Karen Egan
Adran Astudiaethau Theatr, Ffilm a Theledu | Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies

2011

SYLWER: O ganlyniad i newidiadau yng ngofynion portffolio'r TUAAU, nid oes gan bob cylch dysgu a lwythir i CADAIR yr un nodweddlion. Mae’n bwysig bod y cylchoedd dysgu hyn yn cael eu defnyddio fel adnoddau yn unig, ac nid fel canllawiau i’r hyn sydd ei angen i ffolioni gofynion y TUAAU. Os oes gennych ymholiadau, cysylltwch â thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to changes in the requirements of the PGCTHE portfolio, not all teaching cycles uploaded to CADAIR share the same properties. It is important that these teaching cycles are only used as a resource and not a guide to what is needed to fulfil the requirements of the PGCTHE. If you have any queries, please contact thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 2 | Teaching Cycle 2

Formative Feedback and Peer Assessment on an MA Research Methods Dissertation Preparation Module

This Teaching Cycle of the PGCTHE portfolio has been submitted to CADAIR with the permission of the author detailed above. It is to be used as a resource for future PGCTHE candidates and other staff as part of their professional development at Aberystwyth University. It remains the property of the author and Aberystwyth University. If you wish to cite this work then please contact the author. Contact details can be found at http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/directory/.
Teaching Cycle 2, April 2010: Formative Feedback and Peer Assessment on an MA Research Methods Dissertation Preparation Module

1. An account of the issue, including reference to relevant literature

This teaching cycle focused on a core module which I co-ordinate on the MA Film Studies course in my department, Research Methods and Traditions in Film Studies, a module which is core to the scheme in that it introduces students to the key theoretical traditions that have characterised the discipline of film studies since the 1950s and encourages students to begin to think about and plan their MA dissertations in relation to these theoretical traditions and their associated research methods. This cycle aimed to focus on the ways in which the last two seminars on the module could be effectively designed and taught, so as to enable students to begin to think about their dissertation projects in relation to the theoretical traditions and methods they had encountered throughout the module. These two sessions, as described in the module handbook, were: firstly, an individual tutorial with me (their module co-ordinator) about their initial ideas and plans for their second written assessment for the module (which was a dissertation proposal for their MA dissertation); and secondly, a two-hour dissertation proposal seminar, where the students would present their initial ideas about their dissertation proposal to the other students and the tutor, and receive feedback from the other students.

In order to think through how I could effectively plan and design these sessions (including planning the preparation that the students would need to do in advance of these sessions), I consulted the learning outcomes for the module as a whole, and the module handbook's description and assessment criteria for the students' second module assignment, their dissertation proposal (both module assignments had been devised by me earlier that year when the module had been revised and rewritten). The learning outcomes and assessment description and criteria are as follows:

Learning outcomes of the module as a whole (as given in the module handbook):
On completion of this module, students should be able to:
• Critically evaluate, compare and demonstrate understanding of the different theoretical traditions within film studies.
• Make connections between theoretical approaches and methods within film studies.
• Formulate research questions and think about the appropriate theories and methodologies to draw on to enable effective, focused and productive research.
• Understand the primary requirements for putting together and writing a dissertation.

The description of, and marking criteria for, the second assessment on the module (as given in the module handbook):

Assessment 2 - Dissertation Proposal (3,000 words, worth 40%)

The aim of this assignment is to test your ability to conceive and design a research proposal for your MA dissertation. In your proposal, you will: 1/ outline your research question, 2/ how it is grounded within, but tries to move forward from, current understanding about this question/topic area within the field of film studies, and 3/ outline appropriate methods for answering your research question. When addressing these three points, you should draw on relevant literature, illustrating: 1/ what such work has achieved or asked in relation to your topic area (and what methods this work has employed to try to answer questions about this topic area), 2/ how this literature has informed your choice of methods for answering your research question, and 3/ broadly, what your research will add to this area of debate and research within film studies.

Criteria of assessment:

Your essays will be marked according to the following criteria:

• How clear, viable and appropriate is your research question?
• How well and securely is this question grounded in an understanding of, and response to, relevant existing academic literature?
• How clearly articulated are the proposed methods of enquiry? How well grounded are these in a literature on methods, and/or in prior models of their use?
• How well does the proposal establish the point or worth of the proposed research?

