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Circular Pedagogy, Assessment and Cultural Capital: What a student journal can do for graduates, current students and tutors

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Abstract

This paper explores a third-year sociology module assessment where students critically analyze contemporary social phenomena using theoretical frameworks from the module. By incorporating their generational perspectives and zeitgeist, students produce insightful commentaries that contribute to a shared learning experience among peers and tutors. This exercise fosters a community of practice, emphasizing mutual learning and engagement. Furthermore, the assessment follows a circular pedagogy, as the most outstanding student work is published annually in an open-access online journal by a student-staff editorial board. This initiative not only enhances academic discourse but also provides students with their first publication, strengthening their CVs and employability. The paper reflects on the impact of this pedagogical approach, highlighting its role in promoting research skills, critical thinking, and collaborative knowledge production.

Keywords: Undergraduate student journal; cultural capital; assessment; circular pedagogy.

1. Introduction

In this paper our aim is to reflect on and unpack our experiences of producing, in collaboration with sociology students at Leeds Beckett University, an online journal of student 'Critical Reflections' over the past 12 years. Our paper is organized into four parts: in the following section we provide some history and background to the development of our online student journal whilst in section 3 we highlight the pedagogic strategy and principles that informed the construction of the critical reflection assessment from which the student journal publication is developed. In the final section we present two strands of reflections: Firstly, tutors' reflections on 12 years of doing the assessment and working with students who have achieved a first-class grade in the original assignment as an editorial committee to prepare the pieces for online publication with the help of technical assistance from our librarians (Bower et al., 2017). We

also present some findings from an ongoing small-scale research project that uses an online survey to explore if and how being involved in the project and having an online publication has been useful to the student authors since leaving us.

We make several claims on the basis of our joint experiences: firstly, that through careful assessment design and support, students can be facilitated to generate meaningful, valid and authentic academic knowledge of the social world that resonates and has value far beyond the boundaries of the university in the broader online ‘public sphere’ (see also Bruff, 2019). Secondly, that this process can contribute to developing students’ creativity and voice – in our case their ‘sociological imagination’ - and inspire them to produce work that has meaning and value to them, beyond simply completing an assessment. Finally, we suggest that in collaborating with students on the production of the online journal over the past 12 years we have developed a stock of student knowledge that functions as a ‘circular economy of learning and teaching’, whereby each year we use the student journal to showcase the previous work done on the module and invite students to aspire to make their own contribution to the journal.

We suggest that this form of peer-learning can be a source of inspiration and motivation for students in the attempt to move away from the traditional model that constructs students as the object of educational processes and knowledge production and instead emboldens them to be its subject. As Bruff (2019) argues, this means moving beyond understanding students as passive consumers of information and instead enabling them to take an active role in shaping their learning experiences and in producing meaningful academic knowledge in collaboration with their academic facilitators.

2. Background of the online student journal

Started in 2013 as a paper publication, the online version of Critical Reflections: A Student Journal on Contemporary Sociological Issues was launched in 2016 by the University librarian team as its first open-access student journal (Bower et al., 2017; <https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/index>). As the first of its kind at the university, the journal showcases student reflections on contemporary social phenomena through a theoretical sociological lens. In so doing, a recognition was made that the research culture could be grown and developed to include and recognise the contribution of undergraduate research and knowledge production (see also Neary and Win, 2009; Hynes, 2018). Furthermore, the experience of writing for publication allowed students to capitalise on their time and experience at university, creating a consequent effect upon both employability and their career development skills and increasing motivation for the task (Bruff, 2019).

For the library, the idea for the journal emerged from key developments in 2014 when the university’s library repository support team sought to expand awareness of open-access

initiatives. Recognizing the potential to engage both academics and students, the library team explored alternatives to traditional repository systems to promote open-access publishing.

At the same time, the rise of independent university publishing platforms was seen as a way to address the escalating costs of academic journal subscriptions, known as the "serials pricing crisis." The Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform, developed by the Public Knowledge Project, was identified as an ideal solution due to its open-source nature, requiring no licensing fees. By adopting OJS, the university aimed to create a sustainable, accessible publishing model that encourages student engagement in research while contributing to the broader academic community (Bower et al., 2017).

