

Lessons learnt from teaching practices of participatory neighbourhood planning in China

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Abstract: Healey (2010) has questioned the limitations when planning theories and ideas travelled from developed countries to other places. In 2006, there is a new international university opened in Suzhou China, with close cooperation with Liverpool University in the UK. Since 2010, a new programme of Urban Planning and Design (was called Civic Design as the same as the parent department at Liverpool University) was started and in the spring of 2013, a new module of Neighbourhood Planning was taught. During this module, participatory planning methods (Barton, 2010; Sanoff 2000) were introduced and assessed for the group work at local community.

This paper will introduce the teaching practice of Neighbourhood Planning, with a focus on how participatory planning methods were taught, received, developed and applied in the context in urban China. At the end, an evaluation was made based on students' and residents' feedbacks. Lesson and experiences will be concluded for future teaching and practices in China.

1. Introduction

This paper summarises and reviews and teaching practice in the course CDE110 Neighbourhood Planning as it was offered in the spring of 2012-13 at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China. It was delivered by Dr Ying Chang and Dr Raffaele Pernice. Fifty students participated. A live project methodology was employed to develop students' participatory neighbourhood planning skills. Neighbourhood consultation events with about 50 families were organised by students to collect information effectively. The learning outcomes were evaluated by assessment, peer review, student feedback in 2013, interviews with local residents and a separate follow-up feedback in 2015. The conclusion offers a reflection on the experiment of transplanting an international concept to a Chinese context and applying it to Chinese students and Chinese community. It also discusses the benefits and challenges of employing life project methodology in conducting group assessment.

2. Course Summary

The module has two main aims to achieve: firstly, to develop student's appreciation of the importance of planning at the neighbourhood scale with a focus on understanding local needs; secondly, to equip them with relevant planning skills, particularly with an understanding of the value of community engagement in the plan making process. The assessments include two parts, one is an individual critique (60% of the final mark) of neighbourhood planning theories, and the other task is group work (40% of the final mark) consisting of a comprehensive neighbourhood appraisal and proposal for improvements. The neighbourhood planning skills were taught workshop style, and combined with field visits, tutorials, field work, and neighbourhood consultation events with local community. For the purposes of group work, the 50 students were divided into teams of five each.

3. Pedagogical goals

The whole design of the participatory neighbourhood planning workshop is to follow the international trend of the communicative turn in planning practice and accordingly in planning education (Forester 1985, Healey 1992, Jiang and Jiang 2008, Cao and Wang 2009, Hu, de Roo et al. 2013). As early as in 1970's, there was a trend towards the exploration of new perspectives, processes and approaches of planning and the new role of planners as a quick learner, a facilitator, and a mediator among complicated reality in which individuals, society, built environment, economic development, and environmental issues are intertwined with each other. As diagrams below show, different from the traditional top-down model of planning, the process of planning is an evolving learning process, in which both planners and clients contribute to the mutual learning they develop together, in which planners learn intimate knowledge of context, priorities, and realistic alternatives from clients; and clients learn concepts, processed knowledge, and new perspectives from planners. In addition, the international trend of planning has shifted from bold and visionary physical planning and design into process oriented development of collective vision and consensus building, mainly through higher level of participation and innovative participatory methods.



Figure 1: Concept of transactive planning

Source: Friedmann, J. (1973). *RETRACKING AMERICA; A THEORY OF TRANSACTIVE PLANNING*.

4. Challenges

From the UK to China, will it work in local context?

During the design of the module specifications, the module leaders tried to match the pedagogical approach adopted in the University of Liverpool, which is to put people and their demand in the centre. Thus it is very different from the top-down approach that is the norm of planning education in China. In China, there is a lack of empirical evidence of successful consultation with local people on affairs that matter their own neighbourhoods. Transformed from early socialist society, Chinese society is undergoing a transitional period to form new local communities based on private homeownership. Nevertheless, there is an absence of public sphere that is fundamental to achieving mutual understanding.

Were our students ready?

