

KAREN FOLEY: Now, our next session. We're going to talk about feedback. So Peter Taylor, welcome. Now, you're the director of the Open Programme, but most importantly for this session, you are the director of the Assessment Programme at the Open University.

PETER TAYLOR: That's correct, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: And you're also an - how do you say it? Organosilco-

PETER TAYLOR: Organosilicon chemist.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, we're not going to talk about that. But in all seriousness, when students have submitted their assignments, we have been talking a little bit about how they're feeling about it all. And some people have been saying, I'm really, really excited about it. But also, there was quite a lot of anxiety about the whole thing. And I think that's to do with sometimes being allocated a new tutor, going through that first assignment process, and then getting the feedback and thinking, you know, how is it going to be?

PETER TAYLOR: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: So we wanted to focus on feedback for this session. But we also thought that a good way to do this would be for you to give us some feedback. So we've got some widgets there. We want to know how good is *The Student Hub Live*? Well, lots of you are coming back, so I'm hoping it's good, but I'm not going to prime that one. How helpful is *The Student Hub Live*? What is the best thing about *Student Hub Live*? And what do you think of the set?

So we'd like to have some feedback from you right now. Also, there's a feedback button on the website. And so if you haven't had a chance to fill that in, it's a very quick form that will give us an idea about what you think is good and where you think we could improve. So please do that at some point as well.

We also would like to know what the best piece of feedback you've received is. And I bet we'll get some really, really good tips in. How did it help you improve? So you know, what was the best thing someone said to you? It could be to do with study. It could be to do with not wearing red trousers and a matching red shirt. So yeah, let us know what the best feedback you had was and how it helped you improve.

So Peter, assessment, the marking process, how does it all work?

PETER TAYLOR: So you've been listening to how you submit your TMAs, and they go into the ETMA system. And then they're distributed out again to the associate lecturer, who will be busy marking them. And an important aspect of that is the grading process. But in many ways, it's not the most important process.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, I actually think it is, because the other week we asked them what they thought, and they were all like, grades, grades, grades!

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah, but actually, as an AL, I spend much more time giving the feedback than I do worrying about the grade.

KAREN FOLEY: That's a good point, actually.

PETER TAYLOR: So I put a lot more of my time into writing that feedback. And it's specifically tailored to an individual's need. And I really hope that the person who gets it is going to be able to read it, to be able to find time to reflect upon it, and think about how they can use what my comments are to improve their next TMA. So yes, the grades are important, but that kind of feedback, that kind of extra information that you're getting as an individual, and that feed forward into the next TMA is really crucial.

KAREN FOLEY: As an AL, how often do students make the same sorts of errors? Do you find yourself often repeating things? I guess my point is, do you think your students are taking on board that feedback?

PETER TAYLOR: Well, that's a problem for me sometimes. So sometimes - I remember a couple of years ago, this was on a project module, and as part of my feedback, I gave some suggestions for possible ways in which they could change their title of the project. And about two or three weeks later, I got an email from them saying, can you give me some suggestions about what I should put for my title? So clearly, they'd not actually read the feedback I'd given them, which actually provided that information.

And it's because they get the grade, they look at it, they think, hm, I got 68%. That's not too bad. I'll look at the feedback, but then other things get in the way, the kind of study of the course seems much more important, and never quite get around to looking at that feedback. So it's about making space in your kind of tutorial or in your study timetable to actually allocate to looking at the feedback.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Yeah. But it can be hard, I think, because so often, ultimately, the feedback is really telling you how to improve.

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: And one could be forgiven for thinking that's mainly negative, even though I know when I'm marking, I really try and make sure that I've got a lot of positive things in there because positive feedback is just as important as negative feedback.

PETER TAYLOR: Yep.

KAREN FOLEY: But equally, I appreciate that, when you're getting it back and you look at your grade, you have some sort of value-laden way of looking at that, going 68, that's good. That's bad. That's whatever. Rah! I'm putting it down, if you're not happy with it. Or the, yes, that's great. Well, I don't need to read it.

So what happens then, in that process? How would you advise people actually get on board with accepting the grade and then looking at the feedback?

PETER TAYLOR: Well I always feel that, irrespective of the grade, there's good feedback within it. So even if I'm giving someone with 85% who hasn't actually got very much kind of wrong, I'm still identifying ways in which they could improve, thinking about the way that they construct their arguments, maybe the way that they're kind of putting forward particular information, the way they're using tables, figures, or whatever. But there's always ways in which people can improve.

