Journal of Education and Learning; Vol. 13, No. 2; 2024
ISSN 1927-5250 E-ISSN 1927-5269
Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education

Connecting Academia with the Professional World: Exploring Written Assignments in a Postgraduate Professional Development Program

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Received: November 7, 2023 Accepted: January 28, 2024 Online Published: February 20, 2024

doi:10.5539/jel.v13n2p94 URL: https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v13n2p94

Abstract

Master-level postgraduate professional development (PPD) programs have grown rapidly in many parts of the world. Being able to complete written assignments successfully is a significant concern for students pursuing PPD studies. Yet the nature of written assignments in such programs has been under-researched. This paper reports a study conducted in the context of a Master of Education (MEd) program in an English-medium university in Hong Kong. The study addressed the research question *How do MEd written assignments prompt students to engage with academia and the professional world?* Analyses of the documentary data, comprising a collection of written assignment prompts featuring 132 tasks, revealed three categories of assignments: oriented to the professional world, oriented to academia, and connecting academia and the professional world, with the last category being the largest share (75%). The paper illustrates these categories of assignments and considers implications of the study for pedagogy and future research.

Keywords: written assignments in Master-level courses, Master of Education (MEd), postgraduate professional development (PPD) programs, English-medium university

1. Introduction

The past decades have witnessed exponential growth of Master-level 'postgraduate professional development (PPD)' programs (Kelly, 2006) in many parts of the world (Lockhart, 2016). Concurrently, these programs have seen rapid expansion in the range of new specialisms, in the student population of immensely diverse backgrounds, and indeed, considerable increase in the revenue. The nature of written assignments in these programs should be explored, for writing has remained, by and large, the primary means of assessment in most PPD programs and being able to complete written assignments successfully is a significant concern for students. Peer pressure, the need to maintain jobs or advance careers, and the desire for intellectual challenges while getting one's money's worth for the substantial fees paid, all motivate students to do well in assignments. In a PPD program such as a Master of Education (MEd) program, written assignments prompt student writings that occur at the juncture of academia (the university setting) and the professional world (a great variety of workplaces where students pursue careers). Yet very little is known of the nature of written assignment tasks that prompt such dual engagements on the part of the adult students who are in the process of pursuing a coursework-based postgraduate degree as part of their career trajectories. The study to be reported in this paper aimed to address this gap in the literature by analysing a collection of written assignment prompts gathered from an MEd program at an English-medium university in Hong Kong. The study will take a step toward revealing how written assignments, with their variety in forms and requirements, may impact upon Master-level PPD students' professional development.

2. Theoretical Background

The perspective adopted in this study on written assignments in an MEd program is above all located in an institutional environment of New Orders (subsuming New Work Order, New Epistemological Order, and New Communicative Order), which has been profoundly influencing the contemporary academy, by requiring "radical rethinking of what counts as literacy" (Robinson-Pant & Street, 2012, p. 73; Street, 2004). All three types of New Orders impact upon an MEd curriculum, while the notion of New Epistemological Order is immediately relevant for a focus on MEd written assignments. A New Epistemological Order engenders a questioning of the academy as the dominant source of knowledge and the primary site for measuring the value of knowledge; at the same time, knowledge from the professional world is legalized and valued in university which is undergoing "reworking" to increasingly become "a forum for debate" and "a discursive space for critique of

the bases of knowledge claims and frameworks" (Robinson-Pant & Street, 2012, p. 77). This trend is not only manifested in the written assignments of the professional courses in the disciplines of engineering, medicine and business (Nesi & Gardner, 2012), but is also expected to be shown in the written assignments in education, a multidisciplinary sphere with great diversity of specialisms and with students coming from all walks of life in the professional world.

Apart from subscribing to the tenets of the New Epistemological Order, the study is also informed by an academic literacies perspective, which blurs for adult learners the boundary between formal, academic learning on the one hand, and informal, everyday/professional learning on the other (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis et al., 2015). In the light of an academic literacies approach, it has been suggested that "[t]he question for those teaching professional courses is how to ensure that [the written assignments] are designed in ways which will ensure that students learn to make the links between academic concepts and theories and professional practice" (Hoadley-Maidment, 2000, p. 166). A commitment to linking academia and the professional world has been illustrated in studies concerning Master-level writing. Furneaux (2016), in a study of a group of students negotiating the writing requirements in two PPD programs (MA Applied Linguistics and MA English Language Teaching) at a British university, reported that the students, after some set-backs, realized that "academic discussion in the light of [their] professional/learning experience was a requirement in most assignments"; accordingly, they needed to make "a shift in their personal epistemologies" (p. 171). Li et al.'s (2017) study of lecturers' feedback commentaries on MEd students' assignment papers in a Hong Kong context demonstrates that lecturers expect the students to engage with both academia (theory, literature, disciplinary knowledge gained from the university setting) and the professional world (personal/professional knowledge, experience, and practices from the workplaces) in writing.

