

No, You Can't Cite Wikipedia – But Not for the Reasons You Think

While much of the debate about the use of wikipedia in academic settings, particularly academic libraries, has to do with questions of reliability and authenticity, a more fundamental question regarding the *use* of encyclopedias and the librarian's role in helping a patron to credential knowledge—related to the basic question of the purpose of academic writing—has been largely ignored.

If part of a librarian's role is to help patrons determine criteria for what counts as legitimate knowledge and then evaluate sources based on these criteria, wikipedia is an ideal teaching tool. The nature of wiki software allows users to review the debate, see how the “sausage” of knowledge production is made. Similar cycles of writing, editing, fact-checking and debating approaches that happen behind the scenes in traditional publishing are laid bare for the world to see and evaluate in the wiki model.

At a more abstract level, wikipedia offers librarians and researchers an opportunity to deconstruct the process of the production of knowledge, to evaluate how particular epistemes are maintained and who maintains them (Foucault 1966). After all, just as traditional publishing is controlled by an elite and tied to an epistemic agenda, so too is wikipedia controlled by an “oligarchy” of frequent contributors who tend to belong to specific patterns of race, class, gender and sexuality. What does it mean that the “world's knowledge” as represented on wikipedia is largely western-, white- and male-created? What lessons can we draw from this fact to help inform our patrons' research?

Finally, I will conclude this presentation with an explanation of how wikipedia conforms to the purpose of academic writing, be it analytic or synthetic. I often tell patrons that the reason one doesn't cite wikipedia is because one shouldn't cite *any* encyclopedia – an academic paper aims to explore tensions within a topic, not to regurgitate facts. Source material from any encyclopedia is simply too superficial for use in higher education and doesn't allow the paper-writer to develop his or her analysis, to give the topic his or her own spin. Perhaps ironically, then, if the purpose of academic research is to explore controversies, contradictions and tensions, wikipedia is a far better source than a “closed-source” encyclopedia, because on wikipedia the memory of a debate about an article lives in the background of the article itself, available for the user to peruse.