

***Socheolas*¹: Critical reflections on the establishment of a peer-reviewed student
sociology journal in Ireland**

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¹ *Socheolas* is Irish for 'social knowledge'

Abstract

On 23rd April 2009 a new reviewed journal entitled '*Socheolas: Limerick Student Journal of Sociology*' was officially launched. The journal, now in its 3rd issue, is produced, edited and managed by a small team from within the Department of Sociology at the University of Limerick. The key purpose of the journal is to showcase the high-quality academic work undertaken by its undergraduate and postgraduate students. The journal offers undergraduate and first-year postgraduate students in the Department of Sociology an opportunity to improve their writing and sociological skills, both as authors and as readers of sociological research. It allows students to have first-hand experience of the process of editing and rewriting for publication in a supportive and constructive environment, while giving them the opportunity to see their work published online.

This paper will document the establishment of *Socheolas* from its origin as part of a drive to increase the profile of sociology among both the faculty and student body in UL, to its position as a central element in the active teaching and learning culture of the department. Critical reflections of the editorial team are presented, offering key insights into the practical and theoretical challenges as well as the contribution and benefits arising from the journal's evolution and development. These practical insights are supplemented by the findings from a series of small focus groups conducted with a number of student authors. These findings illustrate the positive and negative experiences of students as well as offering insight into the value and importance placed by them on the process of writing for publication. Together, these staff and student reflections inform an overall evaluation of and critical engagement with *Socheolas* as it prepares to move onto the next stage of its development.

Keywords

Writing sociologically, apprenticeship model, constructive feedback, writing for the real-world

Introduction and Motivation

As sociologists teaching various sociology modules at undergraduate and postgraduate level we are keenly aware in our teaching practice of how much students struggle to understand and appreciate the theoretical, conceptual, methodological and empirical components of our discipline. However, in the case of Irish Third Level students the task of understanding sociology is further complicated by the fact that very few people have a priori exposure to or knowledge of sociological insights and contributions in their second-level education. This 'knowledge gap' is further complicated by the fact that students must also quickly learn, recognise and use the theoretical language upon which its observations and arguments are based (Rosie, Buffon and Hirst, 2001, p.217).

While sociology would insist that all students develop such proficiencies, research would suggest that many teachers place much of their emphasis on inculcating the cognitive aspect of sociology, raising the 'sociological enlightenment' (Bauman, 2000, p.86) of their students rather than addressing the professional practice of writing and argument development. Many reasons are offered as possible explanations for this practice: large class sizes, lack of tutorial assistance, the institutional preference for publications and research over teaching performance (Grauerholz, 1999, p.310), and that it is a time-consuming activity in the sociology classroom (Emig, 1977, Griffin, 1982, Maimon, Belcher, Hearn, Nodine and O'Connor, 1981, Walvoord, 1982 cited in Minard Moynihan, 1989, p.346). While Roberts (1993, p.317) has pessimistically commented that 'we as sociologists have neither a systematic conception of writing as an integrated teaching method nor a coherent view of how writing relates to our discipline', research on first year college students offer us salient reminders of how difficult learning to write for Third Level can actually be. Academic writing standards, from referencing to the expectation of being able to be 'critical' in their thinking, readings and writings are just some of the skills that we expect and mark our students writing against. Yet, research highlights the fact that many students find their teachers to be poor communicators of exactly what they are looking for in their written assignments and more importantly, how they can achieve these criterion especially when there is huge variety in the types of feedback they receive on their work (Clerehan, Moore and Vance, NA, p.125).

This article sets out to document and record the unprecedented initiative by the Department of Sociology at the University of Limerick and its establishment of an undergraduate student journal. This student journal is not the classroom based pedagogic tool that has been recorded by Wagenaar (1984) but rather the establishment of a reviewed electronic journal of student writings. The journal is currently internal to the University of Limerick and its key purpose is to showcase the high quality sociological writing undertaken by undergraduate and postgraduate students. *Socheolas* aims to improve student writing and sociological skills, both as authors and as readers of sociological research. It allows students gain first-hand experience of the process of editing and rewriting for publication in a supportive and constructive environment, and gives them first hand experience of the culture of academic writing while also offering them the opportunity to see their work published.

