

Introduction to new FASS short courses

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ROB: And welcome back, everyone, to our fourth session today. So we're going to be looking at four brand new short courses in the arts and humanities curriculum. So I've been joined by Rebecca, James, Marie, and Sean, some of our lead authors on the modules. And they're going to get to introduce you to the new short courses and tell you what's involved if you want to study them.

We also have a question flying across the bottom of the screen. What would excite you about studying film or music in a short course? What would you like to look at? And then we've got two word clouds floating around as well. So think of a new musician or a composer that you want to flash up. So remember, the rules for the word cloud-- you need to have three entries, so three musicians and three filmmakers. And we'll have a look at the ones that you could think of in a few minutes.

So we're going to start off by asking Sean and Becca, who are these short courses designed for? Who did you have in mind when you wrote them? So start with you, Sean.

SEAN WILLIAMS: OK, Rob. So these short courses are written, really, very openly. We're not expecting any previous experience or knowledge or technical skills, like note reading and that kind of thing. So they really are widely accessible to anybody. And what they're really designed for is to give people a taster of some of the ways that we study music at the Open University. And they're really in two broad fields. We're really looking at popular music and music technology.

ROB: Excellent. And Becca, in terms of the film short courses, who have you designed those for? Who are you thinking will take those?

REBECCA HARRISON: Well, again, our short courses in film and media are designed to be accessible to absolutely anyone. So even if you've got no training or background or experience in anything to do with film or the film industry, that's absolutely fine because we will provide you with all of the different tools, all of the different language and analytical skills that you need to be able to take this course. So really, it's for absolutely anyone with an interest in film.

But we also imagine that on the new course that I've been working on, Film and the Environment, it might appeal to people who are teaching these kinds of topics or who are in the industry and want to learn a bit more about sustainability. But yeah, really, it's very, very open.

ROB: Brilliant. So we're going to go through each of the four courses in order. So we're going to start off with Sean. And Sean, we'd like you to tell us about the course you've been involved in. And also, could you explain what we mean by short course? What is a short course? And why is it different to a long course, apart from the obvious?

SEAN WILLIAMS: Well, as you've alluded, the clue is in the title there. A short course lasts for six weeks, whereas a normal Open University module might be about 30 weeks. So it's quite condensed. But at the same time, the study time per week is about half that, that you would typically experience studying a normal OU module.

So my short course that I've written is called Sound System Culture. It's broadly dealing with popular music. It looks at the history of amplified sounds. So we go back to things like the megaphone and then look at loudspeaker technology and how that evolved.

We use quite a few case studies. So we have one whole week we look at Jamaican sound systems, and more or less in the '50s, '60s, '70s, and the kinds of music that evolved as part of the sound system scene in Jamaica. Then we look at rock music sound systems and, again, how sound systems evolved in the '60s and '70s, from gear that bands would bring along themselves to this sort of equipment that you could do a whole stadium gig with.

And then we have other aspects. We look at the visual elements, the visual aspects. We look at sound systems across the UK, particularly in Huddersfield, of all places, which is a fascinating source. It's easy to dwell on London, being the capital, but there's so many more interesting things that happen across the whole nation.

And then we look at the politics of sound systems. And we end up with looking at ecology and sustainability and the Big Green Gathering and, particularly, the rinky-dink sound system, which is all pedal power, solar power. We're trying to look forward to what might evolve.

ROB: So these short courses really let you focus in on some really specific elements. And you can really look at things that perhaps you wouldn't normally find in some of the longer courses. You really get down to some detail. It's fantastic.

SEAN WILLIAMS: I think, just to come back there, that we do a lot of detail in our longer courses. But the short courses allow us to really focus in on a topic to a great level of detail, at the same time as giving-- there's a lot of depth. But we do allow the courses to demonstrate some of the different kinds of ways that you might study music if you were to come and take a degree. But also, you can use it to add on extra knowledge if you're already taking a module or the music BA here.

