

KAREN FOLEY: The Arts Hub was an online interactive event, and you're about to watch a session from that. But I wanted to explain to you how it all worked. You're about to see the video stream of the studio, but our audience participated online through chat and through interactive widgets, and those ideas were fed through into the studio from the social media desk. Of course, because you're watching it on Catch up, you won't be able to do those activities, but I do hope that you enjoy the discussion that follows.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi and welcome back to the Art Hub. Well, this is our penultimate session-- I love that word-- and I'm going to tell you a little story about how it all happened. Because we had a workshop, and we invited all of the academics and various members of the faculty of arts to come along and talk about things that we thought that students would like to hear about. And one of the ideas was myth and storytelling-- fabulous idea, crosses so many disciplines.

And then we asked for volunteers to come to the session. And today, I have Dan Weinbren and Jess Hughes. Thank you very much for coming. Now, tell us, how did you get here? Why are you interested in this whole area? Jess?

JESSICA HUGHES: Well, I'm interested in mythology, as you and probably everyone else knows by now. But I was particularly keen to join in this session with Dan because recently I've started to learn a little bit about the early history of the Open University. Should have done it before now, really, since I've been working here for six years, and particularly the arts faculty.

Dan's written a great book about this. And so I was just really keen to come along and actually hear some of Dan's stories and to think a little bit about how they might connect with classical myths in general and also even particular myths. Were there any particular myths that have been important in creating the OU's identity?

DANIEL WEINBREN: I'm interested in mythology because I think we use it all the time. And I notice people, even in this most modern and technological university such as the OU, would often refer to myths and stories in order to understand where they were, to make sense of what was going on, to give a sense of familiarity and composure to their lives. And I thought that it's interesting that something so old should be relevant even today to us at the OU.

KAREN FOLEY: So you started reading Dan's book.

JESSICA Yeah.

HUGHES:

KAREN FOLEY: We've got a real author here.

JESSICA Yeah, yeah.

HUGHES:

KAREN FOLEY: And you started getting interested in this whole idea. Can you tell us-- well, I mean, I appreciate you haven't read it all yet, but tell us what was starting to spark your interest, and why you even started to read about the history of the OU.

JESSICA OK. Well, I was asked a few months ago if I'd give a talk-- it actually happened yesterday in
HUGHES: the end-- but to OU Pioneers. Now, the Pioneers are our very earliest students. They're people who joined us in-- well, they were 1973, the people who came yesterday. And I was asked if I could give a talk about my research.

So I started thinking about it. I mean, would I talk about votives or souvenirs? And then I thought it would actually be probably a lot more interesting for people if I took a broader view and looked at how classical studies had evolved at the Open University.

So I asked some of my colleagues who are now senior professors, and they told me some anecdotes. And then they told me that the place to go was, first of all, Dan's book, but also an autobiography that had been written by our very first dean of arts, John Ferguson.

And I went along to the archives and found these books, and there were just so many wonderful stories. I don't know if we want to call them myths. I mean, myth sometimes has an element of something being not quite true or invented. And who knows, maybe these stories have been slightly embellished and improved along the way.

But stories like how people, when the campus was being built, everyone got issued with a pair of OU wellies and a pair of OU slippers so they could change out of their wellies when they actually came into the building, because the campus was so muddy apparently. Is that true?

DANIEL That's certainly true. And people did keep the slippers, or gave- because they were a symbol
WEINBREN: of that sense of being a pioneer. And I think the idea of being a pioneer is one of those myths

we like to live by, that the pioneers always feel that they had it hard. They struggled the most. And the next generation, whoever the next generation are, had it easy.

So in that sense, we kind of build on those stories of how things are to understand our lives and the lives of societies around us. So I think it's quite relevant of John Ferguson to have thought about myths and try to make them relevant and make them pertinent for the students at the Open University.

**JESSICA
HUGHES:**

Yeah. Because like we should probably mention that he was actually a classicist, wasn't he, and he was also very interested in religious studies. Now, it's fascinating for us today because we do still work very closely with the Religious Studies Department and to just discover that we've got this shared origin right at the beginning of the institution's history, it just made me feel quite happy really.

And I think that's one of the things that Dan was talking about as myths being about composure and about identity and things, and we can actually get a sense of belonging and community from rediscovering and retelling these stories of beginnings.

KAREN FOLEY:

You mentioned, like, myth and storytelling. And I just wanted to sort of pick up on, what's the difference, and why does that matter? Is there an emotional attachment to something? Are these stories being used for something? I mean, you've got a level 3 module on myth. I suppose you would have a good definition for us.

**JESSICA
HUGHES:**

Well, we spent a lot of that level 3 module discussing what myth is, definitions. The modern use of the word, I think, is quite loaded. As I mentioned, sometimes you say, oh, that's just a myth, with the implication that it's something that's not true. But really, in ancient Greek, the word "mythos" was just word, or speech, or story, and it didn't have that implication necessarily of being something fictitious.

But for me, I like to think of a myth as a story, true or otherwise, but just something that keeps getting retold and retold down through generations by different authors, artists. And I think that part of the attraction of the classical myths is this very fact that they have been retold so many times.

