The Story of a Module: How we teach at the Open University.

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As a central academic authoring courses at the OU, it occurred to me that our students may find an insight into how we work on the courses that they study both interesting and empowering.

Let me tell you the story of a module, and as I do, let me take you on a journey into the world of an academic at the OU. I hope that in doing so, I can show you that the possibilities for you, as an OU student, are vast. I have a lot of responsibilities as a central academic, but the one that overshadows everything is the responsibility I bear for helping every student understand and realise the potential they have inside. I know a lot more about this than many may realise. In fact, the story of this module, in a way, starts two decades ago when I decided to requalify via an OU degree myself. It changed the trajectory of my life and enabled me to fully explore my potential in a way that the standard education system didn’t, primed as it is to force young people to make educational choices and to fit into specific subject boxes at an age where many haven’t even begun to explore and understand who they are. I understand what it’s like to study an OU degree, around full-time work, when bumps in the road and failures to succeed have real impact and consequences for you as a student. I have been that student who used every available moment to cram OU material. I know what it’s like to be writing a TMA after midnight the day of the deadline, once the house is quiet, dinner is served and the family have gone to bed. I understand the dedication that is needed to push through, the friendships that are put on hold as your weekends become all about the study. I have also sat there at 2am, trying to get to grips with a complex concept, with just the cats for company and a large mug of coffee. I was fortunate to find the OU, an institution predicated on the principle of open access and staffed by academics, both central lecturers and the more diffuse network of associate lecturers, who are driven by the principle of giving students opportunities to succeed rather than opportunities to fail. That degree changed my life in many ways.

I studied an undergraduate degree in Natural Sciences. The module whose story I would like to tell is S111, the entry level module for the OU Natural Sciences pathway. The module I studied all those years ago when I was first stepping onto the academic path, was a distant predecessor, S103. This will probably age me – courses, like children, grow up fast and before you know they’re stepping out in the world on their own and you have more grey hairs than you started with. I worked while I studied and became very good at understanding how to present the transferable skills I learnt at the OU and the science skills and knowledge I was developing to employers to convince them that I was a good risk to hire for science jobs for which, on paper, others seemed more qualified. Nowadays, the buzz-word for that is ‘employability’ and I embed that in my teaching to help this generation of students understand how they can present what they learn to employers to get the jobs they need and want.

Here’s the montage scene. With ups and down, I progressed professionally and progressed academically and my Natural Sciences degree led to a scientific PhD, a post-doctoral position and eventually an academic post at the OU as a lecturer in the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences. Along the way, I have been involved in teaching and education at all levels. I have taught
in schools and to adult learners face-to-face, as a scientist and before that, teaching English (the discipline I transferred from thanks to my OU degree). I have a long pedigree in scientific outreach at school level, working alongside teachers to help develop scientific knowledge and skills in the children they work with. I am a Trustee of a local Academy Trust and work intensively at the level of school education to ensure our school develops and thrives in an extremely difficult educational funding landscape. I know education from base level through to higher level – we can only fully understand how to teach our students if we have a solid understanding of what our students have come from.

S111 Questions in Science is a fantastic module that I have worked on the production of and that I support through presentation. Maybe some of our fantastic students will happen upon this article – if you do, I would like to tell you that it’s the students we work with and for that make it such a rewarding and important module. Students are the module. We, as academics, focus a lot of energy on trying to make sure that you are inspired and are given the opportunity to shine, hopefully in places where it might surprise you that you can. I measure my success as an educator by your success as a student – and that doesn’t mean simply getting high grades. My greatest successes are the times when I have helped a student realise that they can learn something that they find difficult, and most importantly where I have designed and delivered the teaching that enable them to do that. I am writing this today because I want all of you, as students, to see that barriers you perceive to be in place, in reality aren’t there. I was a student once. I was just like you. Higher study and learning is not something ‘other people’ do. You can all achieve great things and we, as a university, are incredibly experienced in teaching you how to do that.

