Swiss 7th graders edit the world’s largest encyclopedia

For the complete article with media resources, visit: http://www.nationalgeographic.org/news/web-work/

By Stuart Thornton

Tuesday, October 1, 2013

Middle school students are contributing valuable information to one of the most visited and most cited sources on the Internet: Wikipedia.

Every day, users of French Wikipedia might be reading and referencing entries created by the 7th grade students in Gabriel Thullen’s computer science class at the College des Colombieres in Versoix, Switzerland.

Thullen’s students have created 78 Wikipedia articles—mostly in French—and contributed to hundreds of others. The student-written contributions cover a wide range of subjects—from entries on the clothing brand Aeropostale, to the Israeli singer Asaf Avidan, to the ice cream snack Dippin’ Dots, to the rap album Planete Trappes Vol. 2, to Amazonian parrots.

Thullen, a math and computer science teacher, initially had his students create their own websites before embarking on the Wikipedia project in 2006. He decided on the more interactive assignments in order to help his students better understand researching on the Internet.

“The big problem in the ’90s was the kids would be asked to do a report on something, and they’d come back and they’d printed 20 pages from some website.” Thullen says. “They had absolutely no idea how to check websites or
to filter them a bit."

Thullen focused on Wikipedia because so many students visit the resource when writing reports.

"I started with them editing articles on Wikipedia, like correcting little mistakes or adding articles, because when you add information to Wikipedia, it is actually quite a complicated process." Thullen says. "You have to find the resources and references on the web to write it up. And you just can’t copy and paste. You have got to use your own words."

When Thullen first began the Wikipedia project, he would get all of his students to work together on the same entries, many focusing on geography and biology.

But he quickly learned that students really got into the project if they were editing or writing entries on subjects they were excited about.

"Little by little, I had them choose whatever they wanted—what they were interested in—and they were a lot more positive about the assignment,” he says.

**Encyclopedic Learning**

The Wikipedia project teaches Thullen’s students several skills.

"They have to learn how to use the Internet, how to use the encyclopedia, and at the same time, to learn how to type and use a word processor," Thullen says.

Perhaps most importantly, Thullen’s students learn about research and citation. Since Wikipedia is such a popular resource, the project gives students a better understanding of the website's content, which can be written or edited by anyone.
“That [the project] is how I teach them to search information on the web and to double check the information they find on Wikipedia, because they also realize that anyone can edit Wikipedia,” he says.

Learning how to properly use Wikipedia can redirect students to the resources that have been used to write the entries.

“Within a [Wikipedia] article, if it is well-written, there will be a lot of references to websites, to other information,” Thullen says. “I always tell them to check the references, because the articles on Wikipedia are basically a summary of what you can find on the web.”

Like most Wikipedia editors, Thullen’s students are anonymous contributors.

“It is very delicate, having students contribute information on the web, whether it is by creating websites, blogs, or exchanging emails,” he says. “There are a lot of regulations we have to follow, permission slips and so on. On the other hand, Wikipedia editors are by design anonymous. The only thing I have to watch out for is that my students choose a user-name that does not identify them and be careful that they do not add any personal information on their user page.

Because Wikipedia does not ask for any personal information, I do not have to abide by the different regulations concerning websites, and that just makes life so much easier for me.”

Thullen says his students approach the Wikipedia project in different ways.

“Some students are at ease with writing,” he says. “They write easily. It is not a big thing for them to write. They want to write an article on some particular subject that isn’t there. They feel a lot more comfortable with just creating the article and writing. Some students are a lot less comfortable, and they are willing to add a sentence or two. They do a draft, and then we check it. Then they check it with their French teacher, and then I check it. Then we write it. Even for one or two sentences, sometimes it takes two class periods.”
Even though the students have different levels of involvement in the project, Thullen believes they all get something out of the experience.

"They enjoy it a lot," he says. "Then they show it to their families or their friends, and they are proud of having been able to edit Wikipedia."

**Vocabulary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anonymous</td>
<td>adjective, noun</td>
<td>unknown person or contributor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biology</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>study of living things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blog</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>(web log) website that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cite</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to give as an example.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>computer science</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>study of the design and operation of computer hardware and software, and the applications of computer technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>delicate</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>fragile or easily damaged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>embark</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>to leave or set off on a journey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>encyclopedia</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>book, set of books, or set of articles offering introductory or comprehensive information on a branch of knowledge or a particular subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geography</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>study of places and the relationships between people and their environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initially</td>
<td>adverb</td>
<td>at first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>vast, worldwide system of linked computers and computer networks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reference</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>source of information or direction.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• National Geographic News: Editing Women into Wikipedia
• PLOS: Ten Simple Rules for Editing Wikipedia

Websites
• College des Colombieres (in French)
• Wikipedia: Education Program