3. Literature Review

Two lines of previous research are particularly relevant for the present study. Firstly, a line of research that explored the holistic impact of Master study on in-service teachers' professional development has acknowledged the benefits that fulfilling written assignments can bring. It was pointed out that assignment writing, including completing a professional dissertation, encourages teachers to reflect on their practices, relate theory to practice through critical thinking, and develop innovative strategies to share with colleagues (e.g., Bird et al., 2005; Chambers, 2001; Lahiff, 2005; Reeves, 2007). In terms of the forms of written assignments, we learned that reflective writing may be dominant in practice-based situated models of Master programs for teachers (Finlay, 2008). Nevertheless, we are yet to find out what kinds of written assignments may be given in an MEd program, which has been described as a "more traditional in-service provision" (Bird et al., 2005, p. 427), potentially with a stronger academic orientation as compared with situated models.

Secondly, there have been surveys of written assignments across disciplines or within a broad discipline, many conducted at North American universities (e.g., Carson, 2001; Gimenez, 2008; Jackson et al., 2006; Zhu, 2004). These studies tended to be motivated by a pedagogical concern: to identify students' discipline-specific writing needs, hence to inform the design of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs to better prepare the students for the challenges of disciplinary writing. Beyond North America, relevant studies have also been conducted in other contexts. Stierer (2000), in a rare (though old) study dedicated to surveying writing requirements in an MA program in education, analyzed over 100 specifications for writing assignments across such a program at a British university in the 1990s. He mapped out an inventory of written assignments required in the program, which included such 'genre categories' as essay, project proposal, project report, research topic outline, description, critical review, assessment of article, personal position, lesson observation/analysis, and exam. Stierer (2000) found that these assignments positioned students (who were in-service school teachers) as 'novice academics', ignoring their status of being 'experienced professionals' (p. 193); in other words, the assignment tasks examined by Stierer (2000) prompted the teacher students to engage with academia without requiring them to draw upon their experience in the professional world. Two decades on, however, it can be expected that the forces of New Epistemological Order, as discussed earlier, could only have increasingly strengthened the relevance of one's status as 'experienced professionals' to one's study in a PPD program. Clear evidence of the requirement of linking academia and the professional world in PPD written assignments is found in Furneaux's (2016) study of Master students' engagement with assignment writing, and Li et al.'s (2017) examination of lecturers' feedback on assignments in an MEd program, both referred to earlier, as well as in Nesi and Gardner's (2012) research of student assignment papers gathered at several British universities across disciplines. Nevertheless, it remains true that little research has been conducted to understand the nature of written assignments in a Master-level PPD program in education to provide evidence in this direction. The study to be reported in this paper aims to address this gap in the literature.

4. Methods

Conducted in the context of an MEd program in a Faculty of Education at an English-medium university in Hong Kong, the study aimed to answer the research question *How do MEd written assignments prompt students to engage with academia and the professional world?* The focal program has an annual in-take of around 400 students from all walks of life, although many of the students are local school teachers. The pool of MEd specialisms undergoes adjustment yearly. The academic year 2019–2020, for example, features a total of 19 specialisms, including both more traditional specialisms such as 'Higher Education' and 'English Language Education', and more recently launched ones such as 'Education and Society in China' and 'STEM Education'.

The data collection for the study was conducted in the two consecutive academic years of 2017–2018 and 2018–2019. Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained before the research began. As the researcher was among the lecturers involved in MEd teaching, special care was taken to heed advice from the literature on conducting insiders' research (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). To address the research question, the assignment prompts for a total of 132 different written tasks from 90 courses were collected by the researcher, through making requests to colleagues and students, and referring to course proposals (accessed through the Program Office) (Note 1). Where two versions of a prompt for the same task in a course were found, the more detailed, or a more up-to-date version was used. Each course has a unique course code; course teachers are not indicated for some courses in some of the prompts gathered.

It should be noted that the 132 gathered tasks did not include the research proposal assignment which is required in the research methods course compulsory for all MEd students across the specialisms in the focal program; neither was the task of a capstone research project, which leads to a project report (4000–5000 words, equivalent to the workload of one course) or a dissertation (up to 12,000–20,000 words, equivalent to the workload of three courses), included in the collection. It is also worth noting that of the collected 132 written tasks, a good number were given as options, reflecting the focal program's encouragement for variation in assessment tasks (stated in the Student Handbook), and also in line with the lecturers' desire to cater to the diverse interests among the students, which amounted to a form of 'indirect support' for the students in assignment preparation (Li & Hu, 2018).

