

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. Well, we're now going to take a little bit of a different look at how people have been sharing stories of lockdown. We've all been talking about the different experiences that we've had and thinking about some of the things that we'd like to take forward and reflecting on how we can support our own health and well-being with some of these substantial changes that have happened to us. But in our session now, we're going to look at *A Multilingual Decameron*.

So I'm joined by Emilia and Ola. So we're going to talk about a specific project that Emilia has been involved with. Welcome both, and, Emilia I wonder if you might just be able to briefly tell us a little bit about this project and the thinking that came behind it.

EMILIA WILTON- Sure. Hello. Thank you for having me. Yes. I was just brandishing a copy of the book, which we're all very proud **GODBERFFORDE:**of here. Basically, this was a collection of stories that the students put together. It was an idea that a group of us had. Anna Comis-Quin, Maria Fernandes-Toro, Vena Adinolfi, Caroline Tagg, and myself, invited students to submit stories about lockdown, and I can share a little bit more about why we chose the title *A Multilingual Decameron*. But basically, it was a creative writing project and a multilingual one.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. We've been having people doing multilingual versions in the chat, we'll come back with a little bit about that, but what were some of the stories about? What were people choosing to write about?

EMILIA WILTON- Yeah. Well, maybe before I answer that, I'll just go a bit to the history of the Decameron, if you like, and what **GODBERFFORDE:**we used as our inspiration. So really, in the 14th century, there was a writer called Giovanni Boccaccio, Italian, who wrote this story called *The Decameron* which was about a group of people struck by the plague, in Italy, in Florence, and they fled to the hillside. And these seven women and three men decided to set up a game, where they would tell each other stories. And every day, they elected a king or a queen, and that person would then tell the story of the day, and they had a theme for each day.

And obviously, when COVID broke out, the story of the Decameron, the central driving force was the plague, became current in people's imagination, as did Camus', a different period-- Albert Camus' story called *La Peste*, *The Plague*. So there were these two books that were really became bestsellers again across the world, and we chose to use this inspiration of the Decameron but make a collection that was a multilingual Decameron. So what did we keep from the original? We kept this 10-day structure. So Decameron is from the Greek meaning deca, 10, and emeron means day. So we had 10 days, and across each day, the students had different stories, and this was a huge range of stories.

There was the erotic dimension which features in the original, so lovers, proposals, love triangles. There was heartbreak and sadness. There were family stories. There were stories about disease and plague, and there were more mundane things, like the neighbour playing the piano or your daily routine in lockdown.

And there's also this extraordinary dimension which is really exciting, this magical aspect of the stories, which is where like a butterfly that someone painted became a real butterfly. Or someone sneezed on a bus, and suddenly, they could speak French, and everyone around them was speaking French. This was set in England, the story. Or one story I like, where there was a magic potion that people drank, and they could suddenly speak lots of languages.

So you get the flavour, very creative, spanning all across the globe, different languages, different time periods as well. We had something set in Nazi Germany, something in contemporary Spain. Oh, and one thing I didn't mention was there were lots of animal stories as well, which I really liked. Which is someone was from the perspective of a lizard or someone talking about their rabbit in lockdown or their cat who could magically speak French.

KAREN FOLEY: Wow. Gosh, lots of imagination there, but not only did you have this structure that you were working to, the multilingual, and you've mentioned the multicultural aspects, were really important. Can you tell us a bit about that?

EMILIA WILTON- So I guess, obviously, in the period we're living today, Brexit Britain, we really felt it was important to showcase **GODBERFFORDE:** just how multicultural we are and how diverse our student population is and also how much we value languages in our department and as people and as academics. And so we really wanted to showcase just the linguistic ability and languages that we have as a nation.

So students were invited to use their own languages or the languages they were learning at the OU, and the result was this panoply of languages that were mixed together sometimes and used very creatively. And even if they weren't an expert at French, if they were a beginner, some people chose to write in French, which I think is quite a brave thing to do and use what they had and think creatively around that. And so I think that was something really special about our collection too.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Let me take a quick trip to Eric and see what people at home think about all of this. Eric.

