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HOST: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. In this session I'm joined by Simon Bell. And we're going to be talking about developing your skills as an online learner. Now you'll all be studying online if you're studying with the Open University, but this is something that you can actually do a little bit better. And Simon is going to give us some tips and advice.

I hope I'm not bigging this up too much, Simon, about studying online, because so many students are doing it. And it's not just a medium through which something is received. There is a whole skill to learning online in terms of your module material, and the wealth of information around you.

SIMON BELL: Yeah, it's the way that you make it personal, and make it real to yourself. There isn't one model, if you like. There as many models as there are learners to use it.

So yeah, I mean, it's taking on certain ideas. It's adapting them to your own personal comfort so you feel reasonable. You feel that what you're doing works for you, and doesn't feel forced. And then, yeah, then you can really fly after a while.

HOST: So there's this idea in terms of, I guess, learning pedagogy, that people learn in different ways. And you can, like you say, use the best of your skill to tap into things. How can people sort of start to tune into what they do best in terms of how they like to learn online?

SIMON BELL: OK. I mean, I think we often learn by making mistakes and finding out what's uncomfortable. But it's amazing how often we don't register that. I mean we'll do something. We'll have some kind of learning process going on.

I'll give you a very personal example. I really don't learn well in lecture theatres. I'm the guy in the back falling asleep. So I find that a very hostile way of learning-- even with a really brilliant speaker. And I mean I can't remember how many times I've come out of conferences, or lecture theatres, or indeed online lectures where other people would be saying, that was great, that was great. They said this. They said that. And I thought, [WHOOSH SOUND] missed me. I couldn't learn a thing that way.

And I learned more recently that some universities in some parts the world still have things like three-hour lectures. I can't. No, I just couldn't learn anything from that. But do I just put up with

it? Do I just say, OK, that's what's going to happen.

Well, some institutions you do. But this institution you don't. And in fact, you can actually try to blend the way that the material comes to you in a way that works for you.

HOST: Because I guess there's a distinction between sort of being told something and learning something. Fundamentally different processes, aren't they?

SIMON BELL: Of course. Yeah. And, you know, there's nothing wrong with being told something, like, "Stop!" I mean, it's kind of important.

HOST: Less than three hours.

SIMON BELL: Exactly. I would really, really not want to stop doing that. But learning is different.

And then you find your comfort zone for learning. Where is that? I mean, I think I said that everyone has to have their own personal model. But I think there are kind of some rubrics. And for me there are kind of three areas that I think I could talk about.

One is-- and that we've already addressed it really-- and that's autonomy. It's making it work for you. You are in charge, actually.

Now increasingly we have to recognise this in higher education that it's the student who's in charge of the learning process. Now obviously there's a flow of material which comes to you over a period of time in a certain structure, and that comes at you. And you're a student, and you receive that.

But within that, and a lot of the modules we have now, there's a great deal of flexibility, a great deal of capacity to own your learning process. Now in the same way as I couldn't buck out of a three-hour lecture, because I was told I had to do that. I didn't learn much from it.

Now what I'd suggest is learn the ways in which you learn best. And the only way to do that is by making mistakes, finding things that don't feel comfortable, and thinking OK, I want to do more of that. I want to do less of that. And then try to get the blend right. So autonomy. That's a really big part.

And that leads me through to personal methods-- your own methods for learning, your own methods for understanding things. When do you work well? Are you a morning person? Are

you an evening person? Are you somebody who likes to read long? Are you somebody who likes short sort of episodic pieces of information?

Are you somebody who, quite frankly, learns in a very relaxed way? You like to listen to things. You like to just let it float for a while. Or I use something that likes to really engage hard all the time. Find out your learning process, and then adapt the material to that. So if you like, there's autonomy.

Then there is this idea of method. And that feeds into this second aspect, really, which is, if you like, structuring, owning personally our own learning structure. Now it sounds a bit heavy. But you have the material coming to you. You can then structure that material in a way which feels comfortable to you. But you have to be aware of your note-taking proclivities, the way you like to engage with material on a computer screen, or on a pad, or on an iPhone. How do you do that? How do you address things in different ways? So structure it.

And the third part of, if you like, online learning, which I think is really important, is to make the most of collaboration. Again, part of the history of the Open University was people working in isolation, often quite in lonely ways. And one of the great things about online learning is you can learn collaboratively. Now that can be as organised or disorganised as you like. And you can use a whole range of media for that. But again, it's finding the bit that works well for you, and then using that as much as you can.

