Redesigning an economics course to achieve more reflexivity

Is blended learning a curse or a blessing for mid-career MPA students and teacher?

Peter Koenraad Marks
Erasmus University Rotterdarm
Netherland

Abstract

A recurring issue in (mid-career) master programs Public Administration is to get students to become (more) reflexive (conf. e.g., special issue of Teaching Public Administration 2013). As academic graduates, they should not merely apply public administration theories and methods in standardized ways but always think critically about what they do and why. Moreover, they should be able to make sensible, situated connections between 'theory' and 'praxis' and critically and creatively derive new modes of professional action from these. To achieve this student should approach their study with the main intention to develop personal understanding (e.g., Marton & Säljö, 1976; Trigwell, 2010). In this article, the redesign of a course in a two-year mid-career master program from a traditional instructional mode to blended learning will be discussed and analyzed to see if the redesign attributed to more reflexive working methods in the course and a more reflexive attitude in students.

Keywords: Reflexivity, blended learning, deep learning approach, mid-career program, public administration

1. Introduction

Working – public – professionals wanting to study Public Administration can follow a mid-career Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Even though hardly any student following a master program will choose an academic career, they still need to be educated at an academic level because the complexity of their professional contexts requires this, as do jobs they want to acquire. Hence, as graduates of an academic program, they not only have to 'know' relevant PA academic theories and methods but also to 'use' these in sensible ways in their professional practice (Quinn, 2013). In other words, students should not merely apply public administration theories and methods in standardized ways but always think critically about what they do and why. Moreover, they should be able to make sensible, situated connections between 'theory' and 'praxis' and critically and creatively derive new modes of professional action from these (Van der Meer & Marks, 2013).

The teaching staff of the program feels that for many students it is difficult to meet these standards. Some students seem to use methods, models, and theories quite instrumentally and without reflection. It may be

that students do not expect this reflection as a core task and hence adopt a Surface Approach to learning, which means that students' main intention to learning is to satisfy assessment requirements. Routine, unreflective memorization and procedural problem solving are associated strategies. Whilst a more reflexive attitude requires that students adopt a Deep Approach to learning, which means that students main intention in learning is to develop personal understanding, and is associated with an intention to comprehend, to active conceptual analysis and result in a deep level of understanding (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Meer, van der, et al. 2013; Struyven, *et al.*, 2006; Trigwell, 2010).

To get students to become (more) reflexive (see the special issue of Teaching Public Administration 2013 on this subject) means that their study approach needs to be more in line with the Deep Approach. However, the study approach of students needs to fit into a curriculum that offers ample opportunity to practice this reflexive nature. Even though courses in the MPA program use several methods to enhance reflection, it is still underdeveloped (Van der Meer & Marks, 2013). Several factors contribute to this underdeveloped reflective practice; e.g., teachers experience little time to devote attention to reflection, teachers focus on knowledge transfer, attitudes of students are quite instrumental, the number of students (45-70) makes it difficult to engage all of them in reflective discussions actively, structure of the curriculum, and requirements for papers and exams (for extensive overview see Van der Meer & Marks, 2013). Curriculum level changes have been implemented to strengthen reflective working methods, e.g., management of expectations, developing staff vision and commitment.

However, improving or introducing reflective working methods at course level could also provide the opportunity for students to strengthen their reflexive capacity. Options at course level are amongst others introducing blended learning to create different face-to-face contact, giving less structured exercises and assignments. One of the courses in the MPA curriculum is 'Government and Economic Policy (GEP)' (*Overheid en Economisch Beleid*). In this course, the didactical method changed from traditional instruction to blended learning. The idea is that blended learning will create the opportunity to use class time and study time in different manners to open up more opportunities for more reflective working methods during class hours.

