

KAREN FOLEY: We're now going to take a moment to pause and reflect, as we come to our next session, which is about "Welcome to the Future." I'm joined by Amber Fensham-Smith, who is a Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies. And she's the Student Voice and Well-being Lead for the Childhood and Youth Programme in ECYS, which is one of the schools we have here today. She's a member of E232. I know people have been talking about the various modules that they've been studying which is called Exploring Childhood and Youth module. And her interests are in alternative forms of education and grassroots learning communities, so a perfect topic for discussion today.

We were due to have Yasmin with us, but unfortunately, she can't be here today. But we have all of you lovely people at home. And I hope you've been filling in our word cloud. We'd like to know between one and three things about things that you would like to keep from your lockdown life. So if you can only think of one or two, just remember, you can put a full stop in the word cloud. And then your results will submit and make a lovely pattern for us all to be able to see. And when you do that, you can also see what other people at home have said about that.

So, Amber, welcome. Now, pandemic's--

**AMBER
FENSHAM-
SMITH:** Morning.

KAREN FOLEY: --taught us a lot of new things, hasn't it, including that you need to keep control of your dogs, which I'm doing very well right now. But it's all about sort of knowing oneself. And we've been talking about the importance of setting boundaries and parameters and being mindful of our limitations. What are some of the things that you've sort of taken from lockdown life?

**AMBER
FENSHAM-
SMITH:** I think it's been extremely varied. And I think whilst we've had a common experience, if you like, the ways in which it's affected staff, students, or a whole collection of groups has been very varied and very different. And I think certainly from my own perspective, checking in with each other and some of those small interactions and engagements that we have with each other online are really important. So that whilst we might be physically distant, we're not socially distant.

And I really think all those small engagements that we have and opportunities to really build a sense of community are really exciting. And I've been really excited to see some of the ways in which our students and everyone today have been building their own networks, have been trying new things, pushing themselves to experiment. And I looked at some of the things you talked about earlier around Sarah's veggie patch, which is great. So yeah, just really thinking about how we might further connect, build a sense of connection with each other, and yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: It's interesting, actually. We had an event yesterday, and I know some people who are here today were at that event yesterday. And we were talking about some of these topics. And some people were saying that, actually, they've noticed in terms of their studying that more people were talking and engaging with each other in online tutorials.

Student Hub Live-- we've certainly seen a massive increase in demand for people wanting to be able to congregate because that notion, I think, of community and connecting with other people seems to be really important. It seems that there's something very social that perhaps being locked down has really emphasised for us.

**AMBER
FENSHAM-
SMITH:**

Of course. And I think even though those small interactions that we have with one another, checking in with each other, are really important. And thinking about particularly when we're working with each other at a distance and communicating in different ways and different mediums and tutorials, I've seen some brilliant things that teachers and staff have been doing with coffee chats and channels and forums.

And really, it's an interesting way to see how we might be a bit more creative with how we engage with one another and checking in, as I said, being mindful that one person's experience might be very, very different. And whilst there's been different challenges. Everyone's had to kind of climb their own mountain, if you like, through that, so yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, let's take a look and see what everyone at home said when we asked them about some of the things that they'd like to keep from their lockdown life. So these are some of the things that have come to people's minds-- slower pace and working from home are things that really resonate with lots of people.

But other things, again-- like we've talking about the work-life balance, flexibility with work-- oh, yoga. That's been a lovely thing to do. I've been doing a lot of that also-- appreciation of mask, reducing waste, cooking from scratch, adapting to change, social distancing, time with family, daily walks, trying not to get stressed, saying no, speaking to each other, slowing down, noise.

You know, Kitty wants to keep a momentum for studying going. And I think that consistency and pace and being able to control that pace has been really, really important. Donna Marie says, "Keep less pollution," which, I agree, is a really wonderful thing. And some of these things, we're in control of, and some of the things sort of happened as a result of lockdown that may be outside of our control. But there's certainly this blurring, Amber, I think in terms of the work home environment for many people. Is that something you've found also?

**AMBER
FENSHAM-
SMITH:**

Definitely, and I think the ways in which it's affected both students in different ways-- I think that for many of us where we're working longer hours, and home has become a place where we study, we work, and those kinds of relationships that we have with family and friends might also be intensified. And so students will have completely different strategies to manage that.

Personally, I found it helpful to try and create a little space that I can call my workspace. And everyone will have a different approach in terms of what works for them and also the space available to them. But creating those kinds of boundaries between work and home certainly, I think, all of us probably found ourselves on our phones a lot more. Having screen time can be quite intense.

So thinking about strategies for creating time to decompress and taking a step back from screens can also be really, really valuable, I think, as a strategy.