ROB: Fantastic. We're going to move on to Marie. So Marie, tell us what your short course is around. And is this what I think it is, one of my favourite singers?

MARIE THOMPSON: Yes, hi there, Rob. So I have written a short course on Dolly Parton. So I should probably start by saying that some people might be quite surprised to see an entire course dedicated to Dolly Parton. She's not the first name that probably springs to mind when you think about studying music at a university. But she's definitely an artist that's worthy of scholarly attention.

She's been incredibly successful, not just as a music performer, but as a songwriter, an actor, and a businesswoman. She's got a career that spans decades. And she's made hundreds of recordings. And she's incredibly popular around the world, having cultivated quite a diverse fan base.

She's also a contradictory figure. So for example, she's one of the wealthiest women in country music. And yet she still strongly identifies with poor rural communities in the US. She repeatedly jokes about her own fakeness but is loved by fans for her realness. And all of this means that there's a lot that we can learn from Dolly Parton about music and its relationship to identity and culture. And this is what the short course explores.

So over the six weeks-- you've just heard from Sean that the short course is six weeks-- we examine Parton's complicated artistic identity and persona, her musical relationship with the US South, her appeal to different audiences, how her songwriting, her music making, and her marketing tells us about that appeal to different audiences, how her songs explore different ideas about gender and sexuality, work, and leisure, sometimes in ways that really conform to common tropes in country music but are sometimes quite subversive as well.

And we also consider how other artists have used her music. And because we're interested in how Dolly Parton fits into a wider musical and cultural context, you'll also learn about things like the history of

country music, music's relationship to the leisure industry and tourism, and also the ways that music genres have been defined in relation to race. And I should probably say we also do talk quite a lot about "Jolene." We couldn't not.

[LAUGHTER]

ROB: Oh, absolutely fantastic. As somebody whose dad was an avid country music fan, I've been brought up with Dolly Parton. So it's fascinating. And Alexander wants to know, when it comes to studying the module, do you have to do it nine to five?

[LAUGHTER]

MARIE THOMPSON: Well--

ROB: Thank you, Marie.

MARIE THOMPSON: No.

ROB: So Alexander's taking on the challenge to make the host giggle. So HJ, any other comments that we've got from the chat box?

HJ: Yeah, so we asked earlier what excited people about studying film or music. And we got some great answers. So Joanna says, stories, meaning, and symbolism in film really excites her, and emotional meaning in music as well. And Francesca's interested in how opportunities are being presented in ways to get women into directing films and addressing imbalance between male and female directors. I've heard a bit about that in the news recently, actually. So it's very on point as well.

And Nikki says, film-- especially how in sci-fi and fantasy, films explore social and political issues in a safe space. I suppose we've got a lot of symbolism and reflection of current society in the films that are being made as well. So really interesting contributions there.

ROB: So while we've got you on the screen, can we have a quick look at the word cloud, see what people have been saying about the filmmakers and the music makers?

HJ: So when it comes to the filmmakers, we've been thinking Alfred Hitchcock, Spielberg, Werner Herzog, Ridley Scott, Grayson Perry, Steven Spielberg again. With artists, we're thinking Van Gogh, Picasso. We also think, with films, a lot of documentarians might be involved. Some reckons we might cover some Ryan Reynolds as well. That would be very interesting. Damien Hirst, Michael Bay-- lots of explosions. So lots of interesting thoughts on that one. Have a little look at our wordle on what we'd normally expect from music courses as well.

ROB: OK.

HJ: So in terms of what we'd normally expect on a music course, we're thinking the Mason family, the Beatles, Bach, Bob Marley, Benjamin Britten, Scott Walker, Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler, Chopin, Schubert, Debbie Wiseman, and maybe some Kate Bush as well. So lots of traditional and some different ideas as well.

But I don't think we were expecting Dolly Parton at all. And actually, I'm really excited to hear about it. Natasha says, Dolly Parton is fabulous, also, as a role model for nerdy women who are not so much into motherhood. And Francesca says, Dolly Parton is an absolute trailblazer. Loved her in Steel Magnolias.

