

Wikipedia improves students' work

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A student writing an essay for their teacher may be tempted to plagiarize or leave facts unchecked. A new study shows that if you ask that same student to write something that will be posted on Wikipedia, he or she suddenly becomes determined to make the work as accurate as possible, and may actually do better research.

Brenna Gray, an instructor at Douglas College in New Westminster, B.C., was presenting the results of the study at the 2011 Congress of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

She became interested in why students seem to adopt some technological innovations (Wikipedia, for example) and reject things their schools would like them to use, such as the student-teacher interface Blackboard. Gray says it's easy to criticize Wikipedia because of the unstructured way it is set up.

She says despite its faults, it does promote solid values for its writers, including precise citations, accurate research, editing and revision.

"Those ideals are the ones we espouse as English instructors," she said.

She decided to get first-year students in an English class to write short biographies of Canadian writers that would then be posted on Wikipedia.

What she found was that the moment the students realized their work was going public in a forum over which they had no control, they took

the work a lot more seriously. They became concerned, for example, with the [accuracy](#) of facts.

Gray says it's not only the fact that their work was going public that stimulated the students, it was the realization that in producing the Wikipedia entries they were acquiring skills that were transferable to other parts of their lives.

Gray says students, like most of the rest of us, are more time-crunched than ever. They have to prioritize, and are therefore reluctant to spend time learning skills that aren't useful outside school. That includes online tools like Blackboard, which they perceive as having no relevance to other parts of their life.

Because the Wikipedia skills are perceived as transferable, [students](#) became interested in acquiring them. And they were willing to work to Wikipedia's standards.

Gray says teachers need to talk about [Wikipedia](#) and how it can be used.

"The purpose of my paper is to start a discussion about it," she said.

Provided by Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences

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