

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hi, and welcome back to Student Connections. Well, there's been a flurry of activity in the studio. HJ and Rachel, what's going on on MyFace?

HJ: Well, there's been a lot of discussion on the chat. And I have heard that our mailman is coming. And--

[BELL RINGS]

Oh! He's come. There seems to be some mail in our inbox. And let's have a look. Oh, my word, dear me, people have been busy sending us stuff. Oh.

[BELL RINGS]

Yeah, and another one. Yeah. Dear me, there's a lot of mail. Let's have a-- oh, nice, big envelope, I love them. So, let's have a look in here.

KAREN FOLEY: It's been really great to see everyone engaging on the chat. And with so many new students here, I know it can be a bit nerve-racking sending in things, and sending your questions. But we really, really love hearing from you. We really do, so keep it up.

HJ: Yeah, so-- oh, we've got more of your fantastic selfies. That's what we like to see. We've got Fabrizio. He sent us in a lovely--

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, very nice.

HJ: --selfie there. I hope that's not his work laptop.

KAREN FOLEY: [LAUGHING]

HJ: If you are watching from work, the method I suggest is go under the desk. That always works well. And we've also got Laura. We've got several Lauras on the chat, but she's starting DD102, so that's really exciting, getting off and starting and watching us to kick it all off. Yeah.

RACHEL: And we also have another Laura. And Laura's from Northern Ireland. That's a great selfie of you, Laura. And we have another curly girl. That's Elena, she's 28, and she's about to start

DD102 as well. So it's fantastic. And I have to say, my personal favourite, this really is what being a distance learning student is about, isn't it? Here is Lee,

[LAUGHTER]

--who is currently in Lagos, in Nigeria, in bed with a cup of tea. And that's the best thing about being a distance learning student. But we also have some tips and--

HJ: I know. There's something that I wanted to pin on MyFace with our big update that we're doing and all our mail. But there's a great tip about the different methods used to research. We have quantitative and qualitative methods. One tip was, rather than think about the methods first, think about what you want to do, then look at the methods you need to do that. So I really wanted to pin that for later on MyFace there. And I think Rachel's got another fantastic one.

RACHEL: We have one more. So for those of you who were watching earlier, and you saw the information about PROMPT, I know this is very small. I don't know if you're going to be able to see it. But these are all the tips that this student, Laura, pops on her wall so that she can help to construct coherent arguments when writing a TMA.

HJ: It's very neat and tidy to have it all there.

KAREN FOLEY: Fabulous. Aw, thank you so much for sending all your things through to us. We really do love them. So do that hashtag, #SEC15, or email us connections@open.ac.uk.

Well, we have a brilliant slot. I'm joined by Dan and John in the studio now, and we're going to be talking about learning together at the OU. Dan, you've written a history of the Open University called *The Open University, A history*. And this session is about bringing some props along and talking about what we've been doing at the OU, past, present and future type thing. So what have you got here? Those look really interesting.

DAN WEINBREN: Well, this thing, which looks a bit like some elderly LEGO, is actually a microscope, and it was developed during the '40s. And eventually, the guy who made it, made his first one in 1957. It's very robust. It's light. It's easy to move around. And just at the point when he made it, it was also the moment when the USSR sent its Sputnik into space, and everybody got interested in all of that, changing universe.

And also, it was the moment when a big report came out which said that the country with the worst higher education in Europe was the UK. And shortly after that, the Americans started

saying that they were going to get into space. They're going to land on the moon. And the British started saying, well, actually, we want a scientific revolution of our own, and we're going to open a university of the air. And by the end of the '60s, they've got to the moon, and there's an Open University.

And for the Open University, they thought, well, we need some science stuff. So they got hold of the guy who'd made this, MacArthur. He'd made about 1,000 of these by this point. And they said, well, we want 8,000 within a few months, in plastic. We're going to send them off to students.

And students who see these things, and instead of just looking in textbooks, they could transform their kitchens into laboratories. They could take slides away from the campus and study things themselves. They could have the experience of seeing things for themselves through these devices.

