**Planning education: Exchanging approaches to teaching practice-based skills**

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Planning curricula have continually evolved to meet changing societal needs, technological change and employer expectations. The professional accrediting body in the United Kingdom, the Royal Town Planning Institute, stipulates the core planning skills required, differentiating between formal classroom-based learning and professional competencies, derived in practice. Previous research identified the need to address perceived inadequacies in graduate planners’ practical skills, such as decision-making; leadership; and communication, including negotiating, influencing, and using evidence. Emphasis has also been placed on planning schools sharing innovative practice to improve student learning. This paper critically reflects on the challenges of teaching diverse cohorts and presents the findings from a sponsored teaching exchange research programme. Case studies drawn from each institution are used to illustrate practice-orientated planning education approaches in the classroom to better equip students for the workplace.

**Keywords:** Planning education, Skills, Decision-making, Employability, Competence

**Introduction**

Planners comprise one of a number of core occupations required in the delivery of healthy sustainable communities (ASC, 2007, p.42; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2004). Skills of visioning; project management; leadership; team working; change management; financial analysis; stakeholder management and evaluation; communication; conflict resolution; and customer awareness, were particularly identified in the Egan Review (ODPM, 2004, p.103). The Review concluded that these skills were of importance across a range of professions and that a new body should drive the agenda forward (the National Centre for Sustainable Community Skills, which became the Academy for Sustainable Communities [ASC]). ASC (2007) stated that the education and training of professionals must change to develop place-making skills that transcend narrow disciplines and encourage team working. McLoughlin (2012) identified in his research for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) on employability skills for planners that graduates perform weakly in the areas of commercial awareness, decision-making/judgment, negotiating/influencing and the use of evidence/argument. The importance of ensuring that future planning practitioners are prepared for the current challenges facing the profession is clear (Farrell, 2013, p. 127).

Consideration must therefore be given to what is taught and how it is taught, together with how resources can be used effectively (Cole and Tibby, 2013). Parallel to this is the challenge of embedding employability into the curriculum (McLoughlin, 2012) and considering what higher education should do to enhance the employment potential for the full spectrum of graduates. McCarthy and Bagaeen (2014, p.3) recently detailed the challenges affecting planning education, noting the many external challenges from the erosion of the perceived capability of planning, the challenge of competing professions, and the pressures of internal restructuring. They recommend the wider sharing of good practice across planning schools to allow for educational innovation and enhancement in the delivery of planning practice.

This paper considers the discourse concerning the role and purpose of planning education in the context of the recognised need for universities to produce graduates with the skills to deliver sustainable communities.

**Research approach**

This research analysed a range of secondary evidence from a wide literature review. Additionally, primary research involved observation into teaching methods employed by two accredited planning schools in the UK. The universities undertook teaching exchange visits to explore the rationale for the content and the nature of the learning and teaching framework. It was important to understand how curricula are designed to equip individuals to understand, critically discuss, and (potentially) to practise the art and science of urban and rural planning. Having regard to the balance between practice-orientated and skills focused content; history, theory and philosophy also form core components of planning programmes.

The University of Ulster (Ulster) and the University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE) each carried out three visits, observing and supporting the delivery of content (see table 1). Each visit had different focuses, but the core theme was the teaching of decision-making within a planning context.

*Insert Table 1 here*

Through these visits and discussions each institution developed an understanding of the structural, philosophical and practical approach utilised by the other. This enabled the institutions to individually and collaboratively reflect upon planning education; in understanding challenges and opportunities, the need to strike the balance between the broader and theoretical content and the practice-orientated requirements necessary in a career oriented qualification.

**The nature of planning education: art, vocation or process?**

Planning is an applied discipline with an interdisciplinary outlook and the diversity of roles and activities associated with planning is significant (Frank, 2006, p.16). Appropriate teaching of current and required technical skills as part of the academic, theoretical, and intellectual grounding of this discipline is therefore needed in addition to generic skills in the curriculum to enhance employability. Within planning, the multi-layered nature of activities challenges planners to increase their knowledge bases (ASC, 2007). The way planning decisions are reached is also inherently political, with the determination of planning applications and the adoption of development plans all requiring political mandate. Unlike other professions in the built environment, planning has ‘its aims, goals and processes adjusted over time in response to socio-economic trends and ideas’ (Frank, 2006, p.17). The complex environs within which planners operate are intricate and multi-faceted. With the exponential growth in procedural requirements, some would suggest that the profession has been overwhelmed with process, legislation and regulation. Brown *et al* (2003) consider that the profession has largely acquiesced to the management orientation of local government planning and planning as an activity has become little more than bureaucratic proceduralism. Sturzaker (2011, p.321) considers this as ‘de-professionalisation of the planning discipline’. The discourse associated with the ‘processisation’ of the profession has become intertwined with debates concerning the nature of planning education and particularly the view that rather than embedding skills into academic programmes, planning education should be delivered as vocational training without a broader theoretical and pedagogical curriculum.