Through the establishment of *Socheolas*, we aim to place students and their writings in a new context of teaching and learning, beyond the classroom. This is achieved in three ways:

- First, their writings adopt a 'real world' significance being re-written with an awareness of a much wider audience (Roberts, 1993, p.217). This awareness

of the ‘public’ nature of their writings is assumed to add a new level of purpose and resonance to the writing activity (Roberts, 1993, p.217).

- Second, because the journal allows student to revise and re-work previous course work then the activity of writing and re-writing becomes ‘a more active form of learning’ (Althausser and Darnall, 2001, p.23) than offered in any other course assignments. As a result, students acquire a better appreciation for the skill of writing and their writings improve as a result.
- Third, the journal’s policy of non-anonymous reviewing introduces students to a more dialogic form of feedback than they are used to. Students work is taken through various stages: the initial read and first review meeting where writers can directly talk with their reviewer and get feedback, instructions as well as explanations about how and why these revisions are needed. In this learning context, the students meet with their assigned member of the editorial board and collaborate on the reviewing and re-drafting process. Through these ‘collaborative social interactions’(Seely Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989,p . 40) the students are both shown as well as supporting in developing sociological writing skills. In this way, students are both experiencing and being initiated to the professional norms that go into writing sociologically, as they ‘learn through writing’ (Hylton and Allen, 1993, Cadwallader and Scarboro, 1982 cited in Althausser and Darnall, 2001, p.23). As a result, an apprenticeship model of learning is established (Seely Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989).

An evaluation of the student journal was completed in April 2010. Focus groups research was undertaken with students who had their work published in the journal in order to ascertain the effectiveness of the existing editorial process and to consider the impact that participation with this student journal has on students writing skills and overall sociological development. Overall it is hoped that the findings presented here will encourage more sociology teachers to support students writing skills by adopting a similar initiative.

Submitting a paper to *Socheolas*

There was widespread agreement between our respondents that personal encouragement was a key factor in their decision to submit a paper. All of the contributors stated that they did not have the confidence to submit the paper to the journal initially.

“I think it would be just a confidence thing that you would have to feel that your work was exceptional and it’s very few people that go around feeling their work is exceptional.

“My grades would have been good and stuff but I wouldn’t have had the confidence to kind of go and say ah yeah lob that in there it’ll be great”

All of the contributors held that they needed someone to tell them that their work was a good enough standard prior to deciding to submit to *Socheolas*.

“It was only when it was said to me personally that I did it”.

Indeed, contributors spoke of how they had been encouraged by lecturers/supervisors in the Department of Sociology to submit their papers to *Socheolas*. The following quotes from five of the contributors illustrate the impact of this process of involvement by Sociology faculty.

“It was encouragement from my FYP supervisor because like generally the work I do I wouldn’t have confidence to be putting it in for something like that for other people to be looking at it the whole time but do you know when my supervisor said it was good... follow through on it like”.

[Name of lecturer removed] would have said go for it so I thought okay.. he’s been teaching me a lot of sociology modules and I thought he’s read a lot of my stuff and he would be able to say look you’re not going to make the grade yet maybe later but don’t do it now but he kind of said yeah do so I did.

This finding is very significant, as it highlights the vital role that individual faculty members play in the cultivation of academic confidence in students. It is only once students possess confidence in their academic ability that they are prepared to submit their work to the peer review process. Accordingly, the initial feedback from faculty members may ultimately decide which students from which modules go on to submit their work to the journal.

Furthermore, contributors held that when students see fellow students (who they know personally) publishing in *Socheolas*, they are more likely to try to write for it themselves in the future.

“...there’s some of my friends in 2nd year that I know, well one of them he’s doing it for the next journal... I think when you see people ahead of you or see people that have done it before you, that you know that he was more willing to submit...”

there’s a couple of other students I know who put in stuff but they were like really, really good in 1st year so that is, in one way that can put you off because you think that’s a standard that I would reach but in another way you think well you just keep plodding away and maybe you will get to it you know.

