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ACADEMIC PA EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR LINKING THEORY AND PRAXIS

Frans-Bauke van der Meer and Peter Marks

ABSTRACT

Purpose – One ambition of most mid-career MPA programmes is to combine the attainment of an academic master degree with a qualitative leap in professional skills and functioning. This ambition requires that academic insights and methods be sensibly linked to real-life professional contexts and challenges. This chapter develops a rationale to enhance conditions and mechanisms that help to produce such linking, based on insights in professional learning.

Design/methodology/approach – Two methods used in the mid-career MPA programme at Erasmus University Rotterdam to help students to establish such links will be discussed. The first method involves an evolving personal learning agenda and the second method involves peer-to-peer coaching. Both methods will also be used to evaluate the added value of the programme for the professional functioning of the students.

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Findings – The MPA programme makes students link theory to their own real-life practice and changes their perspective on analysis and professional intervention. Often, however, these new perspectives are quite general in nature, not taking much account of the specific context. Thorough lecturer feedback and training in peer consultation may help students to become more reflexive and to develop better situation-specific strategies.

Practical implications – The findings point to the need for further development of didactical strategies.

Originality/value – The chapter analyses professional added value of an academic programme.

Keywords: Professional learning; linking theory and practice; reflection; didactics of MPA programs; peer consultation; assessment

INTRODUCTION

Students in mid-career MPA programmes may choose to follow the programme because they expect it to formally qualify them for roles and positions they aspire. However, they and their organisations also anticipate that they will become more capable and effective in their professional functioning as a result of undertaking the programme. That is, the programme is expected to enable the students to analyse and deal with challenges in their real-life setting more effectively. It is vital, therefore, that mid-career MPA programmes equip and support students to link theory and praxis, that is to link the new insights and skills they develop in the programme to their real-life context and challenges. On the other hand, effective professional education at an academic level requires that the content of the programme is actually linked to challenges experienced in student's praxis. Therefore, the curriculum and its didactical design should be linked to relevant practice in both directions. The focus in this chapter will be on how mid-career MPA programmes may support learning relevant for professional functioning in student's real-life contexts. The mid-career MPA programme at the Erasmus University will serve as an example on how a programme tries to realise the link between MPA education and the professional practice of its students. The following questions will be

addressed: How can real-life issues and challenges be effectively addressed in the programme? How can content and activities in the programme help to reflect on these issues and challenges? How to develop new ways of viewing these issues and challenges and acting upon these?

In the first section below, rationales for linking theory, reflection and practice in learning processes are discussed: what are its functions and benefits and how are they supposed to be produced. Next, the MPA programme of Erasmus University will be described, focusing on how it tries to enhance and facilitate professional learning, by making connections between academy and practice in both directions. The didactical rationale behind it is elaborated and in the following section a number of exemplary assignments for students are described. These assignments have two functions: facilitating the connection between academy and professional practice, and assessing students' (acquired) ability to do so. However, in this chapter they also serve a third purpose: to serve as a framework for assessing how successful the programme is in supporting professional learning and for identifying areas for improvement. The findings are presented and analysed and at the end conclusions are drawn.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND REFLECTION

Learning for praxis can be conceived of at three levels. Firstly, learning how to do things (better). Secondly learning how to analyse situations and problems (better) and learning how to select or construct adequate solutions accordingly. Thirdly, learning how to reflect, develop new perspectives, strategies and interventions and evaluate these, that is learning how to learn in a practice-oriented and yet reflexive way. These three levels of learning are similar to the single loop, double loop and deuteron learning distinction [Argyris \(1992\)](#) made. These levels are primarily used in relation to individual learning. However, for students to become more effective in praxis attention is also to be given to a fourth level: how to organise organisational learning.

Single-Loop Learning

Individual-level single-loop learning involves training in skills or competences that can be applied in practice quite straightforwardly. Apart from

research skills (and perhaps competences like conversation skills) such training is no core business of academic MPA programmes.

Double-Loop Learning

Double-loop learning at the individual level is far more characteristic of academic MPA programmes. Developing different perspectives and ways of analysing real-life settings, requires linking between theory and praxis in both directions. Theoretical concepts, arguments, explanations should be both applicable and applied.

