

Student Hub Live Bootcamp - day 2, part 2

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KAREN FOLEY: Well, luckily I have a guest here, Mark Nichols. Thank you for coming along, Mark.

MARK NICHOLS: Great to be with you, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: And I'm very hungry too, so--

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, good.

MARK NICHOLS: --must have a--

KAREN FOLEY: Would you like some cake?

MARK NICHOLS: Perhaps after.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, OK. Now, you are very interesting because you graduated in a virtual graduation ceremony--

MARK NICHOLS: That's right.

KAREN FOLEY: --15 years ago.

MARK NICHOLS: 15 years ago.

KAREN FOLEY: And we think learning online is all virtual and different. But graduating online as well. How did that go?

MARK NICHOLS: Really well. I was graduating at 3 o'clock in the morning in New Zealand with my in-laws, my wife. We were all there in our pyjamas.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: There's no photos, so we certainly won't be sharing any photos of it. But it was a wonderful event. And in those days, too, the internet was mainly dial up.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: So unfortunately, I missed my synchronous moment. The computer crashed just as my name came up. But the Open University provided me with the proceedings on a disc, so I was able to watch it later.

KAREN FOLEY: Really? So you did that with the Open University?

MARK NICHOLS: I did, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: How amazing. It's interesting, actually, because New Zealand and Australia, often when you're looking at online and distance learning, they're really at the forefront, aren't they? But that you did it with the Open University, and that now you've just joined recently and are working here.

And you're the Director of Technology Enhanced Learning here.

MARK NICHOLS: Yes, that's right.

KAREN FOLEY: And you're going to fill us in on making the most of online learning environments. And Georgina's been talking about the VLE, the Virtual Learning Environment. We've been looking at the Study Planner, as you might have seen, and we've been looking at OU Live and various ways that students can interface and interact with us.

But you wanted to focus on something a little bit different.

MARK NICHOLS: Yes, I did. I wanted to look beyond just online and look at digital technologies. Because I feel like online is just an extension of what digital technologies can do with us. So I thought that would be a good focus for this morning.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So what do you want to start with?

MARK NICHOLS: Well, I think there are three main ways in which technologies now actually help us in teaching and learning. Firstly, we've got unprecedented access to information. So we can find almost anything with a quick Google search. And of course, we've got wonderful services here at the OU too.

We can find articles from the library. We can search from anything, from YouTube, anything. So we've got unprecedented access. Very, very easy to find stuff and also to download it and potentially use it later on.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent.

MARK NICHOLS: Secondly, we can quickly process and present information. So we can actually put together our thoughts, combine the thoughts of others into new ways using the likes of Word, PowerPoint. For those who are more advanced, possibly video casting or pod casting. So there's a whole lot of ways we can actually bring together our ideas and share them in new ways.

And we can also discuss information now in ways that were just completely unknown about 20 years ago. So the artefacts and ideas we put together in our own documents and things, we can now share through the likes of social media. And in formal education too there's now a lot of use of online discussion forums.

KAREN FOLEY: So your point is really it's not just a different or poorer alternative to things. It actually opens a range of new and exciting options--

MARK NICHOLS: Oh, absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: --that people can take to enhance their study. Now, we've got a whole lot of widgets here, these interactive tools. And we'd like to know what you think and how you're behaving online.

So those should be appearing on your screen. We would like to know how often you use the internet when you're studying, and how often do you use the computer as a student.

So those are some of the ones that we're going to be bringing up. But we've also got other questions that we'd like to know. We'd like to know which three success factors do you think you need to work on. So you might want to have a little think about which of those options you can look at.

And which of the three main applications of the website you use as a student. That could be very interesting for us to know. And in terms of technology for education, where you see yourself in terms of a scale.

So whether you think you're a beginner or whether you think you're a little bit more confident. So we'd like to know the answers of the questions, and we will be bringing those into our discussion with Mark.

So firstly, then, this difference between online and digital. What is the difference, then, between those two aspects? You've spoken a little bit about accessing information and how those are different. But what would you say the main difference is?