The gathered assignment prompts were coded in QSR International's NVivo12. In coding each assignment prompt, the researcher followed a data-driven approach (Gibbs, 2007), segmenting a prompt into units of information and using *in vivo* codes developed from the prompt texts. The first-level *in vivo* codes were typically subsumed under the course code together with a generic name of the assignment concerned (e.g., reflective essay; literature review), which served as second-level codes. The coding process moved from descriptive coding to analytic coding, which led to the categorization and recategorization of the assignment tasks. Three broad categories developed in an earlier study for describing lecturers' feedback commentaries on MEd assignment papers—prompting engagement with academia, prompting engagement with the professional world, and prompting linkage of academia and the professional world (Li et al., 2017)—were adapted to provide three top-level organization codes (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014) to group the collection of assignment tasks into three main categories. These were named 'oriented to academia', 'oriented to the professional world', and 'connecting academia and the professional world' respectively. Middle-level codes (subsuming second-level codes) were worked out to provide more specific labels to characterize the nature of the assignment tasks. As a result, a complete coding structure was arrived at, which was revised repeatedly in NVivo over a period of several months, through the use of a 'code-recode' strategy for intracoder reliability (Ary et al., 2010, p. 503), which was followed by peer debriefing to incorporate peer feedback from the colleagues teaching on the focal MEd program.

5. Findings

The assignment prompts of the collected 132 written tasks vary from giving a relatively brief statement of a task to giving elaborated instructions. These written assignments typically constituted part of the assessment of the courses concerned, because class presentation or participation in class/on Moodle may have a certain percentage in the assessment and there was sometimes more than one written assignment in a course. Each written assignment may range anywhere from 10% to 80% in the final grade. The NVivo-based analysis of the collection of the assignment prompts led to a coding structure with three main categories at the top level, subsuming a set of sub-categories or specific labels that characterized the nature of assignments, as summarized in Table 1 (with frequencies).

Table 1. A summary of the 132 assignment tasks in three main categories

1. Oriented to the professional world (3)
2. Oriented to academia (30)
2a) Essay on a topic or a concept/issue (14)
2b) Literature review (11)
2c) Analysing a research article or comparing articles (3)
2d) Simulating participation in academia (2)
3. Connecting academia and the professional world (99)
3a) Reflective essay or reflection (19)
3b) Designing pedagogical activities with materials or designing an action plan (15)
3c) Critiquing practice and making recommendations (11)
3d) From literature review to implications or a design (10)
3e) Research report based on an empirical study (9)
3f) Text analysis, plus lesson/task design, or pedagogical implication (8)
3g) Essay that shows understanding of theory/concepts and their application to practice (9)
3h) Case analysis (6)
3i) From fieldwork (observation or teaching) to report and analysis (5)
3j) Analysis of personal learning or professional experience (2)
3k) Weekly web-based or Moodle-based individual tasks (2)
3l) Synthesis-analysis of different sources on teaching a grammar item (1)
3m) Annotation of an episode of classroom conversations (1)
3n) Research proposal (1)

Clearly, a vast majority of the assignment tasks fall under the ‘connecting academia and the professional world’ group (99 out of 132, or a share of 75%). In the following, the first two categories shown in Table 1 will be surveyed briefly, before a closer examination of the largest category of tasks is presented (but to detail only 3a, 3b, and 3c shown in Table 1, due to space constraint).

5.1 Oriented to the Professional World

Only a tiny share of three (or 2.27%) of the total 132 assignment tasks represents an orientation to the professional world. These tasks were assigned by two teachers in three courses. In one course, students should work in groups and ‘design a school according to their own ideals and visions’. In another course which was taught by the same teacher, the instructor assigned a final project of designing a policy (a bill):

> The objective is to design a policy (place yourself in the shoes of the secretary of state of education or minister of education—your pick) and propose it to the congress/parliament (the lecturers and other students that will become members of parliament) where it will be debated.

The policy or bill should be about 1500 words and be submitted on Moodle in preparation for debate in the ‘parliament’ (the class), where the lecturer ‘will just manage the time and the debate’ and grade the members’ participation in debate.