Hence the question central in this paper is *How can blended learning create preconditions for implementation of reflective working methods in the Government and economic policy course of the MPA program at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands?*

In the next section, the workings of the course as it used to be will be explained as well as perceived pitfalls. In the third section blended learning will be explained, what it can contribute and how. Based on this theoretical argument it will be argued how it can contribute to the tackling the pitfalls of the GEP course. In section 4 the didactical format for the course will be explained, which will then be evaluated in section 5. Conclusion and a discussion will end the paper.

2. MPA & Government and economic policy

Since 2003 the Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Public Administration and Sociology has a two-year MPA program. It consists of 9 consecutive modules (60 ECTS) in the first year and five consecutive modules (45 ECTS) and a thesis (15 ECTS) in the second year. Each week there are two classes from 18.45-22.00 hours on Monday and Thursday in the first year, and on Tuesday and Thursday in the second year. Students have at least two and on average five or six years of relevant professional experience and have completed a higher vocational training. Each year around 50 students starts with the program and about 45 graduate. The program is specifically designed for practitioners (Van der Meer & Ringeling, 2010).

The GEP course is the fifth course in the first year and consists of eight classes followed by an exam. The goal of the course is to familiarize students how to analyze societal effects due to governmental actions and vice versa from an economics perspective. This perspective means: individuals have to make choices as due to scarcity individuals cannot fulfill all their wishes. These choice problems manifest themselves for consumers, producers, politicians, civil servants, et cetera and on a group level for lobby groups, local and national governments, et cetera. Students should learn how to analyze the behavior from this scarcity perspective. In the course two mainstream economic theories are dealt with by two different teachers; one teaches microeconomics and the other macro-economics / public finance. Mandatory literature is two economics textbooks. The table below shows what topics are dealt with during the course.

The assessment is split into two elements: 1) a short paper and presentation on a case study, and 2) a written exam. The students have to form groups of three and choose one case study out of seven subjects for their paper. During the last class, the total student population is split into two groups, in such a way that all seven case studies will be presented in one group. The subjects of the papers are mostly not on clear-cut economic cases, but on policy fields like environmental planning, traffic management, health care, et cetera. There are three micro-economic cases and four public finance cases. The case studies should trigger students to search and make a selection of concepts, approaches, and theories that are new to them. Since the policy field is most often not their policy field students are confronted with both relatively new policy fields, but also with new economic concepts. When applying the economic concepts, students are looking for answers they hadn't thought of before they started. Even when it is the policy field of one of the members of the group it turns out that with the economic concepts it creates new insights, sometimes contrasting their expectations. Presentation their case study to other students helps students learn to transfer relatively new concepts to an audience. That student audience then actively gives comments using the economic concepts hence applying them to a policy field (that was not their subject for the exercise). Through this exercise, students should open up for alternative approaches and actively learn to apply them in different contexts.

The papers and presentations, graded by the two teachers, can maximally add up to 30 points. The exam consists of 40 multiple choice questions, 17 on micro-economics and 23 on public finance, and one open question on microeconomics and one on public finance, which in total add up to 70 points. Students must have 55 points or more to pass the course.

Table 1. Course schedule and content

	Class	Literature	Time	Topics
Microeconomics	Monday	Ch 1-3, 6 & 9	18.45 – 19.45	Introduction, consumer theory
			20.00 – 21.00	Producer theory
			21.15 – 22.00	Supply and demand, and price elasticity
	Wednesday	Ch 3, 12-15	18.45 – 19.45	Price elasticity and governmental intervention
			20.00 – 21.00	Different markets
			21.15 – 22.00	Government and markets
	Monday	Ch 19, 20	18.45 – 19.45	(New) welfare economics
			20.00 – 21.00	Market failure, externalities, and public goods
			21.15 – 22.00	Q&A
Public finance	Wednesday	Ch 1-3	18.45 – 19.45	Role of the government
			20.00 – 21.00	Collective sector
			21.15 – 22.00	Political economics
	Monday	Ch 4-8	18.45 – 19.45	Rational decision-making
			20.00 – 21.00	Budgeting
			21.15 – 22.00	Norms for public finance
	Wednesday	Ch 9-13	18.45 – 19.45	Social security
			20.00 – 21.00	Health economics
			21.15 – 22.00	Taxes and income division
	Monday	Ch 14, 15	18.45 – 19.45	Levels of government
			20.00 – 21.00	Monetary policy and the European Union
			21.15 – 22.00	Q&A
	Wednesday		18.45 – 22.00	Group presentations
	Monday		18.30 – 21.30	Exam

