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A History Department Bans Citing Wikipedia as a Research Source

By NOAM COHEN

When half a dozen students in Neil Waters's Japanese history class at Middlebury College asserted on exams that the Jesuits supported the Shimabara Rebellion in 17th-century Japan, he knew something was wrong. The Jesuits were in "no position to aid a revolution," he said; the few of them in Japan were in hiding.

He figured out the problem soon enough. The obscure, though incorrect, information was from Wikipedia, the collaborative online encyclopedia, and the students had picked it up cramming for his exam.

Dr. Waters and other professors in the history department had begun noticing about a year ago that students were citing Wikipedia as a source in their papers. When confronted, many would say that their high school teachers had allowed the practice.

But the errors on the Japanese history test last semester were the last straw. At Dr. Waters's urging, the Middlebury history department notified its students this month that Wikipedia could not be cited in papers or exams, and that students could not "point to Wikipedia or any similar source that may appear in the future to escape the consequences of errors."

With the move, Middlebury, in Vermont, jumped into a growing debate within journalism, the law and academia over what respect, if any, to give Wikipedia articles, written by hundreds of volunteers and subject to mistakes and sometimes deliberate falsehoods. Wikipedia itself has restricted the editing of some subjects, mostly because of repeated vandalism or disputes over what should be said.

Although Middlebury's history department has banned Wikipedia in citations, it has not banned its use. Don Wyatt, the chairman of the department, said a total ban on Wikipedia would have been impractical, not to mention close-minded, because Wikipedia is simply too handy to expect students never to consult it.

At Middlebury, a discussion about the new policy is scheduled on campus on Monday, with speakers poised to defend and criticize using the site in research.

Jimmy Wales, the co-founder of Wikipedia and chairman emeritus of its foundation, said of the Middlebury policy, "I don't consider it as a negative thing at all."

He continued: "Basically, they are recommending exactly what we suggested — students shouldn't be citing encyclopedias. I would hope they wouldn't be citing Encyclopaedia Britannica, either."

“If they had put out a statement not to read Wikipedia at all, I would be laughing. They might as well say don’t listen to rock ’n’ roll either.”

Indeed, the English-language version of the site had an estimated 38 million users in the United States in December, and can be hard to avoid while on the Internet. Google searches on such diverse subjects as historical figures like Confucius and concepts like torture give the Wikipedia entry the first listing.

In some colleges, it has become common for professors to assign students to create work that appears on Wikipedia. According to Wikipedia’s list of school and university projects, this spring the University of East Anglia in England and Oberlin College in Ohio will have students edit articles on topics being taught in courses on the Middle East and ancient Rome.

In December 2005, a Columbia professor, Henry Smith, had the graduate students in his seminar create a Japanese bibliography project, posted on Wikipedia, to describe and analyze resources like libraries, reference books and newspapers. With 16 contributors, including the professor, the project comprises dozens of articles, including 13 on different Japanese dictionaries and encyclopedias.

In evaluations after the class, the students said that creating an encyclopedia taught them discipline in writing and put them in contact with experts who improved their work and whom, in some cases, they were later able to interview.

“Most were positive about the experience, especially the training in writing encyclopedia articles, which all of them came to realize is not an easy matter,” Professor Smith wrote in an e-mail message. “Many also retained their initial ambivalence about Wikipedia itself.”

The discussion raised by the Middlebury policy has been covered by student newspapers at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) and Tufts, among others. The Middlebury Campus, the student weekly, included an opinion article last week by Chandler Koglmeier that accused the history department of introducing “the beginnings of censorship.”

Other students call the move unnecessary. Keith Williams, a senior majoring in economics, said students “understand that Wikipedia is not a responsible source, that it hasn’t been thoroughly vetted.” Yet he said, “I personally use it all the time.”

Jason Mittell, an assistant professor of American studies and film and media culture at Middlebury, said he planned to take the pro-Wikipedia side in the campus debate. “The message that is being sent is that ultimately they see it as a threat to traditional knowledge,” he said. “I see it as an opportunity. What does that mean for traditional scholarship? Does traditional scholarship lose value?” For his course “Media Technology and Cultural Change,” which began this month, Professor Mittell said he would require his students to create a Wikipedia entry as well as post a video on YouTube, create a podcast and produce a blog for the course.

Another Middlebury professor, Thomas Beyer, of the Russian department, said, “I guess I am not terribly impressed by anyone citing an encyclopedia as a reference point, but I am not against using it as a starting point.”

And yes, back at Wikipedia, the Jesuits are still credited as supporting the Shimabara Rebellion.