It would be fair to suggest that in performing such tasks, the students will necessarily need to draw upon the theoretical and disciplinary knowledge gained in class and in readings (e.g., engage with academia). In fact, in the assignment prompt for the school design task, the instructor concerned stated: ‘This will be an exciting exercise for students to make connections between theories and practices.’ Nevertheless, these tasks were categorized as ‘oriented to the professional world’ in the study, because they simulate real-world communicative events or action.

5.2 Oriented to Academia

Up to 30 (or 22.7%) of the total 132 tasks fall in the category ‘oriented to academia’, which is ten time more than the number of tasks subsumed under ‘oriented to the professional world’. The category ‘oriented to academia’ contains four sub-categories of assignment tasks. These tasks focus on prompting students to engage with the theoretical and disciplinary knowledge embedded in the literature on which a course is based, to develop and demonstrate their understanding. The biggest sub-category 2a) ‘Essay on a topic or a concept/issue’ is featured in 14 courses involving 14 teachers (with cases of a teacher teaching several courses and cases of co-teaching). Two examples of prompts under 2a) are as follows:

> Critically examine a concept or issue in [subject of the course] that interests you most (such as [topics]). In your essay, you can (a) briefly introduce the selected concept/issue, (b) review the literature on it, and (c) critically evaluate the literature and develop your own position on the selected concept/issue.

> Write an essay of approximately 3,000 words. If you wish to write about a specific [subject of the course] topic to follow up a personal interest, you may do so *provided* you have secured permission from me in advance. Alternatively, choose ONE of the following: [topics] [followed by specification of the elements to be included in the essay].

An example of 2b) 'Literature review' tasks, found in 11 courses, goes: 'Students are required to select one theory covered in the course and do a review on the theory and the empirical research guided by this theory.' The sub-category 2c) 'Analyzing a research article or comparing articles' is manifested in three tasks, given by three teachers on different courses. In one task, students are asked to 'choose an empirical, published journal article using quantitative methods' and 'annotate' it, by identifying the research problem, mapping out 'a schematic representation of the study design', describing the analysis and findings, and discussing 'critical issues you think should be addressed'. In another task, likewise focusing on research, students are asked to select a pair of articles in a provided list; and 'look at the aims and content, and assess the ways in which (and the extent to which) the methods facilitate achievement of those aims'. The prompt also suggests the steps to be taken and the elements to be included in a comparative review of the pair of articles.

Finally, two tasks of 2d) 'Simulating participation in academia' are found in one course taught by one teacher. One of the two tasks asks the students to write an entry (1500–2000 words) for a real online encyclopedia. The other task asks the students to act as reviewers for the entry texts: in the first round of peer review, each will receive one anonymous review and one review from a nominated reviewer; in the second round, each will receive two anonymous reviews. Such a journey of authoring texts that will be published online or peer reviewed simulates practices in academia.

5.3 Connecting Academia and the Professional World

Impressively, a high proportion of the tasks require connection of academia and the professional world (99 out of 132, or 75 % of the total). Despite their variety (as shown in Table 1), the common denominator of these tasks is that they require engagement with both academia (what has been learned through the course, and the literature) and with the professional world (one's life experience and professional development practices, such as teaching in a school). Due to space constraint, only the first three largest subsets of the 'connecting' category (i.e., the three sub-categories with a frequency of above 10), will be illustrated in the first three sub-sections below: reflective essay or reflection (19), designing pedagogical activities with materials or designing an action plan (15), and critiquing practice and making recommendations (11). A subsequent sub-section will then briefly survey the rest sub-categories in the category of 'connecting' as shown in Table 1.

5.3.1 Reflective Essay or Reflection

'Reflective essay or reflection' (occurring 19 times as an assignment task) is the largest subset in the 'connecting' category, assigned in 17 courses taught by 14 teachers. Of the 19 reflective writing tasks, six can be characterized as requiring students to 'perform a task (in the professional world) and then reflect on your learning from doing the task'. For example, three teachers teaching in the same specialism gave a similar reflection writing task in four courses they taught: 'implement a few ideas you encounter in the module in your teaching or professional development, then write a descriptive and reflective paper based on that experience', and 'there should be appropriate contact with literature'. As another example, students in another course should write an individual reflective paper subsequent to their group-based action research project, to reflect on their learning from conducting the project.

