

KAREN FOLEY: Good morning and welcome to the Student Hub Live. Well, it's the 9th of October. And this is the third of our boot camps, where we're getting you geared up to start your studies. So for many of you, your module will have already started. And Lee and Zach are chatting to all of you in the chat box.

But let me just explain how this event works if indeed you are new. So my name's Karen and I'll be presenting the show today. And I have four incredibly fantastic guests who are going to talk you all through the various things you need to know to start your first assignment.

We're going to take a look at critical thinking. We're going to take a look at process and content words in your TMA. And then we're going to look at unpacking the TMA and thinking about what the assessor wants from you on that assignment. And then we're going to take a look at essay writing. So we've got a lot of things that will be essential skills for study.

Now, we've got a lot of widgets in the bottom left-hand corner of your screen. These are interactive tools, not the thing that's in a bottle of Guinness. And what you do with those is you can press on the widget that applies to you and tell us what you think. You might tell us where you are. So there's a map and just put on the map where you are. You can also tell us what level you're setting and how you're feeling right now.

Now, these word clouds, which is a list of three options, need three things to submit. So if you could only think of one or two, that's absolutely fine, but just put a full stop in so that we can see your results. You can also tell us which subject you're studying and if you've been to a Student Hub Live event before and how you're feeling about starting your module. So let us know your thoughts.

And joining me today are Lee and Zach. Hello, Lee and Zach. How are you and how is everyone?

ZACH: Very well, thank you. How are you?

KAREN FOLEY: Good, thank you. Looking forward to today's session.

LEE: Absolutely.

KAREN FOLEY: How's everyone out there?

LEE: Everyone's really up for this. Lots of people out there, really excited, really want to know some more information about looking sort of critically at their TMAs and looking at assessments in general, which we're going to be covering a lot of today as well. There's over 120 students already online, sort of chatting to us. So hopefully that will grow throughout the day as we give lots of information about them completing their essays and assignments.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, thank you both. Now, Lee and Zach, as well as being students, work in our student support team, which is brilliant, because they know a lot of tips about where to find things that may be useful for your studies. So they'll be putting those links in the chat.

Now, I know from a lot of people that they haven't been able to watch with us today because they're working, so I am sorry about that. But hopefully you can still get a lot out of these sessions on the catch-up. And to watch the catch-up, you just go to the Livestream account, which is ouconnections. And you can watch the catch-up immediately after the event. And we'll also be cutting it into nice bite-sized sections and putting it on our Student Hub Live YouTube channel after the show.

But our sessions on essay writing, which will end this workshop, are all in the evening. So hopefully those of you who haven't been able to come in real-time can make those evening sessions, which I'll explain a little bit more about later.

OK. So our first session is about critical thinking. And I'm joined by Paul-Francois Tremlett, who some of you may know from our freshers event last week. Now, Paul is the head of department in religious studies. And he's been working on a new second-level module in religious studies called A227, Exploring Religion Places, Practises, Texts, and Experiences. If you're interested in listening to a session that he and Graham Harvey did, then do check that out on the catch-up, which is from our freshers event that was last week.

But today, Paul, you're here to tell us all about critical thinking.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: That's right, Karen. And I think the most important thing to start with is critical thinking shouldn't be attempted until you've had your morning coffee.

[LAUGHTER]

When you've had your morning coffee, then you're ready to start critical thinking.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, you came in here with your coffee, Paul, refusing to give it up, despite the non-compliant mug. But we've now got you a mug. And then you started criticising our biscuits, which are actually out stationery. We've been writing all our things we've been learning in our boot camp, combining two of our favourite things, stationery and biscuits at Student Hub Live.

PAUL-FRANCOIS I was disappointed that I couldn't do some dunking.

TREMLETT:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, no. No. I like my stationery.

So Paul, critical thinking is a really important thing for Level 2 students, Level 3 students. But in fact, many of our students are here today just at Level 1. And it's a really good habit to get into.

