

Research-led teaching in SSGS – 15 June 2021

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. In this session, we are going to focus on research-led teaching in the School of Social Sciences and Global Studies. I'm joined by Derek Matravers, who is professor of philosophy and chairs the Philosophy MA, and has a full-time Open University staff as part of its teaching. And at the moment, Derek is researching what we should do with cultural heritage, so more on that later.

Suzanne Newcombe I'm also joined by, who is a senior lecturer in religious studies. She researches contemporary religion using a social scientific and social historical method. And much of Suzanne's research has been on religious beliefs and practices in Indian and Buddhist origin in Britain and also in modern India. So welcome, today.

We're going to start by thinking about this notion of how we encourage students to think like researchers. So I wonder if we can talk about different sorts of experiences that they may bring and that they're going to focus on as they begin to shift in their development.

DEREK MATRAVERS: OK. I think with this one, it's a characteristic difference, really, between, sort of, learning at places prior to university and learning at university, in that at - when you're at university, there's not really all that much difference between - oh, I think that's an exaggeration. There are - there's an overlap between teaching and research, so if you - sorry, between learning and research. So, particularly in the subjects that Suzanne and I come from, if you're, if you're learning, then you're thinking, you're thinking through issues, you're trying to come up with your own views of issues, which is pretty much exactly what people like Suzanne and I are paid to do for at least part of our jobs, so - so I think that it's characteristic of higher education that there's the distinction between learning and research just, kind of, starts to break down.

KAREN FOLEY: And then - so there are these different skills that people are bringing. But then what does research-led teaching have to do with that notion of students beginning to think differently?

DEREK MATRAVERS: Well, I think there are two things, really. I mean, the one is that for people like, like Suzanne and myself, we - part of what we're supposed to do is to go out into the world, talk to other people, work out the, sort of, cutting edge answers to things, make sure that we're pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge. People will sometimes say pushing back the boundaries of knowledge [INAUDIBLE]. So we're pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge, and we can then take those results and actually incorporate them into the courses that we provide for students. So that's one thing, and one very important thing, because that means that students, then are getting the most recent, the cutting edge, kind of stuff in the topic.

But the second thing is that if you're a researcher yourself, then you kind of - you know what you're doing because you're doing it all the time. And part of your teaching, then, sort of becomes part of your research. I think if we weren't - it's a bit like - I suppose if you were at a university and you were taught entirely by people who didn't do research then it would be a bit like being at a cookery school and being taught entirely by people who didn't cook. I mean, that's

just - it might work for a bit, but it's just not going to work in the long time because you're not going to get the kind of skills at the kind of level that you deserve.

KAREN FOLEY: So it's important that when you're learning, people from, you know - students have experience from people who are engaged in the real world, doing real things with real projects. Suzanne, I wonder if you can, sort of, talk about from a religious studies concept how those might sort of happen. Can you give us any examples of things that are in your materials?

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: I really like that cooking metaphor because I think there's a lot about research that's really, really similar to cooking, like you have a textbook, like your cookbook, and it kind of says what to do. But the difference between being a good cook and being a researcher, which is what we're trying to teach you at university level, is knowing that, like, if you add a bit more of this spice, it might actually make everything much more delicious. Or you can substitute yoghurt and milk for buttermilk if you don't have buttermilk in your fridge.

And so this is something that really came concretely into my research on longevity, recipes and practices in modern India, and how those relate to yoga. So one of the things I was doing with my colleagues who study Sanskrit texts is we're looking at how these ancient recipes are recreated. And we went to try to recreate some of these Sanskrit recipes and the people who do them. And so, like, from that project, I have this little mortar and a pestle. And I've got a string of pearls here.

And so one of the kind of rejuvenative recipes is you grind up the pearls with a bit of rosewater. And the whole process takes hours, and it's very meditative. And there's a whole, kind of, really felt sense as to - you're transforming your own mind, and that's going into the medicine. So it's about a lot more than just like, the list of ingredients that you might get on the bottle of your pill. And the people who are interested in the system are also experiencing a lot more, buying into a lot more, than what's on the tin or what the ingredients are on the cookbook list.

KAREN FOLEY: So I guess what you're saying is that, you know, in terms of religious studies, it's not really that, you know, is God really there question that you're concerned about, it's what is the meaning of this, of this behaviour that people are doing, these practices, and how do those practices then become embedded within the culture.

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: Absolutely. We're really interested in religion as lived and non-religion as lived. And for, this you need to really interrogate your own self as a researcher, what are your reactions to this material, and also what's the empirical evidence. What, what can you find when you talk to people, when you see people? What are they interacting with? How are they affected by the real world? And how do they affect the real world?

KAREN FOLEY: So things aren't always as they seem. Now, we asked people at home what are some of the stereotypes of religious studies or philosophy academics. You two are probably not who we expected to meet at all. But let's see what they had to say. So they said they're the people who ask questions, which is the key thing there. But also, it's about provoking thought.