The second quote is noteworthy in that it illustrates that even those expressing such views were conscious of the fact that some students may believe that their material is not of a similar standard to those students who had published in the journal previously. This again reinforces the critical role that encouragement from academic faculty has in the decision making process, that students go through in deciding whether or not to submit their work to the journal.

Finally, publishing in the student journal is seen by contributors as being beneficial to them academically. The quotes below illustrate a belief that the opportunity for undergraduate students to publish academically is not something that should be taken lightly. These two students expressed the opinion that they might not

progress to post-graduate study, and as such they grasped the opportunity to publish their work as an undergraduate sociology student.

“When you get the opportunity you should follow through on it that’s just the way I looked at it like.... chances are, do you know, I probably won’t ever get anything published again.”

“You mightn’t get another chance and you know I mightn’t go any further, I might just graduate and then maybe not go on to do anything else, so there wouldn’t be that chance, so take it while you have it.”

Additionally, some of the contributors saw the process of publishing in the student journals as being beneficial to them if and when they were applying for post-graduate courses or scholarships. One stated that there was “practical benefits as well, the practical side, like I said, with regards to you applying for scholarships and things”. Moreover, another contributor spoke of how being able to put an academic publication on their application form was of benefit to them, irrespective of the fact that the course this student had applied for was in a different academic discipline.

“when I was applying for ... a Masters course, that was one thing that came up straight away, even though it was not relevant to the course it was just that I had one”.

Learning about the review process

Considering that none of the students had prior experience of preparing a manuscript for publication all of the contributors spoke at length about the experience of having their work reviewed. As a result, a number of interesting issues emerged from the qualitative data, such as the extent of student anxiety that receiving feedback can generate for students as well as the eventual emergence of a more pedagogic understanding of the review process.

For all 5 participants, their encounter with *Socheolas* was their first experience of having their work reviewed for publication. As a consequence the students entered this process with no knowledge of what the review process entails. *Socheolas* reviewers work with students over an extended period of time, normally a minimum of 3 months, to bring their work up to the standard required for publication. They generally read and review a minimum of two drafts of the students work. However, because a goal of the journal is not just to showcase, but also to foster and enhance, student sociological writing, the reviewers will work with the student authors for longer if necessary. In general, they tend to work with students on their articles for as long as the students require their guidance and are demonstrating progression. Three of the students mentioned time management as a source of difficulty. Greater clarity in the information provided to the student authors on the review process, including on the likely number of redrafts and timescale, would contribute to addressing this problem.

Three of the five students experienced the first review they received as disheartening. This interpretation of the meaning of the detailed feedback they received was informed not by the content of the reviewer’s comments, but rather by

the level of detail provided. It was a result of a failure to explain the review process to these new authors.

“You know when I got the feedback first ... I didn’t know which way to take it ... You know, kind of think, ‘Oh my God it’s crap’ .. or is it good? So it was just, I was a little bit nervous about it first time ...

A fourth student felt relieved that the comments she received were not very extensive, suggesting the same negative interpretation of detailed feedback.

“I was surprised because I didn’t know what to expect and then ... I didn’t get loads of comments on the side so I was relieved at that. And what was good is that I got both positive feedback and then ways in which I could improve so I found it very constructive”.

Only one of the students, an individual who later identifies himself as the least likely to have made use of feedback in the past, did not cite his initial detailed review as causing him disquiet:

“My first thoughts were, do you know, I just read down through what the comments and ... it’s manageable ...”

After their initial disappointment, however, all the students came to realise that redrafting is an expected part of the review process, and in this context they came to appreciate the detailed commentaries with which they had been provided.

The students’ assessment of the quality of the feedback they received was very positive. It was clear that although they found the level of detail initially daunting, by the time of our focus groups they had become positively disposed to it:

“I couldn’t fault the comments that came back it was, someone had literally gone through every page and every section and sort of made comments about it that were really useful so I found that was excellent.”

Although all of the students found the feedback they received very helpful, two specifically mentioned their appreciation of the opportunity to redraft:

“The difference I suppose with with that [writing assessments] and what came with regards to Socheolas was I suppose more the experience itself of, of getting advice during the course of something and working on the advice as, through the editing process and things like that. ... I probably felt a little bit more liberated when I was writing it in the sense that I felt I could draw in more for my arguments and kind of broaden the argument out ... with I suppose the continuous kind of looking at it over and over again and the kind of liberation with that that came with it, it just made it a bit more of a freer process you know.”