The quality of the course is evaluated through several means:

1. The student fills out course evaluation forms during the first class of the following course. In this evaluation students rank things on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from quality of the teacher to quality of textbook, as well as ranging from how well the course fits into the MPA-program to how well the digital support was organized. Also, they are asked to answer the following open questions:
    a. what they missed or appreciated in the digital support
    b. which aspects of the course they would like to see changed
    c. which aspects of the course they particularly appreciated
    d. suggestions/remarks about the exam.
2. A focus group consisting of six or seven students openly discussing strengths and weaknesses of the course with the management of the MPA-program and the respective teachers. These discussion and comments have sometimes led to minor adjustments.

3. Before the start of the course, the management of the MPA-program discusses with the teachers which didactical elements the teacher could pay more attention to or what elements of the didactical formula of the program should be present in the course, but also how the management can assist the teachers in improving the course.
4. Adaptation initiated by the two teachers. This is also based on many bilateral discussions between teachers and students during the course.

Over the years it turns out that a substantial part of the students had no previous economic training, which makes them somewhat anxious and insecure about the course. The teachers do want to instruct as much as possible to the students without deterring the anxious and insecure students. Hence they stick to the textbook and explain, mostly graphically, what the economic principles and mechanisms are and how to explain economic behavior. According to the students that never had any economic education, the explanation goes quite rapidly. The students that did have economics in their high school tell that they have forgotten most and that the classes help in restoring this knowledge, but also that they miss more in-depth discussions on both the fundamentals of the theory as well as the applicability of the theory. Where the first group of students is playing catch up when trying to apply the economic principles the latter group thinks it is not going deep enough. In other words, the strategy to explain everything and only spend a small amount of time on application demotivates the more eager (Deep Approach) students because of superficiality and at the same time do not reach the inexperienced group of students because it is going (too) fast.

From the surveys and focus groups, it also is clear that students find it difficult to understand the value added of micro-economics if their case study was a macroeconomic/public finance topic, and vice versa. They admitted that if their paper was on public finance that they focused on the macroeconomic/public finance classes during the course and that the microeconomic theory disappeared to the background, and vice versa. Due to this one-sided theoretical focus of the students, the teachers feel that they cannot adequately assess whether the students reach all goals set out for the course.

Part of the MPA didactical formula is that students should be able to apply the economic principles to their daily working practice and case study. However, due to instructing theory and how this theory works, the working background of students is hardly ever utilized to help them grasp the economic argumentation. This makes it harder for students to connect the material to their daily practice, which they also state in the survey or during a discussion with the focus group. Teachers feel a dilemma, as they want more discussions on theory and how to relate them to the daily practice of the student while at the same time feeling students' needs of extra instructions of the material to meet the goals of the course.
That is, the teachers feel a need reflexivity needs developing in this course, both in course design and assessment. To reach this, the teachers see blended learning as an opportunity to use class time and study time differently opening up to open up more opportunities to have debates about the theory, discuss different applications to cases as well as the students' working practices.

3. MPA & Government and economic policy

Simply put, blended learning is nothing more than the mixing of different learning and teaching methods. However, mostly "blended learning refers to all combinations of FTF (face-to-face) learning with technology-based learning: traditional education can be enriched with the use of technology and learning with technology can profit from FTF meetings." (Kerres & Witt, 2003: 101; see also Graham, 2005; Heinze & Procter, 2004). However, blended learning is more than the simple combination of FTF and technology-mediated learning as it also has to match didactical parameters like learning goals and objectives, characteristics of the content, the target group and situational/institutional demands (Kerres & De Witt, 2003: 111).

