

Socratic Hive: a model for publishing top student essays

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Video: <https://lboro.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=71f4a518-de5c-4bc1-841e-ad3300924f10>

Abstract

Essays from finalists on topical issues, when setting them an original task and when done well, can produce analysis of publishable quality and of potential interest to the broader public. Current students also like to see what a good essay looks like. Socratic Hive is a blogging platform which I curate and on which I publish such top essays. This helps publicise what we do and has significant learning and teaching benefits applauded by our students.

1. Background

Students often ask for good examples of essays we ask them to write. My final-year module in Politics and International Relations is on a topical issue of potential interest to the general public: *State, Violence and Terrorism* (PIC604). The two main assessments on it ask students (1) to justify their preferred definition of 'terrorism' and (2) to write a critical analysis of a case study of a chosen act of terrorism or political violence. The work they produce, therefore, when done well, is worth sharing with the broader public, as well as of course with students in ensuing cohorts.

2. Methodology

I set up a WordPress website in June 2015, called *Socratic Hive*, on which I curate and publish the best past essays: <https://socratichive.wordpress.com/state-violence-and-terrorism/>. Every year, as I mark the many essays on the module (the cohort size has been ca. 80 students in recent years), I take note of the most excellent essays to consider for publication. After the marks are released, I approach the few chosen authors to invite them to publish their essay (they have always agreed, indeed usually expressing surprise and delight in getting selected for publication) and ask for the final Word version they submitted. I then convert the Word file to html, copy it and paste it on WordPress, iron out the formatting for neatness and consistency, publish it, and publicise it.

3. Issues

Student consent is of course essential, which is why I always explicitly seek it by email, and make it clear there is no pressure to agree.

It does require some basic web editing skills, but only to the level of being able to use WordPress's editor, which is well designed and user-friendly.

It is also essential to ensure the essays are of publishable quality, which is why only the top essays which I deem publishable are selected. I act as sole curator/editor, hence as guarantor of academic standards.

4. Benefits

This teaching practice provides: existing students with model essays (thereby clarifying standards for good performance), potential students with a sense of what the module and indeed studying at Loughborough has to offer, published students with a sense of pride and self-esteem, HE colleagues elsewhere with a model of best practice, and the wider world with excellent analyses of particular

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acts of terrorism and of definitional issues behind the term: 'terrorism'.

I therefore mention the website on open days ("if you're interested in reading more on what I just presented and want to get a sense of what you'll learn to do with us, see..."), on social media, and of course to current students including those considering the module as a potential option. It is also linked from my Loughborough profile and my personal website.

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5. Evidence of Success *(if available)*

The traffic metrics for Socratic Hive for the last full calendar year (2020) show that 3,722 separate users visited the site from over 110 countries in that year. Students frequently comment on the helpfulness of this resource in module feedback and in informal discussions. A 2016 Teaching Innovation Award which convened a focus group of Loughborough students to rate different modules of 'blogging' for learning and teaching uniformly rated this model as by far the preferred one, and led to the production of a short YouTube clip to report this:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rbZpD_dfJ8.

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6. How Can Other Academics Reproduce This?

This practice is easily replicable for any outstanding student work using Word which might be of interest to the general public and help showcase what Loughborough students learn to do. It only requires setting up a website or blog, a relatively small amount of time, and some web editing skills.

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7. Reflections

I had originally sought to publish top student work on the lboro.ac.uk domain, on our (then) departmental website. That meant inviting colleagues to recommend top essays and dissertations. After having done with for a couple of years, it became too complicated to coordinate, and led to inconsistencies in presentation. I felt it would be better if I managed it for my own modules, giving me tighter control of the process.

I still feel this is a model worth expanding. In particular, some of our students' top dissertations could merit similar publishing, perhaps via the library or repository, curated by the dissertation module leaders.

8. References *(if available)*

Socratic Hive: <https://socratichive.wordpress.com/>

YouTube video about the initiative: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rbZpD_dfJ8