



SHANE GREENSTEIN

Teaching Note: Wikipedia in the Spotlight

Synopsis

Wikipedia was positioned as the “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” After only five years in existence the site exceeded 1 million entries in English, and the number of entries was growing incredibly fast. Wikipedia had extended its format to more than one hundred languages, emerging as one of the top twenty most visited sites on the Internet.

The case discusses the factors that brought Wikipedia attention and success. To motivate case discussion, the students are asked to grapple with the issues facing Jimmy “Jimbo” Wales, the founder of Wikipedia and board member of the policy-governing Wikimedia Foundation. The situation faced by Wikipedia had no precedent and was far from the norm for profit-oriented e-commerce. Wikipedia was an open-source site, but did not work like most other open-source projects devoted to assembling code.

The site had grown dramatically, so clearly it had done something well. Should the foundation continue on as it had and hope for the best? Or should it change a few policies in anticipation of accommodating a larger user and contributor base? As discussed below, these questions help direct students’ attention to three subtopics: (1) defining what Wikipedia is and what it is not; (2) analyzing how it works; and (3) understanding why it generates controversy in some circles. If students understand these facets of Wikipedia at the end of discussion, then the instructor has had a successful class.

Teaching Objectives

The case teaches students to understand the factors shaping Wikipedia in particular and wikis in general. Students will become familiar with the internal operations of wikis, an open-source program for developing text from many users. Depending on the instructor’s preference, the case can also facilitate teaching students about factors that shape reference sites on the Internet.

POSITION IN COURSE

There are several ways to teach the lessons of this case, which depend partly on the technical sophistication of the student community and partly on the instructor’s needs.

I have used the case as part of an MBA course on technology strategy in my section on open source. In this class the students come with a mix of technical and non-technical backgrounds.

The students with technical backgrounds (and/or programming experience) typically like this topic, and enjoy discussing Wikipedia. The students with non-technical backgrounds also like the case because they find many facets of this case easier to grasp than other well known examples of open source, such as Linux, Apache, or MySQL. The case also appeals to students because they can examine the history of any page to develop a feel for how specific entries evolved.

The case can be supplemented with other readings about open source. A general overview is provided by Sandeep Krishnamurthy, "A Managerial Overview of Open Source Software," *Business Horizons*, September–October 2003. Another interesting interpretation comes from Eric Von Hippel, "Innovation by User Communities: Learning from Open-Source Software" in Edward B. Roberts, ed., *Innovation: Driving Product, Process, and Market Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). And, of course, no discussion on open source is complete without a version of the essay by Eric Raymond, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar." It is available from multiple sources, including *First Monday* at www.firstmonday.dk.

This case can pair with Robert Burgelman et al., "MySQL Open Source Database in 2004," Case #SM-124 (Stanford University, June 1, 2004). Some MBAs like the contrast between one case with a profit-oriented open-source organization and another that is not. Not all instructors will want to have such a pairing, however, because the lessons from the case on MySQL are quite different. Another possibility is Andrew P. McAfee's article, "Enterprise 2.0: The Dawn of Emergent Collaboration," *Sloan Management Review* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 21–28.

Having the Wikipedia site available for viewing during the class discussion is helpful. The workings of Wikipedia are more transparent as a result.

CASE ANALYSIS

Class discussion can be usefully divided into three subtopics: (1) defining what Wikipedia is and what it is not; (2) analyzing how it works; and (3) understanding why it generates controversy in some circles.

What Wikipedia Is and What It Is Not

Instructors need to devote some time to discussing what Wikipedia is, particularly in comparison to other reference sites. Most students will have some familiarity with Wikipedia, even if it is only second hand, such as through Steven Colbert's nationally televised lampooning of the site. However, most students have not used the site extensively or contributed to it, so they will not have developed a particularly deep understanding of its strengths and weaknesses.

Most essential to the discussion is an understanding of the objectives of a reference volume such as an encyclopedia. It is useful to ask students to define what a traditional encyclopedia in book format does, then to compare it against Wikipedia's objectives. Traditional encyclopedias have a top-down quality, i.e., the editorial staff organizes the content and assigns responsibility for writing passages to experts. Wikipedia has a bottom-up quality because users suggest content, request topics, self-select into expertise on specific topics, and ultimately substantially write the content.

It is also useful to begin with a discussion about the differences between a non-profit and profit-oriented organization, even when both are in online formats. These differences shape several obvious contrasting features, such as pricing, advertising, and some choices over scope of content, between Wikipedia and Britannica Online, for example.

Highlighting other contrasts can initiate good discussion. Though both types of references include large numbers of entries in scientific and historical areas, Wikipedia has room for wider scope and broader coverage of popular topics such as those related to celebrities or other topics that a traditional encyclopedia disdains. Also, traditional encyclopedia entries are written by one author and edited by professional staff. In contrast, most entries in Wikipedia receive content from many sources and no single point of view dominates any entry that many users have revised.

