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Open journal systems and undergraduate research

How an open journal system can facilitate digital literacy and a research culture



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Background

In August 2016 Leeds Beckett University launched its first open access undergraduate student journal, *Critical reflections: a student journal on contemporary sociological issues*. The journal is the first of its kind at the university and includes student reflections upon everyday scenarios viewed through a theoretical–sociological lens. As well as delivering many opportunities for the students, the purpose of the journal corresponds with the strategic objectives of the university as a whole. Firstly, to grow and develop a research culture by recognising the contribution of undergraduate research, and the impact this has upon the digitally literate graduate. Secondly, to allow students to capitalise upon their time at university by facilitating the experience of writing for publication, and the consequent effect upon both employability and their academic career development. The following summarises the beginnings of the journal and its relevance to the student experience, as well as outlining practical considerations for librarians, information specialists and academic staff.

Beginnings of a journal

Several key events led to the creation of the journal. During 2014 the repository support team, based in the library, were looking to expand the scope and awareness of their service, with a particular focus on open access. It was recognised that staff within the team could also enhance the promotion of open access by trialling new systems outside traditional repository software, with the aim of encouraging further engagement from both academics and students alike. It was also noted that the growth of smaller independent university publishing platforms was potentially a way of overcoming the ‘serials pricing crisis’– or sidestepping the cost of journal article publication. The Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform, developed by the Public Knowledge Project, fits with this ethos, particularly as it is open source software requiring little start-up costs other than staff time and a small amount of university server space. During 2014 and 2015 the repository support team played an active role in implementing and promoting the OJS with the intention of securing a number of interested parties throughout the university. It was anticipated that the use of OJS and the creation of a journal would not only provide useful experience for all concerned but also enable thorough investigation into the in-house publishing process as a whole. By 2016 the team had received around six expressions of interest in hosting a variety of open access journals and conference proceedings, of which three have so far made it to full publication.

The journal, which is the first of its kind at the university, has developed from a third-year module assessment task in which students apply their sociological toolkit and theories to everyday situations, thereby making an original contribution to the wider knowledge pool. Upon introducing this assessment some of the students’ work was of such high quality that the module tutors thought it a shame that it would be merely archived, so they started to publish the best pieces. In its second year, the tutors decided that, rather than editing the contributions themselves, the students could be involved in the editorial process, and they have been for the last three editions. In 2016 the move to OJS was made, and future issues will use the platform for the whole editorial process.

The use of OJS provides a good opportunity to disseminate student work to a wider readership. Whilst the student journal existed in print format, opportunities to circulate student work were limited and costly. The option of developing a blog to distribute the articles had also previously been discussed. However, given that as part of digital literacy sessions, students are advised to evaluate the credibility of their sources, the use of a blog seemed inappropriate and contradictory. Therefore the OJS platform seemed a suitable conduit for dissemination.

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In a similar vein the contribution of undergraduate research has recently been discussed. The British Conference on Undergraduate Research (2015) advocated the use of open journals to promote undergraduate work alongside practical information on establishing an in-house journal. Stone, Jensen & Beech (2016) outline the benefits for undergraduates in terms of improving the quality of student writing, and the consequent opportunity to increase employability by including publication details in prospective job applications. This was reflected in the feedback received from participating students who added the journal to their LinkedIn page and commented on how the creation of the journal had improved their academic writing skills. Importantly Garde-Hansen and Calvert (2007) outline the pedagogical advantages of publication as a means of developing higher order learning by encouraging students to develop a more reflective, evaluative attitude rather than a 'passive, spoon fed approach'. They also identified the importance of creating a 'research-culture' amongst undergraduate students. This is a particularly current consideration given both the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which recognises the importance of cultivating a research ethos, and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which emphasises the importance of delivering high-quality teaching and student engagement with their learning.

Institutional strategic drivers

As well as delivering many opportunities for students, the purpose of the journal corresponds with the strategic objectives of Leeds Beckett University as a whole. The Strategic Planning Framework 2016–21 (Leeds Beckett, 2016) comprises four key elements: an excellent education and experience; leading research and academic enterprise; a community of great people; sustainable resources. It provides an opportunity for collaborative working amongst the students themselves through the peer review process. In addition, the knowledge transfer of their research contributes to the wider knowledge base around their subject beyond an institutional level.

The creation of the journal afforded many opportunities for discussions around sharing research, open access, the cost of information, the ethical use of information, copyright and creative commons licensing. Digital literacy skills, which had previously been theoretically discussed during lectures, were put into practice, with noticeable results. The graduate attributes of digital literacy were met through the development of student awareness in these areas and by encouraging students to apply their knowledge to their article.

