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**KAREN FOLEY:** Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live open day, here at the Open University. Sorry for that short break. We had to top off our Pimm's-- I mean, our water-- before we make sense of our next session, which is all about online rooms. I'm very excited about this, because we have the brand-your tutorial system that you two know everything about, I'm told. Rhod, Zoe, thank you for coming along and showing our students.

Now, we've got a lot of people who are really excited about studying at the OU, and we've also got a lot of current students. So, for everybody, I mean, this is going to be a new thing.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** Sure.

**KAREN FOLEY:** But I wanted to talk about this because, earlier in the day, we were talking about the importance of attending tutorials and about connecting with your tutor. And we were speaking really about those physical spaces. And, of course, this is an online space.

Now, I've been to a few of these sort of webinars and various things lately. And I must admit, if I don't know what it's like and you can't get in beforehand, sometimes, to test them, you can think, oh, I don't know who's going to-- they're going to say, Karen has entered the room. And they're going to sort of say, right, where have you got with your reading? And have you-- got all these questions.

So, sometimes you can sort of not know. So I was hoping you could show us what an online room looks like and also talk about the experience that students might have and how they can sort of attend it. For example, if they've got a crying baby or a barking dog, or things going on in the house, and how they might sort of manage fitting these busy lives in around their studies.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** Well, OK. So, we can show you that in a minute. And then I'll just kind of start off by kind of explaining for people who have been studying with the university for a while. I mean, essentially what we're talking about is online rooms or online tutorials. It's kind of the latest in a line of the software that the university's been providing to help do a lot of collaboration online.

So it's not supposed to be a webinar, as you mentioned. It's not really supposed to be a kind of an instructor-led type session. We are trying to make them more dynamic and more

interactive. So it depends on the kind of session that the students get with their tutors or learning event or whatever.

But effectively we've been doing this for a fair number of years, now. We've had a number of different systems. So students might be familiar, depending how long they've studied with us, with something that was called Lyceum. Then there was something called Illuminate and then, most recently, called OU Live.

And they're all delivering the same kind of thing. It's all about the real-time collaboration. So it really is the kind of online space where you've got maybe some kind of a whiteboard or a shared area to work on, and then you've also got the ability to talk to one another. And then you also can text-chat as well, if you're maybe a bit shier or there are some things that you say better when you're typing than when you're saying them out loud.

So there's a range of activities that people will use, as they do these tutorials and other events. And the latest one in that kind of suite of tools the university's been using is Adobe Connect. So people might have seen that in their professional lives. They might have seen it in other universities. They might have seen it in other walks of life.

And what we're doing is we're trying to adapt that Adobe Connect experience to work best for our tuition. So we can show you a few examples of how that works. And we can also just touch on how students will be getting into the room, which is kind of a key thing that we want to make sure is as easy and as slick as possible.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Brilliant. Excellent.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** So, shall we flip over and have a look at how we actually do that? So-- Zoe might be the best person to introduce how you actually get into the room. So off you go, Zoe.

**ZOE GIPSON:** OK. So, for your tutorials, you're more likely to be booking onto these events. They're not going to be something that you just turn up to, maybe. So you'll have booked on your event, and they will be pulled in to your Tutorials page. Your Tutorials page will look very similar to what you're seeing now onscreen, in that anything that you've booked on will appear in a table. And if it's an online event, it will have a hyperlink which will link directly to the room.

And so you will have two options. You can either go below the table, to find your room, or you can click on the link within the table to find it. On this same page, you can also manage your

bookings for bookable events, as well. This said, if you are not attending an online room that's for bookable events, you may be going in for ad hoc sessions, maybe to meet up with students or tutors outside of events.

And they may sit here. They may also sit under another area which is called the Resources tab. But it's usually going to be sitting in one of those areas and easy to find on your module.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** And we've tried to keep it as similar to previous experience so the students who have been with us for some time who've been using OU Live, it's the same way of getting into a room. It's the same way of joining it. We just happen to be using an entirely different technology to deliver that experience.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Oh, but how nice that, when you've booked on, all those links will come through on your study calendar, as well. That's brilliant.

**ZOE GIPSON:** And that takes you through.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Because sometimes, there are-- it depends on what module you've got, but some I teach, we have individual tutor rooms. And sometimes, we'll have, like, a cluster group thing. So sometimes, it can be confusing to know which one to go to. But this, I guess, takes all of that out of it.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** That was the intention--

**KAREN FOLEY:** And you literally just click on the link and then, wham-bam, you're in.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** Yeah.