In addition to the six tasks noted above, another five reflective writing tasks took the form of an 'e-portfolio', which requires students to document and self-evaluate their learning process in the relevant courses. The five e-portfolio assignments were given by two teachers on five courses in one specialism. The rest in the 19 instances of reflection tasks are of another six types, with length requirement ranging from 200 words (Type v. below) to 3000–4000 words (Type iii below). The six types are shown as follows (with frequencies):

1) reflecting on approaches or pedagogies studied in the course, and making recommendations for practice or discussing implications for one's own development (2)

2) drawing upon one's life experience, connecting to the course content, and reflecting upon one's change in understanding, belief or assumption (2)

3) a critical reflective report to wrap up a series of foregoing preparatory tasks (1)

4) reflecting upon one's teaching practice and making connections to learning from the course and literature (1)

5) short personal reflection upon reading a newspaper article or attending a seminar on issues relevant to the

subject of the course (1)

6) reflecting on students' challenges in using English as an additional language in a literacy task, to develop ideas for the final paper (a formative task) (1)

In their prompts, lecturers sometimes explicitly note the need to connect to the literature, as shown earlier. Additional references made by lecturers to the need of citing literature in reflective writing are the following:

> 'any citation should be in formal citation style' (in a task under Type ii. above)
>
> 'also considering how class readings and discussions reinforce, challenge, or reshape their thinking' (in the other task under Type ii. above)

In short, it can be suggested that the wide range of reflective writing tasks expect the students to connect their learning from the relevant courses and specialist literature with their experiences in life and the professional world.

5.3.2 Designing Pedagogical Activities with Materials or Designing an Action Plan

In contrast with the category 'oriented to the professional world', under which a simulation, or an imagined task of 'designing a school' based on the students' 'own ideals and visions', falls, the tasks reflecting the section heading above are subsumed under the category 'connecting academia and the professional world' in the study. This is because these design tasks on the whole more explicitly require the students to make use of what they have learned from a course and readings, and to design pedagogy that is actionable in a real professional context such as a school.

Of the 15 design tasks identified, nine can be characterized as 'designing pedagogical activities with materials'. Three of the nine ask students to embed such design in a lesson plan. In addition, most of the nine tasks require some kind of design consisting of multiple components, illuminated with theories or literature. Four of these tasks, in particular, consist of multiple elements, with a length requirement of up to 3000–4000 words and accounting for up to 70% of the final grade in their respective courses. For example, a task in one course is to create 'a portfolio of school-based Chinese language learning activities which integrate recent theories of multiculturalism or inter-cultural communication'. Another course on teachers' professional development requires a design of a video-based professional development program:

> Based on a critical analysis of the literature, propose a video-based teacher professional development program with (a) particular professional development goal(s). Justify the design of the video-based program in relation to the professional development goal(s).

This design assignment requires fulfillment of three elements in one task: a critical analysis of the literature, a video-based teacher professional development program underpinned by a goal or several goals, and justification of the design in relation to the goal(s).

The other six design tasks can be called 'designing an action plan'. Two language education courses focusing on content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and taught by the same teacher both require the design of an action plan (at 1800–2000 words, 60%). Specifically, following a foregoing group presentation task of analyzing/evaluating published teaching materials, 'students will then critically evaluate a school-based context […], and suggest a practical and appropriate action plan or proposal for implementing CLIL according to the chosen/given school context.'

In contrast, in another two courses taught by another teacher, on STEM education, critical evaluation of a learning context is not the starting point of the design plan tasks given (at 2000–3000 words, 60%). In one of the two courses, students should 'design a representation of a selected STEM concept' and 'develop an outline for its implementation in STEM learning activity'. In the other course, the design task asks students to 'develop a learning design plan for one or more of emerging technologies in their STEM classroom'. Prompting the students to engage with both theory and practice, the lecturer states that 'the learning design plan must include detailed report on their understanding of how specific technologies selected will support transdisciplinary STEM integration', apart from including 'recommendations for a school's capacity building'.

In the rest two tasks in the group of 'designing an action plan', one instructor asks for 'a plan for conducting effective classroom talk about a specific content-area'; the other asks students to create and implement a plan: that is, to design and teach a mini-lesson on a topic of literacy skills, and then write an account of it with reflection. Overall, it can be seen that in all the tasks of 'designing pedagogical activities with materials or designing an action plan', students are expected to connect academia and the professional world.

5.3.3 Critiquing Practice and Making Recommendations

Eleven tasks fall under the category of 'critiquing practice and making recommendations' (with the two components often both required), with a length requirement falling in the range of 1200–3500 words, and accounting for 40–80% of the final grade.