The journal, which remains the only one at the university, has developed organically from a third-year module assessment (discussed below) whereby students are tasked with applying their sociological toolkit of theories and concepts to an everyday social phenomenon of their choice, thereby making an original contribution to the wider pool of knowledge. Upon introducing this assessment some of the students' work was of such high quality that the module tutors thought it a shame that the knowledge produced would be merely archived, so they started to publish the best pieces in order to distribute it to a wider audience. In its second year, the tutors decided that, rather than editing the contributions themselves, the student authors could benefit from being involved in the editorial process, and they have been ever since. In 2016 the move to OJS was made, and future issues will use the platform for the whole editorial process. In the 12 years of publication, the journal has published 131 student contributions (15% of the total 902 students) (Table 1).

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 some of the students participating in the research who added the journal to their LinkedIn page and commented on how the creation of the journal had improved their academic writing skills (see section 4). The pedagogical advantages of publication and peer review as a means of authentic assessment and for developing higher order learning by encouraging students to develop a more reflective, evaluative attitude rather than a 'passive, spoon fed approach' have been demonstrated (Garde-Hansen and Calvert, 2007; Holford et al., 2024). Garde-Hansen and Calvert (2007) also identified the importance of creating a 'research-culture' amongst undergraduate students. This is a particularly current consideration given the importance in the UK of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which recognizes the importance of cultivating a research ethos, and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which emphasizes the importance of delivering high-quality teaching and student engagement with their learning.

Table 1. Number of yearly publications compared to overall student number on module; includes percentage of students published and indication of year of publication/graduation.

No publications	Students on module	% students published	Year
6	61	9%	2024
9	52	17%	2023
12	81	14%	2022
9	78	11%	2021
9	39	23%	2020
12	64	18%	2019
11	75	14%	2018
13	63	20%	2017
9	48	18%	2016
11	72	15%	2015
15	148	10%	2014
15	121	12%	2013
131	902	15%	Total

3. Pedagogic and Theoretical Framework

Several key ideas underpinned the design of the critical reflection assessment that gives the final year student work produced through it particular kinds of value. The critical reflection assignment asks students to mobilize several sociological theories and concepts covered on the module (titled Contemporary Society and Social Futures) in order to explore a social phenomenon of their choice. Within that framework the assessment is deliberately designed to be interpreted flexibly so that students are effectively designing their own assessment by exploring a topic of their choice through mobilizing theories and concepts they have learnt on the module. Students are thus challenged not simply to passively regurgitate theory they have learnt through answering a question designed by an ‘expert other’ (us) but are instead challenged to apply the content they have learned to a social phenomenon *they* find pertinent.

Our experience working on the module tells us that facilitating this kind of assessment task is challenging for both educators and students, not least because designing open-ended, student-centered assessments that facilitate high levels of student autonomy ‘compels teachers to focus more on the needs of students and less on what is easy, comfortable and familiar’ (Hynes, 2017: 3; see also Bruff, 2019). Yet, these kinds of assessments may be highly productive in terms of stimulating particularly meaningful and authentic knowledge production by students because it enables students to articulate *their* voice and to explore *their* interests through dipping into their sociological toolkit of theories and concepts and stretching their sociological imagination in

terms of how they apply that knowledge to real-world examples and in the process bring together or align sociological theory with their own interests. As Bruff (2019: 9) argues, ‘when we give students some choices in what work they do or in how they go about that work, we help them embrace the work as their own and engage more deeply in it’, generating greater authenticity and motivation in the process and a deeper, more meaningful learning experience amongst students, and indeed, academics. From the instructor point of view, putting assessment construction in the hands of students, and tasking students with theorizing their own areas of interest, shines a light on how students perceive the world around them, and genuinely and authentically validates student’s epistemic vantage point as a source of academic knowledge production. We also place this paper in current debates of pedagogy as a circular process where learners grow and develop by taking different roles and identities as they navigate a research-informed learning continuum defined by growing levels of complexity and uncertainty (Morales et al., 2022). Students find inspiration from their predecessors’ topics as well as the resulting publications thereby contributing to what Morales et al. (2022) have called a “circular pedagogy” where the role of the teacher, student and researcher endure thus helping to develop a community of practice.