**ZOE GIPSON:** Absolutely. So it makes it very clear that you know where you're going. Yeah.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** And these are certainly for the formal events, the tutorials, learning events, or whatever. If there are other things, I mean, Zoe's alluded to, there are other reasons why you might be wanting a collaboration space online. Well, there are other cases where those rooms might appear in slightly different places. They'll all be labelled differently. They'll all have a purpose behind them. And it should be communicated to you within the module as to when's the best time to use them.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Now, collaboration is something that I know can fill people with some sense of dread, especially if you're not sure what you're collaborating. And this whole idea of being online,

you're not sure who's out there, how many people, what they're thinking of you, whether they think that you're an idiot because you don't understand this, or-- you don't sort of have that sense.

But one thing I do know is that collaboration doesn't work when no one talks to each other. And so you're sort of saying, here, that these are, I guess, more meaningful and more worthwhile when you're actually doing stuff. You talked about the chat and things, as well. So how does this manifest itself? How do you collaborate, and what do you do in the room when you're there?

**RHODRI THOMAS:**OK, so I think we can step straight into what the interface looks like. So we had effectively a poster that we've created around this, as a kind of quick reference. And that just shows you the interface.

But essentially what we've got is an ability to share some content in the middle. And what we're really keen for people to do is to use that as a kind of a launch pad for stimulating discussion, you know, whether that's actually something that you'd been getting on and interacting with or something that you're actually asked to reflect on and kind of have a point of view that you want to share.

Now, that could be text-chatting away, and that appears in the text box, and everybody can see that. It's against your name, but you can do as little or as much as you like and hopefully the tutors will have an opportunity to kind of work with you and elicit a bit of information from you that, you know, you feel you're happy to do in a kind of a comfortable or secure environment. So part of what we do is to try and make sure that is a good working environment for study and for sharing with your peers.

So that happens online, anyway, in the forums. So, if you're doing it offline, as it were, part of it is to create a kind of a good environment on the forum. And then hopefully that transfers to the real-time-- the online element in tools like Adobe Connect.

And one of the things that we do make clear is that there's a good bit of a cultural difference between us and people in America, for example. They're all about web chat. They want to get on the webcam and have kind of talking to one another face-to-face through the technology, as it were.

We find that a lot of British students tend to be a little bit more reticent on that front-- which is

fine.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Often because they're in their pyjamas-- to be fair.

**RHODRI THOMAS:**[LAUGH] Well-- OK, let's not go there. But, yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** [LAUGH]

**RHODRI THOMAS:**But essentially what we've got is a system which you appear-- your name does appear on the list. You can use nonverbals, in the sense they've got little additional icons that you can use to say, oh, I'm happy with what you've said-- speed up, slow down, or, I'm a bit confused, or-- there are other things that you can do in terms of signalling that you agree, so that everybody kind of says they're on the same page, they're happy, and they're happy to move on.

So there's lots of things you can do that are quite quick, in terms of giving feedback and helping the tutor to see how the whole group is doing. But you can also use the text-chat. And, of course, if you want to, you can use the microphone and actually talk.

**ZOE GIPSON:** I think the key thing about Adobe Connect is, though-- you mentioned about the webcam-- is that, with Adobe Connect, is, you can change the view. So it's not fixed view anymore. So if the webcam is not something that's going to be used, you don't need to have that. You can maximise the space by having the areas in that you want.

So, for example, it might just be you want to see the attendees-- who's in the room-- the chat. And then you want to be sharing a share space where you're doing maybe a PowerPoint presentation or you're doing-- sharing an application. And the power of Adobe Connect is there, to do a lot of really in-depth learning.

**KAREN FOLEY:** But, of course, the students don't need to worry about all of that, because the tutors all sort of do it.

**ZOE GIPSON:** No, absolutely.

**KAREN FOLEY:** They just need to sit back and have a cup of tea and enjoy--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

**RHODRI THOMAS:**And different sessions will be-- you know, they might involve anything from, as Zoe said, a kind of a PowerPoint deck with some interaction. The higher you go, maybe, in the study, or the

bigger groups that you might get involved in, the tutors may need to break those groups up into smaller breakout rooms, as if you were at a plenary in a space. And then you all go off and sit around a little table, do an activity, and then come back.

So you can do that kind of thing with the software. And you can also-- depending on the subject area, we're finding that some subjects-- like STEM, for example-- they might be doing a lot of screen-sharing. So they might actually be showing something on the tutor's machine, which not everybody has access to but actually helps, in terms of the teaching points that are made.