So, what happens when a module is born? Is it really just ‘writing’? I’m guessing that the majority of people reading this, experienced in education through teaching or through learning, don’t really believe that. When this particular module was born (and I work on a number of different modules, each one with a different story, each one an individual like the students studying it), so much pedagogic work and educational work happened before a word was even committed to the page. Before we write, we consider what our students need to know and what our students need to understand how to do. We consider this not just in the context of a module, but in the context of a pathway (and really, many pathways because we are aware of the multitude of possibilities a module at level 1 opens up for our students, all of which we need to prepare them for). We consider the immense spectrum of skills a student may have. We consider groups of students that may be particularly vulnerable, due to a multitude of factors from accessibility to prior educational level … the list is long. We decide on an educational strategy to ensure that we are teaching in a way that stretches the students that need it but supports the students that need us to teach them skills and concepts that, for many reasons, they are coming to us without. The OU doesn’t pre-screen students. We, as educators on a module team, take the responsibility of ensuring that no-one slips through the cracks of our teaching extremely seriously.

Then we write. Although, we don’t ‘write’ as such. We take the scientific concepts that we need you to understand and we unpack them to their component parts. Then we guide our students through teaching material that is designed to help them to rebuild these concepts themselves, all the time learning not just the concept but the skills that they will use throughout their academic and
professional careers. It’s hard to do. I’ve taught face-to-face. This is harder. You, as students, have amazing associate lecturers as tutors. They don’t simply spring out of the woodwork when a module is fully formed. Module teams work closely with associate lecturers and with staff tutors in the regions and nations during production of a module to ensure that we are giving you the highest standard of teaching we can. This doesn’t stop when the module goes ‘live’. Teaching isn’t just about words – we also take scientific concepts and activities and break them down and translate them to digital activities to give all students the opportunity to achieve learning outcomes based on scientific experimentation and scientific activity. We do that in partnership with fantastic software developers who take our teaching designs and work crazy programming magic to deliver an immense amount of teaching in an innovative and interactive way that transcends words. We invite criticism because teachers understand that they never stop learning, and we approach this as academics with an openness to constructive dialogue about whether our teaching is achieving its goal. Which is lucky, because once we’ve started putting the module together, we hand our work to the editors. This is the academic version of TMA feedback.

Once the module goes live, the teaching doesn’t stop. We have immense module populations in relation to a brick university so we have a diverse network of amazing associate lecturers that tutor the students. As central academics, we are constantly in dialogue with them regarding responsive adaptations to teaching and individual student needs. We both support and learn from the associate lecturers’ experience with their tutor groups. In the first of presentation of S111, I monitored nearly 140 student scripts on a TMA I wrote to gain direct feedback on how well my teaching materials were functioning to ensure my students were succeeding.

Research from brick universities with a similar demographic to the OU indicated that students highly valued informal communities of practice that develop around social hubs and credited them as a factor in the success of their study. We know that studying a distance degree can feel isolating. We understand that teaching doesn’t stop when the lecture ends. Students have amazing tutor groups. As central academics, we try to supplement that by building a wider community for our students to embrace. On our module, we use Twitter to enhance and broaden students’ experience of science ... and to have a bit of fun! The best teachers understand that to be effective, teaching also needs to have an element of fun. We are also trying to broaden our Level 1 students’ horizons by involving them in live labcasts, where we get to teach and extend from the labs at the university directly to the students.

This isn’t an exhaustive list. We do so much more and in so many ways. I haven’t even touched on the direct student teaching we do via tutorials, specialist forums and other module-specific opportunities. What I really wanted to do in telling you some of the story of this module, is to reach as many students as I can and show you that the Open University has some of the best teachers in the world working on its modules, both centrally and in a more dispersed network of nationwide lecturers. All of us are driven by the great desire to see you succeed, whatever your personal definition of that is. We are all invested in individual students’ successes. While our module populations are large, we see each of you as an individual not a number or percentage point. We take every opportunity to build your confidence in yourself as a learner and show you where that
confidence will take you. We underpin this with a vast foundation of teaching knowledge and experience. We give you the tools to grow and develop. For us, teaching is like breathing.