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INTERVIEWER: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. So this session we're looking at levels 2 to 3-- a big jump-- probably the most substantial jump that you're going to make in your undergraduate studies with the Open University, and certainly with other universities as well. It's a time when things get a lot more difficult, things matter a lot more. But you will be very prepared from all of your previous studies, so not to worry.

I have Eleanor Betts from classical studies. And we're going to have a look at some of these key changes for level 3. And you've got some brilliant ideas about things that students can start thinking about doing over the summer.

Now the main differences with level 3-- well, there's quite a few-- is the volume of material, the complexity, and being more critical in the way you're evaluated. So a lot of stuff going on here.

And I wanted to pick up on this whole idea of critical thinking, because it's one of the things that we were sort of briefly talking about earlier. It's really, really difficult for students to understand what it means, very difficult for us to explain as well. And also, it applies differently in so many different contexts that it's this nebulous creature that we're all sort of chasing. So how do you make sense of it?

ELEANOR BETTS: Of critical thinking, I think it is that kind of standing back, and just trying to be a little bit objective about what you're reading, and challenge yourself, as well to be reflective, and to argue against your own opinions, and to try not to be too biased in what you're writing. And I think that's the challenging thing, and especially at level 3. Suddenly you've got to write complex arguments-- more complex than maybe at level 2. You're reading material that's going to challenge you, but you've also got to challenge that material as well.

INTERVIEWER: The difficult thing, I think, is that it all seems so much more sensible than it was, because it's more complex, more complete, and also probably more detailed. So you're perhaps not getting such a holistic argument there. So all of a sudden you're being confronted with all these different things, and quite a lot of the depth, that you don't really want to argue with, because they've been published somewhere, and glossy writing with no spelling mistakes and wonderful referencing. So it can be difficult to sort of try to be critical of some of that material, and think about it.

But also, there's a distinction between critical thinking and being critical. So can you explain how that sort of works?

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah. And again, it's something that I say to students, just don't be afraid to criticise something, even if it's published, and even if it's the module material itself. Critically evaluating is something that's different, because you're tussling with the sources. I mean, again, I'm coming from an arts backgrounds. So maybe this isn't kind of completely relevant to, say, everybody.

INTERVIEWER: Don't be ashamed for coming from an arts background. We've had the maths and science people been here before. So we're clear.

ELEANOR BETTS: So evaluating what you're reading, but thinking critically, is much more about developing your own argument.

INTERVIEWER: No, absolutely. OK. So one of the things that students are going to start doing is independent study, which again, is a goldmine. You're in the library. It's all very exciting. You're having to manage your time, et cetera. But there are further reading opportunities. And we do expect students to do some level of independent study in terms of the skills that they're learning. So how much is enough?

ELEANOR BETTS: How much is enough? I think we say about 5% of your time at level 3. And I mean it's something that students are starting to do at level 2, and again I was sort of listening in to the last session. But it will give you the further reading. We're kind of expecting you to do little bits of it.

The Open University Library is amazing. And it's an amazing resource. There's so much there. And you can just keep going and going and going forever if you're not careful.

INTERVIEWER: They do great sessions as well. They've got ones on literature searching, and referencing, and then things that you can go along to.

ELEANOR BETTS: So I think it's find the things that you're interested in, and keep going with them. And if you've got the time-- and again, just be aware of how much time you've actually got for studying that week. And again, sort of had students say to me that I was researching stuff for my TMA, and then I started reading this, and I had to go and took off down this wormhole.

INTERVIEWER: I know. And it's difficult, I think, when you're so into a subject, and you're getting that opportunity to be specific. So there's time management, I guess, and prioritising here that sort of comes into play. And perhaps being less hand-held at level 3 opens up opportunities to go off down a rabbit hole, and do things that you want to. How do you advise students manage their time over the module in terms of the study planner, and also being able to go off and do things that they want to do?