KAREN FOLEY: Mm, absolutely.

AMBER I don't know if others have found that in the chat.

**FENSHAM-
SMITH:**

KAREN FOLEY: Well, let's see, Eric. I hear your sign's gone-- not your sign, your background has gone down very nicely. What are people talking about at home right now?

**ERIC ADDAE-
KYEREMEH:** Yeah, we're getting a lot of conversation around, as you said, the highs and lows and some of which you've mentioned already. But I've picked out a few interesting ones as well. So, issues around getting connected with family, I think, is one of the things that has come up quite a lot.

But an interesting comment from Kitty with regards to making connections with peers is one that we will encourage. And I'm pleased she's done that. So she's taken the opportunity to engage with the student voice and become an ambassador. So that's fab.

But Martin also makes a very interesting point, which is that the pandemic and the challenges that is raised will be a subject of interdisciplinary research as we go forward, which I think it's definitely going to happen. And we see that already with the conversation that's taking place on the chat with students from several different disciplines already sharing the experiences on how they've overcome issues of mental health, issues around resilience. So that conversation is already starting. And I think, yes, it will feed into future research and even our courses, yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And I think it's showcased that there's no one single answer. There's so many facets that can be affected by one particular thing, aren't there, as you say. And this is why well-being is such an important topic of discussion. So it's great that people like Kitty have made connections.

**ERIC ADDAE-
KYEREMEH:** Can I quickly--

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, Eric?

**ERIC ADDAE-
KYEREMEH:** Can I quickly say that I'm fascinated by the multilingual skills of Martin, really. So he says he's got an English keyboard and a Japanese one as well, and he's mixing it up. Well done. [LAUGHS]

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, and I don't know. Does Korina understand what he's talking about? Because I think she identified the dialect that he was speaking in. But yeah, it looks very beautiful. I was very impressed because, quite frankly, Martin, I can't even do emojis on those things, so--

[LAUGHTER]

**ERIC ADDAE-
KYEREMEH:** That's fab.

KAREN FOLEY: --anything like that's super impressive.

**ERIC ADDAE-
KYEREMEH:** Great [INAUDIBLE].

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely.

ERIC ADDAE- Yeah.

KYEREMEH:

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. So, we've been talking about the importance of connection with other students. And we have one word cloud about how other students have supported all of us. And you've been filling that in. So let's see what some of the things were that have been particularly supportive for you.

So here, we can see that checking in is one of the key things, but being positive, solving problems, sharing points of view, encouraging, helping each other, giving advice, forums, tips, not feeling alone, obviously doing things by emails and computers and tutorials, listening, reassurance. So motivations-- so there's lots and lots of positive things coming through here.

Amber, learning communities is a topic that you study. How and why are these things so meaningful to people, particularly when they have an end goal that may be quite far away? And as we've been talking about, persistence and keeping going is a really important thing to do if you want to reach that end point.

**AMBER
FENSHAM-
SMITH:**

I think for lots of students, the core is the module materials and the things that they engage with and their relationships with their tutor and their tutor groups. But when we look at theories of learning and what these communities might mean, we could look at communities of practise theory, or networks practise. And this is the idea or the kind of perspective, that this socially situated learning that happens through these communities in terms of the common purpose that they might have-- so you might set up your own group, a little WhatsApp group, for a common purpose of the module. Or you might be part of a club.

Those groups and communities, those interactions that we have with one another in those groups and communities, give us a shared sense of identity and really help us to learn from each other and are really a legitimate and important part of our experiences. We journey through whatever pathway we're taking.

And over time, those patterns of engagement that we have with each other really help to create a sense of belonging, help to give us a sense of mutual recognition, and make us feel part of-- it's something bigger beyond just our own individual tasks or individual pursuit that we might be doing, whether it's OU studies, whether it's learning to bake, any other area. And as we progress through our lives, we have different networks and different communities that are important to us at different stages. And those are all collectively part of our learning.

KAREN FOLEY: And those communities, I guess, have shifted somewhat in terms of the pandemic. You know, people at home were saying that the things that they've been doing are like emails and forums and tutorials. So some of the ways in which we are able to interact with communities has shifted fundamentally.

And I think one of the points that Yasmin wanted to raise as well was she did one of the many courses on OpenLearn that can sort of help upskill you in things like communication, et cetera. But there's one on forums and being confident in forums. And I think that sometimes we perhaps don't give ourselves enough credit for being able to interact in online environments. It is a real skill. It's a really important skill in many, many different aspects. And it's something that OU students are getting so used through these communications.

So, for example, if you perhaps thought I recognise that it's important for me to have community. But perhaps you feel a little bit unconfident. Then that course would be really useful. And I think I'll ask a colleague if they can put the link to that one in the chat as well. So you can take a look at that a little bit later.