A majority, or six of these tasks are about critiquing aspects of practice related to school curriculum. In these tasks students again are expected to attend to theory/literature and practice simultaneously. For example, in a language education course, a task prompt goes: 'Students will work on an individual essay in which they need to critically review a curriculum design with theories in this course. The practical suggestions for improvement also need to be included.' An instructor may also specify where students should engage with literature, in relation to the structural components to be included in an assignment paper. For example, another assignment of school curriculum analysis in a course on 'life education' both stipulates that students should 'interact with relevant literature' and specifies that they should do so when they 'critically analyze [the relevant curriculum's] rationale and theoretical framework' and when they 'discuss facilitating conditions and barriers to the promotion of life education' in their school. Similarly, the instructor of a course on 'assessment' specified the structure of an essay in which students should analyze a curriculum issue in a school context—introduction to the topic, literature review, analysis and recommendations, and conclusion; at the same time, the instructor noted that when writing the 'literature review' part, the students should 'review key and relevant literature in relation to the selected curriculum issue' and in the 'analysis and recommendations' part, they should also 'use reviewed literature to analyze the issue and make recommendations to tackle challenges presented'.

Three tasks ask students to critique and rethink aspects of their own professional practice or instructional approach, in light of what they have learned in the course, and then make recommendations for improvement. Finally, another two assignments, from two courses taught by the same teacher, concern critique of policy: one is on analyzing a school policy on liberal studies education; the other has a broader and less defined scope—'to critically examine a particular education policy or issue in China' in light of the learning from the course.

5.3.4 Other Types of Assignments in the 'Connecting' Category

In addition to the 45 tasks that are characterized as falling under the three sub-categories illustrated above (3a, 3b, and 3c in Table 1), the rest 55 tasks in the 'connecting' group fall into a range of sub-categories.

The most prominent of these is a group of 10 tasks that can be conveniently labeled 'From literature review to implications or a design' (3d in Table 1). Four of these 10 tasks ask students to identify a concept, a key topic, a controversial issue, or issues discussed in the course to conduct a literature review, and then discuss educational implications. Another four tasks require a literature review followed by a research design, although the expectation on the relative proportions of the two elements seems to vary. Specifically, these four tasks ask a focused, critical review of research literature to be followed, respectively, by 1) the design of a research study and a discussion of how the study might inform practice; 2) a proposal of one's own study, addressing one of the main topic areas of the course; 3) an action plan for enhancing aspects of a research process; and 4) a proposal of research questions. In yet another two tasks, a critical literature review should pave the way for a lesson plan and a unit teaching plan respectively.

Apart from the hybrid writing tasks with literature review as the starting point, another relatively prominent group of assignments, or nine tasks, require a 'research report based on an empirical study' (3e in Table 1), in the range of 2000–4000 words (at 50% to 80% of the final grade) (Note 2). It seems most of the required empirical studies can be characterized as action research, whereby students should conduct a small-scale study through implementing an action for a change in a classroom/ professional context. A couple of tasks as follows do not necessarily lead to action research but are still small-scale empirical studies nevertheless: students are expected to select a topic covered in the course or related to the subject area of the course, to design and carry out a study and then to write up a report. In two cases of the nine tasks, a project needs to be collaboratively conducted, and a group project report should be submitted but the students will get individual grades eventually, by clearly identifying their individual contribution in one case, and by submitting an individual reflection as a follow-up to the group report in the other.

In addition, a series of nine assignments, often labeled as 'essay' by the instructors (3f in Table 1), seem to spell out a theory-practice integration requirement in a straightforward manner, as illustrated in the following extracts from two assignment prompts:

> An essay of about 3,500 words, with a choice from topics on the philosophical and socio-cultural aspects of mathematics education. Your discussion should relate one or more of these aspects to mathematics teaching

and learning in Hong Kong.

Assessment [of the essay] is based on how well you understand the major concepts, debates and theoretical issues covered in the course, and your ability to integrate them with the practice/reality especially based on your professional experience.

Another eight tasks (3g in Table 1), unsurprisingly all assigned by instructors of language education courses, focus on text analysis, which require students to analyze teaching/learning texts using methods learned in the courses; in two of the eight tasks, assigned by the same teacher in two courses, building a corpus of texts precedes text analysis. There are also six tasks of 'Case analysis' (3h), and five tasks of 'From fieldwork (observation or teaching) to report and analysis' (3i). In addition, there are two tasks of 'Analysis of personal learning or professional experience' (3j), and two 'Weekly web-based or Moodle-based individual tasks' (3k) designed to stimulate reflection and application. Finally, synthesis-analysis of different sources on teaching a grammar item (3l), annotation of an episode of classroom conversations (3m), and research proposal (3n) each occurs once (Note 3).