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah, I think just keep to your study plan. Do try and allow a little bit of extra time, and a level 3 that you wouldn't necessarily have done at level 2, just to allow yourself that freedom to actually explore a little bit. And keep focused on those TMAs, because inevitably you've got to tick the boxes and achieve your learning outcomes.

INTERVIEWER: And I think it's that thing where you can read the material, absorb it. Like you say, you've got a lot more material to read, and it can be a lot more complex. And you can understand how students might think I've read all of that. So I've done my thing for the week. But like you're sort of implying here, it's about that space that you need between what you're writing and what you've read, and then what you think.

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah, absolutely. And even if you're just focusing on the module materials, there are going to be complex ideas that are rattling around. And as soon as you start reading [INAUDIBLE] schools or scholarship, it's all swirling around in your head. And you need to just take a little bit of time to stand back from that, and let your brain work before you start writing. And make notes, and keep track of your references as you're the making notes.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. No, exactly. Exactly, our Post-It notes with page numbers and things so you can go back. Now you've given a lovely definition of critical thinking, which is the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement. And we've been briefly talking before about the distinction between critical thinking, critical evaluation, and just being really critical, and sort of saying that they didn't do this, they didn't do that, because of course you can't do everything. But one of the things that you've said to me beforehand is about being objective, which can be very difficult. So how does being objective relate, then, to critical thinking?

ELEANOR BETTS: It's about trying to recognise your own biases, and why you make particular judgments, or come to particular conclusions. And if so, oh, I think this is beautifully written and well argued, why do I think that is? So I think it's that sort of just trying to again give yourself the space, and

stand back a little bit.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So it's to do with this whole ontology and epistemology, like why we think what we think, and who's originated the knowledge and things. And sometimes those sorts of frameworks can be helpful. Do you use any frameworks, then, for students, to sort of try and step back, and think about why they think certain things, or why they might have generated knowledge in such a way.

ELEANOR BETTS: Actually we have quite a good activity in one of the modules that I teach that we asked them to summarise an article, then criticise it, and then problematise it. So that critical engagement is, what is this arguing? The summaries of what's the argument, and what are the main points of the content that criticises that. To what extent do I agree or disagree with that? And then the problematise is, OK, what would I do differently? How could you take it further? So I think that's quite a good exercise that you could do in any module, really.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And I guess there's a sort of logic to that as well. You're using some sort of framework to progress a line of thinking. So being critical can sound really fun, and really sort of nebulous. But if you're using this sort of framework, you can actually progress from one thing to another in a logical way.

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah. And I think that we tend to sort of associate critical with negative criticism, whereas actually positive criticism is just as important.

INTERVIEWER: So with this idea of logic, then, to what extent do you encourage students to try and make connections? I mean, there's often there's the what is there, and then there's the what isn't there. And sometimes the what isn't there can be a lot more interesting than the what is there. How do you encourage them, then, to use these frameworks of logic to start identifying some of those areas that may have been considered by, for example, one researcher that may not have been considered by another one.

ELEANOR BETTS: Reminding them that the reason there is still academia is because there are a lot of unanswered questions. And just maybe just trying that out for yourself a little bit, just playing devil's advocate in a conversation with a friend, and just say, OK, I'm going to turn this around and argue the other point of view, or taking a newspaper article. So why am I sympathetic to this journalism, or why don't I like it, and trying to just turn that around. And I think you can start to see your own processes of how you reach judgments by doing that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. it's Interesting, actually. On some of the level 1 modules, we do these lovely drag and drop activities, and tables, and we encourage students to think about generating knowledge, and using various frameworks that they can make comparisons between things. And we see that slightly less at level 3, I think, because maybe we expect students to do it. And we've been talking earlier today about looking forwards, but also looking back on some of those key skills. Are there some frameworks that you think could be useful for students to maybe look back on that might be useful to get this logical or rounded approach to thinking about something new?

