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Association for Israel Studies

TEACHING ISRAEL STUDIES

Using Wikipedia in Israel Studies Courses

Shira Klein

Instructors of Israeli history or literature, like professors in other areas, complain about students' use of Wikipedia—and with good reason. Unlike peer-reviewed scholarship, many Wikipedia articles contain information that is both incomplete and wrong. Most instructors will warn their students that relying on Wikipedia is a sure recipe for failing assignments. Yet there is a way to mobilize this giant encyclopedia for pedagogical purposes. When students in Israel Studies classes are assigned to edit Wikipedia articles, they achieve multiple goals: they gain critical reading skills, shape public knowledge about Israel, and engage in active learning. This article explains how to run a Wikipedia-editing assignment, outlines its pedagogical benefits, and highlights challenges involved in editing articles on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Here is one way to carry out a Wikipedia-editing assignment. Students begin the Wikipedia project by locating a scholarly essay on a topic of interest in Israeli history (or, depending on the course, literature, film, political science, etc.). After summarizing the essay, they select a Wikipedia article on the same subject. Students then juxtapose the scholarly source with the Wikipedia article, identify the Wikipedia article's weaknesses, and compose a plan to improve it with the help of the scholarly source. After learning basic Wikipedia-editing skills through online tutorials, students inform the international Wikipedia community of their plan on the 'Talk Page', a page assigned to every Wikipedia article for the purpose of discussing improvements needed in the article. Students then make the actual changes in the article and cite the scholarly essay as their source. The changes, like all edits made in Wikipedia, go online immediately and are visible for the world to see. Students may conclude the assignment by writing a reflection paper on the experience of

critiquing and editing Wikipedia. The project may constitute a substantial part of the course—for example, 20 percent of a course’s final grade—while still leaving time for substantive content learning.

Instructors can adapt this model as they wish, but the key is to build up to it incrementally. Some may choose to provide their students with a pool of vetted scholarly sources or a preselected list of Wikipedia articles in need of improvement.

Faculty interested in designing Wikipedia assignments do not need to invent the wheel. The Wikipedia Education Foundation (WEF), a non-profit organization founded in 2010, offers tremendous support for professors eager to incorporate Wikipedia in their classes. The WEF has developed editing tutorials, grading rubrics, and assignment ideas, and it provides live support (see WEF 2017c). The WEF’s most important tool is the dashboard (fig. 1), a user interface that enables instructors to break down the Wikipedia assignments into incremental portions, track each student’s Wikipedia edits, and assign tutorials.¹

With the WEF’s help, instructors in over 1,000 courses, spread out in 400 universities in the United States and Canada, have guided 22,000 students in creating or improving 37,000 Wikipedia articles (WEF 2017a, 2017b).

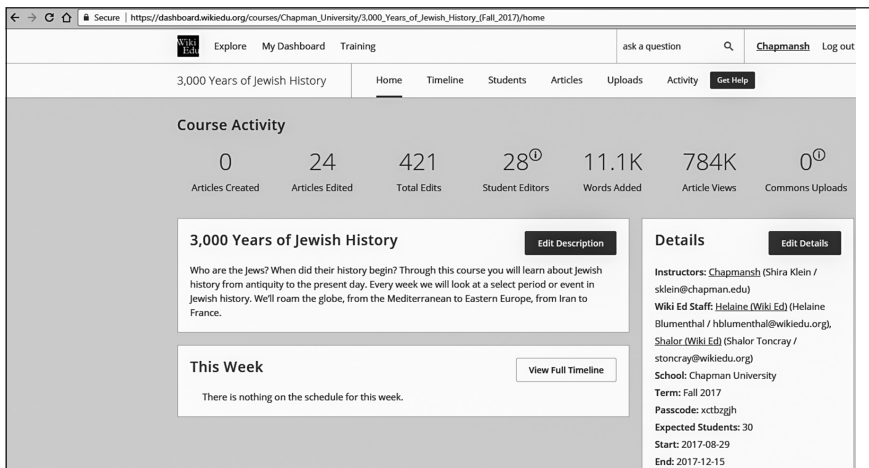


FIGURE 1 The WEF dashboard for the author’s course “3,000 Years of Jewish History.” Source: [https://dashboard.wikiedu.org/courses/Chapman_University/3,000_Years_of_Jewish_History_\(Fall_2017\)/home](https://dashboard.wikiedu.org/courses/Chapman_University/3,000_Years_of_Jewish_History_(Fall_2017)/home).

Benefits of Wikipedia Editing

The most apparent benefit of having students edit Wikipedia is the practice it gives them in critical analysis. By reading Wikipedia articles alongside scholarly essays, students hone their ability to check evidence and weed out fallacies. This criticism, in turn, shakes students' trust in Wikipedia and, more generally, in non-peer-reviewed information. Instructors know well that the massive online encyclopedia offers no guarantee of scholarly rigor, can be edited by anyone, and is therefore riddled with mistakes and bias. Simply telling this to students, however, rarely prevents them from relying on it for their academic work. In fact, a study conducted by the University of Washington found that 75 percent of students used Wikipedia for academic research, even if an instructor advised against it (Head and Eisenberg 2010). Requiring students to critique Wikipedia reveals to them first-hand the pitfalls of trusting Wikipedia.

