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INTERVIEWER: Our next session is for all those people this morning who are interested in creative writing and all of those people out there who are doing EMAs, because I think one thing OU students do well is writing. We do enjoy a lot of writing and do it regularly. Derek Neale, you're here to talk to us about the Creative Writing Part 2. So this is the masters, and this is the second year module of that masters.

You'll see some widgets also on your screen we'd like you to vote on. Do you aspire to be a published writer? Are you considering studying the MA Creative Writing? And also, which genre of the ones that we've selected appeal to you? You get one choice. Click on the button that applies to you, and then you can close the widget and see what other people have said. So, Derek, let's just talk a little bit through the context of this second year in terms of the overall MA.

DEREK NEALE: Right. The first part is 60 credits, this one, this part. The second part is 120 credits. And it's a whole calendar year. So it starts at the start of October and finishes the end of September in 2018, this first run.

And a good part of it is independent study. And it's got a-- as you would expect with creative writing-- dissertation module. It's got a 15,000-word dissertation at the end of it. And it's got the usual choice of genres. So students can take fiction. They can take poetry. They can take script. Or they can take creative nonfiction.

INTERVIEWER: So they choose one of these genres that they'll have explored in the first year of the masters. And then this is their chance to specialise on that. So they'll find a genre that's right for you. Now one of the questions I know that can come up is, can I write a novel as part of this? Is writing work that the aim is to get published a large part of doing this masters?

DEREK NEALE: You can write a substantial amount of a novel during this course. So for instance, you can have up to 23,000 words of creative writing assessed, which is quite a big chunk of a novel. But you've also got venues for peer reviewing. So you can write other sections of the novel that are just peer reviewed and not assessed by your tutor. So there's a potential there for you to write, certainly, a novel-sized amount of text, certainly, or a feature-length film, or a collection of poems, or a memoir, or a biography.

INTERVIEWER: Now whilst people can select a genre, is there anything to stop them from writing in another genre while they're going through the process?

DEREK NEALE: Certainly not. What we've got set up on the MA is quite unique, I think. While you choose a primary genre which you focus on, such as fiction, you're still able to submit your poetry to the module-wide forums in poetry and to the VLE's Workshop in poetry. So even though you're concentrating on fiction, for instance, or script, or whatever, you can actually submit other genres as well for peer review. So you can actually develop your skills in other genres while you're focusing on your main genre.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. That's a brilliant selling point. We'll talk a little bit more about the review process, but first, if we could just get the formalities, I guess, out of the way, in terms of the assessment then. How does it work, in terms of what people submit, and the end-of-module assessment?

DEREK NEALE: Most of the assessments are what I'd call typical creative writing assessments in the respect that you submit a piece of creative writing. So you submit a short story, or a chapter of a novel, or a section of memoir, or a couple of scenes from a script. And you usually submit an accompanying commentary with that as well, a critical commentary, which reveals what your reading has been, what your viewing has been, and how that contributes to what you've written and what your critical opinion of those works is.

The other thing that you will do here is write about the influences-- the writers that you've come across in your particular genre that have caused you to write in the first place, motivated you, made you want to write-- and the writers that you've learned most from. And you'll also write a critical commentary, a substantial critical commentary. And at the end, as I say, you'll write a 15,000 word or equivalent. We've got equivalents. So 15,000 words amounts, for instance, to almost two hours of script.

INTERVIEWER: So let's talk about the peer process, which you said was one of the innovative aspects, and I think certainly one that would really appeal, especially if you had the space to be able to write slightly more than you needed to just for the assessment. So tell us, then, about how this all works.

DEREK NEALE: Creative writing, not just at the OU, but everywhere, is premised on the exchange of work. I give you a piece of work to look at, you give me a piece of work to look at. And we exchange work and criticise that work.

And we learn how to take the criticism. And we learn how to discern what is good criticism, what is useful criticism, and what is not so good, not so useful in this particular circumstance. And we become better editors as a result of this. We become better writers. And this peer review process accelerates the development of your writing skills. And that's the whole premise of it.

At the OU, the way we do it, in my opinion, is facilitated and improved by the fact that we've got online venues to do it. No more photocopying of work. No more distribution of work through the mail. It's all there electronically, magically, for everybody to see, almost immediately, as soon as you've put the last full stop in there.

And so there are two main ways that we exchange views on work. One is peer reviewing via the forums. And there's a tutor group forum, and there's nationwide forums specific to each genre.

And then we also have a VLE tool called the Workshop, which allows people to distribute work and feedback across the whole cohort. So for instance, in the part one MA, we've got nearly 500 students. And you can distribute and exchange work and feedback with all of those students who are doing the same genre as you.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. I wonder if we could look at that idea about genres. We asked our audience about whether they aspired to be published writers. 50% of them said yes, 36% were not sure, and 14% said no.

And then we've also asked them about what genre would appeal to them. Now Fiction was way in the lead here with 69%, second by Creative Nonfiction, and then Poetry, and Not Sure were down the line. Is that a fairly representative splash of the genres? And how might students then engage with other students if, for example, there were a lot of students writing fiction? How does that all work?