Opinions differ significantly in the discourse concerning the balance between education providers teaching planning as a field of study, and the degree to which learning and teaching should be focused upon the skills that a competent planning practitioner needs to possess at the end of their degree. The two are not mutually exclusive, but the rationale for programme content, the learning framework, the methodological approach to equip individuals to understand, analyse, critically discuss, and practise the art and science of planning are areas where debate is commonplace.

As the planning system has evolved to meet the changing needs of the 21st century, shifting away from traditional land use planning, so too has planning education. Since 2010 much planning activity is located within a governance of ‘localism’. The planning systems found in both England and Northern Ireland, though different structurally, are both seeking to enhance the application of the subsidiarity principle through further delegation of powers to the local/community scale. As Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) comment, these new forms of governance create fuzzy boundaries, which give rise to challenges for planners. This impacts on how universities prepare planning students to enter professional practice operating within a context of economic and social uncertainty.

**Planning education in context**

Established from a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary legacy, planning has been criticised for not having its own set of theories and traditions (Frank, 2000). Davoudi (2000, p.124) illustrates that some believed that land use planning emerged as:

*(…) a series of radical, reformist ideas about changing and improving the city. Its impetus came out of concerns about the late nineteenth century industrialization and rapid urbanization.*

For some, this may have meant planning was an inappropriate intervention into private property rights and the market, for others it was welcomed as a solution to health problems, and there were those that viewed it as an economic kick-start to rebuilding after World War II. Efforts to define the domain of planning have been challenging though (Frank, 2006). McClendon *et al* (2003) for example suggest that planning needs a brand identity. Emphasised throughout the literature however, is that planning educators need to take a much stronger and proactive role in shaping both planning education and the profession (Poxton, 2001). Educators therefore, rather than changing education to fit the contemporary task, must play a role in shaping the task itself.

**The profession and education**

The Royal Town Planning Institute’s (RTPI) professional code of conduct requires that all members, ‘act with competence, honesty and integrity… and exercise their independent professional judgement to the best of their understanding’ (RTPI, 2012, p.1). In the context of this requirement, delivering the skills associated with ensuring competence is an ongoing challenge. Institutions offering accredited planning education in the UK are required to demonstrate that they can meet the criteria to be an ‘Effective Planning School’[[2]](#endnote-1). Criteria relate to skills, knowledge, ethics, practice-orientated content and embracing professional and field of study requirements. RTPI accreditation allows for discretion on the part of the planning school with regards to the methodological approach to delivery, with the emphasis, focus and learning and teaching techniques varying between the universities, and thus offering distinctiveness.

The ability to apply knowledge in practice emphasises the understandable and necessary intention of the RTPI to ensure that graduates from accredited degrees enter the marketplace with a recognised standard of practical competence allowing students to progress towards chartered membership through the Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) route. The APC combines a minimum of two years of professional experience with an RTPI accredited degree and ensures graduate planners achieve, and can demonstrate, a professional level of learning and competency outcomes.

**Planning skills**

Frank (2006) notes that the skills and knowledge requirement for the planning profession has always been the subject of much debate, evolving with changes in planning practices. Dalton (2001) describes that planning has three different phases within planning education and practice. A physical and design-orientated planning approach emerged from the 1970s and planning education also moved from studio teaching, which emphasised technical drawing/design skills, to a knowledge-based classroom approach. Knowledge-based social science education supported the rational planning model of the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards a more theoretical, research based, advocacy orientated education materialised. Studio style teaching has re-emerged in the curriculum through teaching GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and CAD (Computer Aided Design) to stress visualisation skills. With such technological applications being used within mainstream planning education, Frank (2006) questions if this can be to the detriment of conveying knowledge and values, and the development of ‘soft skills’ as integral to the planning discipline.