One of the reasons for blending is that technology-mediated environments help change from a more instructive setting to a more interactive version (Graham, 2005). That is, in the FTF meetings less time can be spent on frontal lecturing because that will be technology-mediated, creating time, e.g., for discussions, exercises in the face-to-face setting. Another reason for technology-mediated learning is that students have more flexibility and convenience of studying during their times. At the same time many students do not want to sacrifice the social interaction and human touch they are used to in FTF settings. Also in the FTF setting discussions and other forms of exchange between students, and between students and teacher helps the learning process of the students. Blended learning holds the possibilities to mix the best of both worlds. The idea is to create more effective training settings than classroom training alone, with higher learner value and impact.

Blending may occur at many different levels, i.e., at the activity level, course level, program level and institutional level. Course level blending is most common which means a combination of clear face-to-face and technology-mediated activities between students, teachers and learning resources. One major drawback of technology-mediated activities is that they mostly support only part of the learning processes students engage in. Proper blended learning is then a means to combine multiple delivery media designed to complement each other and promote meaningful learning (Bliuc, Goodyear & Ellis et al. 2007: 233). This means that no blended learning designs are the same, as a blended learning design needs a fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004: 97). Although it seems that in many classrooms face-to-face interaction remains favored, many different forms of technology-mediated activities are introduced (Fleck, 2012). An important aspect to keep in mind when introducing blended learning in any course is that "with the limited results of higher education in facilitating critical thinking, and the need for these abilities in our information age, it is becoming clear that it is essential we do better at facilitating critical, creative, and complex thinking skills. Blended learning offers possibilities to create transformative environments that can effectively facilitate these skills." (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004: 99)

The question is how blended learning will create more critical and reflexive students in the Government and Economic Policy course? What elements of blended learning can help tackle the restraining conditions

mentioned in the previous section?

- *Speed and superficiality*
  Instruction of the 'simpler' theoretical notions and workings of the theory can be shifted from classroom instructions to internet movies and instruction. This will help the students that have no economic background to get a grasp of the basic notions in their own pace and their protected environment, while at the same time will it help students that have had economics in refreshing the material in their own pace. This also creates more time during FTF contact hours which will enable the next three elements.
- *Connection with professional working background of the students*
  Besides having the basics instructed through technology, students will be able to make a short test in which the results are promptly shown to the student. These test results will be observed by the teacher, making it obvious where the students have more difficulty with the economic notions or workings of the theory. The teacher can focus its instruction time on these manifested difficult notions and workings as well as openly discuss these notions and workings with the students and relate them to their working practice.
- *Time shortage to actively discuss and reflect on theory*
  By being able to focus on the more difficult subjects of the theory, to connect the theory to the professional working backgrounds and to the application in case studies the teachers can actively discuss and reflect on the theory. This means no standard format or answer can be given, but it should make students aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the theory and its' applicability.
- *Devotion of time due to assessment*
  FTF classroom time can be devoted to working on / discussing of / presenting the case studies to each other in separate groups or the whole class. Everybody can then reflect on these and learn from their comments to and from the other students, especially if they are all on similar subjects.

4. Blended learning and Government and economic policy

The introduction of blended learning has an impact on what the new course will look like, without abandoning the course goals. The number of classes will be four on micro-economics and three on macro-economics / public finance. The macro-economics / public finance part of the course will be slightly adjusted. The teacher chose not to reduce the compulsory literature, but to teach the same literature in fewer classes. Of course, the microeconomics part of the course will be majorly adjusted, which will be focused on in this section.