Oh, philosophers and pipes - Derek, I don't think you have your pipe today. In fact, Derek's been involved in a philosophy boxing match, more like, with us at Student Hub Live in the past. Old

men - very interesting. Waste of money, over-opinionated - so some key stereotypes here, which, I suspect you're not too amazed with. So Suzanne has said, Derek, that, you know, religious studies is not about just asking whether God is there. I mean, philosophy always just spins my mind with some of the questions that you guys are interested in. But what might you add to that in terms of some of your key concerns then?

DEREK MATRAVERS: I mean, one stereotype of philosophy - one stereotype that people have of philosophy - is that we, we're - the world could do without us. We're a kind of fifth wheel. And, I mean it's true that philosophers - there's plenty of work within philosophy that we can, that we can, we can get done. But actually, philosophy is central. One of, one of the key concerns in philosophy is what ought people to do, I mean not so much about what they do do, but what they should do.

And the question of what people should do is pretty much all over the world. And so a lot of, a lot of philosophical research that we do - that it goes out and just looks at various bits of life and bits of the world, and says, well, what should be done here? So for any - you know, you can just think about anything: sport, science, art. There's a philosophy of sport. There's philosophy of science, philosophy of art.

And one of my colleagues, Jon Pike, who works in the philosophy of sport, and his research is mainly trying to work out how to balance fairness, safety, all the various different values that you might - that might enter into sport, how to balance them all against each other, however, at the same time, resulting in exciting, exciting games of sport. So I think, I think philosophy - there's this kind of, endless amounts of philosophy research that you can do.

KAREN FOLEY: And what's interesting is that you're both coming at this from very different perspectives. And one thing that we've learned today is that, you know, while some of our disciplined areas are quite distinct, they also feed into each other. I mean, one of the things that I know, Derek, you're very concerned with is about, you know, thinking critically, logically, and carefully in line with, you know, the philosophical traditions.

Whereas, Suzanne, for you, it's very much about this lived experience. And so, you know, you might meet Derek's research by saying, well, actually there are other areas that are important aspects of consideration. And this, you know, community of researchers, I think, makes the OU such a thriving place in terms of, you know, being located within a school where we can share information and support for each other.

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: Absolutely. And I think philosophy and religious studies are almost like two sides of the same coin sometimes because we do need the critical, analytical thinking skills that philosophy is really good at teaching. But as a social science, more sociology-based religious studies department, we're looking not at so much as what people should do, but what they actually do once they say they should do this and why. So we're, kind of, looking at the messiness of people. And we also need the clarity that philosophy provides.

KAREN FOLEY: And one of the things that many of our students who are at Level 1 today, here, may meet is this sort of merging of things together. In A111, religious studies and

philosophy are sort of dealt with together as a partnership. Derek, I think it was one of your colleagues, Carolyn Price, who did some interesting work around that. Can you fill us in?

DEREK MATRAVERS: Well, Carolyn wrote about compassion and says - I mean, she was an expert on the emotions. Well, she is an expert on the emotions, wrote about various emotions, guilt, compassion, and the like. But there's no - it would just be daft to sit in your room and say, OK, I'm going to start from scratch and, you know, think about these emotions from the ground up. So there's a very long tradition of thinking of these things in Buddhist thought.

So it makes complete sense - or made complete sense - for Carolyn to go and read what had been done in the Buddhist tradition of thought, just in order to learn what - you know, learn a load of sensible things about the emotions that she studied. So I think, I mean, philosophy - you're going to make life extraordinarily hard for yourself if you try and start everything from scratch. So you have to learn from what other people have said. And that means researching what they have said.

And it's also the case that you'll, you'll make life hard for yourself if you try and tackle the subjects by yourself. And most of topics that we deal with now are so complicated and so vast that you really are going to need help from people who are experts in other branches of the area that you're studying, as well as yourself. I'm just coming off a big project, researching - which was at least in part, and main part, actually - on the philosophy of war, which was not a topic I knew much about. But fortunately, I could find people who were, you know, had spent their lives studying the philosophy of war. So then you look at my research, you look at their research, you put them together and you hope to come up with something that neither of us could do on our own.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, you've both made the point that, you know, being active researchers really benefit students. And I wonder if we could, sort of, develop that in terms of thinking about how that sort of translate into the tuition that our students receive as well. Suzanne, I wonder if you could, sort of, talk about some of the module materials and the work that some of you and your colleagues have done in terms of bringing your research to life and being able to add new insights that people may not have been able to get from other sources.

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: Well, part of being an active researcher is joining in the academic discussion, which, like Derek was saying, is you don't want to start from scratch. You want to start from building on the shoulders of everyone who's gone before you. And a really interesting thing about religious studies is how - what religion is, is changes in different contexts.