In relation to these outcomes and assessment criteria, my second teaching cycle aimed to do the following:

1. To explore and assess the effectiveness of various teaching methods involving formative feedback, in allowing students to address and consider the third and fourth learning outcomes on the module (which are to 'formulate research questions and think about the appropriate theories and methodologies to draw on to enable effective, focused and productive research' and to 'understand the primary requirements for putting together and writing a dissertation').

2. To, as David Nicol and Debra Macfarlane-Dick argue, help 'clarify [to students] what good performance [in assessed work] is (goals, criteria, expected standards)' (2004: 6) through 'teacher and peer dialogue' (Ibid: 7) and feedback about dissertation proposals, and through setting students particular preparation tasks before tutorials and seminars.

3. To encourage students to reflect on the feedback they receive (from their teacher and their peers) in terms of how this develops their learning and understanding of the dissertation proposal assessment and its connection to the requirements of the MA dissertation.

These aims relate to two experiences I had, during the course of designing and teaching this module in semester 2 of the academic year 2009110 (as this was the first year in which the module had run). Firstly, it should be noted that the four students that I taught on this module were very bright, hard-working, perceptive and academically able. However, they tended to panic when thinking about what would be required in their assessments and if they would reach the required standards (meaning postgraduate standards) in order to achieve excellent marks. In order to
help them with this, I held a ‘review’ session halfway through the module (after the first half of the module, which introduced them to a range of theoretical traditions and methods in film studies). This session was focused on getting them to reflect back on what they had learnt and how this might feed into and inform their work for the first assessment on the module (which asked them to write a critical essay on one theoretical tradition within film studies that we had covered on the module). I asked them, prior to this ‘review’ session, to go back to one piece of reading that we had previously discussed in one of the seminars, and then outline, in the seminar, how this reading would play a role in their upcoming critical essay. This review session was extremely effective in one key way: it brought to light aspects of the assignment task that the students were unclear about, and this allowed me to identify ambiguities in the wording of the assignment task, as given in the handbook, and to address and clarify these to students. However, I had also hoped that this review session would encourage the students to evaluate each others’ planned essays, to ask questions about each others’ work and therefore to begin to gain confidence in their status as a group of researchers (rather than as a group of postgraduate students). However, the students were very reticent about doing this, and I presume this was partly a lack of confidence in their ability to evaluate the standard of work of their peers and to evaluate the standards of postgraduate-level academic work in general.

Secondly and as noted above, this module moves, in its second half, from a focus on the students learning about, discussing and critically evaluating a range of theoretical and methodological traditions within film studies, to encouraging the students to think about how they might draw on what they have learnt when planning their own MA dissertations. I thought long and hard about how I could enable students to make this transition, from thinking about existing work to thinking about their own work, during the course of the module. To help them with this, I gave each of them a previous student’s MA dissertation to read over the Easter break. This seemed to be effective in that, according to the students, this helped to make the task of writing a dissertation concrete and to demystify the process of writing and submitting a dissertation, as they were able to obtain a firmer sense, from reading a prior dissertation, of what was required (in terms of format, structure and general academic standards) and the limits of what could be covered in a 20,000 word piece of work.
My teaching cycle therefore builds on these experiences, by: 1/ encouraging students to explore and think: about what will be required of them in their dissertation proposal assessment for the module (through concrete measures which will give them a sense of the requirements of the assessment), and 2/ encouraging the students to do this by assessing and evaluating the work of a previous MA student and the ongoing work and ideas of their peers.

The design of this cycle is primarily informed by a range of arguments, which focus on issues relating to assessment, feedback and preparing students for dissertations.

1. The argument that formative feedback can be approached as a dialogue between the teacher and the students (as argued in Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 7), which allows students to develop their understanding of what is required in an assessed piece of work (Benson and Blackman, 2003: 46) and how this relates to the marking criteria for the assessment. (Rather than, as Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick note, feedback being seen as purely 'summative' in that it is merely 'transmitted' to students on a feedback sheet, once they have completed their assessed work and it has been marked and returned to them).

2. The argument that a focus on preparatory activities (relating to an assessed piece of work), and formative feedback on such activities, helps students to go through the processes of: possessing 'a concept of the goal/standard or reference level being aimed for', comparing 'the actual (or current) level of performance with that goal or standard', and engaging 'in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap' between the two (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 4). This process therefore allows students more scope and opportunity to 'make sense of, and use' the feedback they receive (from the teacher and from peers) purposefully and effectively (Ibid: 4).

3. The argument that 'for students to be able to compare actual performance with a standard, and take action to close the gap, they must already possess some of the same evaluative skills as their teacher', and that 'the starting point for the feedback cycle' could therefore be an evaluation task (which involves
assessment marking criteria and peer assessment) set, for the students, by the teacher (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 4). This, as Phil Race has argued, can shed light, for the students, on 'what goes on in the minds of their assessors and examiners', 'can let them in to the assessment culture they must survive' and thus 'help enable students to really understand what is required of them' (2001: 94).

4. The argument (made by John Biggs) that, in order to encourage deep learning amongst students, there should be 'an appropriate motivational context' (in this case developing their work for their proposal assignment and their MA dissertation), and 'interaction with others' (which, in this case, is peer assessment) (cited in Kember et. al., 2008: 46).

Considering that the dissertation proposal is an assessed piece of work, but also part of the process of preparing students for their MA dissertation, this cycle is also informed by two of Benson and Blackman's arguments (2003) about preparing students for dissertations. Firstly, that modules which focus on research methods and dissertation preparation should encourage students to reflect on their progress and the development of their understanding and ideas about dissertations and research, and, secondly, that allowing students to use and hone their evaluative skills is crucial in enabling students to develop the kind of independent learning skills that they will need when working on their dissertations.

2. Proposed Teaching Practice, Intended Outcomes and Method of Evaluation

As outlined above, this cycle has a range of intended outcomes, including: 1/ demystifying the processes of writing a dissertation and assessing and evaluating assessed work, 2/ encouraging students to be confident evaluators of their peers' work (rather than just being students), and 3/ encouraging students to identify (and then hopefully close) 'the gap' between their current progress and the standard of work that is required of them in their dissertation proposal assessment and their MA dissertation.
Consequently, this teaching cycle was implemented in the following way. Firstly, prior to their individual tutorial sessions (with me) on their plans and ideas for their dissertation proposal, the students were sent a previous (good quality) dissertation proposal from a previous student on the MA Film Studies course. This proposal was for the MA dissertation which the students had already read over the Easter break, and the student concerned had kindly given her permission for her dissertation proposal and dissertation to be read and discussed by the students on this module. The students were asked to read the proposal (prior to their tutorial with me) and, through reference to the dissertation proposal marking criteria, to make a list of at least three factors which seemed to make this proposal an effective (or ineffective) MA dissertation proposal. In addition, they were also asked to come up with some initial ideas for their dissertation proposal, and to use their notes on this previous student’s proposal as a guide for doing this.

The students’ notes and ideas (in relation to both tasks) were then discussed in the individual tutorial session, and I then gave some initial feedback on these notes and ideas so that the students could continue to develop their proposal ideas prior to the proposal seminar the following Friday. Then, in the proposal session itself, each student was asked to outline their proposal ideas to the other students, in turn. After each outline, one other student (who had been designated as the ‘respondent’ for that dissertation proposal) was required to ask the student (who was providing the outline) at least one question about that student’s proposal (which should draw on their knowledge of the proposal assessment criteria and the feedback they’d received from me about their own proposal). Finally, after the proposal session, they were asked to write a brief, one-paragraph reflection on what they’d learned from the session (about dissertation proposals in general) and to then send this to me but also keep their own copy of this (so it could serve as a useful document that they could refer back to, as they worked on their MA dissertation). (N.B. My instructions to the students (regarding the reflection document) and the student reflections that were then returned to me, are included as Appendix 4 in this portfolio).

I originally planned to make the original ‘review’ session (which I held halfway through the module) the focus of this teaching cycle. However, as outlined above, this original ‘review’ session eventually became a test run for this teaching cycle,
focused on the dissertation proposal assessment. Because the review session was the original focus of this cycle, I asked the students, at this point, to fill out two short questionnaires (before and after the review session) which encouraged them to reflect on what they’d learnt from the module and the session, and to outline what was still not clear to them. I sensed that they found filling out these questionnaires to be inconvenient and to take up valuable time which they could have used to get on with other work for their MA. As a result, they either failed to complete the questionnaire or gave only very short answers (in some cases). Consequently, this teaching cycle will primarily be evaluated through the reflection document that the students were asked to submit to me after the proposal session. This reflection document will allow me to assess the degree to which the students have benefited from the processes and tasks outlined above, in terms of whether they seem, through this reflection document, to have a clearer sense of the requirements of the dissertation proposal assessment and a sense of their own progress in understanding and aiming to meet these requirements.

3. Summary of feedback on, and evaluation of, student learning

(N.B. For reasons of ethics and confidentiality, I have changed the names of the MA students that I refer to below).

I'll start with a confession. As this module progressed, I became conscious of one problem that was impacting on the group dynamic in seminar discussions with this particular group of MA students. As noted above, these four students were all extremely hard-working, perceptive, thoughtful and academically able students (with three of the students regularly achieving distinction level marks in their assignments for this module and for other MA Film Studies modules). However, as the module went on, I sensed that two factors were impacting on the flow and productiveness of the discussions that were occurring in seminars. The first, as noted above, seemed to relate to the students’ lack of confidence in thinking of themselves as postgraduate researchers (with views and interpretations that could be just as valid and important as those of their teacher), and the second seemed to relate to a general competitiveness amongst this group of students. Because all four of these students were high achievers and extremely academically able, there sometimes seemed to be a sense, in group discussions, that the students were trying to ‘out-do’ each other in terms of the
comments they made, rather than working as a team and a group who could support each other's learning. My acknowledgment of this problem also informed by aim, in this cycle, to devise a teaching session (namely the module's final dissertation proposal session) which would encourage the students to take control of the flow of discussion in the session, and, through peer assessment of each others' proposals, to develop their understanding (as a group) of the standards of work and the kinds of skills that are required in an MA dissertation proposal and an MA dissertation.

I was therefore very pleased to see that, in his reflection document, the most competitive member of this MA group, Bob, had drawn attention to the problems of working alone and in an 'insular' manner on an assignment (which is further heightened when students are being asked to develop a proposal for an entirely individual, independent piece of work, i.e. a dissertation or thesis, rather than provide an answer to a set essay question or assignment task). In his reflection document, Bob noted the benefits of the 'group sharing' of ideas in the dissertation proposal session, in the following way:

I feel as though this session helped me find my focus more than I’d managed by myself. It forced me to confront my ideas head-on and really test them to see if they were going to work... It was also very useful to hear other people's ideas. This sort of 'group sharing' made me consider other approaches to my chosen field that I may not otherwise have considered. Also, hearing feedback and taking questions from fellow students served a similar purpose in widening the possibilities in my approaches and methodology that may have been closed to me if I had continued in the insular manner common to most students' assignments (Student Reflection 3: Bob, received, by email, on 13/05/2010)

As a consequence of this session, then, Bob seemed to have identified the benefits of testing out his ideas with his peers: both in terms of finding a focus for his dissertation proposal and his associated ideas, and 'widening' his thinking about the range of possible approaches and methods that he could employ within his dissertation.
As with my previous teaching cycle, this cycle led to a range of outcomes, some of which had informed the design of my cycle and some of which emerged as the two-hour dissertation proposal session went on. Unfortunately, one of the four MA students was not able to attend the MA dissertation proposal session, due to a personal issue. However, subsequent to the individual tutorial sessions the week before, the three other MA students (Bob, Nicola and Sally) and I spent an extremely productive, stimulating and thought-provoking two hours discussing and (a key word here) developing the students' dissertation proposal ideas. Below, I summarise the main outcomes of this dissertation proposal session: as identified by myself (through notes made during the session), the three students (in their reflection documents), subsequent email dialogue between myself and the students, and through consideration of the students' achievements in their dissertation proposal assignments (which were submitted and marked by me and a second marker subsequent to this dissertation proposal session).

1/ The development of a 'feedback cycle' in the proposal session
In their article on formative assessment in Higher Education, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick put forward 'a conceptual model of formative assessment and feedback that synthesises current thinking by key researchers into this topic' (2004: 4). In this model, they note that 'an academic task set by the teacher (in the class or set as an assignment) is the starting point' for a 'feedback cycle' (Ibid: 4). As part of this teaching cycle, a range of academic tasks had been set for the students by me in advance of the dissertation proposal session. These were: to read a previous MA dissertation and dissertation proposal and assess its strengths and weaknesses in relation to the assessment criteria for the dissertation proposal assignment, and then, in the class itself, for each student to act as a respondent to another student's presentation of their dissertation proposal ideas. This feedback process (based around the peer assessment of each others' proposal ideas) then led me, spontaneously, to introduce a new task in the middle of the dissertation proposal session. As noted above, Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick have argued that a focus on preparatory activities (relating to an assessed piece of work), and formative feedback (from peers) on such activities, helps students to obtain 'a concept of the goal/standard or reference level being aimed for', to compare 'the actual (or current) level of performance with that
goal or standard’, and to engage ‘in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap’ between the two (Ibid: 4).

In order to help the students think about how the feedback they had received from their peers might inform this process, I asked each student (after the presentation of and peer feedback on each of the proposals) to use the whiteboard in the classroom in order to undertake two further tasks. Firstly, they were each asked to write down a list of different concepts, types of literature, or topic areas that they thought might inform, feed into or play a role in their proposed dissertation. As each student did this, the other students in the room (and myself) offered suggestions of items that might be included on the list, with the student writing on the whiteboard then having to make a decision about whether these possible suggested areas were important to their dissertation proposal. Secondly, each student was then asked to approach the whiteboard and write down what they thought their dissertation research question might be, in light of the previous 'keyword' exercise and in light of the feedback they had received, in the session, from their peers. Reflecting back on these whiteboard tasks they, for me, could be seen to have had two key benefits in the context of this proposal session. Firstly, these tasks seemed to encourage students to relate their developing ideas (and the subsequent feedback they'd received) to one of the key learning outcomes of the module, namely to ‘formulate research questions and think about the appropriate theories and methodologies to draw on to enable effective, focused and productive research’. Secondly, these tasks also appeared to be effective in helping students to compare their draft research questions with the standard and level of research question employed in the dissertation they had read by the previous MA dissertation student - a question which they saw as being particularly focused, precise, grounded in academic debates and achievable within the dissertation word-limit of 20,000 words.

In terms of a 'feedback cycle', then, the initial verbal feedback given by students to each other in the session was then harnessed and utilised through brainstorming activities on the whiteboard (including the formulation of a draft research question), which then led to further comments and feedback from their peers and from me (as their tutor). As Bob's comments above attest and in relation to Phil Race’s arguments on this issue (2001: 95), these whiteboard tasks also allowed students to learn from
each other, as we compared the structure and wording of each students' proposed research question as given on the whiteboard. After much discussion and debate amongst the group, the three students arrived at the following draft research questions:

Nicola: 'To what degree is gender a central concern of reviews of the films of Dario Argento?' and 'How has the representation of gender in the films of Dario Argento changed through his career?'

Bob: 'How do American Cold War Cooperation films attempt to reconfigure prevailing social attitudes in their representation of the interplay between American and Russian cultures?'

Sally: 'How does the discourse and activity surrounding the release of Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull help us to understand its position as a contemporary product within an ongoing film franchise?'

Immediately, and as a result of this activity, Nicola (the student in the group who generally obtains the highest marks in her written work) identified a key problem in her current thinking about her dissertation. As the above research questions illustrate, Nicola, at this point, was unable to arrive at one over-arching focus for her dissertation and, through this process (and through discussions with her peers and me), she was able to arrive at the conclusion that she currently had two separate ideas, questions or approaches in her head which she was unable, at that moment, to fully connect or relate to each other. Whether Nicola would have arrived at this recognition without going through this 'feedback cycle' and brainstorming process is not clear, but it did, in this instance, seem to allow her to pinpoint, effectively and clearly, a key problem or issue that she would need to address when continuing to think about and develop her dissertation proposal.

Consequently an effective 'feedback cycle' occurred across the proposal session. This was initiated by the students' feedback on a previous student's MA dissertation and dissertation proposal, which then fed into and informed the peer feedback which was given to each student in the class as they presented their proposal ideas. This peer
feedback, in turn, then informed the brainstorming activities and formulation of research questions that occurred on the whiteboard in the room, and this then led to further feedback on these research questions, as the students and I compared the strengths and weaknesses of each proposed research question. For the students, this feedback cycle seemed to have a number of positive outcomes. Here is a selection of the comments these students made in their reflection documents, after the dissertation proposal session had taken place:

The 'pitch' helped me form a much more coherent idea of both my proposal and dissertation, allowing me to hone in on what it is I want to discover and how I want to go about it... Overall, I believe this session helped me a lot in terms of actually getting me started with my dissertation preparation... (Student Reflection 3: Bob, received, by email, on 13/05/2010)