Of course, they had to make thousands of slides. Nowadays, they don't do that, because in the 1990s, we've had the virtual microscope. And one of the first things they looked at through the virtual microscope was something which they thought about right back in the beginning because it was bits of moon rock. And you, the OU student, can get one of these things, this virtual microscope, go online, and see the same things which all the boffins, professors, all the other people are looking at. You can go look at that very bit of moon rock. So I think this is a really interesting bit of kit which tells you this isn't just about reading books. It's about going out there, and finding out stuff, and doing it for yourself.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. No, that's fascinating. And like you say, this whole thing with distance education and how we enable students to both learn the theoretical constructs, as well as have the practical applications is something that, as you say, has really developed over time with the Open University. And now we have digital microscopes. We have space missions. We have all sorts of things happening on campus here.

Can you talk about, in the social sciences, about how ideas like this have been applied? So how people can do things themselves in the social sciences?

DAN WEINBREN: Well, one of the things which has been done is to get people to gather data in their town. Could be they send out a noise metre, or a pollution metre. or some other thing which measures things in your town. And then you gather all the information together, and you've got a map of Britain, of all over the place, of who's doing what where.

And one of the ways in which they've done this has been with historical projects. So the students ask to do a study, just a little study, but original research on their own in their town, or their village, or their area. It might be say, boat builders. And then they put all this information onto a CD, as in the good old days of CDs. And then the following students go to study that piece about boat builders and then perhaps compare it to their town. So you get collaboration, working together over time and space.

And the students who did that particular module in social sciences were so engaged, so impressed by it all, they set up their own society, and their own journal, and their own publications. And they've started to have conferences. And this is their journal. I've got a copy of it here. And it's been running for years now. And also, what they're doing, although they're informal learners, they set up their own courses to teach other people what they're up to.

So I think what happened there was that the university structured how you might learn, how you might engage, how you might use the social sciences in a practical sort of a way. And then these students just took it off and are now making a major contribution to research.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. And John, you've got some items, as well, that you've brought along. Because we're talking all about collaborative learning. What have you got here to show us?

JOHN: Well, this object, like Dan's, goes back to the earliest history of the Open University. In 1969, a woman called Naomi Sargant was appointed as a senior lecturer in research methods. And she set out a programme to specify what kind of information this new university needed about its students. It needed to know the demographics. It needed to know whether they were succeeding in their studies or dropping out. And it needed to know how they went about studying.

And this is the first ever survey questionnaire that was sent to Open University students, in February, 1971. And they asked lots of questions. Nowadays, I think students might be a bit daunted to receive such things through the post, or they're likely to get them online these days, of course. But they eventually got about an 80% response rate to this questionnaire in 1971, despite the fact the post office had a strike for six weeks during that period.

Now, that's what happened in the 1970s. What that meant was the Open University had a head start in terms of developing the mechanisms to collect information about students, and in particular, to collect feedback about students. The rest of the higher education sector really

only woke up to the idea that to assure the quality of your product, you need to get student feedback, in the 1990s.

Now around about 2000, it was decided that we needed to have a more systematic approach to getting student feedback. And I and a colleague, John Brennan, were asked to find out what other universities were doing. And it turned out they were doing quite a lot of different things, but it was very uncoordinated.

One question was, could you have a national graduate survey to collect feedback from all the graduates in the country? And John Slater and I piloted such a survey and found, yes, you could have such a survey. The trouble is, if you wait till people have graduated, it's a bit too late. So it was decided instead of having a graduate survey, to have a final year student survey. And this is the National Student Survey on a paper sheet. Most students nowadays, again, complete it online.

This was introduced in 2005, so it's been running for 10 years. And really, it's become a fixture in the world of UK higher education. The information goes into university's websites. It goes into the league tables in newspapers and magazines. And it also influences what universities do. Lots of universities change their strategies for the future based upon the kind of feedback they get in the National Student Survey.

Now, that's the national scheme. But the Open University has continued to become more and more sophisticated in the kinds of feedback it gets from students. In an ideal world, one would like all students to feel that giving feedback was an intrinsic part of their learning experience. We're not in that ideal world, but we do rely very much on what students tell us about their experience of studying with the Open University.

KAREN FOLEY: I'm going to ask you in a minute to see some of those questions, because I'll be very interested to know what we were asking them very early doors, and maybe some of the questions on the National Student Survey that are pivotal now, in terms of how important that is.

But I also wondered-- we're talking about OU, past, present, and future. This sort of brings me back with those two video cassettes. And when I did a degree a long time ago with the Open University, and I was recording things-- remember when we had videos? And I used to listen to the cassette tapes and rewind them back. And I know we've got a lot of new students. But I wonder, in the chat, if there are any other students who've maybe been studying with us, who

can remember such things, or whether I'm the oldest one here.