But I think it's one of those most elusive subjects, where we all think, have I been thinking critically? And am I criticising the right thing? So what is critical thinking?

PAUL-FRANCOIS OK. Critical thinking. Let's begin with what it isn't. It isn't just criticising.

TREMLETT:

And it isn't something you might have heard of called critical theory, which actually comes from something called the Frankfurt School. That's a very specific type of social theory, if you like, associated with Marxism. It's not that either.

Critical thinking is really about developing your skills. It's about reflecting on your own processes of thought. And it's about learning to develop skills when you encounter sources of evidence, so discriminating between let's say good evidence and not-so-good evidence, trustworthy or reliable data and unreliable data. In today's parlance, that might be real news and fake news, for example.

So it's about developing those kinds of skills. And part of it, as I said at the beginning, is it's about reflection on one's own thought. So growing up in this country in the 21st century, I'm a white, middle class, middle-aged male. Obviously I've got habits of thought that are part of who I am and how I've been socialised and how I've been educated. So it's learning to become aware of those kinds of habits that are associated with my upbringing, my gender, my age, and so forth, and learning to try and overcome those or at least spot the biases and distortions that may be there, and then learning to get past that and use my reason in a way that is productive, rather than allowing my judgement to be clouded by different kinds of let's

say ideological distortion or bias.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, we've got some widgets that we'd like you to fill in. Does critical thinking mean criticising? You might have guessed the answer to that already. But do let us know what you think.

And also, why is doubt as important as reason? Something we'll pick up on later. Is it all black and white? I mean, that's quite a categorical answer, so we've got some decisions there to make, which is yes, no, or it's very grey. And why use critical thinking outside the university?

Paul, I'm really interested in this idea, because it sounds really difficult. But you've written something here in terms of our preparation, which is this idea about learning. And you were saying if you memorise a solution to a problem, you've memorised that. And critical thinking is really about sort of taking something and combining it with other things and then applying it to something new, which I think is a fantastic way of looking at it, because that's what learning is.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Absolutely right. Critical thinking is about developing a sort of panoply of skills that you can take from one situation and apply to lots of other different situations. In that example, I said you can memorise a solution to a problem, but then you've only memorised a solution to that problem.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: You can't transfer that what you've memorised elsewhere. So critical thinking is about learning some skills relevant to one's studies, about using evidence, using evidence in a way to support an argument, using evidence in a way to maybe establish or evaluate somebody else's argument, maybe spot weaknesses in their argument, and then learning that actually those skills are really useful in a range of contexts, when you're reading a newspaper, when you're watching television, when you're studying, you might be doing one module, you might be doing a combined degree with different elements to it. Maybe history is one element and religious studies blow my own trumpet briefly is the other. But the skills you learn, the critical thinking skills you learn will be applicable in both subjects, because they're both about evidence, weighing up evidence, balancing carefully, critically assessing, and then reaching a conclusion based on an evidence-based argument.

KAREN FOLEY: So really it's about thinking we've got a lot of skills that we've already generated in life, for example, how do I get a coffee in the studio? How do I get some biscuits, for example? But our students, especially students who are approaching this somewhat later, can often think, I

don't know how to do this thing and thinking critically can sound really, really hard.

But actually, they've been having very complex negotiation with their children about going to bed on time. They might have been working out how they can fit their study into life. And again, like you say, when you start studying, you read newspapers in different ways.

And last week we were talking about freshers and saying, all of these headlines and papers saying a glass of wine is really good for you, et cetera, how do we evaluate that and think about where that source of evidence comes from and to what extent that really is an accurate reflection of that claim? So what you're saying really is to think about how we can sort of take some of these skills that we've already learnt in everyday life how do I tell whether someone's telling me the truth, for example, about whether or not they've taken my pencil or my biscuit how do we evaluate that and transfer that to a learning environment?