DEREK NEALE: Well, it is typical. Those proportions are typical. On part one of the MA, for instance, we've got 70% of the students writing fiction, and the other three genres are split pretty much 10% each. How you cope when you've got so many students studying the same genre is that you have tutor group forums and you have a choice of venues. And that's the strength of the way work is exchanged via this system at the OU.

If you're receptive to small group working, then in part two of the MA, there's only 10 people in

a tutor group. So it's a very small, intimate, and quite safe environment to exchange work in. But you still get access to the bigger venues, so the whole cohort, the 300 students or 400 students, or whatever, if you want to.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And what's so fantastic about your tutor-student relationships is you select your tutors very carefully. They're all practicing, aren't they're?

DEREK NEALE: They're all practicing writers. They're all published writers or performed writers. So the script writers teach script writing. The poets teach poetry. The fiction writers are novelists in their own right.

INTERVIEWER: And then students are grouped accordingly by genre.

DEREK NEALE: They are grouped accordingly, according to genre, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. What happens if they change their mind halfway through?

DEREK NEALE: It causes us problems. It's not insurmountable, but it causes us slight problems. Such students might be stuck with a tutor who doesn't specialise in their genre for a small amount of time. But having said that, most writers nowadays write in more than one genre. So even though they might mainly be a novelist, or might mainly be a script writer, such writers usually have at least one other string to their bow. They write in another genre as well.

INTERVIEWER: Now you've told us about the tutor group forums and the ways of interacting, both on a small scale and a much larger scale, but talk us through a Writer in the World.

DEREK NEALE: Writer in the World is a section that continues on from Professional Practise in part one of the MA. And it's about how student writers, would-be writers, new writers, then take their writing beyond the workshop, beyond exchanging it with peers.

How do you take what you're writing into the world? How do you approach an agent? How do you pitch your idea? How do you write a treatment for a film? How do you write a scenario for a stage play?

All these sorts of things are dealt with in these sections of part two. And there'll be a forum associated with this special part of the course as well. And in that forum, we hope to have guest industry professionals visiting from time to time.

INTERVIEWER: Now you have things like how to get published and these visiting industry professionals. What a fantastic link for students to be able to go and talk to them and ask questions, and also hear what other students are asking.

DEREK NEALE: Yes, it is a fantastic resource. And I would say that there are loads of interviews, recorded interviews, in the course materials with such industry professionals as well, with, for instance, the commissioning editor for radio drama at BBC, Jeremy Howe. The chief radio editor, Toby Swift, is also interviewed there. An executive producer from the BBC, Marion Nancarrow, also interviewed. Sally Wainwright of *Happy Valley* fame and who wrote the Bronte film just before Christmas, she's interviewed as well. So there's loads of writers and industry professionals that are interviewed for the MA.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. Now a lot of this is independent study. So you've mentioned that there will be things in terms of the taught aspects, the forums, the tutorials, et cetera. But the independent study is arguably the most important part of any post graduate work. And you've mentioned that students can write a substantial part of whatever it is they're writing as part of this process and get the feedback on that to then improve their work. How does the independent study work?

DEREK NEALE: The independent study is threaded throughout the module. It's expected in every one week, the student will engage in some independent study. But there is a big block of it at the end, some 20-odd weeks of independent study, where the students aren't left entirely on their own. They're left on their own in the respect that the tutor engagement will be lighter than it was before, but they will have each other. They will have their forums. They will have the Workshop tool. So they'll still be able to peer review each other's work. So in a way, by that time, the self-support mechanisms will be built up.

INTERVIEWER: Now you've mentioned the tutorials and about the tutors, but I wonder if you can tell us about the tutorials and how people would get that interaction. Is it very, very forum-based with this asynchronous form of communication?

DEREK NEALE: It is asynchronous, purely asynchronous, in fact. There might be one or two more synchronous events, and I say it very vaguely at the moment because they're not well-defined at the moment. But there might be some more synchronous type events, but most of it, almost 99% of the course, will be asynchronous.

And the tutorials are manifest in the way that the tutors moderate the forums, both their tutor

group forums, and they will co-moderate the Writer in the World forum, and the nationwide, the module-wide, script forum, fiction forum, poetry forum, and creative nonfiction forum.

INTERVIEWER: So students get access to lots of different voices, which is wonderful, at a time that suits them.

DEREK NEALE: They do, they do.

INTERVIEWER: And of course, I guess being reflective and being able to pick things up, have a look at them on your own time, is also something that would be very much akin to the writing process.

DEREK NEALE: Yeah, yeah. The idiosyncratic thing about writing, it's a very, very solitary business. And the virtue of this course and the virtue of most MAs, in my opinion, is that it brings people together, and allows them conversations and discussions about the technical issues, and the content issues, and the how to get published issues, all those really, really essential issues about what it is to write.

INTERVIEWER: OK, now you've mentioned that this is 120 credits. So there's 60 credits in the nine months, which is the first, which people have already done. And then this is a 120 credits, so almost double. What happens, then, if life gets in the way, as it sometimes can? And on the module, it says you can do this in 2 to 10 years. So what is the interrupted study option, if there is indeed one, and how might students go about that?

