



# Investigating Student Perspectives on School Wide Research Courses

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# Research Courses

- Sources of knowledge: Understanding and analysing research literature Oct-Nov
- Conceptualising research: Foundations, assumptions and praxis Jan-Feb
- Research methods: Planning research Mar-Apr
- Blended delivery to 300-500 MSc students per year from 2010/11 onwards



## Research Objectives / Assumptions

- Insights into student perspectives (going beyond SSLC consultations and course feedback) can feed into the ongoing development of the research courses.
- These insights can also inform a wider understanding of 'current factors' (international students, online learning, research courses) which play a key role in Masters level study in UK universities.



# Research Questions

1. Does the course content and format represent *specific challenges for international students*? **Ken – Part 1: Criticality**
2. How is the blended learning format *perceived by students* in relation to other course formats? **Rory – Part 2**



## Research Methods

- **Baseline questionnaire** to collect demographic data and information on prior experience of studying research methods, and of studying in an online environment.
- **Focus groups** conducted in early February and early July of the Masters academic year. 19 students took part in February, and 8 of these students also took part in July.
- **Reflective diaries** aimed at capturing gradual change over time in relation to the challenges of the research courses and the way they did or did not connect with other subject courses and the dissertation.

## Data: Questionnaire

- 239 responses
- 28 nationalities; 170 responses (71.1%) from Chinese participants
- Gender ratio: female 89.5%: male 10.5%
- 81.5% had not lived in an English-speaking environment previously
- 85.2% had not previously studied at a university in an 'English-speaking' country
- Previous experience of studying online: Yes 43.5%: No 56.5%



## Data: Questionnaire

### Statements (percentage who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'):

I use the Internet regularly: 97.9%

I am confident about using the Internet: 76.8%

I am comfortable with learning online as part of my studies:  
52.9%

I am comfortable with the idea of doing all my learning online:  
23.1%

Undergraduate Dissertation: YES, 84.5%: NO, 15.5%

Previous Study of Research Methods: YES, 67.4%: NO, 32.6%

## Focus Groups

- 2 time points in PGT year: February and July
- Focus on: (1) blended learning aspects of the Research courses; (2) critical thinking as a key feature of 'Research and Inquiry' in a UK PGT context
- Time 1 ( $n = 19$ ): 3 groups of Chinese L1 students; 1 group consisting of 2 Greek and 1 Turkish students
- Time 2 ( $n = 8$ ): 2 groups of Chinese L1 students (from original 3 groups); same group of Greek and Turkish students





## Initial Conclusions

- The majority of students studying on the research courses are dealing with a high degree of 'newness': language, academic context and expectations, research orientation, online learning, and so on.



# Critical Thinking

# Why focus on critical thinking?

- One of the main attributes distinguishing SCQF Level 11 from Level 10, e.g., Masters study from UG study.
- *Sources of Knowledge* (1<sup>st</sup> generic research course) – first two learning outcomes:
  - (1) demonstrate **critical awareness** of current debates concerning the purposes and interpretation of research;
  - (2) **evaluate strengths and weaknesses** of different research paradigms and philosophies...
- Critical thinking often an 'assumed' generic skill for PG students but may not always be a component of UG study
- International students required to attain academic and linguistic levels to enter Masters programmes but no guarantee these encompass skills of critical analysis and thinking.



## Why focus on critical thinking?

- ...because everyone have their definition about critical thinking so I think because **it's different from person to person** so it's really hard for me to say ah I really understand what critical thinking is [C5P9]



# What is critical thinking?

“Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is **based on universal intellectual values** that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.”

(as defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, 1987; emphasis added)



# What is critical thinking?

Moore, T. (2013). Critical thinking: seven definitions in search of a concept. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38, 506-522.

