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KAREN: Welcome to the Student Hub Live. In this session we're going to look at what, where and how do social workers' write. And I'm joined by Maria Leedham. Now Maria, you're a senior lecturer in applied linguistics and English language from the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. And you're working on some very exciting work, as well as some module production.

You'll see on the screen that there are two widgets. And we'd like to know how much time you're spending writing or recording things in your working week. Now we've realised that not everyone might work. So in your sort of non-study time, I guess, how much time do you spend in writing down? Select one of the answers that apply to you.

If you aren't in the Watch and Engage option, you can re-enter the Student Hub Live website, studenthublive.kmi.open.ac.uk, and reconnect with the Watch and Engage. You put your student, or your staff ID in there. And if you don't have one of those, you can create an Open University user account, which is free and very quick and easy to do. And then you can see and engage with the chat, and also tell us what you think.

So in addition to telling us how much time you're spending writing, we'd like to know whether you think it's a reasonable amount of time to spend on this activity, yes, no, or maybe. Maria, these are sorts of questions you're asking social workers.

MARIA LEEDHAM: That's right. Yeah. I'm working on a project called WISP, Writing in Social Work Practise, together with Theresa Lillis, who's the lead, and Alison Twiner, who's our research associate. And we're going out interviewing. We're close to 50 social workers, and counting. And we're also observing them in their daily practise, and collecting their texts. So we're going at it from various angles, to look at the writing. Yeah.

KAREN: You're also looking at student writing, as well, aren't you?

MARIA LEEDHAM: That's right. That was a sort of previous work I did. So I've kind of gone from looking at student writing to now sort of writing in an application, and in practise in a profession.

KAREN: Why isn't it important then to start looking at what, when, and how people are writing and recording things? What sorts of findings can you have from that sort of research?

MARIA LEEDHAM: I think writing can be a bit of a black box. We think we know how to do it, and you've really got to think in a student context about what discipline you're in, about what genre, what kind of writing it is. Is it a report, an essay, reflective writing? And it can be very different.

And especially writing for assessment, when it's the main means of assessments, it's hugely important. We're judged on it. That's where the marks come from. There might be a little oral component. But predominantly it's the writing that we're judged on. So it's hugely important to be clear on what you meant to produce, what it's going to look like, what the layout might be.

KAREN: So we've got two sort of sides to some of the work that you're doing then. Could you start by talking to us about the research that you've been doing about Chinese and British students, and the undergraduate writing that they've done across a range of subjects at UK universities?

MARIA LEEDHAM: Sure. I based my research, I used a corpus, which is a large collection of texts, basically, a collection of assignments in this case. I used the BAWE corpus, B-A-W-E, British Academic Written English, which is predominantly British students' writing.

And then the next group, the next large category of Chinese students, which are why I chose that group. And I compared the two sets of writing. And I also interviewed students and lecturers to look at what they liked about the writing, what they expected from writing.

But in text terms, you can analyse the writing using computer software and find out kind of frequencies of words and phrases, and look at them throughout the writing. And I looked at different disciplines as well, particularly biology, engineering, and economics, mainly because lots of Chinese students do those disciplines.

KAREN: So were you comparing, then, the sorts of things that people were writing, dependent on whether they were UK based or Chinese?

MARIA LEEDHAM: Yes. Well, they were all undergraduate students here at UK universities writing in English. My Chinese would not be up to.

KAREN: Because there are amazing things that go on in the Department of Languages over here at the Open University.

MARIA LEEDHAM: I did do the beginner Chinese module, but that's as far as I got. But yeah, I compared students in the same discipline doing the same genres, or types of writing, like a report or a lab report,

or a reflective piece, and looked at how they went about it differently.

And both groups were doing really well. They were all getting a first, or two-one. So it's all good quality. The lecturers liked it. And if they were doing anything differently, what was that, and why was it? And I found things like Chinese students use more visuals in their writing, which I thought was really interesting.

KAREN: What do you mean by visuals?

MARIA LEEDHAM: Things like images, or figures, or tables, graphic things, not just connected words.

KAREN: So like metaphors, but actually structuring the writing in a different format.

MARIA LEEDHAM: Yeah. Yes, that's right. So biology is quite a visual discipline anyway. But where maybe a British student might describe an organism, the Chinese student would be more likely to put a picture in and label it. And I think that's interesting, because the lecturers liked both ways. Both were acceptable. And sometimes actually, especially in biology, they preferred the visual.

KAREN: So why did it matter, then, what students would do? And if they were getting good grades, the lecturers liked these things, and you found these differences in terms of how they were presenting information and data, why did it matter?

MARIA LEEDHAM: I think it's interesting because as a student it shows you can do things in a different way. There isn't just one acceptable way. And you can maybe play to your strengths. And if you know that you're better at putting information in a table, in table format, here are my results, and then a little bit of talk about it, rather than describe everything in words, you can do that. And that's equally acceptable.