DEREK NEALE: Well, the official interrupted study is you take a break between the two modules. So you can take one in 2016, and you can take the second one in 2020, or whatever, if you want to, and nothing will be lost in that. And if circumstances arise whereby you have to take a break in the second module, for instance, in part two, then your assessments will be banked, but it's not an official way of taking a break.

INTERVIEWER: OK, OK. So really, the idea is to get that dissertation pre-planned and ready in terms of the work that you're going to do in the second year-- well, not dissertation, but the substantive piece of work-- and then really try and plan for as much as possible within that with the support that you've got from the tutors, et cetera.

DEREK NEALE: Yeah. There are several formative assessments and things that happen within part two of the MA that lead towards the final dissertation. One of them is they have to write a proposal for it. The next is that they have to write some draft material, 10% of it, and it gets feedback from the tutor during the period of independent study actually. And so there are all these sorts of things.

There's also a questionnaire task that they have to undertake, which gets them to analyse what they're actually doing in their EMA. So there's loads of little tools and techniques that are in play that facilitates the development of their EMA and their bigger piece of work. Because for most students at that time in their module and at that time in their study, it's the biggest piece of work they've ever written.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Well, it's a substantial piece of work, isn't it? So we've asked people about whether they're considering doing this, and some of them have already started, some of them say it sounds interesting. So at the last count, we had 36% saying it sounds interesting, and 36% saying yes, and 7% have already started the MA.

And I know you had a lot of students on that first level, which is brilliant. What might students do if they have started before September and their summer break, or even if they're thinking about taking year one? Are there any MOOCs that you could recommend, or any things that students could start to prepare for study?

DEREK NEALE: What we always recommend is the Start Writing Fiction MOOC on FutureLearn. And that's running at the moment, so if you Google "FutureLearn Start Writing Fiction," you'll get there. And that's in week four, I think, of its eight-week presentation. But the good thing I'd say about that, even if you're wary of joining if you're behind, once you've joined, you've got access to the web site and all the resources forever. It stays with you afterwards.

The other place you can go is OpenLearn. There's an equivalent version of that MOOC on OpenLearn. So again, Google "Start Writing Fiction OpenLearn," and you'll get that. Or we might have the links on our page, on the hub page, possibly.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. We've got some tasters and exercises from the module, and you can also listen to interviews with authors on FutureLearn. And there's the OUSA group, the Write Club.

DEREK NEALE: The Write Club, yes. And they're a fantastic point of contact because they're always looking for more people to engage in their peer review of each other's work. That's what they do outside of their OU study.

And they started, I think-- they'll correct me if I'm wrong-- but they started, I think, as OU A363 students. And they started peer reviewing, and they got on so well with it, and enjoyed it so much, and gained so much from it, that they started doing it outside of class, so to speak. And that's the A363 course book that they were engaged in. That's the undergraduate level three

course.

INTERVIEWER: Wonderful. And they're wonderful. So I know you don't even have to be studying creative writing to join them.

DEREK NEALE: No.

INTERVIEWER: They're open to everyone. And that process and giving feedback, I guess, is quite a skill in itself.

DEREK NEALE: It is, it is. It is an art form in itself. And receiving the feedback is an art form in itself. It's what writing is all about, really, because it takes a lot of skill to actually say no to a comment as well as to say yes and to accept it, to actually have your best passage trashed and to accept that trashing is really quite an important skill to have, to be able to accept that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, especially something so personal. But I'm sure they do it in a very appropriate way.

DEREK NEALE: Yeah. And that's the skill that's hopefully taught and learned on these courses, is that skill of appropriate positive criticism, so you actually affirm while actually pointing out what is critically not working.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, to improve your work. It sounds absolutely fantastic. Derek Neale, thank you so much for filling us in on that.

DEREK NEALE: Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: You've certainly got some very enthusiastic people out there who are interested in the second stage of the module.

DEREK NEALE: Right, right. Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: Lovely. OK, HJ and Sophie, we've got just a little minute to have a quick check-in. How's everything at home?

HJ: Everything's good. We've just been having a chat with Sin from the Write Club. She's popped in just to see us, and have a quick chat and tell us more about that. It sounds like a great forum, as you said, for students to meet up and just engage otherwise outside of study. We've also had Mark Simmons as well, who's worked on A803, to pop into a chat to talk with us as well. So it's been a good discussion, and there's been lots of questions that we've had help

with in this session.

SOPHIE: Yes. So your big debate on creative writing and to what extent is everything creative writing, that was really interesting actually. It was a really nice conversation. So Mark has really helped, so thank you, Mark, just for answering everyone's questions. And everyone seems to have really enjoyed the session, which is really nice.

HJ: Mm.

INTERVIEWER: Wonderful, excellent. Well, we're going to show you a quick video now, which is about DD317, Advancing Social Psychology, which is our next session. So enjoy the video, grab a cup of tea, and I'll see you in a few minutes.

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