Practicalities and results

As with most journals, we needed to think of the target audience. In the case of Critical reflections, this was potential and current undergraduate students. The journal has been used at university open days as a marketing tool to promote the sociology course to students who may be unsure what a sociology degree entails. It was also promoted to our current final-year undergraduates to demonstrate the high level of work expected. As the journal had no resources to support marketing, this was done via social media, through face-to-face encounters at open days and during lectures.

Once the platform and mandate for the journal had been established, individual responsibilities were assigned. As the team consisted of three people, and the peer review process had been previously completed, we proceeded without section editor and reviewer roles. Key roles were journal manager and editor, which were assigned to the academic staff and academic librarian respectively, journal content being added to both the current and archive issues of the journal within a two-week period. This involved uploading pdf versions of the original and creating a metadata record for each article to enhance discoverability. Once the journal was established, interested academic staff, students and alumni were contacted directly via email and social media. Although the journal has been established for less than a year, data received

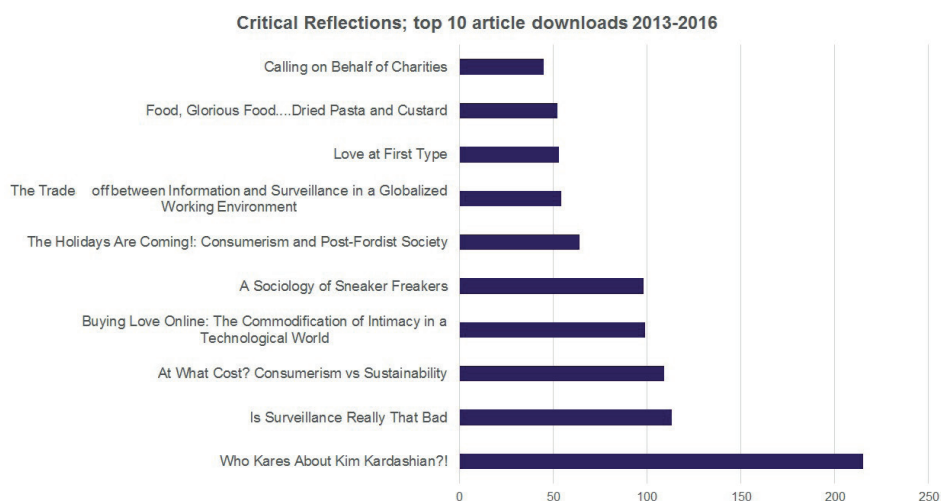
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via OJS for pdf downloads seem incredibly positive, with a total of 1553 downloads across all editions. This compares favourably with many of our subscription resources. The top three downloaded articles are: 'Who cares about Kim Kardashian?' (199 pdf downloads); 'Is surveillance really that bad?' (107); and 'At what cost? Consumerism vs sustainability' (102) (see figure).



Top ten article downloads 2013-16

Given the limited time for the journal to become established and the lack of any marketing funds, the team felt extremely optimistic. The number of downloads received proved that this had been a valuable exercise and that it was worth encouraging other course leaders to create their own journal.

Areas for consideration

Whilst the benefits of establishing a student journal are numerous, there are also many issues to consider. The first consideration was about copyright and intellectual property. The university policy on e-theses was applied to the journal publication as it was felt that the scenario was similar. If undergraduates retain copyright of their work, academic staff need permission from them before publishing. However, should the student wish to publish elsewhere, the article would need to undergo a significant re-write in line with established publishing policies.

As the sociology course does not have a professional body, adherence to professional body requirements was not a concern in this instance. However, other health-related courses with professional bodies have expressed an interest in establishing a journal. Therefore academic staff would need to ensure that professional body codes of conduct were followed, especially around matters of anonymity and ethics.

Reflection and moving forward

Plans are afoot for the OJS to be adopted by other courses and there have been expressions of interest from occupational therapy and physiotherapy. To encourage others to take the initiative, the library has produced a series of open access video tutorials to assist with any queries around establishing a journal.

A review of the student journal landscape shows that several universities are in the process of establishing, or have already established, their own journals on a variety of undergraduate or postgraduate multidisciplinary subjects. It was felt that as Leeds Beckett is a large organisation, with schools retaining individual autonomy, the use of OJS itself should reflect the overall university structure and focus on subject specific rather than multidisciplinary content.

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Creating the journal facilitated discussions around key aspects of digital literacy and contributed towards important elements of the university strategic plan. Moving forward, data gathered from student contributors, in the form of focus groups or questionnaires, could provide information to establish the usefulness of the exercise from a student perspective, and how their involvement helped develop their skills.

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