The assessment will remain split into two elements, i.e., a paper and presentation on a case study, and a written exam. Still, groups of three students will do one case study. The possible case studies are 1) maximum pricing for pre-masters at Dutch universities, 2) factory farming, 3) population decline (in rural areas), and 4) reduction of childcare allowance. The case studies will have to be analyzed from a micro-economic perspective covering the micro-economic course material, i.e., consumer behavior, producer behavior, markets, price elasticity, and welfare economics, of course always related to the public sector and

policy. The paper and presentation will count towards 50% of the final grade and the written exam for the remaining 50%. The exam will consist of 20 multiple choice questions (8 microeconomics and 12 public finance), and two open questions on macroeconomics / public finance, which in total add up to 50 points. The so-called BSKweb supports all courses at the MPA. This is a digital environment where we can communicate with students, put sheets, tasks, and other learning material online. Here we will provide the students a list of embedded short movies from www.Khanacademy.org and www.OSacademie.nl for instructions on the basic microeconomic notions and mechanisms. Also, a short quiz covering the material of the following class will be in the BSKweb (www.bskweb.nl). Students that do this quiz will get the correct answer, and the teacher will get the aggregate and thus sees how many percents answered which question (in)correctly. This provides input for the FTF class.

The four micro-economics classes will be roughly following the following structure:

Time	Topics
18.45 – 19.45	• Prepared instruction on specific difficult notions or mechanisms (due to missing explanation in movies or translation issues from English to Dutch) • Prepared (extra) explanation on experienced difficult notions and mechanisms based on quiz • On the fly (as student practices are not known upfront) discussions and illustrations of the notions and mechanisms related to students practices
20.00 – 21.00	• Groups are discussing the case study. Groups mingle over the different classes to be able to learn from different perspectives both theoretically and empirically • Teacher visits different groups to help structure the discussions
21.15 – 22.00	• General discussion and feedback on common problems and issues encountered in working on case studies • Analogous case study by teacher, i.e., HSR in the Netherlands

Both during group discussions as in the whole class discussions students will get ample opportunity to discuss their cases to get a better understanding of the micro-economic material they are applying to their case, i.e., they will get a better feeling on the working of the theory but also how theory helps to solve societal problems. The fifth class will be different, as the students will present their paper to the other groups with the same case study.

4.1 Assessment of results

Evaluation of the quality of the learning based on both FTF and online contexts and how the technology-mediated learning helps the FTF and vice versa may require adding new questionnaires to existing ones (see also Ginns & Ellis, 2007). Extra questions are added to the existing questionnaire using a Likert scale to get some idea of the students' impressions. The following questions have been added:

What is your opinion on (ranging from 'strongly disagree,' 'disagree,' 'neither agree nor disagree,' 'agree,' 'strongly agree':
1. For this part of the course, I had to work harder compared to the previous course
2. During this part of the course, I have learned to apply many microeconomic concepts
3. The movies on BSK-web have helped me preparing the classes
4. The discussion during class has helped me understand and apply the course material
5. The discussion of the case study in the second part of the class has helped me in my preparation for the final paper
6. The reflective discussions on the HSR-case during the third part of the classes have helped me understand how to apply the theoretical concepts to cases
7. Students could get a positive grade for the paper if they attended classes without preparation

The best insights whether blended learning helps in getting more critical reflective students is by observing how the students work with the theory, how they discuss it, how they apply it, and how they question and critique it. That is, it is successful if time is spent on reflexive exercises. Teacher observations are crucial for this evaluation. Blended learning will also be successful if students feel less anxious about the material, are better able to apply it to their real working experience and develop different insights on the same case studies even though applying the same theory. Results of this process will become visible through the student survey, the focus groups and discussions between students and the teacher

The implementation of blended learning may need fine-tuning during the course. The teacher asked a couple of students at the start of each class if they want to discuss with the teacher on what helps or blocks them in their learning process, both on cognition and reflection. It may be that certain elements in the course need more attention while less attention compared to other elements, or due to the movies being in English that more time needs to be devoted to the Dutch interpretation of words. An open dialogue with the students may help to make the pedagogical change to blended learning more successful. After each class, the teacher discussed and reflected with 4 to 5 different students on the short films, instructions, group discussions, the HSR-case reflection, and all other things that could pop up.