Furthermore, in working with students collaboratively on the design of our teaching, assessment and learning strategy and on the construction of games and learning tools to be used on the sociology degree at Leeds Beckett University over the last 2 decades, we have been strongly influenced by some of the key principles of the ‘students as producers’ critical pedagogy (see Neary and Winn, 2009; Gerodetti and Nixon 2014; Strudwick, 2017; Hynes, 2017; Bruff, 2019). We share a strong belief with that discourse that through careful curriculum and assessment design, and through working alongside academics as collaborators or partners in the construction of academic knowledge, students can be facilitated to produce meaningful and authentic knowledge that is valuable both inside and outside of academia (Matthews, 2016). This has been brought home to us through the years as our student journal gains more and more views online from people all around the world and the student authors gain more and more citations on their individual papers (Table 2). An outcome that was far beyond our initial expectations for the journal.

Taking students’ epistemic vantage point seriously, as the starting point for the generation and production of useful and valid academic knowledge alongside academic facilitators or collaborators, is a foundational plank of the ‘student as producer’ discourse. As Strudwick contends (2017:75) “through embedding students in higher education, not as recipients, or consumers, or customers, but as collaborators, Student as Producer embraces the importance of ensuring meaningful participation between academics and students.... such reshaping effectively demonstrates to students the benefits skills, knowledge and engagement within a culture of partnerships in teaching and learning”.

Table 2. Contributions with highest number of views and number of citations. Source: James Fisher, LBU library technician.

Critical Reflections article	No views	No citations
That's Problematic': Tracing the Birth of Call-Out Culture	2,620	23
SHEIN: The Perfectionists of Manipulation and Exploitation	2,563	3
Veganism in a Post Modern Society	1,555	3
TikTok: The Darkside of Surveillance	979	5
Is the 'Girl Boss' Really Just an Anti-Feminist Commodification	633	2

The 131 student papers that we have now published across the 12 editions of our student journal aptly demonstrate the creative benefits that can also accrue from this kind of approach to student learning and knowledge production. We believe that the process outlined here has assisted in developing our student's sociological imagination and academic identity (McGregor, 2022) by providing them with an exercise and opportunity to develop and articulate their academic voice. Over time the knowledge generated and consolidated in the student journal has become an important resource and a source of both inspiration and aspiration for current students who appear very eager and motivated to contribute to the journal and in the process develop their first academic publication. In the last section we reflect on some of our key observations regarding the benefits of the project to us as educators and also include feedback data from student authors, harvested from an online survey conducted in January 2025.

4. Reflections & Conclusions

For current students seeing previous students' work published serves as a motivational driver to do well themselves and get published in the next issue. Furthermore, it also contributes to the idea of students and tutors as a community of practice and helps the development of a circular pedagogy whereby skills and ideas are fed back into the loop of learning and teaching. For graduates, the publications are yet another form of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) and many clearly deploy their publications in their further endeavors where it frequently is a topic of conversation at interviews:

"Having a publication has helped elevate my CV and provide confidence in the areas where I lack experience. It has also helped me showcase some of my skills that would otherwise not be demonstrable...I have cited my publication during a number of job interviews and higher studies applications - the topic of my reflection has been directly relevant to some of the roles I applied for". Graduate A

"It has certainly been a benefit in terms of getting jobs (and interviews) - a good conversation starter in terms of why sociology is relevant outside of the classroom. I am also an EPQ

mentor at work, so having publications like this is useful in supporting students with their writing....”. Graduate B

“I’m so proud of it! I talk about it all the time, and if anything when i read it back now I find it so interesting that even though ive changed so much my writing is still very similar, so I feel like having the process and being supported through it I felt like I found my voice” Graduate C.

“For me the main benefit was being involved in the editorial process (I also wrote the introduction to the issue that year). This was really helpful experience for applying for postgraduate study and also when I started peer reviewing research papers”. Graduate D

Reading and editing other students’ work has intrinsic value to final year students. For us as tutors we also have a track record and pool of students’ publications that we use at university Open and Applicant Days where we can proudly demonstrate what some of our students are achieving by their third year of study.

This paper has highlighted the value of a third-year Sociology module assessment that encourages students to critically engage with contemporary social issues through theoretical frameworks. By incorporating their generational perspectives, students contribute to a shared learning environment that we use to foster a community of practice and circular pedagogy within our teaching. For the graduate, the annual publication of outstanding work in an open-access journal not only enhances student academic discourse but also provides students with tangible cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), benefiting their career and academic aspirations.

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