

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. In this next session, we're going to shift the focus and talk about creative media. And I'm joined by John Oates, who is a developmental psychologist who has worked at the OU for many years. And you have some wonderful things to show us about the creative uses of media and the way that this impacts on child development.

But before we start talking about this, John, we've had a jam-packed session. And I just want to take a trip to the Hot Desk to see how everyone is this afternoon, and also to shift the focus now as we're talking about the role of creative media. Because a lot of people here are level 1 students. We've got a lot of females here today as well, a lot of people who have got experience working with children. So perhaps creative media is something that you're very familiar with.

But I'd just like to transition over between the sessions to pick up on things that have been going on in the chat and also to see how you're feeling on this very fine afternoon. HJ and Claudia?

HJ: Well, I think we had a very lively discussion in that last session. And a lot of people were saying while that video was playing that- we had chats about things like online bullying and how, in school, digital media is becoming more prevalent and is actually used in lessons as well. So there's lots of apps that children can use to talk about playing the piano and painting as well, and how it's becoming more and more prevalent, especially in schools as well, I think those people were saying.

CLAUDIA: Yes. But they also have discussions about safety online and how some children have had even- they might not have known about social media sites until they were actually told how to be careful on social media sites. And there's been a lot of discussion also around marketing and what has been harvested with people's viewing habits around the internet.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Those videos I found quite scary when I watched them for the first time, because a lot of it I knew was true. But again, it's quite stark when you start to realise how a lot of this is shifting the perception of products and roles, even, for consumers and children.

OK. Well, thank you very much for that. So from the screen and apps and games to creative media to drawing to things that we often associate more with childhood, John, you've been doing some incredible work in Romania with children. So can you tell us broadly what you've been up to, and also what these fantastic images are that you've brought along to us today?

JOHN OATES:

Sure. I'll come to those in a bit, but they're the end of a story, really. In fact, my work is primarily in Hungary, but also very close to the Romania border, a lot of the work I've done, but also Ukraine, Moldova, Central Europe generally.

And I think as soon as I started getting involved with that part of the world and looking at children's lives there, I realised that developmental psychology is not just an academic subject. It's a science that has really significant implications for helping children live the best possible lives. And many children don't live the best possible lives. In this country, we have one of the highest rates of child poverty in Europe, for example.

But anyway, to go back to my work in Central Europe, it started quite some years ago through other connections. I made a documentary film for one of the Open University modules. And part of that involved filming inside a community of, quote, Roma people. I have a little bit more to say about that.

And I realised the complexity of life in poverty in a way that I had not really understood in this country. Because on top of all the material aspects of poverty, the isolation as well of some very isolated villages, there was also the prejudice of discrimination against particular ethnicities. And I've been unable to turn my back on that for many years.

And so as well as my academic work very much integrated with it, I do documentary photography and filmmaking. And I know on your own resources area, you've got a little trailer for one of the films that I've been involved in making, which was a feature film funded by the Hungarian Public Motion Picture Foundation as well as by the OU and a startup.

But I made a director's cut of that for the module E219. So students studying E219 online will engage with that. And really, this is to show, through visual media, something that's very hard to communicate in text.

You can talk about the different factors that influence families. You can look at statistics that identify the strength of effect of a mother's educational level. You can look at the strength of effect of having resources, or having them in home, et cetera, et cetera. But when it comes to

really understanding that, what it really means, I don't think you can get away from a different way of experiencing children's lives, which you get to more emotionally through media.

And so I see film and photography as supplementing the statistical, analytical, rhetorical work that we do through our text. And so certainly, my role in the Open University has always been to integrate these different things. .

OK. So the documentary film work has also followed a very strict methodological and theoretical approach, which is really- I would describe best as ethnography from the academic perspective. But from the cinematographic perspective, we call it cinema direct, which is really to take as much time and trouble as one can to allow stories to be told in a true fashion by the people you're working with.

Because one of the difficulties when you're filming or recording with people is in difficult circumstances, at first, they're trying to work out why you're there and what sort of story they should tell. And it takes a long time before you get to the point where really, they open up and talk about lives in a fully authentic way.

KAREN FOLEY: For students who haven't heard of ethnography, could you briefly describe what that method is and outline some of the complexities involved in being in that research setting? Because as you say, people aren't really sure of your motivations. And there are a lot of issues that you'll need to work on as a researcher to be able to generate a meaningful source of data.

JOHN OATES: Well, I suppose what I was referring to is you can't just go in with a camera or a sound recording one day, get your data, and leave. It's impossible. In fact, I've seen that happen, particularly with charity donations. They go into a poor village for one day.