KAREN: Now you mentioned that these students were all getting good grades. But I can tell you right now, if any of my students writing an essay start using bullet points and tables and lists, I get very cross. Because that's not part of the structure. So how important is it then to sort of bear in mind the conventions of some of these subject areas in terms of what you're being expected to deliver, and also how students were doing these? Were these very fluid projects, or did they have the scope to expand beyond?

MARIA LEEDHAM: They were all undergraduate writing. And particularly in applied disciplines. And I think it matters hugely what discipline it is, and what text type or genre, what kind of writing it is.

So as you say, if the tutor has asked for an essay, they expect maybe a standard essay with a title and then connected words, and not a picture plunked in there. I think if in doubt, you need to ask your tutor, and kind of almost try to push what is acceptable. Is it OK to use subheadings in this report, or should it not have subheadings? Is it OK if I put the results in a table, or is it better to describe them?

And if there are exemplars, that's always good sort of example, pieces of writing. And then not to use as a model, but maybe to think, oh yeah, I can do that. And I think if in doubt, it's always important to ask, because it does depend on what you're writing.

KAREN:

No, absolutely. But very interesting that there are these differences and different ways of communicating and expressing things.

So then this idea about people writing an assessment and things is interesting, because you're getting different methods to communicate. But your WiSP work is all about understanding how people are recording data. And this, in a sense, is a much more applied nature, because you're trying to, I guess, make sense of something that's very dynamic, fluid, but where recording and writing is a fundamental part of the job of a social worker. And also having a sense of accuracy.

We know that writing is always often laden with things going on. It's written from a perspective. So this is a very important piece of work, not only in terms of what's happening, but in terms of how you're applying something academically.

So you mentioned before that this was something you were working on in conjunction with other people. Tell us a little bit about what you're doing. And also perhaps can you relate this to the widget questions that you've asked our audience about how much writing they're doing a week, and whether they think that's reasonable or not?

MARIA LEEDHAM: I shall try. So the project is quite a large funded project. So we've got Alison working on it full time for two years, a two-year project, and Theresa and I doing as much as we can on it. And Theresa's the lead.

So we're collecting a collection of one million words of social workers' writing, of all kinds of writing that they do. So they produce case notes, and court reports, other assessment reports. And this all has to be cleared by the local authority, huge confidentiality issues, as you can imagine.

And our aim is to see what social workers write, how much do they write, when do they write it. Is it in the working day? Is it at home? Sometimes it's in the car, because they're between visits. Often they're hot desking in an office, so the phone's ringing all the time. They're constantly interrupted. And we're trying to kind of look at that in context.

So we are observing them for a week at a time, which is really, really interesting to do, to go on visits, and to see social workers in action, and how the writing is fragmented and broken up among other tasks, which I don't know if many students can identify with that, snatching 10 minutes, half an hour, an hour here and there between other things.

KAREN: Well the group's very spread out, because 40% are spending less than a quarter, 40% are spending between a half and 3/4. And then the rest in the middle. So some people are really writing a lot, or not very much.

MARIA LEEDHAM: Right. Right. That's interesting.

KAREN: But it would be interesting to know how real that was. Because if you asked me how much time I spend writing, I would probably say 3/4 to the whole percentage of the week. But I bet you that I spend a lot of time talking and not really doing that. So it's an interesting thing in terms of the volume versus the perception of that volume, isn't it?

MARIA LEEDHAM: We'll we've tried to get at that by we've observed 10 social workers for a week each across the project team. And so we can write down on the phone while talking, 10 or 5 in a meeting, no writing, we can sort of log all that. And we've also got the social workers to keep a writing diary for four weeks, where they note down all the text that they're writing. So again, we can look at the time taken for those, where they write them, and how that structures their day. So we're trying to get at the difference there.

But I agree it's quite difficult, because the time might be interrupted, where you turn and have a chat with a colleague, and then you're back to your writing. So it's sort of writing, but there's a bit of talk as well. I mean, if what you're doing now, writing, you made a few notes as you got the information. But you're mainly talking. And then if you're at your desk, you might be completely writing and researching.

KAREN: So it's how we categorise this age-old research thing about what we consider to be a tick in the box in terms of what you're doing right now. So a difficult methodological question there.

We asked people whether they think that the time they spend writing is reasonable. And I'd like to talk about that with you in just a minute, because you've mentioned that social workers are writing various different things. And I guess the question I would ask then is why does this matter what they're writing and when they're writing it? And I'm guessing you're trying to find some way of making the process easier, more reliable, or better for them in terms of the applied nature of your research.

Do social workers, I mean, let's see what our audience say, actually, in terms of how reasonable they think the amount of time they spend writing is. Most of them say maybe. So we're not quite sure. 58% are saying maybe it's reasonable.