How can these linking processes be shaped and enhanced? To answer this question, it is important to take into account what we know about professional learning. As Webster-Wright (2009) extensively documents in her review of research on professional learning, the idea of 'knowledge' as a kind of commodity that can be transferred from teacher to student and when well understood can be applied by the student in his professional context, is increasingly seen as problematic. According to Webster-Wright (2009) and Lave and Wenger (1991) and many others, professionals learn in context and in action, often in implicit ways. The present authors suggest that double-loop or higher levels of learning by definition imply that situated sense-making of both theory and practice by students is necessary for professional learning supported by MPA programmes to occur. Double-loop learning is about analysing and dealing with complex situations or problems that can be viewed in different ways and in which theoretical notions can be linked to actual phenomena only after 'interpretation' of both. The student/professional is central in this process of self-directed learning, recently analysed in terms of heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012; Canning, 2010). In the cited accounts of these professional learning processes *reflection* plays a key role. Therefore, MPA programmes, rather than by transferring knowledge may support professional learning by evoking reflection (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Van der Meer & Marks, 2013).

The concept of reflection is elaborated in many different ways (see Halonen, 2006; Smith, 2011). In the context of professional learning at an academic level, reflection refers to sense-making with respect to situations, issues and challenges in the professional context and to theoretical and conceptual notions. Moreover it involves developing and exploring new interpretations and ways of viewing. Making these sense-making processes as explicit as possible, and in doing so reflect on (implicit) presuppositions, enhances the quality of reflection by making it more conscious and flexible.

Thus, reflection is the core of the process of linking theory and practice that MPA programmes try to realise.

Linking in this context, involves both delinking and relinking (Van der Meer & Ringeling, 2010). Practitioner MPA students should learn to take some distance to their own practice and theory in use (unfreezing). They need to learn to take a detached stance if they are to be able to view and analyse their practice and theory in use in new perspectives. Experience-based self-evident interpretations should be put to discussion, not because it is certain that they are wrong nor because theories from the programme are necessarily better, but because evaluation of these latter theories and assessment of their potential added value requires that the existing theory-in-use be bracketed for the time being (delinking). This is often not an easy job to do, since theory-in-use dependent observations and experiences tend to be felt as 'reality' in sense-making processes (Weick, 1995). Inviting students to make their theory-in-use explicit and putting it to academic scrutiny (e.g. in a group of students) may help. Interaction between students (or between students and teaching staff) can be seen as interaction across the boundary of student's community of practice, which is seen by Wenger (2000) as an important condition and mechanism of (organisational) learning.

Linking new theoretical perspectives to real-life praxis is not self-evident either. Explicit reflection and discussion on how this could be done (e.g. in student papers, peer-to-peer discussions or classroom interaction) is essential. The class can be considered as a community of practice interacting across boundaries because students are also involved in their own (overlapping) professional community of practice.

Deutero Learning

Reflection, and so linking theory and practice, is no straightforward procedure (which would suggest the option of single-loop learning of the trick). Therefore professionals should (learn to) reflect on their reflection and learning processes if they are to engage in *reflection in action* (Schön, 1983) in a continuous way. This reflection can also be explicitly addressed in MPA programmes by scrutinising their own learning processes.

Organisational Learning

Individual (professional) learning will not always be directly translated in changes in behaviour in the organisational setting. And if it does, it will not

always be effective. In an organisation or network changed behaviour will have to be adapted to and co-ordinated with the social context if it is to be effective (Webster-Wright, 2009). Therefore, in professional learning processes attention for conditions, dynamics and strategies of organisational change and learning is essential. In MPA programmes reflection on theory and practice of organisational change and learning can be done in similar ways as reflection on other real-life issues and problems and related theories. It will contribute to student's individual learning on these processes, and help to build a repertoire of ways to contribute to making new insights and solutions in their professional context.

THE ERASMUS UNIVERSITY MPA PROGRAMME

The Erasmus University MPA programme is a two-year mid-career programme. Students already hold a higher professional (or sometimes academic) qualification and have at least two years of relevant professional experience. Their average age is about 37, their professional experience varies between 2 and 35 years. The number of students is between 40 and 60 per cohort. Most students work in (municipal) administration or in the security & justice, care or education sectors.