And students might be invited in to go and try something out on a spreadsheet or on a bit of software, through that mechanism, as well. But it is a complete-- you know, it's one tool that does a lot of different things. And different experiences will come forward.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And it's very, very-- I mean, I've used this. It's very intuitive. You can sort of see, when-- you test your microphone and everything. Did you want to briefly-- because we're sort of, as usual, running out of time. Did you want to show anyone about how to access the room? Because you mentioned, Rhod, that this was an important thing.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** So, yeah. The point around the VLE tutorials page that we had just a moment ago, that's kind of the key entry point. But the one that's literally just before you join the room is a page which has got essentially the information, a few quick tips on things that help you get the room set up, making sure your computer's set up, your broadband's good, and making sure that you actually have gone through kind of checks, like you were saying, with the audio check, as well.

And then, when you join the room, you get transferred over into Adobe-- Adobe Connect, sorry. And then, after a session's been done, if it's been decided that it needs to be recorded, then the recordings are available on the page, as well.

**KAREN FOLEY:** I wanted to ask about that. Because some students can't attend the tutorials in live time. So they can then watch the recording.

**ZOE GIPSON:** If one has been made.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah, if one has been made.

**ZOE GIPSON:** Yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Well, I guess-- I mean, George and I were talking earlier about how some of the students' most valuable experiences are with collaborating. And sometimes that can feel quite scary. I know when I plan my tutorials it's often on things that are explained in the tutorial. What would your advice be to students who may think, I haven't got up to speed with the reading, or I don't really understand it all?

These tutorials-- I mean, they're often a space to talk about things and to collaborate, as opposed to to have a lecture or to be quizzed, isn't it?

**RHODRI THOMAS:** Yes, exactly. Exactly.

**ZOE GIPSON:** Yeah. The beauty is that, wherever they are, they don't have to be wedded to their computer or their laptop, depending on the learning outcome of the event. But if they're just wanting to turn up, they're feeling slightly nervous, they can use their mobile device, as well. So we have a screenshot showing--

Adobe Connect is really versatile. They can enter from the Join Room page on their phone or their tablet or their computer. And if they really didn't want to speak, if they didn't feel that they wanted to do that, for whatever reason, they don't have to connect their mic. They can communicate through the text chat, if they wanted to.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Because a lot of people might be carers. They might have someone in the house. And they might not want that privacy. So that's OK, is it?

**ZOE GIPSON:** Absolutely, yeah. They don't have to switch their webcam on. They don't have to switch their mic on. It really depends on what the learning outcome is. But I think the bottom line is just getting them to attend and be there with other students-- the power of that.

**RHODRI THOMAS:** And you do benefit, even if you're not actively engaged, in a lot of cases.

**KAREN FOLEY:** You do. And even if you don't think that you know everything, sometimes sounding things out really helps clarify where you don't understand-- which is often more important than where you do understand, isn't it?

**ZOE GIPSON:** And, more than likely, there'll be somebody else in there that doesn't understand it, as well. And that's really reassuring.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. Brilliant. Excellent. You two, thank you so much for giving us this brief tour. Have we

covered most of the key things that you want students to connect with? When can they start going to find these online rooms?

**RHODRI THOMAS:** Well, this is one thing that we wanted to finish on, if that's all right. Because essentially what we've got is, we've talked about the tutorials. Well, we know that there are cases when students want to talk to one another in between tutorials. And the way that the new system is being set up means that we can't as easily do it as we did in the past.

So what we're trying to do is, we've got a proposal to try and get a student room set up. And that could be something that the module-- that, when the module chooses to add it, it can be used in a very basic way. And this is an example that we've got onscreen, at the moment, of one of our suggestions as to how you could interact in a very basic level.

But if it's actually for project work, team work, anything that the module decides maybe is part of the assessment or is actually part of learning together and actually preparing yourselves for working in professional circumstances, then they might have a kind of a more involved event, and that might need some more student-to-student peer interaction and discussion. Then we will look at crafting something a little bit special for that group.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Brilliant. Rhod, Zoe, thank you so much. Make sure you connect with your tutorials online. And, as Zoe and Rhod say, they're very, very simple. Your tutor will do all the difficult work. So you can just sit there, engage, and really-- you'll get so much from it.

Right. Our next session, well, we're going to have a quick video break and take a look at this tree sculpture which is over there. And then we're going to be doing something called The Force Is Strong with This One, which I know means that it's going to be the Department of Religious Studies coming and talking about Star Wars, in some vague sense. So we'll see you in a couple of minutes, after this quick campus tour.

[MUSIC PLAYING]