“... actually it was very useful to get feedback because I know I’d always have a sick feeling in my stomach when I hand up an essay, oh God have I completely interpreted that question wrong? And that so I found that very useful that I kind of knew oh am I way off track here or am I on line.”

The students' only criticism was that, where they required clarification of the feedback received; they would have found this easier to ask for in a face to face meeting with their reviewer rather than by e-mail.

Unusually for an academic journal, *Socheolas's* review process is not completely anonymous. Initially, both the student and reviewer knew each other's identity and only in preparing volume three did we move to a system whereby the student was unaware of the identity of their reviewer (although the reviewer continued to be aware of the identity of the student author). We moved to a more anonymised review process in pursuit of the ongoing professionalisation of the journal. However, the research that informs this study suggests that student authors desire personal contact with their reviewer and may benefit more from this apprenticeship-style approach.

All but one of the focus group participants knew the identity of their reviewer(s). In all such cases they were also familiar with at least one of their reviewers, having been taught by them previously. However, only one of the students met their reviewer face to face, the others communicated exclusively by e-mail.

All of the students agreed that they would have benefited from face to face meetings with their reviewers, under which circumstances they would have found it easier to ask for clarification:

"It's just, it's a lot easier, well I won't say it's a lot easier because the comments were brilliant, but do you know when someone sits you down, you're sitting beside them, they can go through it with you ... because, myself anyway, I wouldn't be totally inclined to send back an e-mail to say where can I do this, but if I was standing beside him I'd have no bother asking him the questions."

One of the students specifically recommended that, although those who knew their reviewers identities already had a prior (and positively evaluated) relationship with them, an initial meeting would still have helped provide a foundation for more two-way communication throughout the review process.

"You see I think if there was that initial touching base with everyone I think, I think that people would be freer, feel freer to actually make more contact ..."

Despite these minor criticisms, the review process was experienced as being very instructive.

Three of the students specifically cited the review process as providing them with a more critical perspective on their work, which enabled them to better perceive where it could be improved:

"... the reviewer was excellent, like the comments were things I wouldn't have thought of, so you kind of look at the work then differently when you get the comments back ... I would make a point and whoever it was would come in and say well you're not really explaining it as well as you could, say this is [SHOULD 'IS' READ 'AS'?] well, so that it flows a lot better I think now because of that."

“The comments that were on it ... I never really saw it like that and even the people ... I didn’t even realise I was kind of being a bit biased but it was just when you get the comments back and I was like oh ...”

One of the students felt that the reviewer’s comments had opened them up to the larger significance of the particular case they had examined:

“... the topic has kind of changed ... it’s more about Irish identity ... that’s what I find now, that’s how it’s developed.”

One of the students cite the review process as giving them specific insights into how to structure their work:

“Absolutely, I think it’s a gift to get that much comment on what you’ve written. It makes you think, even doing essays now I’m kind of thinking, well the structure, maybe I fell down on the structure and there’s loads of things that I couldn’t see before that I can see now that I can change do you know.”

Prior to their experiences with *Socheolas*, the students had all received qualitative feedback on assignments, but this was always provided after the assignment had been completed.

Three of the students were very positively disposed towards receiving feedback on assignments and utilising it for the purposes of improving future work.

“Oh I really relied on feedback all the time, I always sought out feedback from everyone who I ever handed anything to.”

These three students had had largely positive past experiences of receiving high quality feedback on their work from the Department of Sociology at UL and were as such familiar with the concept of receiving detailed written feedback.

“I found actually the sociology, the sociological department’s feedback [on assignments] was probably the best by a good country mile ... So in one sense getting the feedback from the journal article was like a greater version of the feedback I was getting back so it wasn’t completely alien you know to a point as well.”

One of these students commented that she paid particular attention to feedback *“... if there’s something bad there”*.