And what you get, particularly from this Roma population-- I'll say more about that later-- people put on the music, the stereotypical music. They come into the street, and they dance as a performance for the camera. They say how poor they are. How much they need the charity. The clothes are given. End of story. It doesn't tell you what life is like inside.

And ethnography is not just about getting that authentic voice, but it's about locating it in the context of people's lives, understanding the forces that affect their behaviour. In fact, we named the feature film that I made with a colleague aravain, which in Hungarian means a whirlpool or a vortex. And it was a very good metaphor for the way families were sucked into a way of living by all these different forces. Certainly I felt sucked in as well.

But ethnography is about locating experience and getting as close as one can to, if you like, the truth of experience as people feel it, but in this context, and understanding how it sits in the context.

KAREN FOLEY: And of course, in a given time and space as well. And you've been returning to these settings.

JOHN OATES: Yeah, 10 years I've been involved. And in fact, I've just come back from Romania. And I revisited the village, Told, where we made the feature film. Do you want me to go on a bit? Because I think creative media- film and photography are just one tiny set of media.

And one of the great experiences that I've been privileged to be part of has involved a real community development for the village of Told that I know so very well, which when I first started working there, really, which I think was maybe about seven, eight years ago, was in a very, very dysfunctional, troubled state. And there was no employment. There was a lot of criminality and neglect. Not a good place.

KAREN FOLEY: Tell me, just briefly- as a researcher, were you trying to do anything in this setting, or were you really trying to observe what was happening in this community?

JOHN OATES: It started off as observation and turned, through what I was talking a little bit about, to action, social action. I think it goes back to what I said at the beginning- developmental psychology is real. And it tells you what you can do to support children's development.

KAREN FOLEY: So you started off researching, but the problems were evident, and you could do something. So eventually, you started working with people.

JOHN OATES: Well, I think that the filmmaking was also for political reasons. It was premiered in Budapest, went on release across the country a couple of times, and did have a political impact. It still resonates, really. But can I come back to this?

I think a project- a small foundation when I first started working there was doing artwork in the children's kindergartens and in children's homes to help really give children some sense of self-esteem, some sense of agency and potency.

Now, there's been a real development in all of that work, and it's now well-known across all of Hungary, this work. It's led by a woman called Nora, Nora Ritok, the Troop Foundation. And I've just brought a few examples, initially of children's artwork. So this is artwork that has been

produced by children in and around the villages.

KAREN FOLEY: If I hold this, John can explain.

JOHN OATES: And I think you'll agree these are quite exciting and lovely images.

KAREN FOLEY: They're beautiful.

JOHN OATES: So I'll show you another one, which I think is really, really, really strong. And if you want to show that, Karen. And I should say that the way of working with the children is to evoke from them the designs that they want to produce. There's templates. I think you'll agree that's a very striking design.

KAREN FOLEY: Beautiful, yeah.

JOHN OATES: So that was the first stage, was this foundation working with children. But now the development is into using those children's drawings to engage the adults in productive economic work, which is not available to them otherwise.

So here I've got some examples of tapestry and patches, inlays, which have been produced by the mothers of Roma children based on their children's artwork. And there's now an online shop called Zuno Shop which sells these objects- these are cushion covers- and also boxes, purses, et cetera. And these are really, I think, very striking and potent images.

KAREN FOLEY: So how did you start doing this? Was there some skill involved in terms of actually setting this up as a business opportunity and also enabling the products and capacities for the mothers to be able to create these?

JOHN OATES: Well, I have to really say it's Nora's work, primarily. I supported it. But it gradually became better known outside this very small area where she lives in the east of Hungary on the Romania border.

And she has a very powerful blog, actually, about poverty and the role of her work. And it came to the attention of a foundation called the Ashoka Foundation. And myself and others were asked to give references regarding Nora's work and the work of the foundation.

And after a long process, it led to her being awarded an Ashoka Fellowship, which means this foundation supports people who do social development projects to develop their- I hate to use the word, but business model, the way of working, so it's more transferable. And that's

currently in process at the moment of developing particularly the Zuna business into something that can be used by other people as well to help develop communities.

KAREN FOLEY: Fantastic. In addition to this- we're short on time, as we often are with these things. But I also wanted to ask you about research ethics, because I know this is another area that you're very involved with. And you've mentioned how some of this work in particular is feeding into the curriculum. But another thing that students will become very familiar with throughout their undergraduate degrees, and indeed post-graduate, is this idea of research ethics.

So what can you tell us that's relevant about that right now for new students who are starting their qualification? As we know, a lot of students are level 1 out there right now and are very excited. But research ethics may invoke similar ideas as referencing does, but it's vitally important in terms of being able to both research effectively, and indeed, in this sort of setting, I imagine there are a lot of things that you need to be very mindful of, both personally in your ethnographic work, as well as the extent to which you're are people in these ventures, for example.

