Using Wikipedia constructively in History and beyond

What is a wiki?

A wiki is a website that has been developed collaboratively by an online community of users. The term is also used to describe the software that is used to create the website and facilitate user access. Any user can add and edit content. Of course, an individual can also use a wiki to create their own website, but collaboration is perhaps the defining feature of wikis.

What is Wikipedia?

Wikipedia, as the name suggests, is a wiki. It is probably the most well-known and widely-accessed wiki. As noted above, anyone who uses the Internet can potentially make a contribution to Wikipedia.

Because anyone can edit Wikipedia and its articles are so freely available, this has led to problems with the content and reliability of some Wikipedia articles. Important information might be missed by accident or deliberately, or presented in a 'biased' manner. The result of this is that Wikipedia remains a controversial source of information, in particular within higher education. There are a number of features that make clear that some pages are more reliable than others (e.g. pages can be flagged as needing additional references or as containing dubious information). It is best to point these out to students and emphasise the point that Wikipedia articles can be useful for getting an overview of a subject but should always be backed up with additional, peer reviewed and referenced sources of information, especially for assessed pieces of work.

The open and collaborative nature of Wikipedia means that errors can be corrected and new information added rapidly. In some instances, therefore, the information on Wikipedia can be very reliable and up-to-date. For example, the journal *Nature* published the results of a survey that compared Wikipedia and the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Giles, 2005). Fifty entries were chosen from their websites and sent to an independent review panel. The panel were not told which encyclopaedia the articles came from but were asked to examine them for errors. Interestingly the panel found a similar number of errors in articles from the online and print encyclopedias. The biggest difference was that the errors in Wikipedia could be corrected in minutes while those in Britannica had to wait for a re-publication to take place (which can take much longer).

More information: Jim Giles, 'Special Report Internet encyclopaedias go head to head', *Nature* 438, 900-901 (2005) [http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7070/full/438900a.html]

Teaching History with Wikipedia

A number of lecturers in History (and other disciplines) have made constructive use of Wikipedia in their teaching. This is because aside from consulting Wikipedia as a source of information and references, which as we have seen may not be reliable, it (and other wikis) can also be used as a site for students to develop their understanding about how knowledge is created and communicated online in the discipline. In addition, students can be engaged in activities that encourage them to correct or even to write Wikipedia entries of their own.

Making Wikipedia Work For You

This project, led by Professor Neville Morley, was in a first year ancient history module at the University of Bristol. The idea was to engage students with Wikipedia in constructive ways, rather than trying to warn them against its 'dangers' or simply telling them not to use it. Students learned about how Wikipedia entries are created and edited (and therefore about their potential problems and benefits) and eventually went on to edit and construct entries of their own. Students proved

adept at identifying problems with the coverage, content and referencing of the existing Wikipedia entry. This helped to reinforce their subject knowledge and awareness of the need to provide evidence and references to back up their arguments. They noticed the frequent failure of Wikipedia to convey the extent to which ideas were disputed in the subject. Students did not generally grasp the fact that Wikipedia was produced collaboratively over a period of time, rather than being the work of a single author.

More information: N. Morley, 'Making Wikipedia Work For You... Making use of Wikipedia to promote learning, not just warning students against it', Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/resources/detail/assessment_making_wikipedia_work_for_you]

Practice in other disciplines
Getting students to write Wikipedia entries for assessed coursework
This project involved Masters students at the University of Manchester on a module called 'Environmental Governance'. A single 4000 word essay was replaced by two Wikipedia assignments:
   1.   A 500 word contribution to an existing Wikipedia page
   2.   The creation of an entirely new page (2500 words)
Each assignment was to be posted on Wikipedia, and submitted through Blackboard accompanied by a 500 word reflective commentary. Staff and students learned a great deal about the workings of Wikipedia and 'producing balanced overviews of specific topics in which material is thoroughly referenced is not only highly rigorous, but a potentially more useful skill to graduates in the workplace than the ability to write an attractive essay'. It is important, however, to vary module learning outcomes to take account of this. Wikipedia was judged easy to use, especially if relevant support resources are provided to guide students through the process, while the 'work was generally of a higher quality and was more interesting to mark, as students raised their game for a public audience'. Students increased their awareness of the open, collaborative nature of Wikipedia and there was a feeling that they would be careful about using Wikipedia in future.

More information: J. Evans, 'Getting students to write Wikipedia entries for assessed coursework', *University of Manchester Faculty of Humanities Teaching and Learning News*, February 2012, pp. 9-10 [http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/tandl/news/bulletin/Feb2012.pdf]

Building wikis and teaching History
Students and staff at a number of institutions have constructed wikis as part of their learning. For example, the Sheffield American History Research Wiki (http://history.dept.shef.ac.uk/wikiamerica/index.php/Main_Page) is a user-edited website with links to and analysis of digital archives of primary sources on American History. Further examples and resources can be found at 'Collaborating with Wikis' (at the Teaching History With Technology website: http://thwt.org/index.php/discussion-collaboration/wikis). There are numerous benefits to such approaches: groups can find, share and present larger amounts of information, mistakes can more easily be spotted and corrected, and students can be engaged in activities that get them thinking about how to present information effectively on the web rather than writing assignments solely for the benefit of the tutor. This enables students to think about the form and audience of their writing as well as its content and thus to develop a broader range of communication skills as well as the technical know-how to find information online and present it on the wiki. The use of an online platform also facilitates engagement outside academia and may thus encourage students to think about the broader social relevance of History.