Lastly, a senior teaching trainer with a track record of doing surveys on deep learning vs. surface learning approaches has performed a double survey during the course. He asked the students in the first lecture after the micro-economics part, and he asked the same group of students at the last lecture before the exam (i.e., during the last public finance lecture) to fill out a questionnaire. The students were asked to give their opinion on the following questions, again based on a Likert scale ranging from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree':

Approaches to Study Questionnaire:
1. I've often had trouble making sense of the things I have to remember.
2. I've been over the work I've done to check my reasoning and see that it makes sense.
3. I have usually set out to understand for myself the meaning of what we had to learn.
4. I have put a lot of effort into my studying.
5. Much of what I've learned seems no more than lots of unrelated bits and pieces in my mind.
6. In making sense of new ideas, I have often related them to practice or real-life contexts.
7. On the whole, I've been quite systematic and organized in my studying.
8. Ideas I've come across in my academic reading often set me off on long chains of thought.
9. I've looked at the evidence carefully to reach my conclusion about what I'm studying.
10. When I've been communicating ideas, I've thought about how well I've got my points across.
11. I've organized my study time carefully to make the best use of it.
12. It has been important for me to follow the argument, or to see the reasons behind things.
13. I've tended to take what we've been taught at face value without questioning it much.
14. I've tried to find better ways of tracking down relevant information on this subject.
15. Concentration has not usually been a problem for me unless I've been really tired.
16. In reading for this course, I've tried to find out for myself exactly what the author means.
17. I've just been going through the motions of studying without seeing where I'm going.
18. If I've not understood things well enough when studying, I've tried a different approach.

This questionnaire is based on a validated questionnaire of Richardson (2003; 2006) Richardson et al. (2005), Sun & Richardson (2012). The answers to these questions provide an overview of how students have a deep approach (questions 8, 9, 10, 12, 14 & 17), a surface approach (questions 1, 5, 6, 13 & 18), how they organized focused studying (questions 4, 7, 11, 15 & 16) and how they are in deep reasoning (questions 2 & 3).

5. Results

Overall the films are appreciated by the students. In the survey, the most common strong point of the course named by the students is the films, and then especially that they could watch these in their own time at their own pace. Quotes like “The films were helpful” or “The availability of the instruction films was excellent” prove this point.

It turned out that only half of the student population filled out the online quiz on Mondays and about 15% filled out the quizzes for the Wednesday lectures. This created a problem for the teacher not having a proper image of what the students understood or not. Hence, during this hour the teacher made and used an online quiz program, called Socrative (www.socrative.com), to test the knowledge of the students on the spot. The results per question are immediately shown in class. This created the opportunity to discuss in class what

the reasoning behind the wrong answers and of course the correct answer is. This helped the students in understanding certain micro-economic notions or mechanisms. The students backed this result during the reflection discussions after the lecture. However, this also showed a major problem, which was also addressed by many students in the reflection but also in the student survey; i.e., time issues. These boil down to: a) amount of material and films and b) time between classes.

Ad a) For each class students had to read the material, roughly about 60 pages each time. Then they watch about six films per class, each about 10 to 15 minutes. In the weekend students could cope with the amount of time needed. However, as some students said, the time to let the material sink in was too short. So they filled out the quiz after only reading and watching once. Or as one student said: "I filled out the quiz in the hope to recognize some of the material I had just read, instead of testing whether I understand it."
Ad b) As can be deducted from a) students do not have a lot of time to process the material. This was even worse considering that students arrive home on Monday evening at about 22.30 or later. The next days they have to work. This means that they only have the Tuesday evening to study the material and watch all the films and do the quiz. Most students indicated that this was impossible for them to perform. They were happy if they had completely read the material and sometimes could have watched a film, let alone take the quiz. In other words, the fact that the next class is on Wednesday evening gave them too little time to read, watch, process the material and take the quiz.