The programme consists of four stages (see [Van der Meer & Ringeling, 2010](#)):

1. An exploratory initial module, focusing on unfreezing and the development of individual learning agendas.
2. Modules on policy and decision-making processes, management aspects and strategies, law, political science, economics and research methods. These are offered in the remainder of the first year and emphasise cognitive development and development of research and other academic skills.
3. In the second year the emphasis shifts to reflection and application. This is achieved through modules on substantive issues (steering and network management, public management and organisational change, the role of societal actors in policy processes and problem solving) and a methodology module. Thus, students become engaged in analysing and diagnosing real-life situations and problems, developing new perspectives and solutions, and reflecting on interventions and strategies.
4. In the final module and in their thesis, real-life puzzles and challenges are dealt with in their particular context, which is usually complex and has many different aspects. This requires a critical, reflexive and creative

attitude both with respect to the problem definition and with respect to theories and methods that may contribute to addressing the problem.

At all stages, but to an increasing extent in the course of the curriculum, students' practical experience and real-life contexts are drawn upon. This is mainly done in group discussions, exercises and assignments (see below). Real-life cases are used as illustration in lectures and senior practitioners from diverse organisations and policy domains are invited as guest lecturers.

More specifically the following (re)linking elements between 'theory' and 'practice' are consecutively included in the programme.¹

- By the end of the first module, *Exploration*, students are asked to formulate their motivation for participating in the programme and to make a personal learning agenda for the rest of the programme. In doing so, most students explicitly refer to puzzles and ambitions in their real-life context. One of the intended functions of this assignment is to induce a mind-set in students which prompts them to keep asking themselves how their study helps them deal with real-life issues and challenges.
- In the second module, *Policy*, a group paper (three students) is written on a policy issue of their own choice. A structured analysis of the rationale, implementation and impact of a policy instrument is required. This encourages students to reflect on the theories presented in the programme and apply them to a case they know (or that a peer student knows).
- The third module, *Organization and Behaviour in the Public Sector*, requires groups of four students to diagnose problems in team work in one of their own organisations and formulate recommendations for improvement, using the theory from the module.
- In the module on *Economic Policy and Management Control* groups of three students have to analyse one of six or seven predefined cases, or a non-predefined case that needs to be approved by the teachers, using theory presented. Most, but not all students can choose an area they know.
- The module on *Administration and Democracy*, asks groups of two students to do research on one real-life case from a list of 27, using theory from the course literature.
- The final module of the first year is European Public Administration & Comparative Studies. In this module students engage in comparing practices in different countries, either in a paper or by participating in an International Summer School in which there is much exchange with peers from other countries on PA issues.

- In the second module of the second year groups of two students do a limited but full-fledged research project on a public administration steering issue in a complex network context. The choice of context and issue is their own, which means that most if not all of the students apply theory and methods in their own real-life settings.
- In the third module on *Public Management and Organizational Change*, there is a similar assignment with respect to an internal organisational issue. Here students write an individual paper in which they analyse a case of their own choice and formulate recommendations; both analysis and recommendations are to be based on theoretical reasoning and reflexive argument.
- The next module, *Society and Policy*, also asks students (in groups of two) to theoretically and empirically analyse a real-life case pertaining to a societal issue or challenge.
- *The Public Administration Professional*, the final module, discusses with students and practitioners a number of complex real-life challenges. Moreover, there are randomly formed peer-to-peer coaching groups of four students in which each student presents a real-life puzzle, for which the other group members have to develop possible solutions, supported by theoretical reasoning. Finally, students have to reflect on the programme as a whole: what did they learn and develop with respect to their initial agenda and how and why has their learning agenda changed?

ASSESSING IMPACT

The description above suggests that there is ample opportunity in the programme, if not a forced obligation to (re)link theory and praxis. But does it really work? And if so, how? To shed some light on these questions, three of the assignments discussed in the preceding section are considered in more detail.

The very first assignment in the programme, the agenda-setting essay of the first module, can be considered a kind of initial measurement: it reflects to some extent the knowledge, attitude, questions and expectations of the student on enrolment in the programme. It can be assumed that the initial knowledge, attitude and questions primarily stem from (reflection on) real-life experience and from previous education. The perceptions students have about academic educations also shape their expectations.