ELEANOR BETTS: Absolutely. I mean everything that we're asking students do is incremental. And again, I would say go back to your tutor's feedback from your last module, or your last couple of modules, and see what are you doing well, what aren't you doing so well, where are the areas to develop. It's already oh yes, you built a brilliant arguments, but your referencing's lousy. So that's just a kind of formatting, practical thing to deal with.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent. Now we're going to come back to a tip. I just want to take a quick trip to the Hot Desk and see what HJ's talking about.

HJ: We're just having a good discussion on critical thinking, and resources that we can use about that. So Melody says the openlearn course in critical thinking is a must for level 2 to 3. And Bruce said that he got a critical thinking book a couple of years ago, [INAUDIBLE] coming up with his degree now as a skill. But Maddie also has a great tip for sort of finding more information, and going outside the module, which is sometimes expected in level 3, about finding the references in the books, and going to the OU library, and having a little look at those resources directly to get used to looking at more stuff.

And there's also a really good tip from Libby about preparing for level 3, and maybe getting a feel for the subject a bit more. And she contacted the OU library about the module she was going to do, and they gave links to a few articles that they thought would be helpful for her to prepare.

So I think there's always lots of great advice here, and I think I'm saving it all and writing it down. But we'll definitely have to watch again, and catch up to make sure that we remember everything. But yeah, I love hearing all your advice. And if you want to send us any more, or have any questions, we'd love to hear those as well.

INTERVIEWER: Brilliant. And Melody was saying that she was looking at some of the authors of some of the chapters in her book, and found some great videos on YouTube. There's a lot that's out there.

I know a lot of people have been at the Student Hub Live as well. So you can check out our YouTube channel for lots of content there if you are bored over the summer.

So practicing critical thinking over the summer. Now you've got some ideas about how students might be able to do this, in a sort of bite-sized chunked, nice and friendly way. And you're talking about how you might get a newspaper article, and start thinking about that from a critical perspective. So what could students do?

ELEANOR BETTS: To tear apart the article?

INTERVIEWER: Well, not literally, I mean. Metaphorically.

ELEANOR BETTS: Just trying to try find something that you violently disagree with, because then it makes it a little bit easier to then to OK, what is it that I disagree with here? And again, you might be doing this virtually, but underlining, and just kind of trying to pick out what the main arguments are, what the main content is, how the evidence is being used to support the argument, or how the evidence is driving a particular argument. Because those are all skills that are going to be really useful for level 3 assignments.

INTERVIEWER: Often these things pop up in my Facebook feed-- psychologists say this, this, and this. And you look at them. And if you start sort of thinking in that framework, and you can think, well, is there any evidence behind this? Who are these people? What are they actually saying, and is the journalist reporting what they're saying, or have they got three words within there that they're sort of attributing to something else? And so it's that sort of thing, I guess, in terms of thinking about those things.

But I'm really interested in what you're saying about biases, because this whole idea about why you think what you're doing, and how you're interacting with that material, can be really, really powerful. And often those reflective activities are something that we encourage at level 3. So aside from the content and the provenance, and all those sorts of basic things that might be in there, how could students sort of start to say this article really repels me, or I'm feeling like this towards this, and starting to think about their objectivity?

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah. What is it that is going on in your life that makes you feel like that? And sometimes that might be coming from having a really good knowledge of something, or reading an article, and going well, this is completely out of date. And again, that was a recent newspaper article, and just why is this coming up now? Talking about Roman concrete. Well, we know about it

already.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

INTERVIEWER: Anyway, yeah, so vehement dislike of Roman concrete. But the way that we react to things, and of course everything is based from a certain perspective. And at level 3, it's this whole idea about starting to take apart these ideas and thinking, well, fair enough if you thought this about Roman concrete, for example, because you were doing x, y, or z, or you were only looking at it from this perspective, whereas so and so is looking at it from this perspective. So how might it be useful, then, to start taking these objective reactions to things, and then using those to contextualise without being critical in the sense of being negative, somebody else's knowledge?