So, one of my colleagues, Graham Harvey, has done decades of research amongst Indigenous peoples and how those - how the categories they think with, how their way of being in the world really challenges our ideas about what religion is and how we divide up these categories of this is religion, this is superstition, this is something not worth considering, or this is philosophy. And, in fact, the work on Buddhism and compassion also, kind of, brings up questions of where do you draw the line between philosophy and religion. And that's one of the things that's really part of being a researcher on the social sciences, is what are the concepts we're working with and why.

KAREN FOLEY: Derek, what about philosophy? You, know, you sort of made this point that, you know, we want people to be able to experience some things. It's not just about following like, the instructions of a recipe, et cetera. So can you talk a little bit through about how some of you and your colleagues have used your own insights to, again, provide something unique?

DEREK MATRAVERS: Yeah. My favourite example of this is a block on the Philosophy MA which was done by my colleague Sophie-Grace Chappell. And Sophie-Grace, unlike me speaks - is fluent in ancient Greek, and she was writing about the Platonic text, *Meno*. And the first thing she did - and apparently this is not unusual amongst people studying ancient philosophy, well she did her own translation of the *Meno*. So that meant she had gone through every single word of the Greek text and thought about what the English equivalent could be, thought about how the ideas came, blah, blah, blah, blah.

So when she came to write the module material, she had actually thought through every single thing in the *Meno*, from syllables up. And so that what the - and then she was able to bring in the work that other people had done on the *Meno*, so you obviously look at the secondary literature, talk to other experts on the *Meno*.

But having done all this groundwork, she was able to come with her own ideas of what the *Meno* was about, very, very aware of how it fitted together, where the tensions were. And that just made the module material an awful lot more exciting and an awful lot more insightful than it would have been had, for example, I'd done it, as I just don't have the skills to pull together a translation of the *Meno* out of my back pocket.

KAREN FOLEY: And what's so wonderful about the experience for OU students is that they get to meet through lectures and forums the people who are involved with many of these things. So, you know, even coming and meeting you here today at Student Hub Live, students can begin to experience an interaction with the team, which is really, really fantastic.

We're nearly out of time, so I just wondered if we could look at the areas in which these go into employment and other sort of, I guess, out of school contexts. So how does research-led teaching, then, help students then with things like employment or their roles outside of their study? I wonder if both of you could give a quick point on that. Suzanne, I wonder if you might want to go first.

SUZANNE NEWCOMBE: I really liked the big 'asking questions' in that word cloud you gave to begin with because I think a lot of what you learn as an OU student and as a researcher is how to ask the right questions and how to look for evidence that might be supportive of your answer. So one of, one of the brilliant things about teaching mature students is they have so much life experience that they can draw on. And part of what we're trying to teach you is how to, how to use your, your own experience as a researcher.

And that's exactly what you need to do in any employment context. Particularly, anything to do with people is how to look at what's in front of you. What is the evidence? What are the questions asking? What are the concepts you're using? Are these the right questions? Are these

the right concepts? And how does that relate between the personal and the kind of more evidence-based collective evidence you can find.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. And Derek, what about philosophy then? How might that sort of help with some of these big challenges like identity roles outside of studying and employment?

DEREK MATRAVERS: Well, philosophy - well, actually, two things. Can I just start - just quick preface - by saying that although it might - you say, and I'm sure you're right, that it's exciting for the students to meet us academics. Since the decline of summer school, we've had to, kind of, wait for the advent of technology in order for people like Suzanne and myself and my colleagues to meet the students, which we're doing increasingly more of. And that's as Suzanne was just saying, is extremely good for us, very challenging and so on and so forth.

I think that - one of the great things about philosophy and, indeed, about pretty much all the academic subjects that you meet in school is that researching it means working stuff through yourself, having to clarify your ideas, having to sort them out in a kind of defensible way, and then having to be able to put forward the case in which you'll be able to state your views. And those are just, really, the key transferable skills not only for employment, but also for just having a good quality of life - make you more articulate, more clear in your thinking, more able to spot - to use a philosophical term - bullsh*t, and just generally, sort of, hone in on the things that you need to hone in on.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. Well, we asked people at home what they thought people who were working in an academic context spent their days doing. They said things like thinking and writing, other things like research, teaching, asking questions - and the word I particularly like here - pontificating, which I think, Derek, you might want to take claim for. Damon, quick trip to you. How is everyone at home?

DAMON MILLER: Yeah. That's a really interesting session, really interesting session. So, yeah, I mean, Peter's highlighted that philosophy's useful for studying all subjects, and religious studies stretches the imagination across some very different cultures. So, yeah, that understanding that the two subjects are more than what they seem to be, I think, is something that everyone's really taken hold of here, so, yeah, really, really interesting session, really good.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, thank you very much, Derek and Suzanne. That's been absolutely fantastic. We're out of time, I'm afraid. We're going to have a quick video break where we're going to look at what are the alternatives to prison and the cost of youth violence because our last session today is going to focus on careers in criminology. So stay tuned, and we'll see you in just a few minutes after these ads.

[MUSIC PLAYING].