

Britannica (Not Wikipedia)

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Wikipedia begins its explanation of the Encyclopædia Britannica by saying:

The Encyclopædia Britannica is a general English-language encyclopaedia published by Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., a privately-held company. The articles in the Britannica are aimed at educated adult readers, and written by a staff of about 100 full-time editors and over 4,000 expert contributors. It is widely regarded as the most scholarly of encyclopaedias.

The Encyclopedia Britannica says this about Wikipedia:

free, Internet-based encyclopaedia operating under an open-source management style. It is overseen by the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation ... a troubling difference between Wikipedia and other encyclopaedias lies in the absence of editors and authors who will accept responsibility for the accuracy and quality of their articles. These observers point out that identifiable individuals are far easier to hold accountable for mistakes, bias, and bad writing than is a community of anonymous volunteers, but other observers respond that it is not entirely clear if there is a substantial difference. Regardless of such controversies—perhaps in part because of them—Wikipedia has become a model of what the collaborative Internet community can and cannot do.

Certainly, even today in the age of googling and social networking, the Encyclopaedia Britannica is considered to be one of the most prestigious references and resources for general information about almost any topic. Reviewers claim that the Britannica covers “all human knowledge.”

Until recently “all human knowledge” did not include distance education; now it does. In the 2009 *Encyclopædia Britannica Book of the Year*, distance education/learning is explained and defined (in the past tense, by the way) on page 231.

Four characteristics distinguished distance education. First, distance education was by definition carried out through institutions; it was not self-study or a nonacademic learning environment. The institutions might or might not offer traditional classroom-based instruction as well, but they were eligible for accreditation by the same agencies as those employing traditional methods.

Second, geographic separation was inherent in distance learning, and time might also separate students and teachers. Accessibility and convenience were important advantages of this mode of education. Well-designed programs could also bridge intellectual, cultural, and social differences between students.

Third, interactive telecommunications connected the learning group with each other and with the teacher. Most often, electronic communications, such as email, were used, but traditional forms of com-

munication, such as the postal system, might also play a role. Whatever the medium, interaction was essential to distance education, as it was to any education. The connections of learners, teachers, and instructional resources became less dependent on physical proximity as communications systems became more sophisticated and widely available; consequently, the Internet, cell phones, and e-mail had contributed to the rapid growth in distance education.

Finally, distance education, like any education, established a learning group, sometimes called a learning community, which was composed of students, a teacher, and instructional resources—i.e.,

the books, sound, video, and graphic displays that allowed the student to access the content of instruction.”

And finally, legitimization of distance education/ learning must continue to be a goal of professionals in the field, and the Encyclopaedia Britannica has now made that a little easier.

REFERENCE

Simonson, M. (2009). Distance learning. In *The 2009 book of the year* (p. 231). Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.