And that's really where I want to go next, because I think when we sort of start making those steps, it's a little bit easier to sort of see how we might make those links. But how appropriate are they, really?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Well, I think when we're doing our studies, as you say, we're using the same kinds of skills that we've used in work situations, in family situations. We're using our reason. But we're also using a scepticism. We don't always believe everything we hear. And sometimes we need to reflect on why we're more likely to be sceptical of some sources than others and more likely to trust some sources than others.

But scepticism, healthy scepticism, is good. We can also practise it not only as something personal and individual. Reason and doubt or scepticism are also useful public tools. So when we discuss with our student peers, when we discuss with our friends and family, we're using our reason and our scepticism publicly.

And we can learn from what other people from other people's perspectives to moderate. And I don't mean by moderate as in cleave to some middle path. What I mean is recognise that different points of view can often mean seeing the same question from different perspectives and seeing the same data from different perspectives actually helps you realise that the world is more often answers or the world around us is more ambiguous and more complicated than we might have begun in our investigation.

So it's a complex world out there. Studies are complex. We have to accept and embrace that

complexity and not be intimidated by it and not be intimidated when our reason doesn't seem to lead us to a true answer or a correct answer. But maybe because particularly in social sciences and humanities, truth isn't really something you're going to go

KAREN FOLEY: I was trying to avoid that subject. We don't want to but you're right, though, because what is truth is a very contested idea. What is evidence and what counts as evidence are things that we grapple with all the time. And once we start to make those sorts of connections really and think, actually, it doesn't have to mean just because some scientists have done this on a laboratory of rats doesn't mean it has to apply to a human population. Where is that evidence and to what extent can we sort of use it?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Yeah. Can it be generalised to others? That's right. I mean, the hallmark of science is really that its conclusions are always tentative. There's always the sense that more research is required in order to drive to open out the question further, to open out that complexity that's there.

KAREN FOLEY: Back to this point, because I think often when I'm encouraging particularly Level 2 students and particularly in science to think critically, they might start saying, OK, ah, yes, the laboratory experiment lacked psychological validity. That's my critical evaluation of this. And it's very easy to sort of revert to that sort of criticising of things, because one thing can't say everything categorically. Evidence is always contextualised, isn't it?

PAUL-FRANCOIS Yes.

TREMLET:

KAREN FOLEY: So it's difficult, but you're encouraging students to think about their own systematic way of doing things. And you've got some ideas about how they can start thinking about maybe what's working for them in terms of this more linear approach to how they think and then what sort of techniques they can use to get out of their kit when they're starting to evaluate something.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: It's important to recognise the role, I think, of creativity and imagination. So you're not just following a linear path, question, evaluation, answer. Curiosity and imagination are a big part of addressing questions, TMA questions, bigger questions, or even just what do I think about this particular story on the front page of the newspaper today?

So I really think it's important to try and imagine yourself as cultivating a sort of autonomy as a

learner, learning how to learn. And that intellectual autonomy is all about our end goal at the Open University, which is about creating communities of people who've got a level of critical and intellectual acumen in order to address the complex problems that our world faces today.

For me, the biggest problem the world faces is climate change. I think that's an enormously complex problem for societies to address systematically. And we need the new generations of thinkers from this university and from the other universities around the country to really get to grips with that and its deep implications for whether we drive to work in the future or what kinds of cars we're going to do that in, if at all, and all sorts of questions about the use of energy and so forth.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Well, we asked our audience what use is critical thinking outside the university. And we'll come to that in a minute to see what answers. So if you haven't already let us know, do fill in that Wordle. You can put three things in there.

So what use is critical thinking outside the university, and also how are you feeling right now? We're going to bring those up in just a second. But Lee and Zach, how is this making sense to everyone at home?

LEE: Well, it's making quite a lot of sense. A number of students have been talking about how they critically analyse news stories and how they look at that. And a few students have said they believe that critical thinking skills are more important than ever at the moment, particularly with the wide range of new sources that there are. There's not just like the mainstream media's newspapers and television. There's also social media as well. And they're really sort of important sources these days, but of course, you have to look at them quite critically, because they can be published by anyone, anywhere.