HOST:

You've got a little fan club in the chat, Simon. People are really liking what you've got to say. But I'm sitting here thinking all this is quite a lot of pressure, getting on grips, how am I learning, what is working well, this idea of rehashing stuff that is sort of being given to me. And equally I often sit there thinking I'm reading through this, this, and this, and it all seems to make perfect sense. I close the book, and then think, what was that all about?

There's this whole idea of being very active with what you're doing. And I guess that what you're saying is however you are sort of grappling with some of this, the idea of making something personal, being autonomous, and thinking about the methods that work for you is about retaining things. But equally, there's so much stuff. So how do we know, then, what we need to learn, and how do students sort of get to grips with fitting all of this in, and really being reflective about what is going to work for them?

SIMON BELL:

I think we're getting better and better at this. And I think of this as a 21st century problem. I mean, it's a nice problem to have, in a sense, is we have information and data overload. And

we only have the same number of hours in the day that we ever had. And yet we have so much coming out of so many directions.

So the skill sets that's required now is changing from academic and for academic study. There used to be a whole skill set, which I wasn't very good at, to be honest with you, skills to do with, if you like, long periods of industrious reading, or long periods of unindustrious writing, or whatever.

HOST: Or highlighting.

SIMON BELL: To be honest with you, I wasn't terribly good at it. And for me, as we went online, as the education resources went online, as my contacts went online, as the structures became more flexible, I find it much more easy to learn. And so there is pressure. Of course there's pressure.

There's also a new requirement, and that is we have to be good map makers. It's not just being given the material, digesting it, and reproducing something. There's a whole process of mapping out the way the information comes into you, mapping out the way that you manage that, and mapping out the way you put it back. And that's the new ownership. I mean, that's something which we didn't have 20, 30 years ago to such a degree as we have now.

So if you like, I think of this as kind of like soft learning skills. These are the skills we need to have, the skills we need to do the job we want to do, which is to be successful students. And these are all to do with autonomy, self direction, self management, and collaboration-- but doing all these things in a contained way that works for us.

HOST: Now I like your idea of mapping. So I wanted to ask you how do you do that? I mean, do you think in pictures? Do you make these things? How does it work for you?

SIMON BELL: I literally think in pictures. And if any of my students are watching, they'll probably go, oh no, oh, yeah, he does, doesn't he?

HOST: No, they don't do that, Simon.

SIMON BELL: They might!

HOST: Here is a picture of your feedback!

SIMON BELL: I think visually. I like to represent my thinking visually. Now I think probably my first experience

of this was in the '80s, when I read the books of Tony Buzan, and his ideas of mind maps and stuff like that, capturing ideas as diagrams, as spray diagrams, as exploding concepts building out across a page. And you can do this now on a computer. But you can just do it on a piece of paper. It's a great way thinking.

But I mean there are rich pictures which are much more unstructured ways of just putting down visual metaphors, which help you to remember the things that you've been working through. So if one part of what you've been learning about has been the urgency for certain things take place, well you might just draw a clock with an alarm clock, maybe. And you can draw very simple things which help you to record and remember.

I think it's important also that we don't sort of trivialise our learning process. We're very complicated creatures. Well, I mean you are. We're very complicated creatures, and we learn in different ways.

But we also capture memory. We capture ideas in different ways. I mean it's stunning to me that I've learned apparently that things that I learnt 30 years ago I don't really remember anymore. What I remember are fictions. I've told myself fictions.

And the things that I really remember-- yes, those things-- the things that I really remember. I built brilliant stories around in my mind. I have actually, in a sense, created my own memories to some extent. I've certainly created lots of links between nodes of memory. And those, if you like, are the stories I've told myself.

So I'm getting a little bit off message here, but two things. First of all, visualising to capture stories is a great way. But also building up stories so that your memories, the nodes, the things that you're trying to remember hold together in some way in a systemic wholeness so that it makes sense.

And it's amazing. You'll find 20, 30 years down the line you'll remember the story. You may have forgotten the course you were doing. You may have forgotten all kinds of things. But you'll remember the stories you've told yourself.

HOST:

And in a nutshell, this is the most complex thing we're asking students to do. Because we're not asking them to remember this chapter, or remember this model. It's about being able to understand that in a context of other things. And so taking things out of the module material, and being able to think about them in a way that makes sense and fit those pieces together is

ultimately what gives people a distinction level.

SIMON BELL: Yeah, exactly. And for example, and there's a great example of where collaboration with other students works, it's not in memorising something. It's in representing it in your own words, or representing it in your own frame.

