability to complete in-depth reading and carefully assess data, so important for critical thinking. As one student put it to me, "It's very hard for me to read a book or a long news article."

There is also the issue of plagiarism and cheating. When Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) surveyed 12,000 college students and 18,000 high school students, roughly 40 percent of the college students and half the high school students indicated that they had cheated using online sources. This included such things as not citing those sources, purchasing exams and papers online, and cutting and pasting downloaded information. Exchanging e-mails about assignments that were not team projects was also cited as a less-than-kosher practice.

Many teachers do not know how to detect online cheating, and others are reluctant to report it, another CAI survey found. There is pressure to produce high achievers. Cheating scandals may bring bad publicity and drawn-out administrative procedures to a school. Worse, CAI's numbers suggest, today's networked students are part of a culture that considers online cheating "no big deal."

I saw support for that finding when I interviewed public and private high school students in the Washington area. Most knew of online cheating, and while they didn't condone it, the majority said they would not report it. "We are part of a networked society," one student told me. "Your world is different from ours. We are taught to share information and collaborate. We do it all the time. No one really cares where it came from."

That, in a sense, is the essence of online culture. Shareware sites (free programs and information) abound. Unattributed information constantly arrives in my inbox -- Internet "warnings," excerpts from articles, quotes and YouTube moments that someone thinks are a riot. Rarely is the author or source identified. News agencies quote from blogs.

Can we expect our students to model behavior that is any different from those of the adults around them? Princeton University thinks we can. A university Web site called Academic Integrity at Princeton acknowledges the paradigm shift that students I interviewed described: "Much of the ethic of the Internet, which emerged from the computer culture of collaborative work . . . is in tension with the values and practices of traditional scholarship," it states.

Yet Princeton makes clear that it is not for students to decide what is "common knowledge," and insists that they obey the standard of traditional notation for intellectual property or suffer serious academic consequences. Its model of online ethical standards declares that non-print and electronic sources must be treated with the same respect as printed materials. It provides a protocol for citing electronic sources and warns about the quality of some online sources.

My student with the questionable footnote appreciates this type of direct guidance. As it turned out, even with the online help his answer was wrong. Outcomes like that may be the best antidote of all to a student's online dependency.

As we talked about his answer, he confessed that he used Wikipedia because he felt he could not comprehend or complete all the readings assigned, and was desperate to get the question answered. And he noted that parents or teachers often tell kids who ask questions, "Look it up online." He felt that kids are so programmed to be on the fast track in high school -- "from high school to the great college to the job to the 2.5 kids and the beautiful house" -- that no one really wants to slow down and deal with ethics.

Librarians are a key resource in teaching appropriate Internet skills. Many have invested in databases that direct kids toward quality online sources and research methods. Few students remember to use them, and even fewer teachers assign them as a first source for research projects. The Prince George's County Memorial Library System offers online tutors to help kids think through proper methods for finding answers. When I tested the program, it was not a "let me tell you the answer" approach but a true partnership of inquiry between the tutor and the student.

Not every teacher finds students' preference for online research a bad thing. Brad Rathgeber, a history teacher and academic technology director at the Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, thinks the Internet, used properly, can be an innovative extension of the classroom. Students at Holton-Arms have turned their knowledge of Wikipedia's methods into an asset.

Rather than create "truthiness" (Colbert's word for something that sounds true but is not), Holton students work in teams to build "wiki" pages after extensive research and writing. This requires them not only to find facts and data, but also to analyze the quality of the information and present it in a well-written fashion, able to withstand scrutiny. That's important, because once the information is posted on a password-protected school server, other students and faculty rely on it.

In my American Government class, the Internet is a tool -- but only that -- as students study the

Constitution through Supreme Court cases. Deciphering written opinions can be difficult for high schoolers, so I send them to the Supreme Court's Oyez Web site to listen to recordings of oral arguments. Their understanding of the constitutional issues improves dramatically when they hear the justices' questions and the lawyers' answers. Students can compare the give and take with their own analyses. In this way, the Supreme Court comes to life for them.

Making use of kids' natural comfort with online learning may require a different skill set for teachers. Most schools do not evaluate teachers on the innovative use of online technology. And with all the other watchdog roles on teachers' plates, many may not welcome the new role of monitoring Internet ethics. Changes will be needed in how teachers are trained and rewarded to fulfill the Internet's educational potential.

Will teachers be able to keep up with this iPod generation? The honest answer is that the jury is still out. The only thing we do know is that students are using online resources. We can no longer afford to ignore the "downloading" classroom.

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