MARK NICHOLS: Well, I think online actually requires you to be connected to the internet to make the most of it. Digital, there's a whole lot you can do with a computer that doesn't require you to have internet access whatsoever. So the likes of using a word process, of reading things offline.

There's a whole host of things that you don't need to actually be physically connected to the internet to do. So it's really important to hold both of those things together because online doesn't necessarily mean-- when we talk about online education-- doesn't necessarily mean you have to be online at all times.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, our students who are watching this, unsurprisingly perhaps, are feeling quite confident with their use of technology.

MARK NICHOLS: Good.

KAREN FOLEY: They're using their computers most of the time. So that could just be a bias in terms of the people who have come along today. How accurate would you say that is as a representation of the OU population of students?

MARK NICHOLS: Ooh, I couldn't say for sure. But my understanding is that most students are very confident users of technology.

KAREN FOLEY: The overwhelming thing they need to focus on is focus, though. So unsurprisingly, we've been talking a little bit about that during the sessions. So that is all very interesting.

So there are various types of technologies. But you've said that there are three main ways in which digital tools can help us in our learning. And you've spoken a little bit about accessing some information.

We spoke last week about some of the sessions with the library and about procrastination and about not accessing too much information. So when is being digital helpful for accessing information, and how do you know when to start and when to stop?

MARK NICHOLS: Oh, it's a good question. I think digital, if you did a Google search for a subject straight off, you tend to get the most popular hits first. And they'll usually be the most helpful.

But when I do my own online study, I tend to do a fairly general search first just to get a view as to the breadth of ideas that are out there. And then gradually, I get a sense of how to focus. But it does require a bit of discipline to eventually get to that stage where OK, I now need to start putting some ideas aside and focusing in on those that are really of interest to me.

KAREN FOLEY: Why would you say focus is such an issue then? Because people are saying they struggle with that. And we've been speaking before with Georgina about how to identify when you need to do something, when to stop procrastinating.

But if you don't know what to focus on, how do you know how to rein that focus in?

MARK NICHOLS: Yeah. I think from a use of technology perspective, focus is a little bit different. From a use of technology perspective, I'd be inclined to close down everything except what I'm working on.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: It's all too easy to be distracted and to even distract yourself by having your email client open, by having a Twitter feed open. Every now and then you'll get a ding or an alert from Skype when someone else logs in. It pays in a study session to close all of that sort of thing down.

KAREN FOLEY: That is such good advice, and I occasionally do that. But it's very, very difficult-- I find, anyway-- to turn especially my email off, and my social media.

Because I'll often think, oh, I'll just have those on. Least I'll know when something happens. And yet it's so easy to become distracted because you've got all of this feed into things.

And also there's, I guess, pressure to be connected a lot of the time. So how would you advise people if they are focusing on one thing, manage that digital range of networks to stop doing something?

MARK NICHOLS: Well, I think you've always got control as a user yourself.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: Another important aspect of studying online or studying digitally is to actually organise your study time.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: What I tend to do is decide that I'm actually offline for two hours. I'm just out of this world. I'm just focusing on what I need to focus on for study purposes.

And I'll actually turn off email. And some things can wait a little while while you focus on the study at hand. Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. OK. Excellent. Yeah, focus was chosen by 49% of the students voting today. So a key issue. That's a really good thing.

And I think it's such a simple piece of advice, but it makes a massive, massive difference because yeah, you would just be able to focus. But as you say you can also use digital tools for collating and presenting and gathering information as well.

What would some of your advice be there in terms of how people could use that as an organisational tool?

MARK NICHOLS: Yeah. I think organizationally, what I tend to do when I study an online module is I put a folder together and I include everything in that folder that I need for that particular module.

So I'll tend to go into the online version of the module through the VLE. I'll download all of the assets that I can, all of the PDF files, all of the video files, anything I can lay my hands on. And I'll put it into this one folder.

That way, if I'm not online, if I actually have to go via train somewhere or in my car-- as a passenger, of course-- where I won't have internet access, I do have access to all of my study materials.