ZACH: I'd say a lot of discussion about people's biases and being able to like you go back to, it's the process of reflecting on the way that you think about either a challenge or a subject or a question, and just being able to break down and make sure that you're getting credible sources of information, so really good discussion from everyone, really, on this so far.

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: That's excellent. I mean, I think the point about media is absolutely spot on. There's a lot of different media sources out there telling us lots of different things about all the different issues that we face right now.

I'm not sure if I'm allowed to mention what they are. I've already mentioned climate change.

Brexit. Brexit for example, I'll just go straight there. Lots of different media sources saying very different things about the consequences. And how does one balance that?

And it's the same when you're doing your assignment. You are given different sources of evidence. You have to evaluate those sources, weigh up those different sources, assess their credibility and make some conclusions based on that work.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. We had a brilliant session the other week with the library about fake news. And I know it's a very hot topic. And they gave us these prompt frameworks and different ways of looking and breaking things down.

And I think those could be quite useful. I mean, people seem to be talking about ontology and epistemology, which are big words for sort of like small things. Actually, they're big things in terms of how we view knowledge as being generated and also how we view people. Are people just a number or are they the massive thing that's worth investigating in terms of all these subtle differences? I know you'd probably argue the latter. But these whole ways of looking at things are important in terms of how we break things down.

So what can you say to students about how they might take some of these frameworks or ideas and start thinking about things, because sometimes things can just be too big, like climate change, for example.

PAUL-FRANCOIS Yes.

TREMLETT:

KAREN FOLEY: What sort of ways might they start breaking things down to think actually, OK, what is this saying and to what extent does this knowledge actually hold?

PAUL-FRANCOIS So the prompt criteria are really useful. We use them in our modules as well, A332 and A227.

TREMLETT: And they're really good for encouraging the student to look at the provenance of the source and assess its credibility.

So for example, let's say you're doing a TMA and you've got four or five sources that you found. And one's from an academic journal. One's from Twitter or a link through Twitter to a blog or something. One's a book, but maybe it's a popular science book. And maybe another is maybe an older book but by an established academic.

So you've got four quite different sources. Some may be differing academic credibility, some

from different times. They might be older or newer, so the data they're using might have different reliability or validity. So these are the kinds of issues that you need to look for.

And obviously, those questions are different if you're a philosophy student. Just because a source is old doesn't make it unreliable, whereas if you're in a STEM subject, you're probably just going to be mainly interested in new journal articles as your primary sources, because the data sets change so rapidly in STEM subjects. So you need to think about the subject you're in as well, because the kinds of the relevance of provenance and the prompt criteria changes whether you're a as I say, whether you're philosophy student or in WELS or something like that.

KAREN FOLEY: I want to pick up on that subject back on bias. But let's just see what everyone's said. Let's first see how everyone's feeling right now on this lovely Monday morning. So let's take a look and see what you said in terms of how you're feeling.

Excited, motivated, good, tired, newbie, great, awake, waiting to start, optimistic. Some lovely words. Birthday. Whose birthday is it today? Eager to learn, ready to learn, hopeful, sleepy, enthusiastic, unprepared, tired.

OK. Lots of really good words. Anxious, cranky, scared. So lots of good words and some negative words.

If there's anything there that we can help with, if you're feeling anxious about something because you don't know the answer, Lee and Zach know pretty much everything, so ask them. And if they don't know, they'll find someone who does and we can email you back.

Our email is studenthub@open.ac.uk. So any questions that you would like to ask us, then please, please do. And we will get back to you.

You mentioned bias and Zach said people in the chat were talking about bias. And you were saying philosophy students might approach things differently. Sometimes people go off, and at particularly Level 2 or 3, they might be using these different sources. But they might also have sources in the module, like a case study or a clinical study. They might be looking at a survey.