Identified 7 main strands through interviews with academics in history, philosophy and cultural studies:

- i. Judgement
- ii. Scepticism
- iii. Simple originality
- iv. Sensitive readings
- v. Rationality
- vi. An activist engagement with knowledge
- vii. Self-reflexivity



# International Student Entry Requirements: Example of MSc TESOL

## Normal entry requirements

- All applicants must possess a first degree in a language-related subject area e.g. Linguistics. Applicants must receive a 2:1/1st Honours degree **or an equivalent overseas qualification.**
- Information about English language requirements can be found through the following link: [English language requirements](#)
- **Please note:** Students studying at Chinese 211 institutions require a minimum overall average of 80% for courses and at least 80% on the dissertation; for non-211 institutions, an average of 85% is required for courses with 80% on the dissertation.

**There is no requirement in relation to being able to apply criticality in academic contexts.**



# Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF): Level 11

- <http://scqf.org.uk/the-framework/scqf-levels/>

Most frequent adjectives in the Level 11 descriptors:

- (1)        **critical** (x 7)
- (=2)      *professional, significant, specialised* (each x 4)
  
- *critical understanding* (x2)
- *critical knowledge*
- *critical awareness*
- *critical analysis*
- *critical evaluation*
- *critical reflection*





# Moray House School of Education: Taught Masters Generic Handbook

"The university has general requirements for work at Masters level that are aligned to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework at level 11." (p.13)

Most frequent adjectives in the grade descriptors for the six categories on the Common Marking Scheme:

**1.coherent**                **x 8**

**2.critical**                **x 7**

**3.academic**            x 6

**4.clear**                x 6

*coherent framework (x 4), coherent and analytical framework (x 2),  
coherent understanding*

*critical discussion (x 4); critical reflection; critical understanding; critical  
evaluation*



# Perceptions of critical thinking expressed in Focus Group 1

▪ <b><u>Multiple perspectives</u></b>	<b>10</b>
▪ <b><u>Weighing up pros and cons</u></b>	<b>10</b>
▪ <b><u>NOT passive acceptance of ideas</u></b>	<b>4</b>
▪ <b><u>Arguments require supporting evidence</u></b>	<b>4</b>
▪ Objectivity/avoiding bias	2
▪ Expressing own opinions	2
▪ Think deeply about reasons behind opinions	2
▪ Criticality applied to everyday life	2
▪ Refer to multiple resources	2
▪ Ask myself am I convinced? Why? Why not?	2

[a further 23 aspects mentioned by 1 participant each]

## no right or wrong answers

- C2P5: I think it refers to thinking in different perspectives and there is not right or wrong answer.
- C2P9: I think when we read all the articles **we cannot get a specific conclusion** you know always the paper will say further study needs to be conducted to see more deeply to the issue yeah I think because the authors of different papers they view an issue from different angles so of course they will have different answers so yeah **I think critical thinking is important for us to know that there is no right or wrong answer just based on the perspective you choose** of course you need to use different methods to approach your questions.

# NOT passive acceptance of ideas

- Ok so when someone says something or writes something you need to be critical ... and **you can't take it for granted that ok if he says so it's true** you have to find to search for what lies behind his views and if there are any interests hidden or any interests that he has so he says that or he writes that and the reasons why he or she would support or not support what he says or would contradict another's opinion and also look on, if we talk about research, look on the means that he has used to prove what he says or to support what he says because maybe they are not so reliable or there is no validity and also look for strengths and weaknesses. [GTP20]



## 3 statements about critical thinking

**[1] Critical thinking is a key component for Masters level study.**

Very near complete agreement with this statement.

**[2] Critical thinking is a new approach to learning for me**

7 participants agreed; 4 suggested some degree of agreement; 8 disagreed

A mixed picture but generally clear that it is a new approach/concept to many, which suggests that **awareness of the concept should not be assumed.**

**[3] Critical thinking makes me feel uncomfortable**

6 participants suggest some degree of concern/anxiety in relation to critical thinking while the remainder disagreed.