Now in a collaborative way, students can talk to each other, whether they're on the forum, or whether they're using Skype, or whatever they're doing. And they can actually, if you like, say back to other students, this is what I believe I've learned. We call it, actually, there's quite a good, nice phrase for it, which is active listening, which is before you can speak, you have to say back what you think you've heard. And then everybody can check that and say, OK, well is that what I heard? I'm not sure I heard it quite like that.

So we are autonomous. We do learn for ourselves. But we're sometimes not always as accurate as we think we are. So actually saying things back.

And again, we can do that now. Conventional students in conventional universities have always been able to do that. They've always been able to go to the coffee bar, and talk, and chat, and work things through. We haven't been able to do that for ever so long. Now we can do it. And we're doing it better all the time. Year on year our tools get better and better at doing this.

HOST: Absolutely. Devin says it's like Sherlock Holmes. And I guess there is that detective element as well, in terms of how you're mapping things.

But listen. I wanted to ask you something. Because some of our students are doing things like biology or chemistry. And so this whole idea, then, of course, those aren't necessarily as declarative in terms of what we're teaching people. There is an aspect within a lot of those.

But some things can be more factually true. Some things require less interpretation and less links. So in terms of online learning, how does this apply to people who may be looking at a lot of animations of biology insurrections, or things that are slightly different in terms of having less concepts to map onto other concepts?

SIMON BELL: Oh, I see. Well, again, I guess the main point is I'd kind of break it down in slightly two different ways. One way of learning, if you like, is like a narrative where it all holds together, and the stories tell each other, and they work through each other.

The other way is more episodic. So you get, if you like, episodes of intense bits of information relating to something, which, if you like, is fact bearing. So you're getting, if you like-- I was going to say a dump-- now that I've said that, a dump of facts. You're getting a fact dump. And now you're saying, so all right, OK, no matter how you've actually received that fact dump, whether it's been as an audio, or as a video, as an animation, as a book, whatever it is-- so it's an ebook, you're still going to deal with that as a collection-- a large collection-- keep the word dump-- a dump of facts.

How do you deal with that? Well again, that episode still needs to be tied together in the overall narrative of the module you're learning from. So it can't stay episodic. It has to be integrated. So there has to be porosity between the episodes, which throw links. We make better sense of things-- human beings-- I'm sounding like I'm just declaring from the mountain now-- but in my understanding, people make better sense of things if they see them as part of an overall learning journey, and not just as episodes of factual stuff.

So yes, you may need to tune in hard for a while, and really gain an understanding of some, if you like, non-contentious block of facts. But the fun is, how does that link to the other bits? How doesn't it link to the other bits? Remember, the non-linkages are often as interesting as the linkages. How do things hold together? And what's the overall story it's telling you about?

By the way, I love the metaphor of the detective, because it's one that I've thought of often myself. And there is this, as well, this exploratory element to learning. Which again, we kind of lose sometimes if we have fairly lumpen materials. If we've got material all over the place, sure, there are boundary problems. There are issues of where do I look next.

But part of the learning process is doing the exploration, putting together the story, if you like, learning the continent of material you're learning. You're going into somewhere which is unknown, and you're trying to make sense of it. Detective qualities are really quite important there.

HOST:

Now tell me, with this sort of thing as well, a lot of the Open University courses have been designed with sort of a framework, OK. So you've got all these really interesting things that you need to know about. And then you've got these links. And sometimes you can sort of really focus on what you need to know, as opposed to making the links, because it can feel slightly a bit too luxurious to be spending time thinking about those things.

How would you advise students, look from a top-down level, at maybe what the module is

trying to do, or how that module fits into a qualification? Is there some way that students can scaffold things so that, for example, they might say, OK, I've had to learn these animations, I've had to read this, I've had to watch this video. But what am I trying to learn here, and then how can I put that into a sense of what this module is trying to teach me?

That's a very, very difficult thing, I think, to do when you're going through it. And often I've found when students are preparing for exams, they say, oh, I get that now, because I'm able to look at it from the top down to identify what the important things are. But when you're in the thick of it, sometimes you can miss some of those things.

Is there any way you could sort of encourage students to feed forward with identifying things, maybe through looking at the contents, or the scaffolding of the module, that sort of thing? How might they get a sense of what is important?

SIMON BELL:

Well I'm sure most people watching this will know what I'm going to say. But maybe there's a twist in it as well.

Well, first of all, of course, there's just the idea of foreknowledge, of getting a sense of the wholeness you engage. And I mean I've been involved with lots of module development over the years I've been with the OU. And it still surprises me when you get halfway through a module, and students are asking really quite, oh, I didn't know this was going to happen, or are we going to do this, or, who said that? You think, well, actually it was in the outline, the module outline five months ago. You could have read about it then. So there is a requirement on the student to do some preliminary work in looking at the wholeness.