6. Discussion

The foregoing section has presented evidence to address the research question *How do MEd written assignments prompt students to engage with academia and the professional world?* based on a dataset of written assignment prompts. NVivo-based inductive analysis of the collection of assignment prompts combined with inspiration from a previous study on MEd lecturers' feedback commentaries on assignment papers (Li et al., 2017) led to the specification of three categories of assignments: oriented to the professional world (2.27%), oriented to academia (22.7%), and connecting academia and the professional world (75%), as summarized in Table 1. Considering that an MEd program is by nature committed to facilitating PPD, it is possible to argue that all 132 assignments aim to prompt connection of academia and the professional world. To make a strong case for this alternative perspective, additional evidence, such as that from analyzing student assignment papers and examining the perspectives of the students and the lecturers, should be gathered.

Within the scope of this study, caveats can still be noted in relation to the two smaller categories of assignments. Firstly, the assignment tasks that fall under 'oriented to academia' perhaps mostly resemble tasks that may be given in traditional academic disciplines. It can be suggested that students are positioned by these assignments more as 'novice academics' than 'experienced professionals' (Stierer, 2000, p. 193). At the same time, from another perspective, performing the four types of tasks that are 'oriented to academia', namely, writing an essay on a topic or a concept/issue, composing a literature review, analyzing a research article or comparing articles, or simulating participation in academia (through writing an entry for a real online encyclopedia and conducting peer reviews of the entries), is in effect acting out the roles of professional academics in their professional world. Thus these forms of engaging with 'academia' are also about engaging with the 'professional world'. Secondly, in the study, only a small number of tasks were categorized as 'oriented to the professional world'. As noted in the findings section, it is possible to consider merging this group into the category of 'connecting academia and the professional world'; but a distinction was made between the two in the study, with the tasks in the category 'oriented to the professional world' simulating real-world communicative events or action, yet without requiring the creation of something (e.g., a pedagogy) that is actionable in a real professional context such as a school.

Given the previous lack of detailed analyses of written assignments in a PPD program from comparable analytic perspectives, the study reported here has broken some new ground. The most important finding of the study is that a vast majority of the collected assignment tasks (75%) were designed to prompt students to make connection between academia and the professional world in writing. Such connection is expected to take a great variety of forms. The top three types of 'connecting' assignments (or those occurring over 10 times in the collection), are 'reflective essay or reflection' (19), 'designing pedagogical activities with materials or designing an action plan' (15), and 'critiquing practice and making recommendations' (11). Such assignments in the focal MEd program fully acknowledge the students' status as 'experienced professionals', in stark contrast with Stierer's (2000, p. 193) report on the assignments in an MA in Education program at a British university in the 1990s, but in line with Furneaux's (2016) more recent report on the positioning of students in language education MA programs at another British university. Despite the lack of systematic evidence in the literature, it can be suggested that the forces of New Epistemological Order which legitimizes the status of knowledge from the professional world in academia (Robinson-Pant & Street, 2012) have been behind the change, leading to the growing engagement with the professional world in the PPD training process, including in the requirements for written assignments. In addition, the academic literacies perspective supplies a theoretical foundation for the design of written assignments that facilitate the exchange and merging of literacy practices between academia

and the professional world in PPD programs (Hoadley-Maidment, 2000).

If reflective writing was often a dominant form of written assignment in practice-based situated models of PPD programs for teachers (Finlay, 2008), the study reported in this paper shows that a far wider range of writing tasks can be found in an MEd program. As a 'more traditional in-service provision' (Bird et al., 2005, p. 427), an MEd program, potentially with a stronger academic orientation than situated models, has a curriculum context that presumably motivates the design of writing tasks that both prompt the study of specialist knowledge (Stierer, 2000) and its application to practice in the professional world. It can be suggested that the role of a 'transitional space' (Stevenson et al., 2018) of in-service students' professional development, instrumentally fulfilled through reflective writing in situated models of PPD, is found to be fulfilled through an extensive range of writing tasks in an MEd program. Meanwhile, interestingly, in the study reported here, 'reflective essay or reflection' was still found to be the largest group of writing tasks in the category of 'connecting academia and the professional world'. Yet while 'reflective writing' tends to be used as an umbrella term in the context of professional education courses (Rai, 2006; Stevenson et al., 2018), the study reported here has revealed a diverse range of sub-types, including, for instance, 'perform a task (in the professional world) and then reflect on your learning from doing the task', 'e-portfolio', and a miscellaneous range (e.g., 'reflecting on approaches or pedagogies studied in the course, and making recommendations for practice or discussing implications for one's own development').