Although the RTPI seeks to ensure minimum standards of competence are met within the profession, research in the mid-2000s (ASC, 2007; Bailey, 2005; Durning & Glasson, 2004; Egan 2004) identified a need to address inadequacies in urban planners’ technical and generic skills. This includes the extent to which university students are, or should be, taught to be practitioners, as opposed to being supported to study a broader and theoretical planning curriculum, within which practice-orientated skills form an important element. Such assertions feed the suggestion that planning education should emphasise technical skills to create planners capable of entering the market place as competent practitioners. However, the contemporary value and purpose of a university education and the extent to which the objective should be to create a vocational course to produce ‘practice ready’ planners is questioned.

In terms of the pedagogical approach towards planning education, there is a willingness to experiment with different approaches and media in order to enhance student learning. McCarthy and Bagaeen (2014, p.6) suggest that the most important area of good practice is increasing employability and providing links to practice, including inter-professional project working. Indeed, the RTPI have advocated the acquisition of skills for planning through a variety of modes of teaching, project based learning, studios, study visits, simulations of real world problems, role play and work experience through placements and internships (Bailey, 2005).

**University planning education**

Bailey (2005) notes that higher education has served an important role in offering vocational undergraduate and postgraduate programmes designed to prepare potential practitioners for careers in the built environment. He emphasises the extent to which dedicated planning skills are increasingly taught alongside generic university-wide employability skills. This raises a number of pedagogical questions.

Bennett *et al* (2000) provide a critique of the ‘transfer’ and ‘situated learning’ models, which is useful to draw upon in reference to understanding the effectiveness of teaching vocational courses solely within a theoretical model of course provision through university planning degrees. Dominantly followed in higher education, the transfer model assumes that skills transfer easily to the context of the workplace, and, whilst seemingly attractive, this is noted as not automatic. The model of situated learning, as explained by Bennett *et al* (2000, p.16), operates through the understanding that:

*(…) much of what is learned is specific to the nature of the situation in which it is learned and the circumstances in which knowledge is acquired is likely to influence the subsequent deployment of that knowledge in other situations.*

Bailey (2005) highlights the dominant transfer model suggests the potential difficulty undergraduate students may have to apply the skills learned in the classroom to the workplace. In contrast, the part-time postgraduate degree route, where study is often combined with practice, fits within the situated learning model, combining critical reflection with learning in the field. Nevertheless, Bailey (2005) also questions whether employers continue to consider it their role to develop the skills of early career staff, or whether they see it as primarily the role of university to educate employable students.

At the National Planning Forum meeting in March 2014 ‘Tomorrow’s Planners Today: Education and Training for the Future of the Planning Profession’, discussions took place concerning planning education, the requirements of the profession, and the potential for the future of planning education. Despite such discussions, little has traditionally been said about *how* learning takes place, and what contribution higher education and other providers can make to the world of practice (Bailey, 2005). Peel (2005) stresses the need for a learner-centred approach to planning education and practice, where students should get to experience the full interplay of education, meaningful work and personal development in order to achieve their potential.

**Planning education in practice**

The rationale for this research arose from the identification of the challenges associated with supporting the development of the specific skills required for planning decision-making via the classroom. The research focused upon developing decision-making related planning skills and embedding these within a broader academic and intellectual grounding. UWE and Ulster are both accredited planning schools who directly face the challenges of delivering planning education to both full and part-time students (with the latter potentially working in planning practice already). The aim is to provide an academically robust learning experience that prepares students practically and intellectually for a career within a specific range of built environment professions.

*Observed example 1: Mock Planning Inquiry*

At UWE, a postgraduate module called ‘Implementation and Design Quality’ uses a role-play format to assess the students’ knowledge of decision-making theory, practice and rationale. The module is based around developing students’ understanding of the framework that enables planning decisions to be made. It tests the skills of effective design solutions within the decision-making process. Both aspects of the module are partly assessed through a simulated mock planning inquiry.

Student teams study a real planning application which has been refused but not appealed. The teaching schedule follows the real appeal process as far as possible. The module culminates in a live simulated mock planning inquiry, chaired by practising Inspectors from the Planning Inspectorate. In parallel, students receive academic lectures and participate in workshops supporting their skills development, practice-based knowledge and understanding, and the theoretical underpinning.