So that's just a very simple thing which I tend to do. I also make sure too that I've got my own way of working with those materials. So with the documents, I've got it within that folder.

I'll know, for example, that if I'm going to read part of my module notes, I'll open up the PDF document and I have all of the tools I need to actually work on in that PDF reader. So it's really just making sure that I know how I'm going to approach the materials. Not just downloading them, but also knowing I'm going to engage with them.

KAREN FOLEY: When you say the tools to use PDFs-- because I've recently just discovered some of these. They're brilliant. Ways you can annotate things and actually make it work for you.

Because there are times I read a PDF and I'll think, oh, I'll write that down. And then where was that piece of paper, et cetera. Briefly, how could people engage with some of those tools?

What sort of things? Are you talking about annotations and post-it notes and things on PDFs?

MARK NICHOLS: Well, PDFs are usually read through the Adobe Acrobat application. And Adobe Acrobat has quite a few features built into it. So you can, for example, highlight text. In fact, you've got multiple colour options.

You can also add comments. It's got also a whole range of different ways in which you can actually read a document. You can read it as a single page at a time. You can scroll it.

It's actually a very, very powerful application once you get used to it. It leads on to a tip that I want to give later on as well, which relates to developing confidence with online tools.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Brilliant. Excellent. Well, organisation was important for 20% of people. And as these things always happen, we're so short on time.

So I want to move now into looking at skills for effective learning and some of the technical skills that people could look at. We've been looking at study skills, obviously, with Georgina, and thinking about how to focus things. How to make the most of that study planner and sectioning things.

And as we can see, focus and organisation seem to be two of the key things that our audience is struggling with. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about personal strategies and how people can use that on screen environment. So about how they can actually make that work for them.

We've been talking about various readers beforehand and various assistive technologies that can be helpful. But generally, how could people make that work for them?

MARK NICHOLS: I think two key ideas here would be orientation and confidence. Orientation, I think what we just looked at in the first session. Get to know the VLE. Get to know how it fits together. Get to know where everything is.

Once you've got that orientation, you tend to be able to develop a fairly good map as to what it is you need to do and which parts are more important. But the confidence part is another key one. I think many people have a little bit of confidence when it comes to using online technologies.

We mentioned earlier, though, that most of the students watching now will have a great deal of confidence.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: But confidence is, I think, the number one asset for anyone wanting to use digital technology in education.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, as you said, being confident is something our students are right now. But also, it's something that you can build on.

Let's see then, what are the main three applications or websites that people most use as students. Because we've had a lot of people fill these in, perhaps because they're fairly tech savvy. So we can see here module websites, Open University, Google, YouTube, OU Anywhere, Student Home, museum websites, Wikipedia, Grammarly, regional forms, word processing, mind maps, Dropbox.

So a whole range here of both OU specific things, I guess, as well as various tools that they're using. And we'll talk a little bit later. We've had some questions about referencing tools. We'll talk about that with the library later.

But if you are confident, how important is it to keep building on those skills and honing your application?

MARK NICHOLS: Vitally important. I think if you're a confident user of computer technologies, you should take the opportunity to explore.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: Try new things.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: There's a whole lot of features in Microsoft Word, for example, which are just ready to be discovered.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: But we tend to use only the very surface things that Word enables us to do. Open University students also have access to Office 365, which is an online version of the Office suite. And the One Note tool is absolutely fabulous. It's quite a powerful tool which I think has a great deal of potential for students.

When I first found it, I just loved playing with it. It uses a notebook metaphor. So you can set up new pages, new notebooks. And it's very, very easy to add ideas and search for ideas within it.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. HJ's been telling you all about that, actually. And he's trying to-- well, I need to sort it out myself. Because you can apparently attach all of your various Word aspects.

So if you've got to read a document, you can then attach that Word file to it and actually get everything together. Sounds absolutely brilliant.

MARK NICHOLS: It is brilliant.

KAREN FOLEY: That's on my to-do list. We're running really short of time, and I wanted to talk about some of the devices that you use. Because your desk is a really interesting setup.