Now how do you do that? I'm a great believer in learning diaries, or learning journals. Now when you start a module, you can set out your aspirations, your beliefs, your sense of the scaffolding, your sense of the journey you're going to go on-- and maybe your expectations of what you're going to get at the end of it. Those aren't dead words. Those aren't dead thoughts. Those are thoughts that you need to return to and review.

Now again, this is a process which takes time. But again, once you've built into your learning idea-- the idea of a journal or a diary-- it becomes second nature. And you start looking back. And you're also kind of like, hey, a couple months ago I'm sure I was talking about this. And you can flick back.

Now I keep my diary on my computer so that I've got it available through the cloud on my iPad,

or wherever I am so that I can add to it and supplement it, but also review backwards. And I think you can become a bit of an addict about this. In fact, you can become a complete bore about it. Have you seen my learning journal? No! I don't want to.

HOST: Have a picture!

SIMON BELL: Learning journals are very private things. You write things in there which you would never tell anybody else, particularly about possibly colleagues. Anyway. But to keep that diary is to keep some sense of what you thought you were going to do, what you did, and how it worked out. And to do that, as you do it year on year, module on module, it becomes quite powerful.

HOST: Yeah. No absolutely. And I think making those, we often make the same mistakes again. And this is the whole thing of learning. And often when I look back at my learning journals, I say, why didn't I spend more time reading through these and identifying those mistakes, because it would have saved a fair bit of time. So yeah.

I'd like to go to take a quick trip to HJ, because I want to find out what the most intelligent cat in the UK is doing, and to invest this permanently perplexed Labrador? What's the story?

HJ: Well we're just having a chat about, well, Siobhan said that she finds talking to someone and teaching someone about the subject you're doing is really helpful for your own understanding. And there's problems finding willing victims for this. So we've got Labradors. And my cat is very adept at international relations at the moment.

And apparently, Kate says children under two years of age are very good for this, too. I'm not sure that they'd sit still too much. I don't know. Maybe. Maybe you can tell us more about that.

But Gale also says that her cat should be very good at doing her next TMA since they're always sprawling about her textbooks when she's trying to concentrate. But I do see that Bruce says as well he wants to see more of my face for some reason. I'm not sure anyone's ever said that.

HOST: That was in the chat, so good for you, Bruce.

HJ: I think what Bruce means is he does like it when we have a little chat, and we bring some of the stuff in. But Bruce has said that the learning journal hasn't really landed for him yet. But he is trying, I think, with all of these things. It's just trying out different things, and seeing what works.

Cheryl had a discussion earlier with Devin saying that she doesn't quite agree with him about having 40 minute study sessions, because that doesn't quite work for her, and everyone's sort of got their own way. And I think it's worth keeping it in mind. And if people give advice, try it out if you want to. See what works for you.

HOST: So Simon, I often struggle with some of these journals, because they end up being the back of a book for me, because I find it too much commitment to have a very nice new piece of paper, and write my new journal, this, that and the other. So I often put my stuff in the back of my workbook so that I've got my thoughts and things as I'm going through. If people are struggling to have this sort of journal, what would be a good way to start?

SIMON BELL: I think to start with is to get the idea of the journal is not necessarily being just lines and lines and lines of text. They can be photographs. They can be images. They can be drawings that you've done. They can be little scrappy thoughts, or they can be quite considered thoughts. Liberate yourself from the idea that the journal needs to be, if you like, a Dickensian structure. "This is my learning journal. Boldly I set forth--"

HOST: "--with my profound thoughts."

SIMON BELL: Yes, exactly. And then it came crashing down. But I think the thing is you have to be, again, find out what works for you.

Now I personally find I used to keep my learning journal as, literally, an A4 folder that I would open up and draw and write in. But I'd always date it. And I wasn't too worried if I missed days. It was just a question of if I had tried to record things that I thought were important, that had real merit, that had some value to me. But as I went forward, I thought, well actually I quite like keeping this in the cloud, because I want it to be wherever I am.

When I joined the OU-- just a quick one-- I joined the OU in 1996. And I live 100 miles away from the university, and I always have done. So I've always had to treat the Open University's learning process as being a distance learning process. So I like to be able to learn wherever I am. I don't necessarily have to come into Milton Keynes to the campus to do that.

Now I think again our students are completely on top of that. They understand the idea of this has to be wherever I am. To some extent the cloud is a great way of engaging with that. You can keep your information wherever you are. Of course there are costs and technical requirements.

But if you can do that, if you can keep your journal in the clouds as well, it's always there. You can always refer to it. You can always build on it. And you can always add to it.