So do let us know your thoughts on things that have changed over time with the OU and maybe how they are. Maybe you've been using one of these new digital microscopes in one of the modules you've been studying. Or you've had some experience of doing something that you feel, hey, I never knew that I could do this online, or at a distance. So do let us know that in the chat.

But John, what are some of the questions that were important then in the old survey and the new? Are we asking the same things?

JOHN:

No, we're not. These questions are very much about the nuts and bolts of studying with the Open University. One of the questions would be, did you watch the television programmes that went with your course? One of the possible answers is, no, I don't watch television programmes because I don't have BBC Two, and that's where all the television programmes were put out. Did you listen to the radio programmes? Well, another answer might be, no, because I don't have VHF, and that was where all the programmes went. So it is very specific about the nuts and bolts of studying.

But there are questions in here which are effectively about how satisfied are you with studying with the Open University. And that's more like the questions you get nowadays. As somebody who helped develop this questionnaire, I get annoyed when people call it a National Satisfaction Survey. It's not about satisfaction; it's about the experience of studying.

So the questions like, staff are good at explaining things, do you agree or disagree? The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance. Most students should be able to answer these fairly quickly and easily. They're intended for people who have graduated or are about to graduate. But we find that first year students, second year students can answer these questions just as easily.

And right at the end of the questionnaire is, overall, I'm satisfied with the quality of the course. So there is a satisfaction item in there. And that links back to the very earliest days. That's the kind of item you want to validate the rest of the questionnaire, if it's really telling you something about the student experience.

KAREN FOLEY:

Now, is that right? So when you get these links to these surveys, they really are important to us. So do take a minute to fill them in and tell us what you think. Because as you can see, your

responses are heard and valued.

DAN WEINBREN: And I think there's something interesting about the video which you mentioned earlier. Because of course, before we had the video, you had to watch the television. And there was generally one television in the house, and you had to fight to who got to watch the programme.

And also, what that television did, was to take the university out of the campus. Campuses were alien places for many people. They've not been to universities. There weren't that many universities around. And this is saying, actually the campus, the university, can be in your living room.

There's an old clip which is about Michael Pentz, who's the first dean of science. And he takes the viewers around a laboratory. And it's got a guy in a white coat doing something very serious. And he takes them to the Lowell Observatory in Greenwich. And then this is the bit which he shows next. I hope they're going to show it to us. And it's a picture of him going to a kitchen, and saying, actually, you can use your kitchen for experiments.

MICHAEL PENTZ: --an elegant room designed by Christopher Wren.

DAN WEINBREN: So here he is at the Lowell Observatory, and the programme is--

MICHAEL PENTZ: But would it be right to call this a laboratory?

DAN WEINBREN: It's called *What is a Laboratory?*"

MICHAEL PENTZ: I think so. I think it was a laboratory, in the sense that it was a place where a particular piece of nature could be observed in abstraction from all the rest. The observations that were done here, of course, were the simplest of astronomical observations.

But you may say, after all, there is a difference between an observatory and a laboratory, between observation and experiment. The first implies looking at some natural process, more or less passively, to see what happens. The other implies some sort of active intervention, some modification of a natural process. But even the simplest observation contains some element of experimental design. And no experiment can be done without observation.

The 17th century gentleman whom we saw peering through this telescope was perhaps simply observing the moon. But to do so, somebody had to design this room. Somebody had to design this instrument, which could bring an image, the desired image, furthermore, to the eye

of the observer

The biochemist doing his experiment on enzymes had abstracted them from the organism which produced them. And he had set up in the laboratory controlled artificial conditions in which he could observe certain processes to the exclusion of all others.

DAN WEINBREN: So that was him really explaining to people, take science away from the campus. Go and do it at home. And it seemed to me that was a really exciting thing to do. And, in a way, what the videos are doing is something very similar, which is saying, you can do this on your own time. Sometimes they could get you to say on the videos, they go, now read a book, or replay this, or do something else.

So it was a way of giving you control of what was going on, and allowing students to decide on how they best could learn. So that was an interesting way of using technology. And that's something which the Open University's been trying to develop for a long time.

KAREN FOLEY: So learning together-- I mean, it's obviously a key theme, I guess, in terms of enabling learners to do things, and thinking about that distance environment, and how things have changed over time. I wonder if you could both say something about your experiences of doing that at the Open University. What's been the most meaningful way that some of these aspects are being developed so that we're enabling students to be able to learn more effectively?