KAREN FOLEY:

And in terms of the Open University, what myths are being retold? What are some of the good ones?

DANIEL

Well, good, I'm not sure. It's the judgement .

WEINBREN:

[LAUGHTER]

But one of the first professors of distance education, David Seward, said that the Open University was like Athena, who was born, I think born, out of the head of Zeus. Now, that's an interesting myth because it says to us-- it reminds us, and he's trying to remind us-- that the Open University was founded largely by one man-- Harold Wilson.

But actually, it may be that it's not just born out of Harold Wilson. It's also got its roots in part-time adult education in the 18th century, or correspondence courses in the 19th century, or summer schools on radio in the 20th century. It's got much more complicated roots.

And it's also, of course, not just one man. There's also people, notably Jennie Lee, who ensured the university took the form it did in all sorts of ways. And perhaps the story also put it, it's this good story because it's about a great man doing a dramatic thing. And often that's what people like about their stories is a clear moral, that something's happened, and you can see before and after.

But actually, The Open University, maybe one of the things we're learning about is the subtleties of it's not just one person. It's not just one speech. And that actually, also, the University's about the involvement of the government, about market forces, so about all sorts of other things going on. So the myth, in a sense, helps us and also confuses us.

**JESSICA
HUGHES:**

Another myth that we thought was quite pertinent when we initially discussed this discussion was the myth of Prometheus. Well, lots of things happened to Prometheus, but the point that's particularly salient here is the fact that Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to man. And this has been widely interpreted by different writers, playwrights as a symbol of technological progress, Prometheus as this liberator of mankind.

And the Greek playwright Aeschylus, he has a beautiful passage that actually then turns up in our very first humanities module, A100, and it's all about Prometheus explaining, as he's chained to this rock, everything that he's done for man and what we were like beforehand. We were like ants living in burrows, if you're interested, with no medicine and nothing nice.

And then he taught us how to read oracles, how to communicate with the gods, how to heal ourselves, how to build houses that faced the sunlight, and it was a big gift to us. And I think

that that myth was really quite useful and drawn upon, wasn't it, by the early founders?

DANIEL

Because the university was originally going to be called the University of the Air. It was going to be all about television and radio and, of course, correspondence. But that idea of using the technology for good so that everybody could go to university. And that was open to whatever your qualifications, wherever you lived, you could study.

WEINBREN:

And also, it took the university, it took education, it took learning away from the quadrangles of Oxford and put it firmly into your front room. And that was what television could do. So that idea that technology could be used in all sorts of ways, but particularly to help people learn was a very potent story which the Open University was able to tell right from the beginning.

JESSICA

And when I first looked into the A100 module materials, and I was looking just to see which was the very first myth that students would have encountered in their arts career, and I saw Prometheus. And I thought, oh, well, that's a nice depressing one for them to start off with.

HUGHES:

But it wasn't until we'd had that chat that I realised, well, actually, that is an incredibly symbolic myth. You're at this university, which is all about technology and progress and civilisation, and that's the passage that you choose to start off with. So that really added a depth of meaning to it for me.

KAREN FOLEY:

Wonderful. Let's see what people at home are saying about myth.

RACHEL:

Well, Davin said he thinks his interest in mythology came from growing up watching all the epic '60s movies. We've also got-- Melanie says, our memory is a myth. That's quite an interesting one, isn't it?

HJ:

That's one for our philosophers as well, I think. They have a lot to say about memory, as always. They have a lot to say about everything, though, don't they?

RACHEL:

After what we said about philosophers yesterday, I think we're er...

HJ:

Sylvia's got an interesting point I would like to pick up on. She went to the British Museum and she said that when she went there, she heard that Athene was born out of Zeus's head. So all of these mythical stories do sound a bit out there, but they are quite entertaining, I must say.

RACHEL:

They are so diverse as well, isn't it? Ben said, mythology can be a fantastic view into the psychology of civilizations past. And we do have a question somewhere. How far up is that?

Oh, no, I think it's a bit too far. We'll come back with a question.

[BELL]

Oh.

HJ: Ooh. We haven't had that in a while, have we?

KAREN FOLEY: What's that?

RACHEL: We haven't.

HJ: Well, I don't think that's the end. I think that's someone telling us that our mail box has actually--

RACHEL: We got mail.

HJ: We've got some mail. But I think I was wondering. Let's have a quick look at what we've got. No, no, nope, nope. I think some stuff's getting in there that's not where really where it's supposed to go. I can't reach it.

RACHEL: Oh, some spam again.

HJ: Full of spam, as always. I may need a hand to reach in there for me. This is the hand of god.

KAREN FOLEY: The hand that of god.

[LAUGHTER]

HJ: So this came into our email, studenthub@open.ac.uk, and it's a lovely picture. This is from Karen and she says, it's a picture of me and some fellow OU students at the Ashmolean Museum.

KAREN FOLEY: Ashmolean, yeah.

HJ: Ashmolean, there we go. Thank you for that. And she says, we meet up regularly to share our love of art history, which is very--

RACHEL: That's lovely, isn't it?