For example, I started my journal this morning back at home. I wrote a bit more when I got in and had my first cup of coffee, and felt particularly aggrieved by certain driving behaviour. Do you know the way people drive around Milton? Anyway, the driving around here is terrible.

Anyway, I wrote a bit about that, not because it's anything to do with my learning; just because I felt cross about it. And no doubt after this meeting I'll write some thoughts, probably about, did I say that? Oh no.

So keeping it mobile, keeping it relevant, keeping it meaning something to you. It's your journal. It's your learning. It's your process.

HOST:

And I guess sometimes it's important to write down what's not going on, where you're getting stuck, when you're not doing things. I notice, for example, that I need a deadline.

I'm very, very good under a deadline. But I'm good about 48 hours before that deadline. And I know now that it's fairly pointless trying to sort of shift some of that stuff in certain circumstances. So I guess partly it might be helpful to sort of track some of those things that you can be aware of your own study patterns, what you're doing well, what you're absorbing, what you're not absorbing.

SIMON BELL:

Yeah, absolutely. So you're 48 hours beforehand for the deadline. So working with you--

HOST:

Irrespective of the length of the task. I was asleep.

SIMON BELL:

You see, you're a nightmare working with people like me. I like to get everything done a week before it's required. So if someone's working with you, I'd be needing to understand your working pattern, and then shouting at you a lot. No, I wouldn't do that.

But I need to understand, when I'm working collaboratively online, I need to understand other people learn in different ways. And they also produce their final product in different ways. Some people like to be very early, some people right on the wire. And these can be integrated if we think about it, if we plan for it.

And again, back to that word "mapping," creating your personal map. The journal is part of the map. It's part of your way of handling the map, understanding the map.

But remember, the other thing about this is we're mysterious to ourselves. When you start a module you don't know what you'll know at the end when you begin. Well that's obvious. But you won't be the same person you were at the end as you were at beginning. You'll have gone on a journey. And you need to hold that. That is a really important part of your learning, and the learning journal is a great place to put that.

I understand it didn't land. But keep working at it. It's not an easy skill for some people. Some people, they find it so easy. But I didn't. I find it quite tricky. Keep working at it.

HOST: Brilliant. Simon. Before we go-- and by the way, we've been told that we've got to have you on again, and I'm hoping you'll come back at Freshers to tell us.

Just quickly, these books, last time I spoke to you, one was but a cover, and *Formations of Terror* is hardly something synonymous with the exciting opportunities of learning journals. But just briefly, can you give us a plug of these books? And I'm hoping you'll come back at Freshers to tell us a lot more about them.

SIMON BELL: Yeah, sure. OK. [CLEARING THROAT] Pardon me. That probably sounded awful on the mic.

OK. This actually relates to online learning as well. 2014 I became increasingly concerned by the amount of fear that was around. It seemed to me that we were getting very worried about things, particularly climate change. That was a big one for me. I started some research. It resulted in a book called the *Formations of Terror*. This is an academic book. [SNORE] Yawn. How to make something really interesting really dull really quickly. There we are. Done it.

But I wanted to reach beyond the, if you like, the academy of scholars who might buy this book. So I talked to the university. The university's been brilliant at supporting this. And on OpenLearn now we have a range of media. So people can talk about fear and worry in a number of ways.

So the first thing we did was after the *Formations of Terror* is we produced a comic version. Now it's only a slender version, but it's called *Project Fear*. Now again, this is available on OpenLearn. It's actually available as a free ebook, or you can also print on demand, and they'll send you copy. Amazing.

But also we produced an animation. And the animation's four minutes long. And it again tries to tell the same story, but from a slightly different angle. And also we've got some quizzes

online. So using the online format we cover the range from animation to comic to book. And different people will learn differently in different ways from that.

HOST:

Simon, thank you so much. As do check that out. I hope you'll be back soon. That has been such a fabulous session. I can't thank you enough, Simon. People have really, really enjoyed that, and gained a lot from it. Thank you.

Right, check those resources out on OpenLearn, and do join us, when I can hopefully persuade Simon to come back at one of our events in September and October.

So we're going to have a little video now. We're going to look at the Summer of Love, and what that had to do with Glastonbury. And then we will be back very soon for our next session, which is about starting to study, returning to study, and access. So again, the very start of your journey. Do show your tips and advice, and stay with us.

But I've heard there's mention of chocolates, biscuits, and Hobnobs in the chat. That only means one thing. Grab a cup of tea and a biscuit, and we'll see you very soon. Bye for now.

[MUSIC PLAYING]