ELEANOR BETTS: And recognising, well, it's recognising your own subjectivity, I think. And it's back to that why do I think that? What is it that's influenced me to feel like that? And, OK, so how do I turn that around to look at the other side of the argument, or again, what do I need to read, or look up to actually support the opposing view? And again, that's where I think we're sort of pushing into the independent study again, and the reading around the subject.

INTERVIEWER: Because whether or not we agree with it, someone will have approached that from a logical perspective, just like we approach something from our logical perspective. And there's bound to be some sort of rationality between why they've done what they've done, and the outcome of the study that they've had. So although we can be critical and say I don't like it, equally it's important to recognise why they may have made those methodological choices about how they chose to study something, for example. And being aware of the strengths and limitations. So strengths and limitations, then, in terms of these arguments. That's a fairly easy thing, I think, often for students to identify. Often there's a comment in there about, well, a limitation is they didn't have a big enough population, for example. But going beyond that, and starting to make links with other things, particularly in terms of the way that people do research is a key thing at level 3, isn't it?

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah. And it's following up references. So again, you're back into that wormhole. It's not just the further reading that you're given in the module material. It's if you're reading an article, following up some of the bibliography there, just to kind of start to understand how that author has actually got to their position. And I think that's a real tough thing. And I think that's something-- it's a skill that if you can crack that by the end of level 3, if you're thinking about

postgraduate study, you're going to be away and running.

And there is an access thing there as well, about it's mostly going to be journal articles that our students are able to follow up. But it is back into that wormhole. But if you can read a little bit, if you find an article that you, again, whether you violently agree or disagree with it, or agree with it, to just follow up some of the author's references to understand how their writing's informed.

INTERVIEWER: So there's the study skills as well that are coming into play here. Because in addition to this larger workload, more complex reading, a lot more material, et cetera, you're going to need to sort of be mindful of your study patterns so that you have this space between learning something, writing about something, and then thinking about it, and maybe amending it before you submit your TMA. So how might students, then, best reflect on some of their study patterns, bearing in mind they're going to need to stretch out some of this time to get the space in between the time. It's a lot more important.

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah. I think again it's a really good thing to be doing over the summer before you kind of launch into the level 3 study. We sort of have our work load plans, and you shouldn't be doing more than 16 hours a week. I think there is a risk that at level 3, if you've got the time, you will be doing more than 16 hours I think.

So yeah, just to take a step back, and think, well, what works for you. How do you actually approach your study? Do you have long blocks or shorter blocks? And I think with the additional complexity of level 3, it may be good just to, yeah, you need to maybe chunk, take a bit of a little and often approach, so that you can kind of start to get into some of the concepts, but then maybe take a step back, and actually give you actual, real breaks from it.

Go and do something else, whether it's a run, or making a cup of tea. And just actually again giving yourself a little bit of time to digest those concepts. And then come back and carry on.

INTERVIEWER: Now tell me, then when you go for your run or cycle, you're doing something after studying, do you ever use that time to reflect on things and try and remember what you've read? Can you use non-study time as--

ELEANOR BETTS: --as study time.

INTERVIEWER: --as study time. And is that a good thing to do?

ELEANOR BETTS: Yeah. And I think even it might be subconsciously. So, yeah, I mean when I was doing my PhD, I just went and swam for a mile. It took however long it took. And sometimes the ideas and the reading was floating around my head. And sometimes it was completely different.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Well, a lot of our audience have been telling their dogs and cats and two-year-olds all their studies. And I think ethics aside, it is really good to articulate your ideas as well, because again, once, you start reformulating something that's being said, maybe in a different context, it can tell you what you do and don't know.

We've also looked throughout the day at feedback. But tell me then why, for level 3, tutor feedback from level 2 matters, and what sort of things students could glean from that as they're getting into a more complex territory?

ELEANOR BETTS: We are building on existing skills. It's not that we're trying to do something completely different at level 3. It's developing the skills that you've already been building at level 1 and 2.