ROB: Brilliant. Thank you, HJ. We're going to come to James in a moment. And James is going to talk to us about computer audio. So a short course on computer audio, James-- what's involved in that?

JAMES DOOLEY: Hi, Rob. Yeah, so the computer audio course actually traverses quite a large area, really, focusing very much on how computers really have transformed the way in which sound is used and exists within our lives today.

So it starts, really, with a history of computer audio, beginning with some of the enormous and hugely expensive early computers, moving through to the first wave of personal computers, such as ZX Spectrum, then arriving at more contemporary examples, like laptop computers, mobile phones, and all along the way, so examining the many different ways in which human beings have used these kinds of technologies to make sound and music.

So some of the things that we cover include a variety of musical examples and, in particular, thinking about how, around the world, computer audio has changed the way in which people make music, the way people distribute music, consume and listen to music and, actually, the impact that that's then have on musical practise and the types of music that people make.

One of the key things with early computer audio that we talk about is the way in which some of the early pioneers had to programme computers. So one of the things that we wanted to try and do is give our learners that experience of what it's like to programme sound.

So as part of the short course, there are some activities that allow learners to explore programming music using a very basic kind of audio programming language and just get that experience of what it is like to create sound with a computer and, actually, how difficult it can be, but also how fun and interesting it can be as well. So we do cover a diverse range of musical genres that feature throughout the whole of the course, just really demonstrating the far-reaching impact that computers have had on music.

ROB: Absolutely. And I don't know about anybody else, but as you were talking about consuming music, I can't remember the last time I didn't use computer technology for listening to music. It's really changed from-- showing my age here-- when I used to wind up my record player, way in the past.

So thank you for that, James. Becca, you're going to talk to us about Film and the Environment. So what's involved in studying Film and the Environment?

REBECCA HARRISON: Well, this course takes two different things that you will probably be familiar with from your everyday life-- so first of all, film. I mean, most people are going to have been to the cinema or watch film on Netflix or other streaming services. You'll be familiar with the entertainment industry in some capacity or another.

And then, also, discussions about the environment, which are looming large in the press and in the news. Some of you might have been on climate marches, dealing with the really urgent issues of climate change and pollution. Obviously, they're so big. I'm not proposing I have all the answers to how we solve those. But one of the things that interests me and, I think, might be surprising is how these two different topics actually fit together. So what Film and the Environment does is it introduces two different ways of thinking about film and its connections to the natural world. So a lot of the information and the ideas that we have about places around the globe and also beyond the globe, looking into space as well-- they come from film.

So half of the course we spend thinking about, well, how does film ask us to feel about those spaces? How does it set them up? How can we read film to better understand what it's telling us about different environments, whether they are remote and in Antarctica, or whether they are urban spaces, and it's like walking outside on the street.

And then the other part of the course starts to ask questions about how the film industry relies on natural resources. So actually, how is film implicated in even causing climate change? So there's quite a lot of conversation to be had about its reliance on fossil fuels, for example, in making items like DVDs or film cameras. So there's a lot to unpick with that.

But what the course also aims to do is end on a more hopeful and optimistic note. So we also think about what the film industry is doing to try to rise to some of these challenges. So we'll be looking at different strategies to be more sustainable, different ways that the film industry is trying to go green.

So yeah, there's something for everyone in this. We cover all different kinds of films, different filmmakers from around the world, from blockbusters like Star Wars through to Senegalese indie films like Atlantique. So yeah, hopefully there's something of interest for everyone in here.

ROB: Oh, fascinating. And I was watching-- I think it was Springwatch this week, where they were talking about using hydrogen-powered equipment, where the hydrogen is generated by solar power, as an attempt to move away from using fossil fuels in filmmaking. So hopefully that's the sort of thing that people can get involved and talk about.

REBECCA HARRISON: Yep, that is exactly the kind of thing we like to hear.