*Insert Table 2 here*

It is intended that students have a factual, ‘learnt’, understanding of the planning decision-making process, and an experiential grounding of a ‘good’ planning decision. They put this into practice through a realistic simulation of a scenario that the students could experience in reality once they enter practice. For the post-graduate group, which typically includes a number of practitioners and practice-focused students, the creation of a real-world scenario is helpful and receives very positive feedback annually. In parallel with theoretical and contextual taught content, an effective balance is struck between vocational and academic, critically reflective study.

*Observed example 2: The X and Y game*

At Ulster, a scenario-based game was observed based on the ‘prisoners’ dilemma’ scenario where two criminals are arrested and imprisoned awaiting trial. Each prisoner is placed in solitary confinement and has no way of communicating with the other. The consequences of whether they ‘talk’ or remain silent influence the nature of their potential punishment. Decisions are made simultaneously, without knowledge of their partner’s choice. The game involved students undertaking decisions in five groups of four over ten rounds. Points were attributed for each round to each student dependent on outcome and the scoring was kept cumulatively as shown in table 3.

*Insert Table 3 here*

There were a number of possible outcomes for the individual students and collectively for the five groups. To incentivise participants at the end of the game the group with the highest score cumulatively was awarded a large bar of chocolate. The person with the individual highest score across all groups was awarded an even bigger bar of chocolate. Students were aware of the prizes before the game was played.

The game is played iteratively, to allow participants to experience their colleagues’ approaches and to ‘learn’ from occurrences in previous rounds. If the iterations are finite and the players know the number of turns each will have then this affects the strategy they choose to adopt. It allows for the study of the emergence of cooperation and defection among selfish and unrelated individuals (Axelrod, 1984 in Liu, Chen, Zhang, Wang & Perc*,* 2012). For the purpose of our exercise, it allowed undergraduate students to understand first hand why people might not cooperate, even if it seems that it is in their best interests. Although the scenario is removed from the direct planning decision-making process, the underpinning learning is transferable and highly relevant. As a precursor to knowledge and understanding in a planning context, this exercise is an effective foundation that can be embraced regardless of prior learning and subject awareness.

Following the exercise, students were asked to reflect on their approach to the game in considering their choices with regard to the bigger picture: win-win being the ideal situation (both sides need to feel comfortable with the outcome to be considered win-win). McClymont (2011) notes a win-win in a market sense is when one party wants what another is prepared to trade and in this sense a win-lose scenario should only be considered where an on-going relationship is not required, for example one-off transactions, such as buying a house.

*Observed example 3: Participatory budgeting*

‘Sharrow Decides’ involved UWE undergraduate students taking on specified individual characters (drawn randomly) to argue their case for a slice of the available budget to carry out work for a specific site in the Sharrow area of Sheffield. Using a real location with hypothetical objectives students investigated the area using internet search tools to gain additional background information on the locality. The role play was prepared by the students over two lecture sessions. Each role was different and came with a set of objectives for that person to achieve. The overall budget was not sufficient to allow each role to achieve all of their desired objectives. Students were required to prioritise their ‘shopping list’ and to seek alliances with other characters to share services to achieve win-win scenarios. The real context, complexity and research requirements associated with this scenario represent an opportunity for progression in learning and understanding from exercises such as the X and Y game, as well as the development of skills. In parallel with enhanced academic understanding, vocational skills and abilities can also be developed in a progressive manner to support student learning journeys.

The exercise comprised a summative assessment and incentivised students to play their roles seriously and to the best of their ability. Two distinct approaches were seen during the exercise, reflecting Claydon’s (1998) notion of positional bargaining versus principled negotiations. The former adopts a competitive stance, noting the size of the cake, trying to grab as much as possible, adopting a tactic based on the desired outcome. Trade-offs occur between parties until a mid-point consensus is achieved. This may be a sub-optimal solution only derived as a way of appeasing other parties, providing for relatively arbitrary results dependent on time constraints and the skills of the participants. It is an approach which can result in entrenched positions and make matters worse (Claydon & Chick 2005, p.223).

Following the session some students felt that their performance was poor as they had not achieved all of their objectives. Others, who had secured their aims early in the debate, were inclined to sit back and watch others fight it out for the limited pot of money. Those students who were able to take a step back from the immediacy of their own objectives to cooperate with others and broker deals between parties demonstrated a principled negotiations stance.

**Reflections**

As a result of the inter-institutional learning exchange, a number of alterations, some strategic and some module related, are being considered at both universities. Ulster is looking at ways of following the Mock Inquiry for final year students and UWE has incorporated the X and Y activity into a number of modules both for planning students and those studying for a Real Estate qualification. The potential for greater recognition of programme content to enhance inter-disciplinary learning has been noted for Ulster to develop. In addition, both institutions are actively reviewing the potential of on-line material to reinforce particular topics. This interlinks with graduate development programmes providing greater reflection upon comparative elements across the devolved UK to enhance practice knowledge, conceptual debate and graduate mobility.

There are clear challenges, and opportunities, in facilitating learning to a diverse cohort, potentially combining part-time and full-time students, together with students from a non-planning or non-cognate discipline background. Full-time and part-time students can have different expectations as to what programmes can provide. Full-time students can be more academically orientated in their approach whilst part-time students can bring practical application into the classroom and into assessment. Styles of teaching need to acknowledge, and celebrate these differences in contribution and exploit the potential of peer learning. This research offers a positive example of inter-institutional sharing of pedagogical practice to enhance experiential student learning appropriate to a skills-orientated programme such as planning.

Student, employer and external examiner feedback has been overwhelmingly positive towards this research project. As expectations for practice-ready graduates increase, it is suggested that future research should explore the teaching of specific practice-orientated skills for planners in relation to RTPI requirements and meeting the needs of employers in areas such as decision-making, negotiating and influencing, as suggested by McLouglin (2012). The position of development management teaching, for example, will need further consideration to ensure effective delivery of practice-orientated skills. This needs to be balanced with the need for academic theory and conceptual understanding. One key opportunity in this regard is to engage students and employers further as partners. As highlighted in the HEA report ‘Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education’ (Healy, Flint & Harrington, 2014), the concept of 'collegiality' amongst all concerned is an important and current phenomenon that is crucially relevant to the field of learning and teaching in Higher Education. This raises important questions around the teaching, learning and assessment strategies adopted.

**Table 1. Examples of the activities carried out on each visit**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **University of Ulster activities observed during visit to UWE** | | **UWE activities observed during visit to University of Ulster** | |
| Visit 1: | Observation of a mock Planning Inquiry used to support the teaching of planning law and the decision process to Masters students.  Observation of negotiation exercises.  Meeting with planning inspectors involved in the mock planning inquiry assessment.  Heads of School discussions. | Visit 1: | Participation in a session exploring ethics and professional practice to year three undergraduates.  Meeting to discuss module content and strategies for teaching planning law.  Meeting with Visiting Professor to observe the teaching of negotiation skills. |
| Visit 2: | Localism Seminar (exploring the development management perspective). | Visit 2: | Interview with Planning Appeals Commissioner on graduate planning skills and competencies.  Teaching exchange discussions at Belfast. |
| Visit 3: | Review, reflection, analysis and planning meeting for future collaboration and knowledge exchange. | Visit 3: | Attendance and participation in the International Planning Law and Property Conference in Belfast.  Presentation of working materials. |

**Table 2. UWE Mock Inquiry Exercise**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Element of exercise** | **Understanding/knowledge** | **Embedded skills** |
| Acting as expert witness. | Process and procedures undertaken – who does what, when, why and how. | Confidence in presentation/public speaking skills. |
| Evidence gathering. | Understanding importance of policy and its interaction. | Researching skills (linking policy and evidence to practical situations). |
| Preparing the case and forming the best argument. | Understanding how a case representing the best argument can be developed from an inter-disciplinary team. | Negotiation skills, argumentation. |
| Preparing proof of evidence for the Inquiry. | The use, content and purpose of proofs of evidence. | Report/proof writing skills. |
| Responding to cross examination. | How to use evidence to support a case. | Listening and analysing skills. |
| Role playing. | Insight into the role in practice. | Viewing situations from others’ standpoints. |
| Submitting a final Proof of Evidence. | The use, content and purpose of proofs of evidence. | Report/proof writing skills, responding to challenges. |

**Table 3: Scoring for the X and Y game**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Cards played** | **Outcome** | **Scoring** |
| Four Xs | Lose | -1 point each |
| Three Xs  One Y | Win  Lose | +1 each  -3 |
| Two Xs  Two Ys | Win  Lose | +2 each  -2 each |
| One X  Three Ys | Win  Lose | +3  -1 each |
| Four Ys | Win | +1 each |

**Notes**

1. [RTPI (2004) Policy Statement on Initial Planning Education](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/8479/microsoft_word_-_policy_statement_on_initial_planning_education_2012.pdf)

**Acknowledgement**

This work was supported by funding from the Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE).

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2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)