I would say go about through all your PT3s, if not the comments, and just first work out what you've done well, and make sure you've got a list of all the things that you're actually doing really well. Because then that's just about nudging their skills forward a little bit. But do look for patterns, and anything that still needs developing. And then work out how you're going to build on that at level 3. And if you are getting the incessant you need to work on your referencing comment, then it's something that you can look at.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. No, exactly. And those things will really start limiting the grades. So things like bad referencing will actually start capping what you're capable of.

But I love the way you're talking about things that are important to recognise that you're doing well, because actually if you know that you can nail an introduction, if you know your paragraph structure's solid, that's one less thing to worry about. And your tutor is very likely to be commenting on the positive things, as well as the things that aren't so positive, in your TMA. So yeah, again, getting an idea of where you're at, and where you might, most usefully develop would be interesting.

Now with the different subject disciplines and things, some modules will have set texts. So you could get ahead with that. Some modules won't. And we've talked about sort of open access to study materials. But in your opinion, would you say that it's better to start doing the what, like the knowledge, and maybe going and doing one of these MOOCs? Or would you suggest that

something more skills-based could be more useful in terms of time people spend over the summer?

ELEANOR BETTS: I think it depends on what you're doing. I think if you're carrying on with the same subject discipline that you've been working on at level 2, you should have sufficient background. But if you're moving into a new subject area, it is really worth just getting a little bit of that background context for it, because it's just going to help, because the expectation at level 3 is going to be that you can just launch yourself straight into a new subject.

So with the Greek and Roman myth module, I said we get a lot of students coming from art history and English literature. So if you don't know anything about the Greeks and Romans, read a little bit of historical background just to give yourself that little bit of support, and that you can hit the ground running.

INTERVIEWER: No, excellent. No, absolutely. Very, very good point. All right. Let me just see, HJ, what's going on there with you and the chat.

HJ: I think it's all very positive. We're talking about other people's experiences. So people are saying both the level 3 modules work towards completing TMAs from questions to independent research, and Stuart found that with the sciences modules. At level 2 he saw a step up, and felt quite prepared to do level 3 modules.

And I think Bruce is right with this point. The problem with Student Hub is that you end up with a list of actions to do-- so sessions to rewatch and openlearn courses and visiting the library. But he says it's all very motivating, though, and I definitely agree with that point.

INTERVIEWER: Ah, thanks Bruce. That's nice. You can stay. Excellent.

Now we're as ever short on time. We've put loads of links that Eleanor has given in the resources page on the website. And in fact, there's lots of information on the Student Hub new, fabulous website. So do make sure that you have a chance to check those out. Some of them are great in terms of blogs that we've mentioned, skills for OU study, strategic study techniques, and critical reading techniques, which are really good to go through. And I think if you've got some time and space, they're nice, small, bite-sized chunks of things that can really work well. And, of course, we wanted to flag up some of the library training events, which can be very useful for level 3. So about navigating the library, and spending time doing that can really pay dividends when you've got to do some independent research.

ELEANOR BETTS: Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: Wonderful. Well, Eleanor, thank you so much for coming along and filling us in. And for those of you about to embark on level 3, good luck. It's going to be an absolutely fantastic journey. I know everyone's really excited about starting to study.

And we're lining up a series of events in mid to late September and early October to get you geared up for module start. So I hope you can join us there. We'll give a lot more practical advice about things you can do right at the beginning of the module, and taking apart some of these skills in a little bit more detail. We really want to give you a flavour right now of some of the stuff that you could do over the summer. But it's important to have a rest and a break so that you're rejuvenated for when you do return.

So we're going to have a very short break. Now we're going to look at a little video where Dan's going to be talking about the tree sculpture and the Harold Wilson building. And then we're going to look at preparing for post-graduate study, which of course takes this idea of critical thinking and peer support to another level. So I'll be joined by Janet Cullen-- sorry-- Jane Cullen, Janet Soler, and Maria Leedham in a couple of minutes after this short video. So join us then. See you soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]