So I think I agree. When I was a lad back in the dark ages, you know, the kind of feedback I used to get was just things like, this is rubbish. And that was useless. I mean, apart from making me feel bad about myself, it really didn't help me kind of progress and learn from my mistakes. Hopefully, within the Open University, we've moved on, so that now we're kind of identifying ways in which people can improve, giving students the kind of guidance about how to improve, hopefully linking it to the teaching materials in some way, just kind of making sure that there's always some hints and tips on how to do better, irrespective of your grade.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. No, absolutely.

OK, well we asked everybody at home for some feedback on *The Student Hub*. Would you like to know what they said?

PETER TAYLOR: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. How helpful is *The Student Hub Live*? They said 100%. I think they are a bit biased, though, because maybe those who aren't have been kicked out. So how good is it? 100%. How helpful is it? 100%.

So we've got some numerical data. That's obviously brilliant. Thank you for that.

What is the best thing about *The Student Hub Live*? So this is a little bit more of a qualitative feel. So informative, community, interactive, helpful. Some negative things buffering there. Some people are having problems with the stream. Popcorn - yes, popcorn is good. Learning, a community, advice, chat, ease of use, presenters. Lots and lots of really good things. Biscuits. So a combination of really lovely comments and food, which is really what *The Student Hub Live* is about.

We also asked what they thought of the sets. 43% said what are you doing in a basement? 35% percent said genius. 19% hadn't really noticed, probably because of all the food and cereal eating, and 3% said it's not really academic. So a real mixture of things there.

But when you think about some of these things, how do you feel getting some of this feedback? And what are you taking on board with all that mixture of information that we've given you?

PETER TAYLOR: Well, there's a couple of interesting. First of all, there was a kind of a multi-choice question there. And one of the things I should say, it's not just TMAs that give feedback, but our computer marked assignments give feedback as well.

KAREN FOLEY: The ICMA's.

PETER TAYLOR: The ICMA's. So all of our kind of assessment has some feedback element. And when you get feedback it's, as you said earlier on, you kind of think, well, how do I feel about that? So your 100% of liking *The Student Hub Live* is great, except the sad thing about that is you don't know, now, how to improve.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, somebody said that the other week. And they said, well, I've got 100% and my tutor said, oh, it's all downhill from here, which I suppose ultimately it is.

PETER TAYLOR: So one of the things that I learnt very early on in my career at the Open University is, when we

produce materials, we kind of produce a first draft and we send it round to a number of people to read. And there will always be comments on it. And at first, when I got all these comments, I found that, you know, oh, dear. I've made a mistake. I haven't written it properly, or whatever.

But as I got more comfortable with it, I then started to realise that the comments I was getting were the ways I could improve it. And therefore, I got to a point where, if I didn't get many comments, I felt quite sad because I couldn't think of the ways of improving things. So I think having those comments, but it's the way that you structure the comments. So rather than saying, I don't understand this, or, this is rubbish, actually kind of trying to understand what the problem is and explain to me what the problem is so I can then think about how I can make it better.

KAREN FOLEY: That's a lovely way of putting it because what you've really said is that, within academic writing and, in fact, the academic dialogue, it is all about feedback all the way. You will never have a time when you're not getting feedback, whether you're submitting something for a peer-reviewed journal or just writing a module chapter. You know, you're always trying to get that feedback. I know HJ was looking at something and he goes, look at all this stuff. I've done it wrong! And I said, no, you haven't. It's just people feeding in stuff. It's good.

PETER TAYLOR: So I can give you two examples from this morning of feedback I've had. One was a journal article. So this is an American journal I'd sent the paper to, and it'd gone to three referees. And each of them had given me slightly different comments, but ways in which I could improve the paper. So it was fairly straightforward for me to be able to make those changes and to meet their requirements, and it can now go to be submitted. So that's one way.

The other way was in a grant application. So I've written this grant application. But before it goes out of the Open University, I give it to at least two of my colleagues to read so they can be a critical friend. I don't want to come back and tell me all is well. I want them to say, well, that doesn't work very well, or you need to explain that a bit more clearly. So yeah, criticism and accepting criticism is very much part of the academic life.

KAREN FOLEY: Because you can get to that point, can't you, where sometimes you're so immersed in things, and you understand it. You understand the background, the context. And sometimes, it's really helpful for someone to say, you actually need a little bit of information here because what you're saying doesn't really make sense.