The final assignment of the programme asks students to refer to this first assignment of the programme. They are asked to describe whether and

how they made progress regarding their initial agenda and their questions stemming from their real-life experience and previous education. Moreover, they are also asked to describe the new questions and challenges that emanated during two years of studying in combination with professional practice and how they think they may deal with these new themes. Undoubtedly, not all learning in terms of substantive answers or in terms of reframing questions is to be considered as a link between theory and praxis. On the contrary, if students adopt scientific approaches and theories without adequate reflexivity, the effect may be that their professional functioning and efficacy is hindered instead of enhanced (Webster-Wright, 2009). However, a careful analysis of the combination of the first and last assignments of the programme may shed light on how the programme helps students to view their practice in new ways and to act more effectively. For this chapter the assignments of 18 students were analysed.

A second way to get some evidence on the theory–praxis nexus in programme, is to look at the products of the peer-to-peer coaching sessions in the final module of the programme. This peer-to-peer coaching explicitly focuses on student's real-life puzzles on the one hand and on making use of theory, insights, skills and methods learnt in the programme on the other. The cases, recommendations and reflections on six peer-to-peer coaching groups (24 students) were analysed for this study.

HOW DOES IT WORK? IMPACT OF MPA SUPPORTED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ON THE LEARNING AGENDA

Looking at the initial agenda of the 18 students, four types of learning ambitions were identified:

1. Insight into administrative and public management processes and into relationships between politics and the civil service.
2. Problem diagnosis and problem-solving strategies (interventions).
3. Personal professional competences (broader expertise; research skills steering in policy making presentation skills; arguing in order to be able to influence and to function more professionally).
4. Domain-specific knowledge and insight, for example with respect to inter-municipal collaboration, dealing with diversity or managing care.

In a sense this type of agenda is rather instrumental: how to deal with organisational and societal problems, how to improve personal/professional

functioning? Most learning ambitions seem to reflect a need for single-loop learning, although there are elements of double-loop learning.

Does the programme help to realise these needs? The student self-reports on what they learned, formulated for the final assignment of the programme provide many insights.

Firstly, most students report having acquired new insights, especially with respect to the complexity and multiplicity of organisational and social contexts and problems, and with respect to the dominant role of social construction processes around problems and solutions. One student explicitly stated that these insights had made her realise that the instrumental ambitions with respect to more effective professional functioning would take a longer learning process than two years. Other students expressed similar reservations with respect to the ability to realise straightforward solutions to the problems confronting them in their work. This outcome may be read as an indication of an incomplete realisation of the initial expectations and learning goals. However, at the same time it reflects an important shift in problem definition which to a large extent can be classified as a shift from single- to double-loop learning. This is also mirrored by the dominant type of new learning goals students formulate by the end of the programme. These focus on more insight into the role of context, complexity and multi-dimensionality of real-life issues. It seems clear that students have learned to see their professional practice in new ways and reframe their problem definitions accordingly.

Secondly, students report enhanced competence to develop solutions in interaction and cooperation with the other actors involved. This corresponds with one of the major initial goals, but here again a reframing can be observed, since the social interactive dimension in developing and realizing solution has clearly got more emphasis.

Thirdly, many students experienced personal growth in terms of skills, reflexivity and understanding of personal and organisational limitations. They feel more able to explicitly reflect on their own actions and strategies and to change actions and strategies accordingly.

Finally they also experienced growth in substantive knowledge, both with respect to theory and in the (context of) real-life settings.

However, many students are still putting further personal development on their learning agenda, especially with respect to diagnosis, reflection, intervention and leadership. Also, most students want to enhance their substantive knowledge further with respect to specific organisational or policy issues.

The outcomes show that the initial instrumental and practice-oriented attitude has not disappeared, but the phrasing and the summary of the learning experiences show that a substantial redefinition of what is instrumental and what it takes to be effective has taken place. Students display more attention to context, divergent perspectives and the role of interaction and social construction processes. It is clear from many observations in these assignments that most students realise that an open, critical, research-oriented attitude and interactive skills are required. These facilitate a process of continuous learning and strategy development in conjunction with the other stakeholders and in relation to specific contexts (see the concepts of situated learning, heutagogy and organisational learning referred to above).