And I thought, oh, I could never have a desk like that. But when I came and saw you, I thought actually I could. And I got a picture just under there of your desk.

MARK NICHOLS: This one?

KAREN FOLEY: We can show just the first one. Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: Great.

KAREN FOLEY: Because you've got an interesting setup. And you were saying to me when we looked at this that devices were really important. Now tell us about how you work.

MARK NICHOLS: Great. How I work. This device you see there on my desk top-- I'm not sure if this is coming through.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, that's perfect.

MARK NICHOLS: This is actually a tablet computer. And I've got it here with me as well. It's actually a full computer and a full portable tablet device. So what I've done there is I've got it connected to an external monitor, which I've arranged in a view to make it easy to read documents.

I've got an external keyboard and mouse. So it's actually a full desktop replacement. Now, if I take those plugs out, I've actually got a full mobile device as well. And you'll see here this is actually a full mobile computer as powerful as a typical laptop or desktop PC.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

MARK NICHOLS: So this runs Windows 10. The beauty of it is this device costs 120 pounds. So it's reasonably cost effective. And it comes with a keyboard as well. So very, very powerful device for working online and offline.

Because if I need to go to a meeting, I just unplug all of those peripherals and I've got a full tablet device computer with me with a touch screen.

KAREN FOLEY: And it's got all your work saved on it. Everything.

MARK NICHOLS: It has, yeah. And the wonderful thing too is it sits on top of my work issued laptop. It's one third the size. But it's just as powerful.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, I asked you where I could get one of these and you said no, no, we can't advertise or advocate anything. It's all up to the individual. I still want to know and I'm going to find out, Mark, one day.

But you did say it's important that people get the right devices. And what you were saying was that having different layouts of your screen and having split screens is something that's very, very easy to do.

I wonder how many people actually at home are doing it. Devin, you probably are. And so how would people go about getting some of the setup? What do they do?

MARK NICHOLS: I think if you went to Amazon.co.uk-- I'm not sure if I'm allowed to advertise them at all.

KAREN FOLEY: We'll soon know.

MARK NICHOLS: If you do a search for tablet PCs, you'll find quite a range of them, actually. They're very, very good devices.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. But I guess the take home point here is knowing that you can actually have various things like a keyboard that will allow you that whole functionality, having a mouse, having something that you can pick up and take off and having the dual screen. That can really help you and help you be portable also.

MARK NICHOLS: Absolutely. It makes online study or digital tool study very, very easy because you got the two screens. You can actually look at your module materials and have a document open on your other screen which you can quickly enter type.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Brilliant. Mark Nichols, it has been a short session-- well, it hasn't been short, actually. It's been full length. But it's been backed with information.

In particular, I love your ideas about having these. And this is one thing, in addition to learning End Note, that I'm definitely going to take away from this myself.

I hope you've enjoyed the session. And Mark, if you'd like to take some cake, you're very welcome. You'll see that I've made some lolly cake here, which is a popular New Zealand treat.

MARK NICHOLS: That's fantastic.

KAREN FOLEY: So if you'd like to have some, you're very, very welcome. But thank you, Mark Nichols, for joining us today.

MARK NICHOLS: Thanks, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. So Annie and HJ, before we start looking at note taking and essay writing and all things sensible, how are you two doing?

ANNIE: We are good. The chat is going really well. At the moment, everyone's been discussing references and how it's so tricky and hard to follow.

Patricia Grey has said the Harvard reference in the OU Library is really, really useful. Michael Clarke has said there's also OU library sessions with references if you want to go and try them out.

And I know personally, as well as other people on the chat have said that the Ref Me app is absolutely brilliant, and it really sorts all your referencing out for you. All you have to do is scan the bar code of the book, and it sorts all of that out for you.

So that's a really, really quick way to do it. We've got some cool selfies in.

HJ: Yes. People have sent us loads of stuff. We're loving it. So keep them coming in. What have you got, Annie?

ANNIE: G. Johnston has brought his selfie in. Loving that. I'm liking the selfies. Bring more selfies in.