PETER TAYLOR: But it's also about - and I do this all the time. I write down what I want to tell the person rather

than what they're actually asking of me. So quite often, on a kind of research grant application, I will say, I want to tell you about this bit of work. And then someone will come back and say well, if you actually read the small print, this is what you were asked to do. And you haven't done that.

And I think it's the same with TMA questions, that sometimes we, as students, we want to kind of give, this is what I know. This is the answer I want to put down. But it doesn't always match the question. And so part of the feedback is about getting people to think about the question, what it's trying to do, and kind of answering appropriately.

KAREN FOLEY: I'm going to be a referee very soon.

PETER TAYLOR: Right.

KAREN FOLEY: I've got the philosophical boxing match coming up, see?

PETER TAYLOR: All right!

KAREN FOLEY: So I'm going to umpire that. So I'll be looking forward to my feedback there.

Right. Reflecting on feedback, then - so we get all this feedback.

PETER TAYLOR: Yep.

KAREN FOLEY: We think about it. How can we actually deal with this and reflect on it usefully?

PETER TAYLOR: Well, I think the first thing is that one of the important aspects is it needs to be relatively quickly after you've submitted it. So, if you get the feedback three or four weeks later, then it's out of your head, the assignment. You've moved on and it isn't very useful. So it's important to get that feedback within a couple of weeks while it's still relevant, whilst you remember what you went through in answering the question.

And then it's just a question of going through it and reflecting on what your tutor is saying, thinking about how could I, not just, how do I understand that better, but how could I have written it better? How could I have made it, so that instead of getting seven out of 10, I got eight out of 10 for that section?

KAREN FOLEY: Is it, though, a numerical trajectory in terms of improving? Because I know a lot of students are saying, I got x grade, I now want y grade. And I say, well actually, I think you should be

focusing on writing a better essay. Our challenge now is to work on your introductions or your conclusions. That's our goal, not get getting 2% more, because the assignments get progressively more challenging, and consequently, the marks get more difficult to award. And they're also looking at entirely different things.

So how do you advise people to actually take on board that feedback and, I guess, identify the areas, then, that they want to improve on or they need to improve on?

PETER TAYLOR: Well, that's interesting. There are two aspects to that. First of all, there's the actual knowledge and skill content that you're studying at the moment, so improving what you've just been learning about. But the other bit you mentioned was about being able to improve your general kind of assignment writing - so how to write a better introduction, how to kind of make clearer arguments within your essay. So there are two bits to that.

So it's about thinking about what are the misconceptions I have of the stuff I'm learning, but also, how do I develop my academic voice in terms of creating those arguments? And -

KAREN FOLEY: Can you tell us how one could work with their tutor? Say you identify something like, I want to write better introductions because my introduction isn't clear. That can be quite a big thing. And people can then think, how do I write a better introduction? I'm going to try really hard next time. How do they go about making that feedback useful and working with their tutor or associate lecturer?

PETER TAYLOR: One of the things that often disappoints me is an AL is that I will write some feedback, and it will go out to the student, but I then don't hear from them anything about it until the next assignment. So I would personally be perfectly happy for someone to come back to me and say, well I've thought about this, and I can understand this bit, but I really am not sure how I could do that differently. And I would hope that they would get back to their AL, who then might be able to enter that dialogue about ways in which they could improve what they're doing.

KAREN FOLEY: I love it when people do that, because we, equally, are fallible, too.

PETER TAYLOR: Right.

KAREN FOLEY: And sometimes I'll think, well, I've made that perfectly clear. And then with hindsight, I think, oh actually, maybe I should've been a bit more explicit. And so if you don't understand something, it's a really good idea to go back to your tutor and pick up on those things. And it shows us that you've read it.

PETER TAYLOR: Exactly. But try to be in a positive way.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

PETER TAYLOR: So I once had a student who, their immediate reaction of me being critical - or what they thought I was being critical to them - was to come back and be critical to me. And it was not a kind of an open dialogue. And I think I was trying to kind of give them advice on how to improve, so maybe they could come back and say, well, I understood that. But that really doesn't make sense to me. Can you explain that to me again? Or, I'm not sure that what you were saying was quite right, and I thought about doing it this way. Can you explain why it wasn't quite right? Rather than, well, I don't agree with you.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I know. It is difficult, I think. And you know, we put so much into these assignments, both in terms of people submitting them as well as us marking them. And you know, it is an emotional process.

PETER TAYLOR: Yep.