How Wikipedia Works

The class will need to discuss how a wiki works. The case discusses the mechanics behind a wiki in some detail, but the instructor can easily pull up an online site to illustrate certain facets—such as a history page. That discussion also should include a review of the basic tenets of open-source licensing. For example, under the license governing Wikipedia every contributor authorizes every other contributor to use his or her content, but small sections may be used by anyone for his or her own commercial purposes.

The class discussion should concentrate on understanding how Wikipedia manages to grow and sustain itself over time. Students must appreciate that a community of volunteers lies behind what they see, as in any open-source project.

The most devoted volunteers call themselves Wikipedians. Wikipedians vary in level of specialization and degree of contribution. Some, probably less than a few thousand, tend to focus on editing passages and making them more readable, as well as adding content. Others, somewhere in the tens of thousands, add content in places where they can, but do not tend to do more than that. Still others, somewhere in the hundreds of thousands, add a small number of things here or there, but very infrequently.

Students should try to understand that humans—and human processes—lie behind the operations of this community. Wikipedians share an outlook about what they are doing. Many of the most devoted Wikipedians have developed friendships and working relationships with each other. Those relationships help the organization function.

The instructor can decide how much he or she wants to discuss facets of Wikipedia that are unique to its culture and not found in other open-source projects. At a minimum, the discussion must review the basics of open-source philosophy. For example, all Wikipedians believe that more review improves an entry, as perty expressed in Linus' Law: "Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow." Such a discussion is essential because this philosophy is part of the shared outlook of all heavy contributors. It is also useful to discuss Wikipedians' shared understanding about the importance of a "neutral point of view" and the need for a credible source of information. I also review the shared understanding among Wikipedians about the importance of consensus and "wiki etiquette"—i.e., good faith, civility, and discussion.

The fact that Wikipedia works at all is quite counterintuitive for many students, especially when they become familiar with some of the challenges the site faces. The site has a running battle with vandals and pranksters, who insert profanity and deliberate inaccuracies in some passages. The site had to develop sophisticated programs to allow contributors to be alerted when others edited their entries, making it possible for one contributor to monitor another. In addition, while wiki etiquette resolves most disagreements and open issues, some entries also deteriorate into revision wars. These disputes require overt dispute resolution from an arbitration committee.

Many observers have commented on how remarkable it is that the entire site did not collapse under the weight of vandals and disputes. Wikipedia depends on many volunteer contributors caring enough about it to limit the damage from destructive behavior. This accomplishment deserves attention, and the case highlights it with several quotes. At the same time it can lead to an interesting discussion about why contributors care so much.

Why Wikipedia Is Controversial

Students usually engage in a lively discussion about why Wikipedia generates controversy in some circles. The case highlights criticisms coming from those in the traditional profit-oriented reference business, in part because it generates the sharpest contrasts. Most students immediately embrace concerns about the accuracy of the information in Wikipedia, especially in the scientific entries. That discussion is worth having, but a good discussion should not stop there.

There are several other contrasts worth highlighting. While a traditional encyclopedia's editors select experts and edit passages for quality and accuracy, Wikipedia has self-selected editors. Volunteers bring information from many sources. While a traditional encyclopedia contains passages from one author, Wikipedia contains passages from many authors, blended together to represent different points of view. The scope of coverage and emphasis within passages also varies between the two formats, as already noted.

That process appears to work reasonably well when the topic is a scientific one with a long-established set of accepted facts. It also seems to work reasonably well on uncontroversial historical topics. Remarkably, it can work well when the emphasis on neutral points of view brings many different details to light. But in some cases entries receive little revision or attention, so inaccuracies can go undetected for long periods, and erroneous writing can stay on the site until someone takes an interest in editing it.

Students should leave the discussion appreciating that proponents of traditional encyclopedias and Wikipedia each hold very different world views. Participants in traditional encyclopedia organizations find many objections to the way Wikipedia operates. The case brings many of these criticisms to light. Heavy contributors to Wikipedia would find the objections invalid and would raise an equal number of objections about the operations of traditional encyclopedias. As Wikipedia grows and enjoys success, its contributors have become more steadfast in their views that Wikipedia has developed something uniquely valuable. Somewhat ironically, it appears that neither side cares for the other's point of view and there appears to be no middle ground.

SUPPLEMENTAL EXERCISES

I highly recommend that students have some familiarity with the site before having the discussion. There are three ways to do this: (1) require that students read some passages on the site and report about the experience; (2) ask students to choose an area in which they have expertise and then compare particular passages on the site with particular passages in a traditional encyclopedia, such as Britannica, and try to discern which entry is most accurate; (3) have teams of students make entries themselves or fix existing entries, then report on the experience.



NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY