
INGREDIENTS FOR A CRITICAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE. RETHINKING UNIVERSITY EDUCATION FROM AN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

In the following article we would like to put forward a proposal for training aimed at professionals working in the cooperation sector, which aims to foster a critical development practice. This training is in fact the Official Master's Degree in Development Aid, formerly the Master's Degree in Development Policies and Processes, which has been taught at the Valencia Polytechnic University (UPV in Spanish) since 2007. We shall begin the article by discussing what a critical development practice involves. Subsequently, we shall see how fifth generation DE shares elements with this proposal and how both reinforce one another. We shall then provide a description of the UPV Master's degree and the outcomes of an exploratory study, which focused on how skills, knowledge and attitudes that are irrefutably linked to a critical development practice are acquired. Finally, we shall bring together our conclusions, which summarise the key learning experiences and encourage experiences of this sort.

What type of training for what type of cooperation and what type of development? Ingredients for a critical development practice

We wrote this article as university teachers specialised² in the planning and management of international cooperation operations. Therefore, it seemed pertinent, to say the least, to ask ourselves why we train professionals and what type of professionals we want to train. It also seemed relevant to ask ourselves about what an Official Master's Degree could possibly contribute to this, and how this specific sort of education could very well become an extremely useful tool for transferring knowledge, skills and values that foster operations geared toward social change.

As Gulrajani (2010) notes, management of development operations is characterised by an ideology based on rationality and blind faith in scientific knowledge, based on cause and effect. This vision has given rise to generalist practices that are characterised by being aseptic, essentially technical, based on management and driven by experts. (Wallace et al, 2007). They are based on linear suppositions, aimed at ideal objectives that can be achieved by following logical, rational and causal steps.

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These practices are being investigated extensively (Mowles *et al.*, 2008; Quarles *et al.*, 2003; Gasper, 2000), highlighting the inhumane effects they have on all those who participate in said practices: workers, beneficiaries and other agents (Dar and Cooke, 2008).

In this article, we shall argue the importance of the development professionals acquiring different skills that leads them to a "critical development practice" (Clarke and Oswald, 2010; Belda *et al.*, 2012). In particular, we shall consider that these practices are possible if the professionals take the complex nature and politics of development processes, the relationships of power that characterise them and the political interests and influences that exist into consideration (Mowles *et al.*, 2008; Pettit, 2010; McCourt, 2008). This requires different skills, such as being able to keep a political commitment, a responsibility with the partners who share similar values, being able to manage power relationships, being able to respond to a shifting reality, being able to create alternatives to change, in short, a real commitment to social transformation (Eyben, 2005). These practices must also be creative and self-critical (Kaplan, 1999), receptive, contextual, flexible, reflexive, (Escobar, 2008) and up to date so that they can constantly learn together (Mowles *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, the potential for a permanent learning experience and adaptation is critical. Professionals are permanently involved in individual and group-based intellectual and emotional experience-based learning processes.

From our point of view, when managing development operations, these 'critical' skills must coexist with the essential skills based on the linear proposals we laid out at the start of this sections, since the aid funding system requires it in this way. We share the same opinion as Mowles (2010), in that while it is hard to go beyond some of the concepts of standard practice, it will always be possible to find room for this critical practice. In this process, however, we must think about employing the standard *mainstream* tools from another perspective, while we must also propose other means that place importance on the values and consider the complex political nature cross-sectioned by the power relationships of the development processes, and that focus on the political commitment with the people they work with.

ED and a critical development practice

In this section we will deal at greater length with the elements of fifth generation DE that can help us think of, develop and implement university education activities that foster the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values that are in line with a critical development practice. In order to do so, we shall review various authors (De Paz, 2007; Celorio, 2008; Argibay and Celorio, 2009; Boni, 2006) and educational proposals, for example that of Intermon-Oxfam (2009), propounding that DE viewed as an educational practice must share the following dimensions:

- A political dimension where the person is the focus of the educational activity and plays the leading role in the teaching-learning processes. This not only contributes to

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their personal training, but it also trains them for group activity. The person is understood to be subject to laws and responsibilities with the ability to achieve change and be capable of redistributing power to combat inequality.

- Interculturality as a proposal of coexistence, but primarily, as a learning experience and cultural exchange framework.
- 'Conscientisation', just as Freire proposed, as an emancipating tool, a process that makes people aware of reality and individual and group abilities to act on reality.
- Global Citizenship as a powerful concept to protect the most nagging demands and requirements of today's societies in the belief that Education can no longer define itself in a local, blinkered vision; instead it should be capable of including a global, worldwide vision as a tool to enable people to develop in a social and political environment affected by the relationship of phenomena with different origins and complex explanations.

DE establishes a dialect between theory and action, between local reality and global vision, between individuals and society, between training and collective action. Changes in values and attitudes come about due to specific actions and these should be analysed extensively at times of reflection. The practice of DE from a political dimension is a form of teaching-learning that recognises others as providers of wisdom and culture, which together form a network of new knowledge through dialogue. This dynamic and interactive education model is complemented by the development of an interpretive framework, which paints a more extensive and global picture of the phenomena (Mesa, 1999).

As we can see, the fifth generation DE proposal overlaps to a great extent with what we referred to in the first section as a critical development practice. Although DE has focused to a greater extent on the school environment and critical development practice contemplates capacity development between the professionals, there are obvious parallels. For example, the political dimensions that DE proposes, based on conscientisation processes, is clearly a central element of critical development practice and frameworks: the appreciation of the complex and political nature of development processes and the power relationships that characterise them; the importance of the political commitment, the responsibility towards partners with whom we share values; being able to handle power relationships; and being able to generate an alternative for change. In our opinion, these are all elements that a fifth generation DE proposal would endorse.

Both approaches place importance on contemplating action, the assessment of the learning experience, the emotional elements, in short, the socioaffective approach, which is the cornerstone of the DE proposals.

What DE could add to the critical development practices is the assessment of intercultural elements and the idea of global citizenship; from a critical development

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perspective, we talk of the practices needing to be receptive, contextual and specific, but we do not make the intercultural element as important as the learning experience framework. Neither does the "glocal" idea take centre stage.

What a critical development practice could impart to DE is the importance of considering the adaptability of a shifting, complex environment and the ability to operate within said environment. It is about "being able to operate within the inherent complexity and unpredictability of social systems" (Woodhill 2010: 53), of being able to "better deal with the complexity – not to control it, but to act conscientiously and with purpose within said complexity" (Ortiz Aragón, 2010:39).

The Master's Degree at UPV. Between dominant approaches and a critical practice

The Master's degree is led by professionals specialised in international cooperation that belong to the UPV Department of Engineering Projects. We are talking, therefore, about an essentially technical environment, imbued with a rational and instrumental vision regarding the skills the University's students should acquire.

The university environment that the student becomes part of it similar to many other Spanish and European universities, characterised by having a managerialist vision of how a university should be governed and how to measure students' and the academics' performance, (which has been referred to as academic managerialism by Amaral et al, 2010). Furthermore, the deep economic crisis Spain is currently experiencing has meant a decrease in the public funds given to universities. The outcome of this is a rigid model in terms of the syllabi, methodologies and bureaucracies, and that also has the student body accustomed to expert classes and memoristic learning (Galcerán, 2010).

However, the social environment is characterised by weak social organisations, bureaucratised NGOs for the main part, with little social emphasis and unaccustomed to reflection, self-criticism and change (although there are many very interesting exceptions). Both social organisations and NGOs are, in general, detached from the academic environment.

It is also important to consider the political environment in which it is implemented. Autonomous cooperation policies almost exclusively promote the use of logical management models, and are found wanting in the practice of a clear and continuous strategy. Furthermore, they have recently been tarnished³ due to alleged clientelist

³ The scandals about the fraudulent awarding of cooperation funds by the Valencia local government are covered in newspapers such as *El Diario*, *El País* or *El Mundo*. The most recent story at the time of writing this article is the firing of the Directorate General for Cooperation who is awaiting sentencing for his management of public grants

<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/02/26/valencia/1330255008.html>;

http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2012/02/27/valencia/1330369781_247099.html

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practices. This situation has permeated public opinion, which is increasingly sceptical towards the cooperation system and towards the legitimacy of its actors.

It is in this context that the Master's degree has come about and is implemented. From its beginnings it has opted to reflect upon the design of its syllabus with social actors relevant in the field of development and cooperation in Spain. Two participatory workshops were held in 2006 in which the key ingredients of the syllabus and the teaching method to be used were discussed. An intermediate proposal was chosen, which caters for the demands of the context and the vision of the developers. On the one hand the approaches and tools belonging to the dominant approach of development management will be offered (such as the logic management models) and on the other we shall investigate alternative models (such as the participatory approaches, of power and rights), which offer different visions from development processes. Furthermore, more purely critical perspectives, alongside the constant questioning of all the approaches, had to feature throughout the syllabus.

This very dichotomy can be found in the teaching approach: there are teachers who propose a more conventional approach to the teaching, based primarily on the transmission of knowledge by the professors where the role of the students is, at most, studying and presenting case studies. They share the stage with more risky proposals where the aim is not only to provide spaces for dialogue but also to make them significant for the learners, that is to say, to base them on everyday situations, their conflicts and interests. We could say that the majority of the Master's degree professors share this teaching approach, although bringing this to fruition is not always easy. Without doubt, strengthening teaching practices based on this paradigm open up an extremely thought-provoking path for the training of the Master's Degree in Development Policies and Processes' professors.

The first edition of the Master's degree was launched in 2007 and after four years of teaching in which a special type of feedback between the students and professorship has been sought (through quarterly monitoring committees) and collaborating social organisations (through the Advisory Council), the Master's degree is at the start of a new phase thanks to its integration in the Interuniversity Master's Degree with another four universities from the Region of Valencia, which involves new changes and challenges that we will not deal with in this article. However, the promoters still plan to conserve the spirit described previously and move forward with a continuous evaluation process that enables the quality of the Master's Degree to improve.

Researching the critical abilities of the Master's Degree students. An exploratory study

In this section, we shall provide the findings from an exploratory study performed in 2011, the aim of which was to discover to what extent the Master's Degree students had acquired skills for a critical development practice (Belda et al, 2012). The

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methodology employed consisted of performing semi-structured interviews with 13 students that had completed the Master's Degree. This information was complemented by reading the dissertations and internship reports.

It is important to clarify that, when these interviews were performed, the only graduates were those who had studied the Master's Degree in Development Policies and Processes (direct predecessor to the current Master's Degree in Cooperation). We thought it relevant to interview people who had finished the Master's Degree so as to explore the formative space of the internships and the end of the Master's Degree dissertation as well. These people were taught via the blended learning system, with a training period of 36 ECTS over two semesters (from October to June) consisting of three modules of four subjects each one (12 ECTS per module). The first module, theoretical in nature, introduced development concepts and the international cooperation system; the second examined the nature of development processes, with a particular emphasis on participation, power and rights perspectives; the third dealt with the management of development projects, the contents of which were linked the most common development planning. The training was complemented by 2 subjects, each worth 3 ECTS credits, dealing with social research techniques. Subsequently the student must complete an internship in the area (16 ECTS) and finally a recognised dissertation worth 5 ECTS Table 1 is a schematic presentation of the structure of the Master's degree studied by the interviewed student.

INITIAL MODULE	SPECIALISATION	PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES	
15 ECTS credits/4 subjects + Seminars	15 ECTS credits/4 subjects + Seminars	15 ECTS credits/4 subjects + Seminars	16 ECTS credits (400h = 4 months)
Module I: INTRODUCTION TO DEVELOPMENT →	Module II: DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES →	Module III: PROJECT CYCLE MANAGEMENT →	INTERNSHIP
Bird's eye view of the situation worldwide	The nature of development processes	Cycle I Management: Diagnosis, design and creation	To be conducted in Public Administration agencies, NGOs and International Organisations.
Development economy	Development planning and management	Cycle II Management: Implementation and monitoring	↓
Human development and new perspectives on development	Development organisations management	Cycle III Management: Assessment	5 ECTS credits
The international development cooperation system	Qualitative research methods and techniques	Quantitative research methods and techniques	DISSERTATION
Seminars	Seminars	Seminars	Research work based on the activities performed during the internship.

Table 1. Structure of the Master's Degree in Development Policies and Processes

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We are aware of the methodological limitations of this study; the sample is small, the information has not been triangulated with other people who have interacted with the graduates (in particular with the organisations where they completed their internships) and the limitations of the individual interview technique to reconstruct group experiences. However, in our opinion these limitations do not invalidate this essentially exploratory study and its potential for subsequent research.

Is it possible to train in critical development practice?

Our findings enable us to state that there are some elements of critical development practice that have been acquired. There is a strong presence of a group of knowledge/skills and attitudes linked to the view of power, politics and critical thinking; furthermore, we can also see a critical but purposeful view of cooperation based on ideas of change and individual, group and experiential learning is held in high regard. Let us look at this in more detail.

View of power, politics and critical thought.

The combination of power, politics and critical thought is present in many responses.

For example, one of the interviewees stated that after studying the Master's Degree s/he was able to understand power from a different perspective, linked to knowledge and the ability to analyse real situations:

"I believe power to be [...] the ability to remove yourself from this situation, of knowing how to deal with the situation and to understand why it occurred in the first place. That is power, how I am empowered based on the knowledge and the ability to analyse, and understand real life situations, from the day to day, where we are close to the development of people, the ability to understand knowledge, and of being able to apply it." E5.

Another of the interviewees directly attributed the ability to control a situation with power and politics to critical capacity:

Regarding politics, when you develop a critical capacity you develop tool to better analyse politics, which is just what I think is lacking, critical capacity. And I believe this is what the politics today is all about, you have a lot of information from different sources and with critical capacity you are able to sift through it" E3.

Part of this understanding of power has come about during the formative process of the Master's Degree in Development Policies and Processes:

"Power, because as well as providing the tools to analyse power, it's an extra perspective that helps you see. Just like gender goggles. Simply being aware of the tools for the powercube and all these things, sometime when you arrive at an NGO they've told me that this person leads a lot, this is the person that gives orders, this is what's his name" E3.

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"Yes, in terms of the different types of power... as well as being able to see the different types of power, visible, invisible, hidden, above all the subject of hidden power... You criticise visible power and we have more tools to criticise it, invisible power you know it's there, but hidden power is more complicated because it's ingrained" E4.

While another part has taken place throughout the internship and dissertation period:

"I remember an interview in a workshop in the community and afterwards I had to interview the president and a man from the community. In many communities where I went and in many workshops, I noticed I was interviewing the president but I wasn't getting much information because the president was just a figure they that had... it's your turn to be president, but actually power, there was a hidden power that some member of the community had, he was an extra member of the community, but he was the one pulling the strings" E2.

"When we gathered together in a circle and I wanted to ask a question about their day to day, which is not easy because they're shy, they don't have a voice and they aren't given the space to speak up, and that's why it's so hard for them to talk in public normally. However, I wasn't asking anything complicated, I was asking about getting up day to day to see if what I was going to propose fit in or not. So I remembered what [professor of the Master's degree] had said, because the lady didn't answer me, so I bent down a little bit to be at her height and she answered me" E2.

"At [organisation where the internship was completed] there were very obvious power struggles, about how the Pro acted with the other groups and how the different groups adopted or failed to accept the process itself or were against it altogether, in fact, the process ended relatively abruptly because of something similar, due to a power struggle, in the end the groups are brought on side" E3.

There are also different accounts that demonstrate that in the current context the interviewees are immersed in, issues concerning power are clearly perceived:

"Especially when experiencing organisational processes, you have more points of view [...] keep quiet in a meeting so that it's not always the same people talking, someone who finds it hard to give other people room" but now you analyse this a lot more and participating in an organisational process becomes a more conscious effort" E1.

"Now, with my current work [at a bilateral donation organisation] I am very aware of how power is used to control situations. For good and bad ends... Almost always for bad...At XX you see how everything works and it's very sad that power can't be used to transform relationships. I had a good experience... I managed, due to bull-headedness, to try to lead gender municipal policies in a specific municipality where they are developing an Equality Plan and it's going to be a demonstrative experience that guides others" E7.

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Critical vision of cooperation and ideas of change

The most common feeling is that the Master's Degree in Development Policies and Process favours the creation of an anti-establishment sentiment and critical perspective of how development aid is focused:

"I believe that with the Master's Degree I have learnt that phrase that I always hear about the hypocrisy of cooperation, well yes, being rebellious within this context allows you to see, because you can't change what you don't know, first you need to know how it works to then be able to act on it [...] first find out how it has been and this is something the Master's Degree does really well, discover the new trends, the new theories" E5.

"Yes, I can clearly see how the system is making fools out of us and what surprises me is that we haven't taken to the streets. The whole subject of civil society in Spain makes me quite angry, I've kept very quiet about the importance of what's happened and in this sense, yes, I have noticed that I have a more intense political and social attitude" E6.

"Perhaps things that I saw before I tend to see more critically now, more disillusion, at times I see that cooperation is used as a new type of colonialism, at times I think it's better to not intervene because you only end up doing more harm" E12.

Beyond widespread criticism, some of the interviews provide clues about how the students attempt to practice an idea of change from their daily jobs, which are far removed from development practice.

"It is even affecting my work. In fact my boss told me I was converting the unit into an NGO as I was really changing the way the unit worked, because the people there are, in my opinion, too aggressive and we were beginning to stop sanctioning many processes and seeing in another way. Even on the scale of something as independent as an inspection job I was acquiring other nuances, because I was bringing my boss on side". E6.

Or from a social activism perspective:

"For example, with regards to the work I do at XXX you end up realising that it's more important or what's important is more the structure than the specific thing you do [...] working there I am becoming increasingly aware that structural change that has a real and lasting impacting is more important, it is becoming more and more difficult, it's a slow process, for example, there, an idea of change is to give the process a wider approach or focus and to look at the structure and the general processes" E1.

"For example at [organisation name], as a result of the Master's degree, combined with other factors, we started to work, as well as working with teenagers, which is what I normally do, we started to work more on the subject of advocacy work and social

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awareness because we believe in the topic of attitudes and in topics of power relationships.” E4.

“The Master's degree [...] makes you completely change the way you conceive things because it allows you valorise what has happened up until then with the cooperation and it prepares you for this new cooperation that we want to achieve, the new sustainability and to see what needs to be done for change” E5.

Personal, collective and experiential learning

There are different thoughts that refer to the formal and informal moments when learning occurs:

“Even at the dinners you learnt, it was a continuous process, I ended up exhausted ... I think the best of the Master's degree was that it was multidisciplinary” E2.

“What I learnt in the Master's Degree from the lectures helped me as much as what I learnt during the long social gatherings with my classmates” E11.

It also highlights that part of the learning experience is produced in collective spaces:

“I believe it obviously has a collective dimension, within the Master's degree, when ideas click it usually happens in a group [...] there are times when it hangs in the air, when you are deconstructing ideas in a community you can feel it” E1.

In some cases, but not across the board, they highlight the internships as a period of experience-based learning that makes you confront different situations:

“My internships involved tackling issues head on [...] I had some training but I'm not the finished article, tackling issues and so I realised and I learn everything about the staff topic [...] therefore it was an important personal learning experience. E6

Finally, with regard to completing the dissertation, it is easy to see the difficulty this task poses, especially for those who are removed from the academic world, although the personal effort and determination required to complete it is valued:

“The scientific level changes, the research changes [...] and I wasn't really expecting it, in fact, there's a moment when you start to lose heart and you say, I give up, there was a moment when I said I give up, because I can't do it. So you pick up your self-esteem, carry on, make the effort, but it really is difficult. More so when you have to link work with teaching. But I was very keen to change”. E5.

There are many accounts stating that the Master's Degree in Development Policies and Processes fosters critical thought among the participants although having a critical capacity is also one of the motives for studying the course.

“The ability to reflect upon oneself is inherent but the Master's degree provides you with a series of tools and trends that enable you to think about yourself more efficiently” E3.