## anxiety mostly in relation to assessment

- When I am working on my assignment because sometimes I think it's very difficult to refute a certain theory, I can even though I disagree with this theory personally **I can't find the references to support my idea so sometimes I feel stressful** but of course I know that it's a good approach for our development, yes but sometimes I just feel stressful [C1P2]
- when I was approaching to the day of assignment and **I am always uncertain about whether I was being critical or not in my assignment and it sometimes feel insecure** because you don't know I am not sure whether I was being critical and which opinion ... agree with [C2P8]

## uncomfortable being in grey areas

when you need to shape your own opinion especially on matters that are really complicated political for example or I think **it is really difficult because there is not one truth there are many truths so I think it's not the easiest thing to do to shape a firm and strict opinion on something** I mean I don't because there is not black and white so many times it's difficult to really explore and see if someone has, why someone says that or what are the interests because **it's not always so obvious even if you read from different sources** I don't think it's always that easy I mean ok for now I mean in real life in matters like more political [GTP20]

## 2<sup>nd</sup> set of focus groups

- Students asked which of the identified features (16 taken from 1<sup>st</sup> of focus groups) they most and least associated with critical thinking.
- Findings slightly more limited due to the lower number of participants.
- **There was a general sense of increased positivity and confidence in relation to being critical.**
- Anxiety about critical thinking only identified in relation to assessment.



## Personal strength; finding own voice

- critical thinking means you have a complete view of something and therefore **you have a strong basis you have a strong basis on what you say** or what you express so there would be no need in feeling anxious or uncomfortable [GT2P20]
- Yeah because as my friend said I basically don't I have to rely on a wide range of references and build an argument using them so also well basically I was reading the article before the master level study I was basically reading the article and taking many things for granted but now actually I learnt to compare with other definition of the arguments on the same topic and sort of yeah and trying to find my own voice [GT2P18]



## A generic cognitive skill

- yeah I think of course I think for me critical thinking is different from other you know what we gained from all the courses it's just special skill I think it's for example maybe when we graduate from here we will forgot what we learnt in the specific courses I mean not knowledge part but critical thinking is a skill that we can take away and then yeah for all the things so I think of course it's helped me to study here for the master level [C5P9]

## Implications: Teaching

- Avoid the 'non-pedagogy, of osmosis' (Turner, 2011, p.21)
- Make the implicit explicit.
- assessment validity?: endeavour to uncover and clarify implicit assumptions lurking in assessment criteria

## Implications: Research

- When assessors require students 'to be more critical', what are they actually expecting?  
*'The evident importance of critical thinking in higher education, as well as the seeming pedagogical uncertainty surrounding the concept, suggests there is a need to find out more about how the ideal is actually understood and used by academics...'*
- Take categorizations identified from focus groups for larger scale empirical work across different subject disciplines, students from different educational backgrounds, English proficiency levels, etc.



# Blended Learning

# Blended learning

- exposes students to a **greater variety of learning tools**, enhancing the overall learning experience (Eugenia 2008)
- enhances students' **reflective skills** and their ability to reframe and reinterpret existing knowledge, values and beliefs (Cooner 2010)
- allows students the opportunity to **coordinate with their classmates** and consider material in considerably more depth (Cooner 2010)
- provides learners with **greater control over the pace of learning**, instructional flow, selection of resources and time management (Chung and Davis 1995)



# Blended learning

- Many students view online tasks as additional or extra-curricular work, **choosing not to participate** or engage (Orton-Johnson 2009)
- Those who did engage eventually abandoned online learning tasks, perceiving **traditional texts as more 'authentic' sources** of academic knowledge (Forsyth & Archer 1997; Johnson & Kiviniemi 2009)
- Students often experience **frustration, difficulty and confusion** utilising web-based study materials (Hara & Kling 2000, 2002; Parkinson, Greene, Kim & Marioni, 2003)



# 1<sup>st</sup> focus groups, February

**Participants were asked to rank by usefulness:**

- Watching videos
- Reading video transcripts
- Reading books/articles
- Using the discussion board
- Having tutor input
- Participating in group work/discussion

then discuss their usefulness for different purposes.



# 1<sup>st</sup> focus groups

## What was considered most useful?

Books/articles, teacher input and group discussion featured, but 9 nominated **the videos** as most or equal-most useful.