Editing Wikipedia, even more than critiquing it, helps students realize why they should not trust Wikipedia. The strongest moment of realization takes place when students make worthy changes to an article, only to see those changes deleted, sometimes within minutes, by one of Wikipedia's many anonymous editors, who evidently lack the expertise to recognize the value of the students' new contributions. This experience illustrates to students one of the major failings of the online encyclopedia: non-experts have as much clout as experts. Discomfiting though it is to have one's changes expunged, this experience emphasizes to students both the crucial need to question information and the value of peer-reviewed, scholarly work. In this age of 'alternative facts', when statements count regardless of their truthfulness, it becomes all the more important to teach students to examine information critically.

A second benefit of Wikipedia editing lies in its impact. Unlike virtually any other assignment, students can educate the global community while enhancing their own knowledge, a form of service learning. Students, with their instructors' guidance, have a tangible contribution to make to Wikipedia's often faulty articles on Israel. To give just one example, the Wikipedia (2017b) article on the Second Aliyah states that its "immigrants were primarily idealists." This statement has been disproved by recent scholarship (Alroey 2014:

chaps. 1; 3) and—in Wikipedia’s typically discombobulated way—is even contradicted a few lines down in the same article. With a professor’s help, students in a course on Israeli history could find a scholarly work examining the correct characteristics of Second Aliyah immigrants and fix that error.

Furthermore, by citing peer-reviewed books and articles in Wikipedia, students help disseminate scholarly findings. They therefore render a service to scholars, whose research rarely reaches such audiences. Students’ impact is immediate and immense, since the improvements they make in Wikipedia are read daily by people all over the world. To continue with the example above, according to the analytics hosting site Wikimedia Toolforge (2017), the “Second Aliyah” page receives 1,500 views a month, more exposure than most academics would dream of achieving for their books or articles.

We may think of undergraduate students as too unversed in Israel Studies to be able to contribute to Wikipedia, but they are in fact better qualified than many Wikipedia editors. For example, 45 percent of Wikipedia editors have no degree level of advanced education whatsoever (Wikipedia 2017g). Our students, in contrast, make their edits after studying a semester of Israeli history (or some other aspect of Israel Studies), reading some of the best scholarship in the field, and receiving their professors’ expert feedback. Students’ work can therefore help to make Wikipedia a more accurate source of knowledge. Although some Wikipedia editors do read academic works (some even more than a typical student), college students usually have access to libraries and subscription-based journal databases that the general public cannot easily obtain.

A third reason to encourage students to edit this online encyclopedia is the student engagement it encourages. The same ‘anyone-can-edit’ rule that weakens Wikipedia also prods students to fully engage in the writing process and constantly think about what they are doing. Students editing Wikipedia receive continuous feedback on their work, starting with the article’s Talk Page, where they lay out what they intend to change in the article.² Anonymous editors can—and most often do—comment on students’ planned changes, critique them, or pose questions. Further feedback is given in the article itself, after the students input their actual changes. Anonymous Wikipedia editors react with their own edits, sometimes tweaking the original contribution, other times changing it substan-

tially. By responding to such feedback, students become active learners, since they need to justify their edits every step of the way.

Wikipedia editing encourages student engagement because of its public nature. Research shows that writing for large audiences increases motivation and improves writing fluency (Cohen and Riel 1989: 143; McGrail and Behizadeh 2017: 29). My five years of helping students edit Wikipedia confirm those findings. The pressure of going public brings out the best in students, who invest more in their work because they know thousands of people will read it. Normally sloppy writers produce coherent prose, take care not to paraphrase too closely, and cite their sources religiously—all to ensure their work will not be judged as wanting under the scrutinizing eye of other editors.

Warning: The Conflict Zone

While professors in most fields can assign Wikipedia editing without a second thought, Israel Studies instructors face a particular challenge. There is a firm barrier on who is permitted to edit articles related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such articles can be edited only by seasoned editors—people whose Wikipedia user accounts are at least 30 days old, and who have made at least 500 edits—and that necessarily precludes college students, most of whom are new editors, as well as their professors. The 30/500 rule, as it has come to be known among Wikipedians, was not designed to preclude our students: it stems from what Wikipedians call ‘edit wars’. Wikipedia has become a sort of digital microcosm of the actual Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with editors slashing at one another’s contributions. One person might make a change; the next will delete it; the first will revert the deletion; the next will revert the reversion, and so on.

These battles, along with rabidly hostile remarks posted on Talk Pages, became so frequent and belligerent that in 2015 Wikipedia’s Arbitration Committee—a group of veteran editors who resolve serious disputes—decided to place a blanket restriction on all articles related to the conflict (see “General Prohibition,” Wikipedia 2016). They established the 30/500 rule in the hope that seasoned Wikipedia users, more versed in editing etiquette, would avoid hotheaded behavior. This rule is extremely unusual for Wikipedia, which prides itself on providing “free content that anyone can use, edit, and

distribute” (Wikipedia 2017f): There are other areas where editing wars have resulted in sanctions—the Arbitration Committee lists 34 such topics, including abortion, climate change, and scientology (see “Current Areas of Conflict,” Wikipedia 2017e)—but articles on the Israeli- Palestinian conflict face the strictest barriers. The 30/500 rule is “something drastic,” admitted the Committee, employed only after “all the conventional remedies [had] failed” (see “General Prohibition,” Wikipedia 2016).