HOW DOES IT WORK? ASSESSMENT BASED ON THE PEER-TO-PEER COACHING GROUPS

In the final module of the programme, peer-to-peer coaching groups consisting of four students are created. Each student presents his or her problem and question for advice in writing (initial problem definition). In total there are six hours of scheduled time to work on the four cases (and more if the group decides to do so). The three 'coaches' for each case have to analyse the problem (if they think it necessary they can ask the 'client' to provide additional information), and to formulate well-argued recommendations. They write an advisory report. Finally, the 'client' reflects on the advice, both orally and in writing.

For this analysis, an inventory was made of the types of problems presented in six groups (24 students), the modes in which the advice on these problems was constructed and the nature of the reflections of the clients after receiving the advice. This illustrates how students deal with real-life problems by the end of the programme and how able they are to help others in dealing with their real-life problems.

With respect to the problems put forward by the students in their role as client, 9 of the 24 problems explicitly pertain to the role and behaviour of the 'client': *What can I do in this case ...? My boss is inclined to take a sub-optimal decision; how can I intervene effectively?* In the other cases substantive organisational/management (8), policy (4) or combined policy/management problems (3), for example, on implementation strategies, are formulated, but all cases directly relate to student's professional context

and responsibility. In the large majority of the cases the client seems to be quite sure about what the problem is and frequently also what is an appropriate or even the best solution. In other words, students are quite able to formulate instrumental practice-oriented questions. However, the cases presented differ considerably with respect to the relevant context provided. It seems as if not all clients are aware of what it takes for their peers to get a basic understanding of 'the' problem they pose. This is a remarkable finding, because students report that the programme gave them more insight in the complexity and multi-dimensionality of PA problems (see the previous section).

Looking at the peer consultations and the advice reports produced, a first observation is that the problem definition presented by the client is often taken for granted by the coaches. Only incidentally coaches suggest a reframing of the question. Many recommendations do not seem to be based on a thorough diagnosis of the specific situation but look like general literature-based suggestions: in almost all advice reports, extensive reference is made to scientific literature used during the programme. Still, especially when dealing with organisational, management or policy issues, the coaches tend to develop creative recommendations, often process-oriented. Their reasoning is sometimes well-argued, but sometimes the recommendations are presented almost without explanation of why and how these might help. Also, especially in the cases where the client's question focuses on his or her own professional functioning, there is a tendency to prescribe what the client should try to do but to pay little attention to why and how s/he should or could do that.

All in all, these findings may suggest on the one hand that by the end of the programme students see clear connections between theory and real-life problems and are able to develop strategies and interventions on this basis. On the other hand, it seems that many students tend to interpret problems in practice and solutions in the literature rather unquestioningly, that is they do not seem to have fully integrated their insights into complexity and the multidimensional nature of problems into their way of dealing with real-life problems. Moreover, not all coaches seem to realise what it takes for the client to put recommendations into practice. This pertains to convincing the client on the one hand (argument behind the recommendations) and to provide him or her with options for concrete interventions on the other.

The reflections of clients on advice received can be divided into two categories. Some reflections (7 of 24) have the style of a review. In these cases, recommendations are commented upon and judged, often from the

perspective of the initial problem definition in terms of 'good' or 'bad', 'valid' or 'incorrect', 'feasible' or 'unrealistic'. This is not to say that in these cases clients do not get new ideas from the advice, but these tend to be forms of single-loop learning (Argyris, 1992) in which no really new perspectives or approaches are developed. A possible explanation for this finding might be that these students received rather limited recommendations.

The second type of reactions has a focus on 'what can I learn from it?' In some instances, clients announced without any reasoning that they would follow-up the recommendations. However, most students writing this type of reflection used the advice to elaborate and develop their own thinking about the problem, their attitude, possible interventions and strategies. Some students receiving rather superficial advice nevertheless produced thorough reflections with respect to the problem and their own course of action.