Another student contrasted qualitative commentaries with quantitative feedback, which he described as:

“... about as helpful as a chocolate teapot ... you get this list and you have ... a scale of 1 to 5 ... what do you mean by that? You know fair enough alright I’ve got a problem with this ... but you kind of say okay how do I brush up on this and 1 in a tick box isn’t going help you ...”

The two remaining students had been much more reticent about seeking or utilising feedback. In one case, the student found it difficult to engage with more critical feedback which she experienced as undermining:

“It depends I mean if you’re in 1st year and you go for feedback and you get a very negative feedback it actually puts you off going back to that lecturer and saying you know ‘Can you just, you know, do another hatchet job on me?’. You don’t want to do that, you just think I’ve put it in and forget about it. But then having said that if you go and see someone and they are constructive and they say look if you do this, this and this you can go home and think about making those changes”.

In the second case, the student saw the learning from one module as disconnected from his performance in the next, a (mis)interpretation which may be encouraged by the modular nature of the curriculum at the University of Limerick:

“I rarely look for feedback to be honest ... once it’s [the assignment] done it’s done.”

It is notable, that as a result of the review process both of these students found their perspectives on feedback somewhat altered. The first individual came to a new understanding of how to approach feedback:

“... definitely maybe step back from your writing and detach a bit from it and just see it as a piece of work that you can improve.”

She suggests that consequently she may be more open to feedback in the future assignments:

“... if you don’t go and look for feedback: ‘Where did I fall down?’ - and you mightn’t always want to - you never find out ... and you make the same mistakes with the next assignment...”

The second individual, although he was completing his undergraduate degree at the time of his publication, recognised that the learning he acquired from the review process had the potential to aid him in other work.

A third student, who had been positively disposed to feedback prior to his encounter with *Socheolas* confirmed that he also had developed an improved attitude towards it as a result of the review process:

“... to be honest with you one of the best things about it, I found since then, is that it’s kind of broken that dam now that I don’t see feedback as being, not that I would have seen it pretty negatively anyway, but I don’t take it personally, I see it as advice now ...”.

In summary, the review process was experienced as being very supportive. The students perceived the reviewers as gatekeepers whose standards had to be satisfied to enter the journal, but equally as mentors whose seal of approval provided the students with the confidence to expose their work to public scrutiny.

“ ... I see reviewers like, I see them as kind of, these kind of gatekeepers you know. I saw them as people who were kind of saying ‘We’re giving you a hand’... ”

“They gave you every hand that they possibly could ... to do what they wanted and expected ... ”

The students felt that were other students aware of how supportive the process is they would be more willing to submit their work for review.

“I think if people were aware of the support that’s there ... I think you would be overrun with applications.”

The challenge of re-writing drafts

The review process inevitably leads to a re-drafting of the essay. The task of re-writing drafts of work also proved challenging for the students. From a compositional perspective, two students found the re-writing process difficult as they struggled with *“trying to mix the two together”* i.e. reviewer comments and incorporating them into the body of the essay. Others remarked upon the difficulty of finding the time to write for *Socheolas*. In this regard, writing for *Socheolas* has to compete with other course work, often coming second to more pressing assessments. Furthermore, two students expressed a concern about the opinion of others when re-writing their essays. Such an awareness of a wider reading audience for their essay made them more self-critical about their work. However, in both instances, the prospect of being published for a wider audience inspired him to work harder on the piece-

“you’d feel yourself putting in kind of more of an effort when you know there’s other people that are going to read it”

“it’s a bigger audience . . . I don’t want other students that know me going ‘Oh my god her referencing is absolutely rubbish’”

Despite these issues the students remarked on having achieved a strong sense of accomplishment at getting an essay published in the student journal.

“you feel a sense of achievement you know with more than an essay”

In addition, three students commented on how the re-writing process enabled them to become self-reflective learners and writers. Re-writing was seen to encourage students to be

“reflective about what you’re bringing to the process, I think that it is really important and it is really good for yourself to put it (your writing) out there”

Lastly, the re-writing process allows students for the first time to see the writing process through to an observable end. It allows students *‘to see your work kind of evolve from start to finish that was, I found that was good’*.