We've also got Elle Bond has sent her selfies in. And I love your glasses. They are amazing. And Jen Hemming's little Lana. Beautiful little cat there, just having a relax and a doze, just as cats do best.

HJ: I've got two to show right now that I really like. So Tony sent in a picture of a study buddy, which is very fluffy, I have to say. That is one fluffy dog. She must be great to cuddle.

I have to do that after TMAs. I look at the scores and I have to hug someone. Marilyn's also sent a picture in of her desk with her cupcakes and what looks like a very yummy pie there.

But it's a very clean and organised desk, so putting me to shame again, which I'm quite sad about. But we had loads of great things. People were talking about all the apps they're using.

So we got Ref Me. Jonathan recommends Zotero for referencing. And Julie is another One Note user, so I agree with that one. Great application.

But what we'll do is we'll put all the links that you suggested together, and we'll put it in the forum section of our website before the one next week.

But everyone's loving the cakes. Ben's very intrigued by these cakes. But Marilyn wants to see some of the stationery that you've got on the table. She's very curious to have a look--

ANNIE: She's very interested to see what it all is.

HJ: --at what you've got if you're not too busy eating all the cakes.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh. No. Sorry. Delicious. I see what you mean about Battenberg cake, actually.

Stationery is really important. And this is one I like in particular, although to be honest with you it's so pretty I haven't written on it yet. But I really like having these planners out so that I can schedule and block out stuff I'm doing in the week.

Having little bits that I can put post-it notes on elsewhere. So this is a really nice compact take home little planner thing.

These things are all over the place as well. You can get them everywhere in Paperchase and this, that, and the other. But those sorts of things are useful.

Another top favourite of mine is highlighters. And I quite like these because they're handbag sized. And they've got two ends. They've got like a thick tip and a thin tip, which I thought was quite nice for circling and drawing through things.

So those are my favourites. And also, we've got some other Live Love Dream things, which are unopened. So you can see how far I get with my stationery.

HJ, though. You're a massive stationery fan.

HJ: Yeah. I love all my stationery. We were talking about colour pens and highlighters earlier. But yeah, I just like my coloured pens. That's my main thing. But I think if anyone's got some cool stationery--

ANNIE: Send them in, definitely.

HJ: Send them in. I want to see them.

ANNIE: People were talking about Paperchase actually, earlier. And I worked in Paperchase for my first job. And I used to collect all of the crazy pens and go in and everyone would be like, oh, here's Annie again with her weird pens.

And I'd just leave them lying around. So yeah, any Paperchase stationery.

KAREN FOLEY: And there are other stationeries available. I've been told.

ANNIE: Yeah. Waterstains. Yeah. So all good.

HJ: Yeah. I'm starting some new study stuff in this month as well, so I'm quite nervous as well. So I find these helpful, all the tips and stuff we get and that you send in.

But I had a really great tip, actually, that I'd love to bring up. Amy Smith, I love this tip. She says she pretends she's explaining her notes to someone else and it helps it click, which I thought that's a really good, nice tip.

So I think that's something that I'll try. But we'll put that up on the board. I like that tip so much. If you send your information to studenthub@open.ac.uk, then we've got something to send back as well, because I really like that.

ANNIE: Yeah, it's pretty good.

HJ: You sent us that tip. That's lovely.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, some people have been worried about getting addicted to stationery. And I know you've been talking to people on Twitter as well who've been getting in touch with us, and somebody said you were taking it a bit too far with the stationery.

So yeah, just be mindful of your limits, guys. And don't spend too much, even though you can.

OK. Some great tips and ideas coming up, though. That's absolutely brilliant. Do keep being in touch with us, studenthub@open.ac.uk is our email, and our hash tag is #StudentHubLive16 and @StudentHub.

So any questions, any pictures. Loving the pictures coming through it's so nice to get a sense of community here. So please do keep those coming.

And also what you're having for lunch as well. And you might like to tell me which cake you think is best. I'm not sure about the Battenberg cake. It's a little bit sweet, but I'm going to get through the rest during this session.

[MUSIC PLAYING]