DAN WEINBREN: Well, I guess that one of the things we've seen has always been the idea that you could collaborate and talk to all the students. And students have always had self-help groups. And they've always done this formally, but it's been encouraged. They'd meet over a cup of tea, or they would go down to the pub, or sometimes they'd just chat at residential school.

So I think part of the experience of working together is finding those other people who you want to talk to, who you can moan to all of them about what's going on, or they can tell you the answer when you're stuck. Or you can, by explaining to them. Only if by very, very, very active explaining what you can't understand, it helps you to explain what's going on in them to think about what might be the answer. So it's really this informal social moment, which I think can be quite helpful.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, I think it's one of those things. I mean, I've certainly developed an awful lot of friends throughout my time at the Open University. And they helped me. I think sometimes just being able to talk through ideas can be really useful. And we were talking about earlier as well about

collaborative learning and some of these activities. You've mentioned wikis, and collecting data, and actually using that to generate knowledge, and things like that. So those are often, I think, very useful ideas. John, do you want to say something, maybe, about how this applies to your area?

JOHN:

Yes. The Institute of Educational Technology, which is where I work, only runs postgraduate modules. They're all global. So, in principle, we're recruiting students from all over the world. And therefore, enabling them to collaborate and exchange ideas with one another is particularly important.

Apart from encouraging the students to work together, in my experience, an important ingredient is the role of the tutors. Many of our tutors go beyond their own terms and conditions to put on extra events for the students online, perhaps using OU Live, to have all kinds of discussions. If one of the tutors goes to an interesting conference, they'll often come back and tell the students about interesting presentations that were made there. So the tutors are an important ingredient, and they sometimes get overlooked in the whole OU process.

But as I said, in our case, because we've got a global coverage, holding together groups of international students are particularly important. And we're dealing with topics to do with education. In my case, it's to do with supporting disabled students. Now, how people think about disability and how people support disabled students varies tremendously from one country to another. So it's important to get different students to be able to articulate their own experiences, their own legal systems, and the kinds of issues that arise in their own culture.

KAREN FOLEY:

Mm-hmm. We've had a lot of students talking before who were perhaps disabled in various different ways, and talked about how they learn. And of course, the Institute of Educational Technology not only has modules and postgraduate courses that they're doing, but also studies the way that people learn, and tries to feed that back into the faculties to enable people to do that. So there's lots of interesting ways that we're looking at distance learning both theoretically and in that applied sense, aren't there?

DAN WEINBREN:

Yeah, there certainly is. And the other ways in which people are looking at those distances are when they take what they've done at the OU and apply it elsewhere. There was a course, a module, a few years ago, where you had to upload your photographs, and people shared their photographs. And they were told how to comment on them, what's best to say, what would be useful critique.

And the students were so engaged with this that they continued to do it once the module was over. They set up groups. They set up competitions. They even met up in real life to take photographs together. So they were using that technology to reduce the distance between each other and to build on the skills they developed at the OU.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Well, I'd like to go to the Social Media Desk. And HJ and Rachel, how's everyone at home? Can anyone remember any of these videos, or am I on my own there? What's everyone saying?

HJ: Well, we have had students from across the board who've been studying for years and years and just want to keep going. And then other newer students-- loads of newer students are joining us today.

RACHEL: Yeah. Gareth says that he did a module before online content, and he felt that the study experience was far more isolating than it is now. And that's something that we've done working collaboratively. We're studying different modules, but we work, we use technologies, such as Skype, Twitter, to keep in contact. So you feel that you've got that kind of community, that student feeling.

And one other comment that came through about the internet has made distance learning more sophisticated. Students were wondering what study was like before the internet. So there's a big mix of those who have and those who haven't. But I think those who have studied are keeping quite, because that means that it's an age thing, isn't it?

KAREN FOLEY: Before the internet, I remember that. [LAUGHS] I don't know how we used to cope. I was talking to the Library the other day about those little blue-- I can't remember what they were called, but how you used to get-- do you remember what those things are called? Those little-- "filofiche," or something like that. And you used to be able to go and look at old newspaper articles, and things, and put them painstakingly. And now, of course, we can just search things. So it's, yeah, all massive change. It's a lot easier now, isn't it?

DAN WEINBREN: It's, yes, microfiche, I think it's called.