ERIC: Yeah. There's a lot of stories being shared, and I think one of the things that is interesting is that, as adults, we often focus on our stories, and it's interesting that we're hearing all these diversions. But one particular one that struck me is the joy a student had when they had to return to swimming, and it tells you how high it impacted our children and youngsters as well as it did for adults, in terms of all the losses that were reported on TV, et cetera. So I think the impact on children, although we often talk about the learning gap that may emerge in the coming years, I think there's the associated emotional development as well is something that we really need to think about. And the joy of being able to go back to swimming is a typical example of its impact on children.

Another interesting thing that I picked up is the relationships. I think I felt that as well, and I think I've shared it previously. The pandemic gave us opportunity to connect a little bit more with family, although it could have been electronically. But as children go back to school, as Katie's saying, they go back to school, they reconnect with their friends and mates more and sometimes forget their parents and grandparents, like they did during the pandemic. So yeah, that's what we're getting in the chat. It's still buzzing, and thanks, everyone, for contributing that.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. We also have Ola in the session today, and Ola I know is someone who's very keen on sport working in the department there also. Now, Ola, you weren't involved in this specific project, but you have experiences. And I wonder if you might want to touch on some of the ways in which students, for example, may have experienced some of these challenges with lockdown. What are your thoughts?

OLA FADOJU: I think what is really interesting about this project from a non-sporting background, since my background is in sports, is the creativity of using different languages and what would either be a native language or a non-native language and having the confidence to put this to pen and paper. But I would like to ask Emilia, what about-- did you think or what about like a podcast or audio version of the book? Has that been looked into? Because I would have been really interested to see students talk as well and not so much write, writing's brilliant, because of the creativity.

But for example, I'm from-- my parents are Nigerians, and I'm what you would call a second-class British immigrant, second generation. So I know how to speak in my mum's native tongue. I can speak in English, but we also have in Nigeria-- and Eric will know about this, being from Ghana, having the background of Ghana-- about what we call Pigeon English which is broken English. We mix words of our mum's tongue, mix what we call Queen's English, and then local English. It would have been really to see if that would have been something that you would have thought about, or could that be an extra project as well?

EMILIA WILTON- That is really, really fascinating, and it's a brilliant idea and something we haven't actually talked about doing.

GODBERFFORDE: We haven't. We haven't talked about doing that, but I would love to do that with the members of the team.

And I think, as you said, just hearing languages spoken adds this other dimension. It's one thing to see the Chinese on the page or the French and, even if you don't understand it, have a sense, OK, this is another language. But just hearing those languages spoken just gives that richness and adds something, and I think that would be something-- I can imagine students would be really keen to contribute to that.

OLA FADOJU: Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's a lovely suggestion. Thank you, Ola. And Peter's written a book about his favourite football players during the lockdown and is trying to get it published. And Kitty's writing a poetry book, so lots of exciting things going on there as well for people at home. Emilia, on the subject that Ola raised about language, would it be very challenging to be writing perhaps if you were still learning a language?

EMILIA WILTON- It's a good question, and I think creative writing is something that some people, for whatever reason, are

GODBERFFORDE: slightly frightened of I think sometimes. They think that they don't have the skills, or that they haven't-- yeah.

So I think sometimes people come to creative writing thinking, oh, I don't have anything to say, but there's a pleasure and playfulness there that's important. And then, if you add using another language that maybe is not your native language, in a way it can free you. Because you're not limited by-- or you might be limited by a vocabulary, but you can think around things.

So from a cognitive perspective, you problem solve a bit better, and you keep it simple maybe. And then in a strange way, that subtracting can make it simpler and more effective. So I think some of these stories in some ways are quite simple, but then the ideas behind it are very, very rich. So I think it's not being afraid to just put pen to paper, as Ola said, and just let your imagination run wild.

And then if you reach a barrier that's linguistic, then you can see it, and this concept of translanguaging or code switching is important. It's like can you find-- can you use another word in your own language, and we were very open to that, people just being inventive with their own language. And so maybe sometimes they didn't use the word a native speaker would use, but that in itself is interesting. So just dealing with what you have and trying to play with that, and really that's what language, poetry, everything is about. Isn't it? Playing with what you've got and being an individual in the way you communicate.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, and here's another idea Martin's given us, a book of Pigeon Creole or code mix stories and poems would be absolutely amazing, he says. Well, let's see how confident people at home say they might be about writing in another language. So we also have our word cloud which we'll show you in just a moment, but first, let's see how confident people might be. Not very confident at all. I don't think I would be to be fair either. Emilia, what do you make of that?

EMILIA WILTON- I think, yeah, that doesn't surprise me, and if you ask me, well-- my mum's Greek, but I've never written in **GODBERFFORDE:** Greek, and I'm not bilingual in Greek at all. And if someone said, can you write a story in Greek? I would panic, I think, but then I would think of the words my grandparents say and some of the things. And slowly I could kind of bring something together. It might be slightly silly at first, but I think it's, of course, the initial reaction might be panic. I can't do this. But then it's thinking, well, what do you know?

KAREN FOLEY: No. Absolutely. Absolutely. We've also got our word cloud. Ola, I'm going to ask you to reflect on this as well. We've asked people about three words that come to mind in terms of pandemic, and we've said that they can do this any language. So let's see what people have to say, and then, Ola, you might like to share some thoughts of what our audience at home think.

So here are some key words. Some of them I'll read out, but the key things that come to mind for people from the pandemic, the isolation, that it was scary, and that it was life changing. So a lot of agreement around things like that, but also stressful feeling, a lack of control, terrifying. Some nice things though coming in, peaceful, unifying, and family. But overall, I think some of the feelings here are fairly negative.

Some of them I don't understand, because unfortunately, I only speak one language. I was brought up in New Zealand, and it wasn't very, the done thing to speak different languages there. I was on triple science all the way instead of learning lovely French and German, which I bitterly regret.

Anyway, Ola, what do you think of what our students had to say at home?

OLA FADOJU: It was interesting. Just before you asked that question, I was thinking back, and we're talking about the creativity behind the project it sent. But I think the main thing, I'm looking at some of the key words that have been mentioned, I will say, it leads to one thing which is about mental health. And if you think, I think I would say, it would have been very cathartic for the students who actually engaged in the project in terms of their mental health.

Now, whether it would have been, I will say, most likely it would have been a positive effect on them to get away from what maybe you would say are the pressures of being a student to write something which is not linked to a TMA. It's not linked to an assignment. It's not linked to that academic aspect. It's just fun. So I will say that, but also again, it's away from the pandemic, in the sense that they're not focusing on what's happening in the pandemic at that particular time. So I would have seen that as an improvement of mental health.

But on the other side of it, it may also have brought up issues that may have been in the background, that may have been a bit negative. So I would, again, I would see this as something that could be replicated as something that should be an ongoing thing. Because I would see that as a really good positive way of improving someone's self-esteem, self-confidence, getting away from all the pressures that happened to-- and really did happen and are still happening now, as the pandemic-- as we are talking about it.

The pandemic still hasn't yet finished. So there are these issues that were there. So I, again, I will always just implore the students to continue to involve themselves in projects like this, because I think it's a really good thing for mental health.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, and Emilia, when you were talking before about some of the stories and some of the topics, what really struck me was not only the enthusiasm with which you spoke about these but the way that people were using fantasy as some perhaps therapeutic technique. And also, I think that combination is, as Ola says, about being able to play with language.