JOHN OATES: Well, I think once you get involved deeply through ethnography with people's lives, you hit situations with unexpected consequences, basically. So can I say? I just came back from Brussels, where I was presenting to an international conference on research ethics. So it will flow.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

JOHN OATES: And I was arguing in that that rules, guidelines, codes, and so forth only go so far. And when you hit a new situation, you're thrown back on basically your virtues as a researcher. Are you a virtuous researcher?

And I used an image of an egg with an adult popping out of it with a briefcase. And I said that the ethical researcher does not emerge fully formed. And really, understanding what ethical behaviour is in research is a learning process. And really, I think there are stages.

James Rest, an author in this area, talked about the four stages. He talked, first of all, about ethical sensitivity, just becoming aware of an issue. What is the issue like? Identifying children that you're filming.

The next one is about ethical reasoning. So you identify the issue through your sensitivity. Can you reason to a course of action? Then the next stage is motivation. Are you actually- have

you got enough motivation to pursue the action that you believe is ethical? And then there's the actual implementation. So that's all very theoretical.

Concrete example- after we premiered the film in Budapest, the next day, the minister for human capacity sacked the director of social services for that part of Hungary. He sent in the Child Protection Team to take the children away from one of the families we were filming. OK?

So sensitivity wasn't very much needed there. I was very aware of it. It wasn't a subtle issue. This was a big, big issue. The next one was ethical reasoning. What should I do in that circumstance? Did I have a role? Was I responsible? Should I turn my back on it?

Well, I felt yes, I had a role. I was one of the causes of this. So discussed with colleagues action, and we arrived at a reasoned approach, which in the case of Maria's family was to improve the living conditions, which was the main reason why they wanted to take the children away. So we did that.

And it took a lot of motivation to do that. We had to spend a lot of our time getting charitable donations, et cetera, and feeding them through to the village. In respect to the sacking of the director of social services, we discussed that one, and we felt possibly that was justified and we shouldn't intervene in that. But I hope that shows a shift away from following guidelines. Because there were no guidelines as to what you should do there. It just had to be ethical reasoning.

KAREN FOLEY: But for many of our students, we've talked about how some of them may be in settings where they are working with children already in terms of this qualification. And in terms of ethical guidelines, I guess one of the things we might want to remind them of is that we are held by a code of conduct. And whilst it can be really exciting to start learning about some of this material as well, we always need to be very careful in terms of how we apply it and the extent to which we're able to operate.

John, I know we've got a question for you, so I just want to go to the hot desk quickly. HJ.

HJ: I know everyone has been really enjoying the session. And we've posted a link to the trailer of the film as well so everyone can tap it and watch it. It is going to be available on the catch-up this session because people have been asking. So you can go to our main web site or YouTube page and watch this session again and get all those information that you've wanted as well. But yes, we had a question.

CLAUDIA: Yes. Darren wanted to know if there was any other form of research other than ethnographic studies where the researcher actually lives within the setting that they're trying to study.

JOHN OATES: Yes. Where do I start? Well, there are so many techniques in social science. And I think also, just going back to your ethics point, Karen, the ethics of these different methods vary a lot. Ethnography- you have to be a relatively participant but non-influential person in the setting to get inside it.

KAREN FOLEY: Which is very difficult when you're interacting with people.

JOHN OATES: Yeah, very difficult. And there's lots more to say about that. You could be a very distant observer. You could be a participant observer. You could be someone who gets in there and joins in- I don't know- with picking up litter on the street or going out for a cycle ride or whatever with the children. Or you could be a participant.

You might want to interview them. You might have a very structured interview schedule. You might want to use psychometric tests with them.

KAREN FOLEY: Action research as well.

JOHN OATES: Action research. You might want to do something in the setting and change things. So really, it's matching the research method to the research question. And my research question was what is life like in extreme poverty and what are the forces that influence children's experience and outcomes.

KAREN FOLEY: And what a fascinating way of using all these creative medias, both in terms of the way that you're able to observe things, the way you are able to support political change, and also the way you're able to work with people in a setting to enable their families to have a better future.

Thank you, John, for talking to us about that today. That's been really, really interesting. We've had some people who've had to nip out and taxis has gone to go and get milk from the shops for the children. So you can watch all of this available on catch-up later. But John Oates, thank you very much for joining me today.

JOHN OATES: Thank you, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: We're going to have a short video now, which is the Briggs Building, so another building on campus we'd like to introduce you to. And then we're going to take a look at language with

Paul Ibbotson in the final session for today's programme. We'll see you in a few minutes.