It is clear from the above comments that students are confronted by a number of personal obstacles as they progress through the final writing stage of their publication. The competition of demands on their time, in conjunction with a fear of social comparison, would appear to distract them momentarily from the task at hand. Despite these diversions, the decision to persist with the final writing stage was strongly endorsed by all contributors in both affectual and cognitive terms.

The impact on sociological writing skills

Three students remarked how challenging the subject and discipline of sociology can be for novice student.

“when I started the jargon drove me insane I just couldn’t understand do you know we had to use all these words that we’d, that had other meaning, you know that we couldn’t use English, that we had to use it”

Nonetheless, every research participant highlighted that writing for *Socheolas* enabled them to appreciate the language of sociology more and instructed them on how to construct better sociological arguments,

“I understand now that every academic discipline develops its own little meaning language you know that it’s really important”

Firstly, it shows students how to improve their writing style and general composition,

“there’s loads of things that I couldn’t see before that I can see now that I can change”

It also acts as a way to help them treat writing more objectively, to *“step back from your writing and detach a bit from it and just see it as a piece of work that you can improve upon”*

More specifically, the experience allowed them to strengthen their awareness of their sociological imagination and the critical lens that it offers,

“you challenge things more, you challenge what you read and that’s one thing, . . . , in everything I do now at the moment if I read something or hear about something I challenge it and try to think of it in different ways”.

For one student writing in *Socheolas* presented a greater opportunity for self-expression, to develop their own viewpoint on a topic independent of a lecturer,

“for the first time I actually felt that I had the ability or nearly the space to give my own opinion and that’s one thing I’ve brought to other essays now that it’s more that it’s not just someone else’s view that I’m presenting it’s my own”

The self-confidence in asserting ones own opinion was also matched by one student having the confidence to

“challenge a question more even if I know that the lecturer is more kind of leaning along to that way as well”.

In addition, students felt that writing for *Socheolas* offered them writing skills that are transferable across different modules and programmes,

“that you are thinking more, more like I need to put this in or I want to put this in here”.

In terms of the students estimation of writing sociologically, students learned the importance of writing clearly as well as a greater appreciation for the critical awareness that sociology offers. In both these ways, the contributors expressed a positive self-belief in their newly acquired writing and thinking skills which would prove advantageous within the discipline of sociology as well as beyond into other subjects.

Conclusions and Future Work

Clearly, the opportunity to write and be published in an undergraduate student journal presents students with a unique opportunity to gain one-to-one support in the development of academic writing skills. The initiative presented here, namely the establishment of a reviewed undergraduate student journal, suggests that many students underestimate the value of their own sociological writing skills needing active encouragement from lecturers to submit their course work for consideration by the journal. Such feelings of uncertainty continue into the early stage of the review process for the students when they receive their initial comments from their reviewers. The qualitative data outlined in this research would suggest that the use of detailed, constructive text-based as well as face-to-face feedback over a certain amount of time, being delivered by a person who is known to the student helps to encourage students to re-write and re-submit their article for publication. Such an apprenticeship model to the teaching and learning of sociological writing skills was found to yield numerous benefits to the students in question. In addition to improving their general writing skills, students commented upon how the mentoring experience with a faculty member enabled them to develop stronger analytical and critical thinking skills as well as encouraging the development of reflective learning.

However, there are two important caveats to make about the establishment and achievements of *Socheolas*. First, the writing initiative discussed here is undertaken outside the classroom and is made possible by the voluntary commitment made by the faculty members of the editorial committee. However, the Department of Sociology does fund the publicity launch of each issue and a limited paper run of the journal for department archives. In this respect, this student journal is offered at a near cost-neutral basis to the Department. Second, it must be stated that since students work has to be of a B2 grade standard this sociological writing support is only offered to students who already have an established knowledge of sociology and appropriate level of sociological writing skills. In this respect, the benefits of this mentoring approach to students undergraduate writing does not target or include students who are struggling with the discipline of sociology. However, because of its online nature, lecturers direct their students to the publication as offering good examples of essay writing and argument development. In this way, it is hoped that *Socheolas* can improve the writing skills of all the students of sociology in the University of Limerick and also beyond.

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