- *Watching videos. It's more systematic ... and if I can't catch up with some ideas I can repeat it back again. [C1P1]*
- *Some of the videos are very conducive to your understanding of the abstract concept ... also because we can improve our listening ability. [C1P2]*
- *The videos. I like them very much. I think that when I watch them with the transcripts together I am getting more information than the books. [C4P19]*

# 1<sup>st</sup> focus groups

## What was considered most useful?

Some emphasized **the transcripts** over the videos.

- *Some jokes I can't understand, so I will read the transcript, why the jokes make others laugh. [C3P17]*
- *When you watch the video at the same time, you can grasp what the lecturer is talking about. [C2P7]*
- *In most videos the lecturer, they might have accent, sometimes their tone make me feel sleepy, to be honest. ... And also sometimes, like, they speak too fast, and English is not my first language, so it may be hard to understand what they are talking about, so I highly depend on the transcripts. [C3P11]*

# 1<sup>st</sup> focus groups

## What was considered least useful?

A few nominated **the video transcripts or the videos themselves.**

- *Sometimes the pace in the video is so slow, and I can read the transcript in a short time to get the information, and also if I listen to something it's easy for me to get distracted. [C2P5]*
- *Sometimes on the transcripts you can't find the charts or the graphs ... and when you watch the slides in the video it will help you better understand what the lecturer is saying. [C2P7]*
- *I can learn from different ways, like reading articles I learn from reading, and for me, video [helps] train my listening ... just train my learning strategies. ... Video is good, but video transcript, I mean for me it's the least useful. [C2P9]*

# 1<sup>st</sup> focus groups

## What was considered least useful?

Most nominated **the discussion board**.

- *We hardly ever use it. We are not initiated to use it. Maybe if someone throws a question then other people will start to use it, but it's just, like, nobody. [C1P4]*
- *We will put our homework on the discussion board and we will reply to others, but we won't read all of the students' work. It's a little bit [boring]. We will read one or two, or some longer ones, just ignore others. [C3P17]*
- *Group discussion is face-to-face and is more intense than the discussion board. [C2P8]*

# 1<sup>st</sup> focus groups

## What was considered least useful?

Same gave cultural reasons for not using the discussion board.

- *Most of the students are from East and we don't [use it] to communicate. If we have questions we prefer to contact with the tutor immediately, like email them or ask them questions, or we prefer to talk with our peers ... face-to-face. [C3P11]*
- *The tutor said we can just use the discussion board instead of email her directly [so that she] can solve the questions for all of us, but for a lot of Asian students ... we are worried we are asking silly questions [that] may bother others, so we are used to just email the tutor directly. [C3P17]*

# 1<sup>st</sup> focus groups

## What was considered least useful?

Others gave practical reasons for not using the discussion board.

- *[We were asked] to comment on one of the articles your classmate has written, and I noticed that not everyone finished this task. Even if someone has written a comment on, it is just very general ideas, so I don't think I can learn something from the discussion board.*

[C3P14]

- *It might be not very user-friendly. If you, like, make the discussion board ... like most of us are used to ... we might engage in this discussion board more often.* [C3P12]



## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups, July

**Have you revisited any of the materials from the three courses (the readings, the videos, the video transcripts, or the posts on the discussion board) to help with your assignments, other courses, or your dissertation? If so, which ones and why?**

- Little of the uniquely online material was revisited. Most nominated the readings.
- 2 of 8 participants mentioned revisiting videos and transcripts.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups

**Now that you have done all three courses, what is your opinion about the value of the discussion boards?**

Some participants still said they didn't use the discussion boards, and saw little value in them.

- *I think it's not very useful or helpful because in my class ... few students use it. Maybe the students are busy with their assignments or dissertation so nobody uses it. [C5P16]*
- *It just never occurred to me to use it. [C7P12]*



## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups

But others now saw value, even if they didn't use them.