The questionnaire to show the difference between surface approach and deep learning approach encountered several problems. First of all, there were 42 students who filled out the course the first time the questionnaire was handed out, but the second time only 28 students were present. In other words, the data to base the difference of behavior on has to be based on 28 respondents. This *n* is quite low making it difficult to see whether the blended learning technique triggered different behavior by the students compared to the traditional teaching style during the public finance part of the course. Notwithstanding the small *n*, two things stand out: 1) the students showed deep reasoning during the micro-economics part dropping significantly during the public finance part.

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Measure: MEASURE_1

Source	Deep Reasoning	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Deep Reasoning	Linear	11,655	1	11,655	12,045	,002	,301
Error	Linear	27,095	28	,968			

Also, students are more organized focused studying in the micro-economics part than in the public finance part. This may point in the direction that students are more focused on performing well in the micro-economics part and have less tendency to go for the higher grade in the public finance part of the course

(i.e., a strategic approach to studying, cf. Richardson, 2006). This can be related to the fact that in the first part students are explicitly taken along a path to reading, watch films and talk about it during lecture times, while in the second part of the course the teacher is instructing the material in class with less interaction and less demand of the students. In other words, the students could relax a bit more and learn whenever they wanted instead of being in a straitjacket.

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Measure: MEASURE_1

Source	Organized Focused Studying	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Organized Focused Studying	Linear	1,335	1	1,335	8,849	,006	,240
Error	Linear	4,225	28	,151			

For the other two relations, no significant correlation can be deducted. Both relations do suggest that it may be (careful definition) that students adopt a more surface approach attitude in the second part and a more deep learning approach in the first. To be able to prove this possible relation *n* must be much larger. In other words, more students have to fill out both questionnaires in a similar setting to be able to test whether there is a correlation for Dutch mid-career students in the public administration master program at the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the possibilities of blended learning in the Government and Economic Policy course have been explored. Blended learning offers opportunities to make students study course material in another manner than only reading textbooks and getting frontal instruction lectures. That is, blended learning makes the student more accountable for his learning, i.e., they can autonomously and at their own pace study the basics by combining the textbook with explanatory movies on the internet. Students having different backgrounds both in working experience and economics training and thus different learning curves are better met, i.e., it will facilitate students that find the material difficult and it won't deter students that only need to refresh the material.

The internet quiz will both help the students in seeing their own 'weaknesses' in understanding the course material, and it will help the teacher in seeing the course material problems that the student population is dealing with and can focus FTF class time on these. However, as has become clear during the course students did not have enough time to let the material be digested to fill out the quiz. Also, there was not enough time between classes to be able to cope with all the material.

Due to having part of FTF class time transferred to technology-mediated activities part of the class time can now be devoted to discussing the material with the students to get them to reflect on the course material as well as on their working practice. This helped students get a better grasp on the material and their daily practice. However, the aim of using the diversity of backgrounds and applicability to make them more aware of shortcomings, the meaning of assumptions, et cetera, i.e., more reflection, turned out to be too much. As mentioned before, students didn't have enough time. A remark of one student makes this absolutely clear: 'I am trying to survive this period to get all things done demanded of me.' One of the lessons from this and the time above problems is that the whole MPA program has changed its lecture days from Monday and Wednesday to Monday and Thursday. For all courses, hence also for the economics course, this creates more time between the lecture giving students more time to study the material, but more importantly to process it and reflect on it. The students of the following cohort were asked if they can process and reflect on the material. The overall view is that it is quite some work to read the material, watch the movies but that most of them could reasonably well apply it to their case and own practice, but that critical discussion about the underlying assumptions was a bridge too far.

Even though blended learning created the conditions to use face-to-face classroom time more effectively for reflective working methods, there is no conclusive evidence that students are more reflective. More research and a larger population might reject the hypothesis that it may lead to more reflective students, but it may also corroborate it. No matter what the future may bring, from the survey and discussions with the students the interactive manner and the diversity in teaching methods were appreciated. E.g. "The interactive teaching through means of films, quizzes, and Socrative added to my understanding of the material."

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