For Israel Studies professors, the 30/500 rule presents a hurdle because it gravely limits the topics students can edit. By December 2017, close to 1,500 articles were placed under the 30/500 rule, and the list is growing (Wikipedia 2017a). An article is restricted if its Talk Page bears the banner “WARNING: ACTIVE ARBITRATION REMEDIES” (fig. 2). Restricted articles range from glaringly controversial topics, such as Jerusalem (Wikipedia 2017d), to less obvious matters such as the First Aliyah (Wikipedia 2017c). Some of these articles show the warning banner without any enforcement, meaning that new users could get away with edits even though they are not supposed to. Other articles—marked by a padlock icon on the top right of the article’s main page—are ‘locked’, meaning that new users will find themselves automatically blocked from any editing (fig. 3).

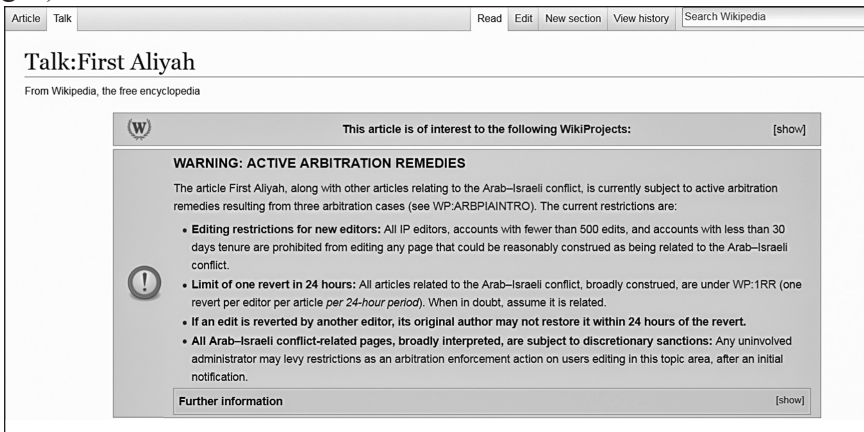


FIGURE 2 Wikipedia’s “First Aliya” Talk Page, with the “Active Arbitration Remedies” banner. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:First_Aliyah.



FIGURE 3 “Yom Kippur War” main article page on Wikipedia, featuring a small padlock in the top-right corner. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yom_Kippur_War.

Luckily, there are still hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Israel-related articles that are free of restrictions. Instructors could propose a pool of Wikipedia articles for students to edit. To give a few examples, students could edit “History of Zionism,” “World Zionist Organization,” or “White Paper of 1939” in a class on Israeli history; “Ajami,” “Yossi and Jagger,” or “Sayed Kashua” in a class on Israeli film and literature; “Israeli Labor Party” and “Likud” in a political science class, and so forth. Some of these articles may come under the 30/500 rule in the future, but there are plenty that will not. If students still want to edit articles on the conflict, there is a workaround. They can draw up a plan to improve a restricted article and post it on the article’s Talk Page, requesting someone else (who qualifies for the 30/500 requirement) to post the changes for them. An especially industrious professor might work in advance of the course to accumulate 500 edits and thus be able to post her/his students’ changes for them.

The edit wars themselves can prove illuminating for teaching the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. Faculty who teach graduate-level classes on the conflict may embrace the edit wars as an opportunity to engage students in historiographic questions. What historical controversies generate the most heated debates, and why? How do edit wars differ from the battles waged among historians? To what extent do editors bring in scholarly literature to back their arguments on Talk Pages? In what way do they tie historical debates to the current conflict or to personal experiences? For undergraduate-level courses, such in-depth analyses would be lost on most students, but even then, the degree of animosity between editors can be brought in as a telling example of the

country's conflict-ridden past and present.

Notwithstanding the pitfalls particular to Israel Studies, Wikipedia editing is a worthy pedagogical tool. With 470 million unique visitors a month, Wikipedia is the most widely accessed source of information on any topic, including on Israeli history, film and literature, and political science. It is time to harness this behemoth of knowledge for our students' benefit.

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SHIRA KLEIN is an Assistant Professor of History at Chapman University in California. She holds a PhD from New York University and is the author of *Italy's Jews from Emancipation to Fascism* (2018). She has won awards from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Yad Hanadiv/Beracha Foundation, and the USC Shoah Foundation. E-mail: sklein@chapman.edu

NOTES

1. Information about Wikipedia's dashboard system for developing and managing courses can be viewed at <https://dashboard.wikiedu.org/>.
2. For any Wikipedia article's Talk Page, click the 'Talk' tab on the top left of the page. This option may not be visible when accessing from a mobile device.

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