

UC Berkeley students help improve Wikipedia's credibility

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Ten public universities, including UC Berkeley, are collaborating in a 17-month pilot program, the WikiProject Public Policy Initiative, aimed at improving the quality of Wikipedia pages about public policy issues by having students and professors in the School of Information create and update content as part of their course work.

While searching for a quick fact one day on Wikipedia, Brian Carver, an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, came up with an idea to get his students more engaged in his intellectual property

law course.

"The page was inaccurate," he said, "and suddenly I thought, 'I should have my students write this article!'"

Carver has now been successfully integrating Wikipedia into writing assignments for his course for five semesters. Based on polls he takes in class at the end of each semester, Carver said his students feel more engaged and that the work has a lasting impact. A student once told him that his Wikipedia assignment was the first paper he ever wrote "that didn't end up in a professor's trash can."

Wikipedia is a free, web-based encyclopedia project based on an openly-editable model that allows users from anywhere around the world to contribute to the online content. It is supported by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation and contains about 22 million pages. There are over 13 million registered users.

This semester, Wikipedia began collaborating with 10 public universities, including UC Berkeley, in a 17-month pilot program called the WikiProject Public Policy Initiative. The program aims to improve the quality and curriculum of Wikipedia pages about public policy issues by having students and professors create and update content as part of their course work.

Carver was one of the professors asked to participate in the program through his course "Intellectual Property Law for the Information Industries," along with two students, Max Kline and Matthew Senate, who are facilitating a DeCal course this semester called "Politics of Piracy." DeCal courses are student-run education programs where students create and facilitate classes based on subjects of their choosing.

Carver said he was eager to participate in the pilot program when

approached by Wikipedia because of his past success having his students take part in similar projects.

"The students contribute to a public resource that is seen the world over, and their work has a lasting impact," he said. They also learn to have their work reviewed and edited by others, which Carver says is an important skill in the business world. Overall, he said, the assignment has proved very beneficial.

LiAnna Davis, communications associate for Wikipedia, said professors like Carver are one of the main reasons the pilot project was started about a year ago. "We felt like professors and students were already the fuel of the site," Davis said in a phone interview from San Francisco. "The project gives them an opportunity to help improve the quality of the site and spread their contribution to a wider audience."

Wikipedia initially approached Carver based on a recommendation from a current employee who is a UC Berkeley alumnus with a connection at the UC Berkeley School of Information where Carver is based. The School of Information recommended Davis also reach out to Kline and Senate, who had been facilitating their DeCal class on the subject of piracy for about four semesters.

Kline and Senate said they were planning on integrating Wikipedia into their course, which focuses on what piracy is and how it affects our globalized economy, even before they were approached by the company.

For the final project in Kline and Senate's course, students will form groups and create and edit a Wikipedia page from start to finish. Subjects of the pages include "Legality of rooting Android OS" and the "Digital Millennium Copyright Act."

"I am surprised at how refreshing is for students [to work on

Wikipedia]," Senate said. "While most professors are telling their students to avoid the site, we are actually directing them there."

Kline and Senate both say the use of Wikipedia in their course doesn't make it any less academically rigorous. The information on Wikipedia can be just as reliable as other sources if students know how to properly use the information and better understand where it came from, they said.

Some students are a little uncomfortable with the project, especially those who have never been a part of Wikipedia before, Kline said. Wikipedia provides each course with a group of online ambassadors, he said, who help the students with everything from overcoming technical barriers to tips on how to get your article into Wikipedia.

Davis said these ambassadors are a key part of Wikipedia's pilot program. They are trained in August on how to best support university students with their Wiki projects and act like personal teaching assistants, she said.

"These people are experienced Wikipedians who have a history of helping newcomers at all hours of the night and day," Davis said. "They can really help out college students with their odd hours."

Davis said the goal of the program is to create a model to be replicated outside of the [public policy](#) discipline in other academic disciplines. "We are trying to get the wheels in place for this to be a self-perpetuating system that goes on without our involvement," she said.

She also hopes the project will increase media literacy and help [students](#) everywhere to better utilize [Wikipedia](#) as a resource.

The program is funded by a grant from the Stanton Foundation and will run through September 2011.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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