KAREN FOLEY: Microfiche, that's right. That's the one. Yes, excellent. So, I guess, to sum up then the session, I guess what we're saying is that there is so much about the OU in terms of that history, and about really putting students first, listening to students, and enabling them to be able to study and develop a curriculum that supports our distance education.

DAN WEINBREN: I think there's two things here. Partly, it's recognising there is uses to all this technology and that it's not straightforward. You have to think about it a bit. So it wasn't simply that people went to the moon. It was that somebody had to think about a way of getting that material so that students could look at it. Or it wasn't simply people had telephones. Somebody had to think about how do you use telephones through tutorials?

So I guess what's going on is the people in the Open University are thinking about that connection. How do we make the best use of the technology so that people can socially engage with one another? They can engage in dialogue with each other. They can learn from each other. They can draw upon their own experiences, because you've got a lot of adults out there who know an awful lot of stuff. And we can build on that. And how can we best use the technology to do that?

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent.

JOHN: I think the one thing I'd like to add is that, traditionally, there was a lot of prejudice against distance education. People assumed it couldn't be as good as face-to-face education. And that rubbed off. Because as the changes have happened in the last 20 years-- new quality assurance arrangements, the National Student Survey, and so on-- we can actually hold our heads up and say, the quality of the education the Open University provides is at least as good as what you'll get anywhere else. The student experience that we provide is as good as you'll get anywhere else.

The Open University has always done very, very well in the National Student Survey. So we can be very confident now, and we can put away the idea that distance education isn't a match for face-to-face education. In some ways, because of the use of the internet, and so on, we can claim it's better.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Dan, would you like to just finally tell us about your book? Because I'm sure students would be interested in knowing about some of the history.

DAN WEINBREN: Yeah, well, one of the things about this book which was a pleasure to write was that the Open University Students Association decided to sell it and give the money, the profits they make, to the OU's educational charity. So I'm really pleased that that's where the money's going. So you can get it through the OU Students Association. And actually, what I found was a bit interesting is that I discovered the opp-- had the opportunity to listen to what students have to

say, and to just nosy around the place and find out what was going on.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. No, a very interesting book. All right, well, that's fantastic. Thank you very, very much Dan and John for coming and showing us all of these fabulous things. We're just going to end by going to the Social Media Desk. HJ and Rachel, how's it all going?

HJ: Well, it's going well, We have had the postman. He snuck around earlier to pop in some mail in our inbox.

[BELL RINGS]

There we go. That bell, as you know, means we've got some stuff in the inbox.

KAREN FOLEY: It's just like email, isn't it?

HJ: It is. But we like our inbox. It's very fun too. Yeah, it's controllable.

RACHEL: Hopefully, our lunch will be delivered in there later.

HJ: Oh, yes, that would be good. Yes, sneak it out there. Now, let's have another little look here. I'm very excited. I love opening mail. I get very-- except for those phone bills. They just go away. Let's have a look at what we got in our inbox today. Ah, there you go, selfies. And we love those.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, brilliant.

HJ: So we've got Rowena.

KAREN FOLEY: Rowena.

HJ: We're very grateful for your selfie, lovely selfie there. And Gareth, he's been very chatty today, so that's very good. Another lovely selfie there.

RACHEL: And we have Claire from Weymouth. Hello, Claire, and welcome to Connections. And for those of you who missed this, well, it's generated a lot of chat in the chat box. Yes, again, this is Lee from Reading, but currently in Lagos, in Nigeria. And he's not being lazy, apparently. It is OK to sit in bed with a cup of tea,

HJ: I think that's how most of us spend 80% of our time anyway when we're studying, isn't it? Just in bed with tea.

RACHEL: What's a kind of calming colour for study? Should we think of a green?

HJ: Oh, I don't know.

RACHEL: We've got green.

HJ: We need to set the mood here, don't we, for studying? I'm not too sure.

RACHEL: So you guys are going to have to let us know at home what you think. I mean, our wall here-- I don't know if you can see behind my big head-- it's filling. We have a lot of comments, a lot of questions. So don't forget to keep sending through your tips. Don't forget the connections@open.ac.uk or the hashtag, #SCC15.

KAREN FOLEY: Aw. Thank you very much, and thank you for all of those. It's so nice to see everybody at home. And it's so nice to feel that sense of connection, so thank you for sending all those through. I'll be going to have a look at them later. But thank you very much, my guests in the studio, Dan and John. We're now going to watch a short video about a research project called Enduring Love. And then we'll see you back in five.

[MUSIC PLAYING]