ROB: Excellent. I love it when technology works, and it can move things forward. So thank you. So we've talked about the four new short courses that are coming forward. What sort of skills do you think learners will develop? And how are they able to combine them together in any way? So I've got Marie and Becca. If you'd like to talk to us about the types of skills that students could expect to develop over there, studying the four short courses. Don't know who wants to go first.

MARIE THOMPSON: I'm happy to talk about the music courses. So as you've probably heard from us talking about each course individually, there are some specific skills that you might expect to develop in relation to each course. So for example, with computer audio, you might get a taster at audio programming. But taken together, all three of the music courses encourage learners to consider different types of music from a variety of critical and analytic perspectives.

And as a result, you can expect to develop your critical reading and writing skills, but also your critical listening skills. And what I mean by critical listening is that you will be expected to listen in a focused way and listen out for particular elements or events and how they're being used in music. And it can also involve connecting up what can be heard in music to wider trends in culture, technology, and music. So while these short courses are focused on specific topics, these kinds of skills are really useful for studying a wide range of musical practises and are applicable to a wide range of musical practises. You can also expect to develop your independent learning and study skills, but amongst a community of learners. So yeah, those are some of the things you can expect to develop as part of the music short courses.

ROB: [INAUDIBLE]. I wouldn't be expected to sing if I joined your Dolly Parton course, though, would I? That would really put people off.

MARIE THOMPSON: No, singing is optional.

ROB: And Becca, can you tell me how often the courses are going to be run? Is it once a year? Or are they run more frequently, with them being short courses?

REBECCA HARRISON: So my understanding-- someone else actually might be better placed to answer this than me-- but my understanding is that they will run three times a year. Just to say quickly, with the

film courses, in terms of skills, quite similar, actually, to the music courses. In that there's lots of critical thinking and space for you to develop critical skills specific to film.

So I would add, as well, that there's a lot of inbuilt accessibility here. So if you don't think that you'll be engaging with something by watching it or listening to it, we have transcripts. And there's lots of different ways for you to engage with the material that we have.

ROB: Oh, fantastic. I'm going to jump back to HJ, just in case we've got any questions, any burning questions from the chat box or anybody trying to make me laugh again.

HJ: There's no burning questions. But a lot of people are very interested in these courses. And a lot of us didn't know about them, as well. So this is amazing. Now that we're finishing up our exams and EMAs and waiting for our big modules to start, there's a lot for us to sink our teeth into in the meantime.

But yeah, it's very interesting to hear, especially about the film, about sustainability. And we're wondering what happens to all the props after and all the materials they use-- so yeah, answering all our questions in these modules. And I'm sure we'll find a lot when we sign up.

ROB: Oh, I'm totally on board with what to do when your module finishes. I'm sure many of you out there are like me-- you're an OU junkie. Once you finish studying, you say, never again. And then it doesn't take many months--

HJ: Lots of those in the chat.

ROB: --before you start flipping through.

HJ: First, we discovered OpenLearn. Now we're hearing about these short courses. We're going to be kept very busy, aren't we?

ROB: Absolutely. So I'd just like to say thank you to everybody today. So it's been great to have you with us. And it's great to get the authors of the modules to come and talk to us and tell us what you found interesting about writing the courses. And I'm sure everybody agrees the passion that you've got for them, for the courses, is definitely coming through.

My only problem is there's four, now, that I want to do. And I can't do them all at once. So I'll be picking them in order. But Marie, definitely, Dolly Parton is the first one on my list, I think. So thank you for that. And thank you for everyone who's been taking part in the chat box. Hopefully, we got all of your questions answered. Hopefully, you got the information that you needed as you went through. Remember that these recordings will be available on YouTube in a short while, and you'll be able to revisit and get any information that you might have missed.

We do have another session next week. I'm coming back to talk with my home faculty, business and law. And we're going to be talking about employability that comes through business and law modules. So thank you, everyone. And Rob from the Study Shack is saying goodbye, and we'll see you next week. Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]