MARIA LEEDHAM: OK. OK. There's going to be a wide variety of,

KAREN: Slightly less yeses than no's there.

MARIA LEEDHAM: Well that's kind of good, depending if people like writing. When I interviewed students about whether they enjoyed writing, I found it was a real Marmite question. You know, they kind of either loved it or hated it. And some of them said it was like drawing teeth. It was painful. It was difficult. And others kind of really enjoy that creative act of getting their ideas down.

But in terms of work-based writing, it could be creative, compiling something, or it could be kind of minute taking, more recording things for social work, because it's often putting case notes on the computer system, and having to do it in a really systematic way. So every phone call that comes in, they've got to log. If it's not written down, it didn't happen. I actually saw this on a piece of paper in a local authority, a little mantra, kind of, "If it's not written down it didn't happen." It's got to sort of be recorded.

And I've got a little cartoon here that the cartoonist Harry Venning drew for us. This is showing the age-old emphasis on writing. I'm not sure social work as a profession goes quite back to Shakespeare times.

But the next one, I love this one. He's got the beast of the computer software that social workers have to feed. They're constantly got to write their case notes into the computer system, and keep feeding the beast, which I think sums it up for a lot of social workers, that it's a tough old job in terms of constantly recording everything. And we're trying to get at that.

The last cartoon, this is a kind of idealistic view of our research, I think, that the cartoonist drew. This is meant to be the researcher. And here we've got a queue of social workers

waiting to be interviewed. But actually, we had to go out and persuade people that they really wanted to take part in our project.

KAREN: Now you're part way through the project. So you can't really tell us anything about the findings. But I wonder if you can tell us about some of the aims, so sort of almost going back to the start, in terms of what you're hoping to do so? So really about the applied nature of this, and why you're doing it in the first place. Why is it so important?

MARIA LEEDHAM: I think it's really important because it's kind of hidden. Nobody's really investigated this in such a comprehensive way before. People have done smaller studies. But writing is hugely important in the daily life of social workers. They estimate at least half, maybe 3/4 of the time is spent writing.

But it's often quite hidden. So it's to uncover kind of exactly how much to quantify how much time we spend writing, what kinds of writing are they doing, where are they doing it? So hot desking in the office with the phone ringing, in the car between appointments, or at home, because they can't fit all the work in the working day.

And to look at what counts as good quality case noting. It's a sort of quite hidden area. And when anything goes wrong, particularly in child protection, and social workers, maybe jobs are on the line, or they're vilified in the press, it's often about the recording. But how can they win? You can't possibly write down everything that you said in a conversation. There's no end to it.

So I think it's very difficult. And it would be good to research that more, and hopefully we'll ease away a little bit. That would be good.

KAREN: Now as a university, obviously a lot of our academics are involved with research like this. So I'd like to ask you about the process of research. What do you enjoy most about this particular project, and being a researcher?

MARIA LEEDHAM: I think all researchers, university researchers, love it when teaching and research kind of come together. This synergy, this magical thing that research feeds into teaching. It's great. It's kind of kill two birds, isn't it?

KAREN: Getting it into a module.

MARIA LEEDHAM: Exactly! Getting it into a module. And I work on a module called Exploring English Grammar, which we've got lots of sort of applications of language analysis. So this is one kind of

application. Others might be translating, teaching, interpreting. And it's showing that what you do in studying can have a real-world application, can be important in the world, and have an impact on people's lives, hopefully. So that's really why we do it, to feed into each other, I think. Yeah.

KAREN: And has it been difficult? You're working with a lot of agencies, I assume, in terms of this research. And I guess a bit like this cartoon, it may not be going completely according to plan. What are some of the challenges that you've come up against maybe in this project, or even in any other research you've been doing recently?

MARIA LEEDHAM: I think that a really big challenge is getting people to take part. And especially in social work, it's for obvious reasons, quite sensitive data about people's lives. So we're not just allowed access to the texts. We've got to be cleared. And we've got to apply to local authorities, tell them pages and pages of sort of here's what we're planning to do and why we're doing it, convince them.

And then we've got to convince individual social workers, who are really, really hard pressed for time, that it's worth taking time out to take part in our project. So it's the constant I suppose it's not my favourite bit of the job, kind of persuading people that they do want to talk to you.

KAREN: Especially when they're so busy writing or not writing as the case may be. So part of the challenge, I guess, is finding these participants. And you mentioned before about the sorts of method that you're using, I guess participants' observations. So you're having to fill in reports and get clearances for certain things. But also, I guess when you're observing whether people are writing, whether that meets your category of writing or not, you're getting a certain level of information.

So can you tell us a bit about why you chose that in terms of meeting the needs of this particular research project? Why was this a good method to go around following these social workers and see what they're doing, as well as talking to them?