And so they might have all this evidence and they're sort of starting to think about in their essay. Now, you mentioned bias. And sometimes I think, ooh, this empirical study, that must be a lot more robust than this case study here, which I think is a bit woolly and doesn't really say a huge amount. So how can people use bias to sort of make sense of their evidence and

recognise as well that we do have these biases depending on what we've learnt already and also there will be biases in the subject in terms of what we value as we're thinking about?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: So one of the things to think about is the way a question actually frames the answer. So a question is never innocent or neutral. It may be intended to be innocent and neutral. There may not be anything at there may be no question mark to raise against the sincerity of the person or discipline asking the question.

But nevertheless, questions can produce particular kinds of responses. So one has to think very carefully about how one's questions are setting things up in advance. There's a great I did my field work when I was doing my PhD in the Philippines. And there's a historian of the Philippines. And in the back of one of his books, he's got an interview that he conducted with a Filipino religious leader.

And what's interesting for me about that interview is the American historian is asking relentlessly factual questions, which is all good. He clearly knows his subject matter. He's clearly trying to draw out the empirical the really granular nitty-gritty of what was going on that this particular man had been involved in in his younger days.

And some of the guy's answers address those empirical, factual questions. But some of them lead towards more mystical other kinds of ideas, other kinds of reasons why certain things might have happened. One of the things he talks about is being haunted by the ghost of a particular person important in Filipino history. And those answers never get explored by the Filipino by the American historian.

So what was interesting to me about that interview is what the American historian was after and what he was getting was this clear mismatch. And he never explores that data, but just relentlessly keeps asking about what happened in 1928 or whatever it was. And so when you're trying to ask a question, it's always important to listen very carefully to the answers you get and not just stick to your script, because there might be some really interesting stuff that you're not responding to that you need to explore.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Well, let's see what people said about what use critical thinking is outside the university. So we're going to take a look at that widget. The other widget, is it all black and white, well, it's Rachel White's birthday today, so this is not a vote on that Rachel.

PAUL-FRANCOIS Happy birthday, Rachel.

TREMLETT:

KAREN FOLEY: But happy birthday. But also let us know your thoughts on that.

Let's take a look, though, at our word cloud, what use is critical thinking outside the university? OK. So lots of really good things here, credibility of news, tackling challenges, get to the truth, curiosity, intellect, understanding, building on knowledge, reflecting, thoughtful. So there's lots and lots of excellent words here.

PAUL-FRANCOIS Professionally as well.

TREMLETT:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. Good habit. So a lot of people seem to be into this idea, Paul, that these skills are going to be sort of good life skills, and in particular what you were saying about fake news and being able to interpret things in that sort of way.

PAUL-FRANCOIS And they're going to be really useful in the workplace, because if you've got a decision to

TREMLETT: make in the workplace about a product or you've got an important meeting to make decisions about strategic direction of the company you're in, all those kinds of decisions are evidence-based decisions. And you need to, as it were, think critically and reflect on your own opinions, your own feelings, but also look at the evidence, make sure you've got really rigorous evidence and you believe in its reliability. And then you can make a decision or make a recommendation to the committee or the group that you're part of.

But that is using that critical those critical skills that you've learnt in university that have been there all along as part of your life skills. But you've refined them here at the OU and then you're using them again in an even more refined way further down the line.

KAREN FOLEY: So if we've got the hang of sort of looking at newspaper articles and saying, is this fake news, is it not, what is the source of this and does that make sense, and what have you left out, we can do that. That's easy. It's evident that people are doing that now.

But it can be a bit more complex when something is in glossy bound module material where you think, actually, these people know what they're on about. This is the Open University, and they've given me this book. How can I start thinking critically about that? So what might you encourage students to sort of bear in mind as they're maybe reading their module material or thinking about what to put in an assignment?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: Oh, gosh. You're putting me on the spot now. So one of the things that happens when you've got your module material is, yes, you're thinking. You're immediately, as it were, deferring to the authority of the module material. There's nothing wrong with that.