HJ: That is lovely. But she also sent us another picture as well, and it's a picture of a live mask of

Lorenzo Medici. And his mask is at the-- you'll have to say this word again for me.

KAREN FOLEY: The Ashmolean.

HJ: At the Ashmolean as well. So he was-- well, I don't know. She hasn't said what he's famous for. Do our classicists know?

DANIEL I think he might be a patron of the arts.

WEINBREN:

HJ: Yes, a patron of the arts. There we go.

[LAUGHTER]

HJ: Or if you could tell us more, we'd love to know. But thank you for that, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely, excellent. Did you want to pick up on any of those points? What do you make of what our students are saying?

DANIEL I think that one of the ideas about myths and stories and the confusion between them is that
WEINBREN: they do overlap. And that often we do tell stories about our own lives that draw a bit upon mythical ideas, but also they are change over time. So it's not as obvious as the way you rewrite your CV every time you have a new job, if you do. It's more to do with understanding how things have changed. Our memories, perhaps, aren't like video recorders, and they just keep the same things.

They change over time. Bits get added, and bits get moved around. And in that sense, our memories, our understandings of ourselves, are a bit like the stories we understand from the Greeks or other societies. That retelling of them changes the story, but also, in some ways, changes ourselves, our understandings of ourselves. So I think that it's very interesting that people say, well, our memories are our myth because, in lots of ways, that's the case.

JESSICA That reminded me of another discussion that we had about summer schools when we were
HUGHES: just talking outside the session. And we discovered that both of our mums had done OU degrees and had both been in summer schools. And now that is a bit of a myth, isn't it, for us now working at the OU where that doesn't really happen. We've constructed almost a golden age of the 1970s, where everybody went off and had brilliant boozy times.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. One thing I did want to touch on, which is often mentioned in the context of

the Open University, is *Educating Rita*.

**JESSICA
HUGHES:**

Yes, well, I just finished listening to the radio play, and I didn't like him very much, I have to say. But yes, so that's got echoes of Pygmalion, the story that's told, well, most famously in Ovid's "Metamorphoses," which is actually a whole book about transformations.

But the particular transformation that Pygmalion works is sculpting an ivory maiden, and he desperately wants her to be alive. He's really in love with her for some reason. Yeah, and eventually he prays hard enough to Aphrodite, and she comes alive and becomes a real woman.

Now, this story, my classical studies colleague, Paula James, has written a whole book about how this story's been adapted in popular culture and particularly on screen. *My Fair Lady* is one popular example. But *Educating Rita* is one of our, I suppose, origin myths as well, because it's about-- well, do you want to tell the story, Dan, because you--

**DANIEL
WEINBREN:**

I think this is a very interesting story. It's about a Liverpoolian hairdresser, a 26-year-old woman, and she starts off at the Open University. And the author of the play has never been to a university, but he came here one day and had a little chat to people. He's got some good ideas, not necessarily about how the university works, but about the relationship between the tutor and the student.

And it starts off that she's very nervous. She can't physically go into the room. She can't open the door to get into the Open University because she's bowed. And that sort of, seems to me, that sets it up. And she says, my mind's full of junk, and she wants to clear it out. And she thinks of her tutor as this person who puts good things into her head.

But actually, as the play goes along, we see that it's not just the case, as she says, I almost said in my exams Frank knows all the answers, but he doesn't know all the answers. And she learns for herself, and she's, in turn, not just a snogged statue. She's more like somebody who transforms herself.

And in that sense it's a different take on the story of Pygmalion. But also it's a reassuring one, that at the end, she's confident, she can walk on, get through the door. But she doesn't come across as some bluestocking academic. She changes her voice at some point, but she goes back to being a Scouser. Then the final scene, she's cutting his hair, like she's a hairdresser.

And what she's perhaps saying here is-- she talks about degrees for dishwashers. And she's saying she's on the stage and, in a sense, she's taken the Open University off the stage, putting it back in front of the kitchen sink. And that's a familiar place that allows people like our mums to recognise this-- we can go to university.

So I think it's a story which the Open University's made much of, and it's not a bad one to start with, because it has all those elements of both referring back to the Greeks and Ovid but also referring to degrees for dishwashers.

KAREN FOLEY: You've given so much to think about. And as usual, we would carry on for hours, but we are out of time from tonight's session. So Jess and Dan, thank you so much for coming and talking about that.

I wonder how many students are aware of some of the heritage of the Open University. I've got your book, Dan, and I'm getting through that as well. And you can get the *History of the Open University* through-- I think the cheapest way is through the OUSA Shop, isn't that, and it's 12 pounds there.

So you can go to the Open University Student Association, and you can buy the *History of the Open University* there. Really interesting read and great to know that the OU's got such a heritage. I think, for a lot of people, that really does matter. So thank you very much for that.

Right. We're going to have another little video break. We have lined up Astrex, dinosaurs, and Odysseus. And so we're going to be watching some videos about that. And then we're going to come back for our final session of today and the final session of the Arts Hub, which is about, why are arts students dangerous?

I'm really looking forward to that session. I hope there is no fighting involved, but I'm assured that there isn't. We'll see about that. Anyway, enjoy these videos during the break, and I'll see you very soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]