- *I mostly used them in the last course which was for the poster proposal, but I never wrote. ... I mostly opened it to see the notes of the tutor and maybe if there were some questions of others. ... I can't say I was part of it—I never posted something—but I think it's very good that they exist. [C6P20]*
- *I didn't use it very often [but] it's good for I think for the peers to communicate with each other and also for the teacher-peer communication. ... I was checking it regularly. ... My opinion is positive actually because these people asking their questions and ... they were sharing their writing for formative assessments, so people were commenting on each other's work, so in that times it was okay. [C6P18]*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups

- *For research methods number 1 and 3 ... it was just like blank. People say you can use it, but nobody posts, and the teacher doesn't help [by] initiating some posts. But the second one ... [the teacher] initiated the conversation and students asked follow-up questions, which makes it all kind of natural. ... So I think it depends on the teacher. ... [The teacher in the second course] specifically said, 'If I have mentioned this question in the board don't ask me in person,' so it's sort of, like, intimidating. You want to check the board, you know, you don't want to make [a] fool of yourself, so I think for that course specifically was fully used by ... a lot of people. When it's used it could be very helpful. When it's not used I mean how can it be helpful? [C5P4]*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups

**Would regular tutor input improve their usefulness?** Yes.

- *If the tutor is going to post things there then I will make sure to check it up, if it's the teacher. [C7P12]*
- *I can't remember something important that I read there ... from the tutor. I remember only that she put the presentations from the course, and maybe she replied to some questions, but I can't remember something valuable. Yeah, it would be more beneficial. [C6P19]*
- *Why would we choose to use the discussion board instead of other communication ... we have QQ, we have WeChat, we can even chat on Facebook if we want to, so it's all about the teacher putting input ... otherwise I don't see why we would prioritise the discussion board [over] other ways to communicate. [C5P4]*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups

**Would the possibility of anonymous posting improve their usefulness?**

6 out of 8 thought so, 2 were unsure.

- *I think that when you know that there will be anonymity you are more free to ask questions that maybe may seem otherwise stupid, or you would be maybe shy to ask, so yes, why not? [C6P20]*
- *I don't know. Actually, for me, it didn't make very much difference, anonymity, but maybe it could be beneficial for some, like, inconfident people to raise their questions, yeah. [C6P18]*
- *I don't know, because I can't remember others' name. [C7P8]*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups

- *I was in a group project, ... five people, and two of us were just ... not working with the rest of the three girls, and we were really having trouble. ... We wanted to talk to the teacher, but it was sort of, you feel embarrassed ... you don't want them to have a negative impression. ... If I could ... put it on the discussion board ... then maybe the teacher as a figure can talk to us as a group instead of knowing who said that ... that's something that would make you feel uncomfortable when you talk to the teacher if he recognise your face. [C5P4]*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> focus groups

**Can you identify ways that the online materials enabled you to be more reflective?** Generally, the videos helped here.

- *I think so ... especially in video, because they, usually they make examples in their own research. [C7P8]*
- *The videos, [where] those people who talked were referring to specific examples of research, so it was ... easier to understand practically what has to be done. So yes, they helped me. Not all of the videos, but I think most of them were very helpful. [C6P20]*
- *Yeah ... for example, if they were talking [in the videos] about ethical concerns and they were, like, sort of matching their own ethical concerns in the research with the material ... it just made me a bit more reflective toward my own research. [C6P18]*
- *I don't think the videos helped me to be reflective, because I could barely finish watching the video. [C5P4]*



## Some blended conclusions

- Videos were valued by participants for extending the readings, and for their repeatability.
- Transcripts enhanced the value of the videos, and were preferred by some, but sometimes missed key information.
- Discussion boards went largely unused, with exceptions.
- Stronger tutor input and direction could turn this around, as most participants see this as adding value.
- Anonymity could also remove inhibitors to posting.

## Some blended conclusions

- We observed some of the problems with blended learning reported in the literature, and not all of the supposed benefits.
- But there were indications of practical steps that can address perceived problems.
- If students don't see the value in an online resource, they won't use it.
- Improved direction from course developers, course organisers and tutors adds value...
- And so does greater engagement.
- Most of the perceived problems are solvable.