But at the same time, you need to recognise that those materials are written at a specific time and that knowledge didn't stop when they were published. People have conducted further research. And the important thing to do is always to be aware that there is further research and the module materials and the module website will probably have pointers to research that's been conducted since the module materials were written that's ongoing. Have a look at that where appropriate and where relevant, because that is ensuring that you are up to date and you're taking those module materials and asking questions of them with the new research that's taking place right now.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. So we're going to look later at sort of breaking down your questions for your assignments and when it's appropriate to go off piece and when it's not. And some people will be thinking about these things and there might be all sorts of burning questions. I've had many students say, I often go off track and I often am interested in this, that, and the other.

So how can we sort of rein some of this in about thinking critically and thinking, OK, this piece of evidence is written in a given time in a given place. These things matter to this discipline, for example, or this sort of subject area right now. So we can't sort of unpack everything. We don't want to overwhelm students by thinking there's so much here that's missed, because there is, because it's a limited thing.

It's like looking at a fruit bowl. And we're saying this is an apple. It might be surrounded by lots of other things, but if we're just looking at the apple, we're just looking at the apple. So how might we sort of frame this so that people don't feel like they've got to go off to the library and do all this other research and work around some of these complex subjects?

PAUL-FRANCOIS TREMLETT: OK. So that's a really important point. Critical thinking is not something you're going to it's not just a set of skill that you can learn and then accomplish instantly. It's something that you're cultivating through the different levels, through your different modules so that when you finish your degree, when you finish your qualification, you can take that skill set and apply elsewhere.

And as you move through your degree, the amount of independent study that is expected of you grows. So let's say it's 10%, 15% in Level 1. It may be 30%, 40% at Level 3. And you've

got that progression of that expectation that you're developing that intellectual autonomy through your studies.

And that's what this is about. So don't overwhelm yourself now and think, oh, I heard what they talked about and now I need to about critical thinking and now I need to go to the library and read all this more up-to-date stuff because I don't trust my module materials no. That's not what we said.

What we said was this is a skill that you're slowly developing through your modules. Take your time. Learn from the feedback from your tutor. Enjoy your studies, really important that you enjoy it. And see this as something that's taking time to grow through your work.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Absolutely. And there are stages at which you develop all of these things. The essays do become more challenging and complex. And inadvertently, by just doing compare and contrast and evaluating and all these sort of more complex things, you do build those skills quite naturally.

PAUL-FRANCOIS And sometimes you just like have an epiphany moment. You think, of course.

TREMLETT:

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

PAUL-FRANCOIS And that might be this year, next year, or the year after. It doesn't matter when it happens.

TREMLETT: And you'll probably have several of those moments in fact. And that's like, oh. But that's what makes it fun.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. Absolutely.

PAUL-FRANCOIS Then you know you get that realisation, that sense of, oh, I am really growing and I really am

TREMLETT: changing as a result of this. And that can and that's a really positive feeling, a really positive experience.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, thanks, Paul. Well, that's been a really, really interesting session and we're out of time. As ever, it always goes too quickly. But that's given us some really good food for thought. And I think you've really reassured our audience as well that whilst they can start thinking about these things and they do indeed have these skills that they can now transfer to their learning, it doesn't have to be a very arduous task. We can grow nicely and organically with it.

PAUL-FRANCOIS Absolutely.

TREMLETT:

KAREN FOLEY: Thanks for coming along today.

PAUL-FRANCOIS Cheers, Karen. Pleasure.

TREMLETT:

KAREN FOLEY: Right. We're going to show you a short video of the campus. So if you've seen this before and you've been to an event before, go and grab a cup of tea or go and find your assignment.

Now, we're going to take a look at your assignments and we're going to think about process and content words in your TMA. And then the next session's going to take a look at the guidance. So if you haven't already tracked down your assessment, why don't you see if you can find that now so that you can start applying some of things that we're going to talk about in our next two sessions to your first piece of work? See you in a few minutes for our next session.

[MUSIC PLAYING]