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"But I think I previously had the ability, it's an aptitude, an aptitude that I was born with, a skill that I was born with, which throughout the Master's degree that has naturally helped me to develop it and, in fact, I think that it's the first time in my life in an academic environment that I can that I can talk about the self-reflection topic" E10.

Making the most of the existing synergies has not been perceived to a great extent among the interviewees; there are references to enriching experience of group work, to the issue of interdisciplinarity, a relevant factor those who have technical training, to differences in opinion. For example, one of the interviewees states:

"I suppose this is part of the Master's degree's wealth; people come to different conclusions from the same readings and classes. These conclusions could be similar or the complete opposite." E1.

"At times we had all kinds of debates, there were a lot of discussions; also there were people who had become involved in aid and that was very enriching, because there were people who are from here, from headquarters, who send, send, send... but there were people from there who receive, receive, receive." E5.

Shortcomings identified

As opposed to the many accounts demonstrating that the issue of power has been internalised by the Master's students, the findings regarding 'navigating' the complexity is less visible, although the idea does crop up in the interviews. There is a generally vague understanding of the concept:

"For example, I worked at XXX during my internship, well there you have to manage the agenda of the people working there, your own agenda, the dynamics, it's very complex and you need to know what time you need to be in what place, at what point to stop and say you need something and at what point understand how things flow." E1

"At XX we were also working on fair trade coffee, primarily with a little bit more strategy with a view to sustainability. Later you see that maybe I could do something here to speed up the process, to make it happen within half a year instead of two if I prioritise maybe I can incorporate people in the process, primarily what is most sustainable and then most effective. But the main objective is to foster empowerment, participation and involvement, and the growth of other people..." E1.

Neither is their conclusive evidence of the ability to adapt or constantly renew or update oneself. The closest examples we have are these two that mention a broadening of horizons ("Reading things I wouldn't have thought about reading two

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years ago” E4) or a more open attitude to new experiences (“I feel that I am completely open to anything that might happen” E6).

Finally, neither are their accounts of the two elements that we noted in the second section, DE could contribute the critical practice, the interculturality as a learning framework and global citizenship.

Conclusions. Thinking to the future

Given the exploratory nature of this research, our main proposal is to provide some pointers for the future, thinking in all the possibilities that exist to rethink training for development professionals from a DE perspective. We believe it to be a little explored field, which, in turn, has enormous potential if there is a desire to foster a different development practice. Our example, that may be imperfect but is constantly being renewed, signals a possible direction we can head in.

With regard to the exploratory study's contributions to the Master's Degree at UPV, we can state that it has demonstrated the possibility of teaching critical practice, which is also important to maintain the spirit and energy levels of those involved, and it has also revealed certain aspects where it is found wanting.

Obviously there are limitations to the context in which the Master's Degree finds itself in, even more so now as it has become an Official Master's Degree, and therefore the teaching must be provided by the UPV's professors. However, as we noted at the beginning of the article, while it may be difficult to go beyond some of the concepts of standard practice, it will always be possible to find spaces for this critical practice.

Some of the learning experiences derived from the study have already been incorporated in the most recent edition of the Master's degree that started in September 2011 and is currently in progress. A new subject has been incorporated, which is called Research-action processes in a local context. In small groups, the students perform small research projects, which are useful in a local context and their thoughts are then linked to the problems surrounding development on a global scale.

With regard to the shortcomings related to intercultural contexts as a learning framework, this thinking will be strengthened during the internships, as well as in the subject mentioned above. Emphasis has also been placed on intercultural thinking in the Master's Degree's introductory subject on and it has strengthened thinking regarding diversity in different formative moments: an approach for the capacities for human development, gender perspectives, rights perspectives, research, etc.

They are small changes but they demonstrate what the spirit of the Master's degree has been since the beginning: thinking and learning about action. This is one of the most important teachings for those that endorse this article. If we truly wish to

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redirect development practice, it is essential that all those involved in the training project (professorship, academic management, students, collaborative bodies) are willing to consider and reconsider their own practice and act accordingly. If this is not the case change will not be possible.

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