The session was very helpful in getting me to really think about my proposal in a more critical way and to see parts of it that may have been not quite so well thought through. The ‘keyword' exercise, where we were required to write concepts that our proposal may encompass on the whiteboard, was especially helpful in highlighting where one idea may appear to cover too much, or touch on ideas that may be problematic to include in the dissertation. It helped me to think carefully about a more streamlined set of academic themes to concentrate on when I am further developing my proposal. (Student Reflection 2: Sally, received, by email, on 10/05/2010)

In thinking of questions and suggestions for others' ideas, places for improvement on my own proposed dissertation came to light. The suggestions and questions posed by my classmates also proved to be massively helpful, especially in helping me through a certain confusion I had in my own idea. While I went into the session with a fairly jumbled idea with no clear path out, I left the session with two clear paths ahead to a coherent dissertation
proposal, the next work required of me being picking which one to take! (Student Reflection 1: Nicola, received, by email, on 09/05/2010)

I want to particularly focus on three aspects of these responses, which suggest some of the key ways in which this exercise and process appeared to be effective and helpful for these students. Firstly, both Sally and Nicola focus, in their reflections, on the ways in which the session (and its feedback cycle and forms of peer assessment and feedback) have encouraged them to approach their own proposal work critically and reflectively, helping them, in Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's terms, to 'develop their ability to self-assess', their 'capacity for self-regulation' and their confidence in 'self-monitoring' their work and judging their 'progression towards goals' (2004: 6).

Secondly, all three students end their reflections on the session by identifying further 'appropriate action' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 4) that they now wish to take in order to achieve the goals and standards that they are aiming for in their dissertation work.

As a consequence, this cycle (and its associated student tasks and exercises) can be seen as a concrete illustration of the way in which formative feedback (and a subsequent peer-driven feedback cycle) can allow students to obtain 'a concept of the goal/standard or reference level being aimed for', to compare 'the actual (or current) level of performance with that goal or standard', and to engage 'in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap' between the two (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 4). Finally, Sally notes, at the end of her reflection, that the session 'helped me to think carefully about a more streamlined set of academic themes to concentrate on when I am further developing my proposal'. This comment was heartening for me, as it seemed to acknowledge that one of the session's key aims was, as Benson and Blackman note, 'to encourage students to discuss and debate their work in a developmental way' (2003: 46), rather than the students assuming that their ideas and research questions would need to be perfect and fully formulated in order for them to be presented, in the proposal session, to the tutor and their peers.
The session also had one other positive outcome, in that it succeeded in initiating further 'dialogue' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 7) between myself and the students, which allowed the students to further develop their understanding of what was required in the assessed dissertation proposal (and the subsequent MA dissertation). In the dissertation proposal session itself, all three students noted that, while the previous MA student's dissertation proposal had addressed the majority of assessment criteria for the proposal assignment, that this student's proposal did not really address the criterion of 'how well did the proposal establish the point or worth of the proposed research?' This led to Bob enquiring about the degree to which MA dissertations need to be 'original' (as pieces of work more advanced than BA dissertations but less advanced than PhD theses), and, in relation to this, what the nature of this 'originality' was considered to be in relation to the proposal and dissertation requirements. This, I have to confess, was not a question that I had previously considered and thought about, and it led me to consult with senior colleagues about this issue of 'originality' in relation to what is required and expected in a MA dissertation. As a result of this consultation, I was able to clarify this previously rather woolly issue with the students, and also clarify this question of 'originality' in MA dissertations for myself and my colleagues (as the markers and assessors of the MA Film Studies dissertations). As a consequence, I sent out the following clarification on this issue to the students:

---

'In tenus of how the dissertation marking criteria relates to the expectation that your dissertation should be 'original': It is a primary requirement that a PhD should be original in that PhD research should be seen to be 'at the forefront of knowledge' on a particular topic or topics (i.e. asking questions of the topic area that haven’t been asked before, or approaching the topic area in a way that it hasn’t been approached before). This is not as much of a primary requirement with an MA dissertation (particularly in that your research project can only be reasonably small-scale, as you only have a 20,000 word limit, rather than a PhD word limit of 80-100,000 words).