We can conclude that all students are quite practice oriented in their reflections on the advice received. They seem to be quite able to connect recommendations (even if these are not of high quality or primarily reflect theoretical literature) to their real-live praxis. Most students appear to do this in quite reflexive ways by redefining the problem or solutions considered as well as adapting their own thinking and intended way of acting. A few students, however, seem to accept or reject recommendations without critical analysis. There were one or two students who gave advice purely based on literature, as if problems were standard and the literature a recipe book. Sometimes, the received advice was similarly discredited because it was simply considered invalid for the case concerned.²

CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

From the data analysed in this chapter, it can be concluded that students tend to be strongly focused on improving (their own) functioning in practice. This is not primarily an outcome of the programme, but rather a starting point. This attitude can be recognised from their motivation and learning agenda at the start of the programme. But students claim the programme helps them to link theory and praxis and that it provides them with new insights and new ways of thinking about professional functioning and strategies of change; more insight into complexity and the multidimensional nature of problems; greater awareness of the role of contexts and sense making; a shift from orientation on the 'best' solution towards

process strategies to construct viable solutions and to create win-win situations.

In the analysis of the peer consultation process in the peer-to-peer coaching groups at the end of the programme, it was observed that students indeed make ample use of PA theory in constructing advice for their peers' real-life problems. However, a number of shortcomings in the process of professionally connecting theory and praxis were identified in this stage. In a sense they are all related to reflexivity, despite the fact that faculty paid much attention to encouraging reflexivity (van der Meer & Marks, 2008, 2013). One issue is that the relevant context is often not fully considered, neither by clients nor by coaches. A second point is that the analyses are frequently made in a straightforward and somewhat simplistic manner, with clients just using their initial problem definitions and with coaches just picking 'a' theory without exploring different perspectives. Thirdly, both with respect to problem definitions and to solutions proposed, argumentation is frequently lacking, as if the rationale is self-evident. Finally, advice is sometimes quite general and abstract, as if it is self-evident how it should be or could be translated into action.

In the framework of this chapter these findings are not interpreted as shortcomings of the students, but as shortcomings of the programme. To put it in other words: the key question is what can be changed or added in the programme design and context to help overcome these flaws. The following options may be considered.

Feedback by Teaching Staff

In feedback given on exams, papers, presentations by students, it may be possible to pay more attention to arguments and/or evidence. Students should not only formulate 'correct' answers or statements, but primarily show why they think they are correct. Feedback and marking should address this aspect explicitly. If an answer is 'wrong' or 'unconvincing', feedback should explain why, not only to help students to improve their knowledge, but also to socialise them in argumentative practice. Also feedback in the shape of questions may be helpful in this socializing process: 'How do you know?', 'What is your argument?', 'Would this convince actors involved?' 'Why do you think this theory is valid?' Giving feedback in these ways reinforces the importance of reflexivity and a research-oriented attitude, which seem to be essential elements of professional learning (in action).

Feedback Training

Especially in group work during the programme, students can be triggered and trained to give, get and use feedback to and from their peers and react upon it. Our experience in the final module reported above suggests that it may be useful to pay explicit attention to feedback skills in an early stage of the programme. This may involve giving an overview of the functions of feedback, tutor feedback strategies and guidance and feedback on the way students give and use peer feedback.

Debate in Class

Also in the interactive parts of the class sessions students should be challenged to argue and give evidence for their statements, to develop alternative interpretations of facts and phenomena and to justify proposed strategies and interventions.

Emphasis on Critical and Research Minded Attitude

The mission, image and design of the programme should put somewhat less emphasis on 'knowledge transfer' and more emphasis on becoming reflexive and developing a research focus, also in connection to real-life issues students are dealing with. MPA students, as stated before, generally are not aiming to become future academic researchers. But, making use of academic knowledge and research in their professional functioning is a central key in the added value of the programme. This requires a research attitude. No real-life problem and no suggested solution or strategy should be seen as self-evident. Central questions for PA professionals will always be: how come? What impact is to be expected of strategy X in situation Y, why and what are criteria by which this impact is to be judged? In this sense research orientation and reflexivity, also with respect to norms and values, become synonymous.

The overall conclusion of the explorations reported in this chapter is that the design of the programme, that is curriculum, didactics, type of assignment, collaboration between students etc., is quite successful in establishing links between theory and praxis. In this way it contributes to professional development of the students. However, the programme may be improved to enhance the quality of the linking theory and practice by

stimulating students to become more reflexive, critical and creative, both with respect to theory and their own (and each other's) practice.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Ibrahim Aarouss who made a systematic overview.
2. Of course there was also tutor feedback given on the assignments discussed. However, we did not assess the impact of this feedback on professional learning.

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