Tarla-- hey, Tarla-- is from Lebanon and speaks Arabic, but she's been in British schools. So she's saying that she's using often English words that can't translate into Arabic and vice versa. There's something fascinating about language and the nuances that particular words can convey. Emilia, I wonder if you might want a feedback on that.

EMILIA WILTON- Yeah. No. Thank you for that input. I think that sense of what can we translate, and what is so inherent to our **GODBERFFORDE:** identity that comes through our mother tongue is something we also wanted to communicate. But also that when we speak another language, we inhabit a different space mentally. We also inhabit a different world, and we come into contact in a very, very intimate way with another world. And this collection is called "Stories of a Different World," and it was really a different world in the sense that we were in this uncharted territory which was COVID pandemic.

But I guess it's also touching on a different world that comes from experiencing the world with a different language and how that gives us this keyhole into a new world, and I think that's something that is hopeful as well. Like you may be stuck at home. You can't leave, but through these stories and through language and through sharing as well, sharing these stories with each other, we can come together, and we can see things in a new way.

KAREN FOLEY: And one of the things I love about a collection like this is I guess you could dip in and out, because they're short stories. And also the fact that I guess you could explore languages that were more familiar or less familiar and really play around and have fun with that also. So Ola's given you some ideas Emilia about things you could do. What are your plans then for the book already?

EMILIA WILTON- So we have thought about doing a second volume, because we had a lot of interest in people submitting stories.

GODBERFFORDE: So that is something in the pipeline. Also, the podcast idea is something that I really want to pursue. So thank you again, Ola, for that, and also, we have been thinking about designing specifically creative writing projects in-- multilingual creative writing projects-- to go into schools and help teachers.

Because actually, this project itself was inspired by a project that a teacher called Giuseppe Rosa did in Italy with his fourth grade students. It was called "Decameron in the Time of COVID." So we took that as a model, and so thinking about what creative writing projects maybe younger students could work on. I guess, not just around the pandemic but in the future to bring their languages together and practise and explore.

KAREN FOLEY: And Colin makes a point that it can be different and frustrating but also very liberating to be able to use another language, again, just picking up on the culture that the particular words can convey.

EMILIA WILTON- Yeah. That's so true. Isn't it? My daughter's French, because my husband's French. And I teach French, but it's

GODBERFFORDE: so interesting to see how in different moods, she speaks different languages. So sometimes, when she's cheeky, she speaks French. She read certain stories in French and then sometimes mixes them together, and I just love seeing that unfold. It's very special, I think, and very playful.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Oh, and Shirley is trying to learn Irish Gaelic, and Kitty loves Greece so lots and lots of interest in a variety of things out there as well. We'll be talking a bit more about languages later in the day. So if that's something that appeals to you, do stay tuned, and I'm sure that Korina and I know Eric is also putting links in the chat as well that may be relevant. So do make the most of your chance to ask them any questions here today.

Well, that's all we have time for, I'm afraid. Emilia and Ola, that was an absolutely amazing session. I never knew what a Decameron was, so now I know, and what a fantastic idea and a really inspiring book. Thank you both for coming and sharing that, and thank you, Ola, for your thoughts and contributions as well to this really exciting project. And well done, Emilia, for getting it off the ground and actually being able to produce something so creative and wonderful.

EMILIA WILTON- Thank you very much. Thanks for having me.

GODBERFFORDE:

KAREN FOLEY: No, a pleasure, thank you. Eric will be back to hear what people are talking about at home in our next session, but we're going to have a short video break now. We're going to show you another of our campus tours. We'll get there soon, Kitty. We really will. I'm desperate to get back on campus, and I think it is opening up very slowly. So hopefully, you'll get to the library soon.

But we're going to look at celebrating diversity in WELS and beyond. I'm going to have a really fascinating talk about artificial intelligence. So if you have an Alexa-- well, don't say that, actually, because she's listening. But stay tuned, because we're going to have a really interesting discussion in our next session. Grab a cup of tea, or watch our quick video now for the Jennie Lee building, and we'll see you very soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]