Consequently, your MA dissertations are expected to be original in the following ways:
11 that you ground your dissertation in a reasonably up-to-date critical overview of academic literature on your topic or topics, i.e. that you illustrate that you have a reasonably clear sense of some of the main debates that have occurred around your topic area, how academic thinking about your topic area has changed through time, and therefore that you have a clear sense (through a critical evaluation of this literature) of which literature that focuses on this topic area is most valuable or helpful to your research project/research question (in terms of approaches, arguments, concepts or methods).

2/ In terms of the idea of "pursuing the possibilities of your study": that, in your dissertation, you should illustrate that while you’re aware that you’re only able to do something quite small-scale (because of the length of the dissertation), that your research might allow you to raise new issues, ask new questions or suggest new approaches for researching and exploring the topic areas in which your research project is grounded. (For instance, you could consider these issues in the conclusion section of your dissertation).

It is notable, in this respect, that all three students achieved good marks in their dissertation proposal assignments (of 61, 69 and 69) and that, in all cases, their clear articulation of the worth, purpose and significance of their proposed dissertations (in relation to existing academic debates within film studies) was singled out, by the markers, as a particular strength in all three assignments. Without the dialogue and debate initiated by the dissertation proposal session (and its encouragement to the students to engage with the specific wording and character of the marking criteria for the assignment), it is possible that the articulation and understanding of the worth, purpose and significance of their proposed dissertations might not have been so clear, precise and strong in their dissertation proposal assignments. Finally, to date, one of these students (Nicola) has submitted her MA dissertation, while the other two students (Bob and Sally) are continuing to work on their dissertations over the coming year. Nicola achieved a final mark of 73 for her MA dissertation and was particularly praised, by one of the markers, for 'the exceptionally careful way' in which she had 'outlined and justified the dissertation's aims, methods of analysis and findings' and
her 'careful outlining of what she can and can't explore within the confines of this dissertation'.

4. Conclusions, and comments on the implications for the professional development of my teaching practice

This was a very small-scale teaching cycle. It focused on a very small group of students, and on two sessions that took place at the end of an MA research methods module. However, the students seemed to have found it valuable and helpful (for all the reasons outlined above), and it was certainly valuable and thought-provoking for me, in relation to a number of issues that inform my teaching practice.

As indicated in my initial teaching and learning statement, which I produced for the PGCTHE induction, I'm very interested in methods that are designed to empower students in teaching sessions. By this, I mean methods designed to make students feel, in Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's words, that they are 'actively involved' (2004: 4) in the process of learning and improving their knowledge, understanding and analytic and research skills, and that they have ownership of the ideas, debates and discussions that occur during teaching sessions. This, as Benson and Blackman note, is particularly important when teaching or supervising postgraduate students at MA or PhD level, where the need for students to develop independent learning skills, self-motivation and self-assessment skills is particularly crucial and central (2003: 43).

This particular teaching cycle was initiated by my concerns that this particular MA group were struggling to make the transition from undergraduate students to independent, self-critical learners who felt confident critiquing and commenting on the work and ideas of their peers and engaging in discussions with them as much as, or more than, with me, as their tutor. In the session itself, I utilised a teaching resource which (as outlined in my teaching observation report by Dr Paul Newland) I had previously neglected in my teaching – namely, the whiteboard – in order to encourage students to take ownership of their ideas, to set the agenda for the seminar discussion and to allow them 'to make sense of, and use' the 'feedback information' they had received from their peers (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004: 4).
As a consequence of this, the use of the whiteboard has now become central to my MA teaching sessions, in order to encourage postgraduate students to develop their thoughts and ideas and to emphasise the centrality of these ideas to the MA teaching sessions. It is difficult to determine whether a cycle like this one could have been implemented at undergraduate level (in the sense that there are perhaps too many students in teaching sessions at undergraduate level to engage in a focused, developing feedback cycle like the one discussed above). However, this cycle has helped me, through a number of processes and outcomes, to have a clearer sense of the most effective ways in which to teach research methods and dissertation preparation, and to manage and guide students through the process of moving from students (completing assignments) to researchers (engaging in the development and undertaking of an individual piece of research in their MA dissertations).

The outcomes of this cycle also got me thinking about another set of students that I teach and work with - PhD students and their conceptions of themselves as independent researchers and self-assessors of their own work - and this was subsequently developed and further explored in my third teaching cycle for the PGCTHE.