Sunita says that "lockdowns made us aware of the importance of the time of independence that we had meeting/greeting our family and friends. And we learned to treasure time together." And I think that's such a valid point as well. You know, time and space have been things that perhaps we've taken so much for granted that now, because they've been realigned, do make us interact in different ways and treasure them in very different ways also.

Let's look, Amber, at what people said in terms of connections. So we asked people what making connections has helped me to do, and this is what people said. So it's helped in feeling supported, which is the key thing which lots of people have put there. But also not being isolated, feeling confident, making friends, feeling included, and feeling part of something, staying sane, being able to ask for help, to combat isolation, step out of comfort zone, doing this through things like Zoom with families, et cetera, and using computers, and also to be able to communicate better and chat in groups. So some different sorts of things that people have been doing here as well.

Audrey says that "WhatsApp has helped to see some loved ones far away that I'm longing to see." And actually, it's funny because I've got so many people I've been having Zoom calls with in Australia who, before, I just wouldn't think about doing. I'd just be texting all the time. But actually, our use of communication has really shifted. And actually, perhaps, we are seeing more of those people who we just sort of hadn't done even though the technology was always there.

But Amber, what are your reflections, then, in terms of what people are saying about the benefits of connecting with others?

**AMBER
FENSHAM-
SMITH:**

So I think there's some really great points in the chat around feeling together, combating isolation, all of those areas. I think it gives us a sense of copresence and making us feel a sense of helping us to provide an important reassurance for challenging circumstances. And I think really empathy and looking for ways in which we can establish friendships based on kind of mutual interests are really, really vital, again, to going back to some of the other challenges that all students have overcome.

Just to go back to your point, Karen, I totally empathise with the family on Zoom. I managed to get my 91-year-old grandfather on Zoom in New Zealand, which was great. I'm sure many students have had similar experiences with their families. So I think, really, when we're thinking about all of these connections, it's really important to find whatever works for you and try different range of approaches and strategies.

But also, I know that one element that Yasmin was keen to emphasise in thinking about building connections is also being an advocate for your own needs and being mindful of the fact that student needs are different, and being open to asking and reaching out to other people, including your tutor and also peers to reach out for support.

And again, going back to thinking about what we were talking about earlier about knowing oneself and thinking about aspects of lockdown life that we might want to take with us, really thinking about taking time every day to think about your own needs and your own circumstances in that is also really, really important for thinking about how to manage those connections. And I know that's something we're going to talk about later.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, absolutely. Zoe's had a lovely thing going on with her family all over the UK. They've been having a monthly family quiz, taking turns to host it, which has been brilliant. And she says it's a lifeline and something to really look forward to. But while we've been sort of having a lot of these positive things and new ways of working, equally, the experience hasn't been the same for everybody.

And Kitty makes a really good point about the discontinuity felt by children, which I really empathise with. She says in her playgroup, the children have needed a lot of additional emotional support. And I think recognising that some of these things can be challenging and do shift, I guess, where our workload and focus is, is one of those things.

Amber, do you want to sort of round up by saying something about perhaps the differences that people have experienced? Because I think no one of us has had the same sort of experience in lockdown. It's been different for so many of us despite many commonalities.

AMBER FENSHAM-SMITH: Sure. So I think one of the greatest impacts that we've seen and the sorts of bigger societal inequalities that have kind of been exaggerated or exacerbated by various lockdowns are only really beginning to be understood. But obviously, connecting and forging those connections with friends and family and all those things is really predicated on internet access.

And, of course, the extent to which, particularly to take Kitty's point around children and the extent to which children have been able to make the most of school-assisted learning at home, for example, has been very, very varied. We've seen huge increases in terms of inequalities around employment and how that's affected food bank use and all sorts of different areas.

So I think the answer is very, very varied. And we shouldn't take for granted some of the underlying things that have allowed some groups to maintain and sustain themselves whilst at the same time being challenging for others. So I think it's extremely varied, and it's important to recognise the fact that depending on the line of work that you're in and all sorts of things will have depended on whether you're even able to work from home and all of those things, you know? So it's important to not lose sight of that and to reflect on those as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Mm, absolutely. Amber, thank you so much. That's been a wonderful session. It's all we've got time for, I'm afraid, now. But we're going to be picking up on this theme in our next story, where we're going to focus on stories from lockdown, et cetera. So do keep the conversations going in the chat. Eric's doing a wonderful job there, as is Korina.

So we're going to play you another video. Grab a cup of tea if you need one. We're going to look at Walton Hall from one of our campus tours. And then we'll be back to talk a little bit more. See you then.

[MUSIC PLAYING]