Overall, the study reveals that in aiming to prompt students to connect academia and the professional world, MEd lecturers designed written assignment tasks that are hybrid in nature. That is, in any one assignment paper that aims to meet the requirement of making such connections, students typically have to fulfill multiple components of writing. Under the sub-category 'designing pedagogical activities with materials or designing an action plan', the findings section of the present paper gave an example of an assignment task to illustrate hybridity—that the assignment paper should cover 'critical analysis of the literature, a video-based teacher professional development program underpinned by a goal or several goals, and justification of the design in relation to the goal(s)'. Hybridization, which has tended to be researched in relation to academic/professional discourse (e.g., Mäntynen & Shore, 2014), has emerged as an important topic of investigation with students' assessed writing in higher education ('About EATAW2019'). Future research on writing in PPD programs should explore the intricacies of hybridization, through detailed analysis of students' assignment texts, triangulated by analyses of other types of data such as the data gathered through text-based interviews.

7. Conclusion

Despite its limited scope, the study reported in this paper made several noteworthy contributions to the literature. Firstly, it has extended the discussion of the relationship between 'theory' and 'practice' typically surrounding teacher education (e.g., Anderson & Anderson, 2008; Johnson, 1996) to the realm of assessed writing in a PPD program which not only has teachers, but also practitioners from all walks of life, as students. In fact, by demonstrating the diverse and complicated relationships that MEd students are expected to construct between academia and the professional world in their writings, the study also echoes the argument in the literature that a dichotomy between 'theory' and 'practice' in professional education is problematic; instead, the two constructs should be regarded as being inherently 'linked' (Jahreie & Ludvigsen, 2007, p. 299) and should be 'conceptualized as different types of cultural practices' (p. 300). Secondly, compared with previous research on the impact of PPD education on in-service teachers' professional development which has acknowledged the catalytic roles of written assignments in such forms as professional dissertation (Chambers, 2001) and reflective writing (Rai, 2006), the study reported here has shown that a full spectrum of written assignments can be found in an MEd program, prompting students' engagement with academia and the professional world in a great variety of ways. Thirdly, the study has also extended previous research on assignment writing tasks (e.g., Nesi & Gardner, 2012; Stierer, 2000), through detailed coding of assignment prompts and through the purposefully selected lens of focusing on the connection between academia and the professional world.

The study also has pedagogical implications. The diversity of assignments in the focal MEd program potentially implies that PPD students would face challenges as they move from one assignment to the next (Lea & Street, 1998). Although the degree of diversity in the literacy practices expected across assignments remains to be researched, it may be safe to suggest that students would welcome pedagogical support in achieving their goal of completing a diverse range of written assignments successfully. Many universities have credit-bearing writing instruction for undergraduate students and research postgraduate students, yet often leaving a gap in supporting coursework-based Master students. Although the content lecturers themselves may provide some assignment writing support (Li & Hu, 2018), perhaps a more systematic and effective form of support resides in collaboration between content lecturers and language teachers/writing specialists. Such collaboration is not easy

to initiate or sustain (Simpson et al., 2016), but it would be worth exploring in any PPD curriculum.

With its chosen focus and scope of research, the study reported in this paper is methodologically limited. Clearly, the next step in research would be to analyze student texts produced in response to the assignment tasks (e.g., Soden & Maclellan, 2004), coupled with other types of data, not only to study the issue of hybridity, as pointed out earlier, but also to examine myriads of other issues, such as students' interpretation of the tasks, potential differences between lecturers' and students' perspectives, and the impact of fulfilling written assignments on students' professional practices as well as their professional development in the long run. Finally, connecting academia and the professional world is probably a common expectation of the written assignments in PPD courses. Future research should explore how this plays out in a wide range of disciplines, with students of different personal and professional backgrounds. The rapid expansion of PPD programs around the globe (Lockhart, 2016) provides an excellent opportunity for research and for enhancing teaching and learning in these programs through research.

Acknowledgments

Not available.

Authors' contributions

The author was solely responsible for the research and the writing of the research report.

Funding

This work was supported by a General Research Fund granted by the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong, China (project code project code 17607517).

Competing interests

None.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Notes

Note 1. These 90 courses accounted for a majority of the core/elective courses offered in the focal program in the two consecutive academic years of 2017–2018 and 2018–2019. Calculation based on course schedules indicates that 116 MEd courses were offered in 2017–2018 and 119 courses were offered in 2018–2019.

Note 2. As noted in the Methods section, the task of a capstone research project, which would lead to a project report or a dissertation, was not included in the present study.

Note 3. As noted in the Methods section, the present study did not include the assignment of research proposal which is a required assignment in the research methods course compulsory in all MEd specialisms. The fact that all MEd students have to write a research proposal for a compulsory research methods course may help to explain the rarity of additional research proposal assignment.

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