MARIA LEEDHAM: Because we're trying to get at the social practises around writing. And I mean as you pointed out, what you think you're doing might not be the same as what you are in fact, doing. So by observing a social worker, kind of 9 to 5, whatever their working hours are over a Monday to Friday week, where we're trying to pin down how much time they're spending in meetings. Are they writing in them, those meetings? How does one text change into another text type? Are

they writing in a kind of fragmented way? Because people are constantly interrupting them. And then they have to take the work home. So where does writing fit within the working day?

And then alongside that we're interviewing them, getting their perspective. And alongside that we're building the corpus, or collection of texts, which we can analyse using computer software, and find out what different types of text are alike. What is case note writing like. What a court report writing, what are they like? And I think all these things together will build a picture of social worker writing.

KAREN:

Wonderful. it sounds really, really exciting, and also with its challenges. And I guess very tiring, because you're following people around. It must be very labour intensive, if you are connected to a 9 to 5 workload with somebody, that there's a limit to what you can do.

So where are you in terms of this project? How many years has it been ongoing for from right through getting the clearance and the project funding, et cetera, to where you are now, and when will it finish?

MARIA LEEDHAM: Well we first applied for funding in, let me think, autumn of 2014. We heard about early 2015, began the project in October 2015. And it's a two year project ending this October. So we're just over half way. But we're still collecting data. And hopefully in the spring, maybe April, we'll turn more to analysis.

But yeah, it's quite a long haul. And then at the end of the two years we'll have huge amounts of data. And we'll have to keep finding the time to really do justice to it, and analyse it, and come up with findings.

KAREN:

So you mentioned before a module that you're teaching. How do you fit all of those in your day job?

MARIA LEEDHAM: We do get research time. But yeah, it's often interrupted by teaching and vice versa. And I think I enjoy the mix of teaching and research. I think it's actually great working at the OU, and having that mix.

And we are largely able to plan our time around module meetings and so on. But we can plan our own time, and try to make it work together, and I think particularly look for that magical synergy where things sort of work together. And you might be reading an article for research and think, oh, that would work with the master's unit I'm working on. And I can kind of make that link. And that's really good when that happens, because it just all comes together. Yeah.

KAREN:

Maria, thank you. That's been such an interesting insight into not only applied linguistics, but also some research. And so important as well, because I think so many students don't recognise that as a university, we are very active. Often people are not only writing and presenting module materials, and chairing things, but are going off and doing these exciting things that have a real value to the community. So thank you for coming along today to talk about that.

Well we're going to have a little break in terms of our live time now. Jordan, I hear you would like more widgets. Well we'll do our best to think of those. In fact, I'll tell you what. I have loads coming up at 6 o'clock. We're going to be doing a session all about what students think. So it's really important, and in particular if you like a lot of widgets, to vote on and tell us what you think. You turn up to that session when we're back at 6 o'clock.

For the evening we've got again a really nice programme of both study skills sessions, as well as some great discussions. We're going to be talking about student feedback with Alison Green at 6 o'clock tonight. And then we're going to talk to Paul-Francois Tremlett about religion and politics. He's fascinating. So do tune in for that.

We've then got a tutor Q&A with Jonquil Lowe. So anything we haven't covered from Georgina's session earlier, or anything you'd like to know about the tutor relationship, that is your turn to ask. But we also have a list of common questions.

We're going to end, because it wouldn't be a student hub live without some life science with Nick Turner, who's going to be showing us about radiant heat infrared. So we're going to be taking a look at that again later tonight at 7:30. So do join us then.

What we're going to do now, though, is we're going to break the live stream. And that means that you at home are going to have to refresh your button to see the replays that we're going to show. We're going to be talking about assessment, again a hot topic. And don't forget that if you missed anything from this morning, you can catch up.

One thing I'd like to ask, though. We're going to try and get some selections of our favourite quotes about why you like the Student Hub Live. So if you can, put something in the chat about why you like the Student Hub. We're going to give away a prize, and send it to you in the post for the best quote that we can get from you. So let us know why you like the Student Hub Live.

If you'd like something a little bit more formal, there's a small feedback form on the website that you can connect with. That will take about five minutes tops. So you can tell us your thoughts there. And don't forget that if you are new, and you haven't joined our email list, there's a Count Me In button on the website. And we'll tell you when more of this stuff is going to happen.

But for now I'm going to have a break. And I'll be back live at 6:00. And I hope you'll be able to join us then. HJ and Evaghn, would you like to say goodbye? And is there anything that remains outstanding until then?

HJ: No. All good. I think we've had a nice chat, though, about academic grading, and what we like in our different strategies, which has been very nice. And we posted the links to the WiSP project in there as well for everyone to look at. But yeah, we'll see you after the break.

KAREN: Perfect. Thank you both very much. And thank you, Sophie, also. We'll see you very soon. Bye for now.

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