KAREN FOLEY: But equally, you know, they are, I guess, part of a formative learning process where you're getting really personalised, individual advice from your tutor, who's spending a lot of time marking these.

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: And really, taking on board and reading them is going to be ultimately useful to you, isn't it?

PETER TAYLOR: Yeah, very much so. But as I said, it's about creating that space and saying this is an important activity to undertake, because there's pressures on everybody's time. And there's always a tendency, oh, I need to get on reading the next bit.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

PETER TAYLOR: And so, making space when it comes in to look at the grade and then look at the kind of feedback, thinking about, well, how can I use this to improve, maybe making some notes for the next TMA about how I could approach it differently. And you know, it's very valuable. And I would hate to think people are missing out on that because they're just too busy getting on with other things.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. So the take-home message is there's a temporal process here. You're going to get your TMA back. You're going to have some sort of a reaction to it.

PETER TAYLOR: Yep, and it's an emotional one.

KAREN FOLEY: It is. And that's cool. But then sit down a bit later, read through it, and maybe pick a few things that you could work on, and make sure, I guess, that you're very clear about what those things are. And then really try and work on those for your next assignment, even with your tutor, to pick on those things that you really want to develop for yourself.

PETER TAYLOR: Yep.

KAREN FOLEY: Peter Taylor, thank you so much. That's been a really, really useful session.

PETER TAYLOR: Thank you for letting me come.

KAREN FOLEY: No, thank you. I hope that's been helpful for everybody at home. Sophie and HJ, are people feeling a little less anxious now about submitting their assignments?

SOPHIE: Strong favourite, I don't care what Ladbrokes say.

HJ: Sophie!

KAREN FOLEY: What's going on?

SOPHIE: Sorry. I'm preparing for the boxing match tonight.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, right. Oh, I'm already ready. I've got my whistle.

[WHISTLE BLOWS]

All sorted.

HJ: I'm a bit nervous about that. I have heard something about a boxing match.

SOPHIE: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. No, it's going to be really, really good. I'm really looking forward to it.

SOPHIE: I wouldn't say that you were our favourite, at the moment, unfortunately.

KAREN FOLEY: Really?

SOPHIE: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: I'm rooting for you. I think you're going to definitely win.

HJ: Oh, well thank you, Karen.

SOPHIE: I mean, you could earn quite a bit if you'd like to put some money on it with me.

KAREN FOLEY: How much?

SOPHIE: Ten to one for HJ Yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, and what about Sean?

SOPHIE: He's a bit more of a favourite, so three to one.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, OK. Well all right. OK. I shouldn't get involved. I shouldn't get involved in this.

HJ: We'll see what the audience thinks about this.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, well anyway, is everyone still eating cereal? And how are the feeling about their assignments?

SOPHIE: I think the conversation's actually gone quite back to more academic. We've all talked about our TMAs and the length of time it takes to write an assignment, how different people sort of plan it and how long it takes you to do it, which has been quite a big topic.

HJ: I think, one of the things someone just asked that I just wanted to pick up on, they said, so all tutors are associate lecturers? Yes. Associate lecturers is just one of those funny words that the OU uses, but they are your tutors, yes. So if you hear us saying associate lecturers -

SOPHIE: Or ALs.

HJ: Or ALs, yes.

SOPHIE: Just to confuse you.

HJ: But I think one of the things that was picked up on was getting feedback from tutors. And a lot of people like feedback from their tutors. But if you don't understand your feedback or want to ask more, there's nothing wrong with talking to your tutor about it as well. They're asking for

more detail about things that you can improve on. And that's what your tutors are there for, is to have a dialogue with, so don't be afraid, ever, to ask them if you're unsure about something or have a question.

But one question which I think is good that a lot of people have mentioned, are you allowed to use proofreaders for the OU for looking over assignments? So I'm not sure. Maybe we'll have to get back to that one by e-mail. But I'm not too sure.

KAREN FOLEY: That's an interesting one. I know that some students who have additional requirements may need proofreaders as part of that their learning. And I guess I'm not really sure what the actual thing on that is. I guess -

HJ: Well, I know what we'll do. If there's anything that we can't answer or missed, if you e-mail us studenthub@open.ac.uk, we'll get an informed answer for that one, shall we?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, that's brilliant, because we're here pretty much, actually, most of the week. And I hope you guys are going to come along and join us for the process. We will have some breaks. But yeah, we'll find out about that. But you certainly mustn't plagiarise or get any help. It must all be your own work. That is the most important thing, definitely.