At the time of the live project, it was the second semester of the first year of the professional programme of students enrolled in BA Civic Design. Other modules taught in the first semester included foundation courses, such as Planning in the UK, Planning in China, History of Planning and Urban Economics. CDE110 was the first module that has narrowed down to neighbourhood scale, with specific tasks of practical skills and fieldwork. After traditional high school education which focus on entry exams, students are lack of life experience and people skills to work with real clients, particularly those who were senior to them.

Work with uncertainty-Live project and partnership

The risks in employing live project methodology lay in time management and coordination with clients. The workshop had a rigid weekly syllabus to follow, which was decided as part of the module specification before the semester started. However, many uncertainties existed: firstly, the consultation event with local residents also required a good fit into the existing plan of community regular programme and to avoid the time conflict with other events with same scale; secondly, the level of cooperation of local residents could only be anticipated and not be promised or controlled; thirdly, weather conditions, other preparation work such as advertisement, music equipment also increase the uncertainties and accordingly, the stress to both teachers and students.

5. Creative Approach and to Overcome Difficulties Together

The initial site visit was organised by teachers and an introductory talk by the developer was given to the students. The first step in participatory neighbourhood planning is the building of trust. Bearing all the challenges in mind, students started ice-breaking activity to get closer to the local community. It was student's idea to organise activities for children to use Lego to build their ideal home. Teachers from LC were invited to participate in the event too. Through the success of this activity, local community got to know students from XJTU. Students have used this opportunity to promote the forthcoming neighbourhood consultation event and some parents have already expressed strong interests in participating.



Figure 2: site visit and ice-breaking activity at Living Bank neighbourhood

One month later, a neighbourhood event was organised to collect residents' opinions and suggestions about their community. Before the event, teachers have delivered the lecture on participatory neighbourhood planning skills and provided resources for student self-study. Each group has developed their own innovative way to engage local residents. Tutorials were given during the

workshop. Student leaders also met with community leaders to discuss details of the neighbourhood consultation event, including its programme, advertisement, invitation, table settings, etc.



Figure 3: Left and middle: student discussion in class; Right: students discuss with community leaders

On the day, 50 families worked with the ten teams of students. Students used various methods to encourage the participation of local residents of all ages, including model making, walking tour, interactive iPad presentation, post-it notes, and a message wall, etc. Dr Rebecca Kiddle joined in the event and made the following comments:

‘From what I can see, the kids really enjoyed making models, I am sure they really like to see how the whole thing, pieces together, at the end. I think students come out with some really creative ideas, about how they create buildings, using sand and grass, etc. So the young kids obviously have their hands on to making models. This experience is really a good one. I really like the ideas of the board at the back, on which parents can write down what they really like and the whole range of different tools you try to use, that board, questionnaire, things like this, I think they did really well.’

6. Effects on students and society

Capacity building as individual, as group and as a community

The success of the neighbourhood consultation event enabled students to collect information efficiently. With the aid of models, drawing, maps, sticky notes, iPad and message wall, residents



Figure 4: various methods innovated by students have facilitated efficient communication with local residents

were able to express their opinion openly and more importantly, collectively, which is impossible if it was individual interview or survey. Student’s communication skills have been greatly improved during this practice.

In addition, it can be observed that because it is a live project which demanded intensive preparation, organising and communication tasks, each student has been commissioned to some sorts of tasks and there was no “free rider” could be found. Instead, a strong spirit of team working was developed when students have to work under stress, and with uncertainties. Teachers also asked each group to choose a team name for them and local residents to have a shared identity. Students have made logo for their own team and their invited guests too.



Figure 5: Left top: group meeting before the event; Right top: group memory after the event; Bottom: gala event with local residents after the consultation

The head of the community committee, Mrs Su, said, ‘I think it really turned out very well, the students really have brought many new ideas to our neighbourhood and it was much more interactive than our activities before.’ A young father said the activity: ‘...can reduce the distance between children and our home owners with our neighbourhood’. This event also helped build the sense of community of local residents. One young mother said: ‘I like this community very much and here is my real home.’ One young father said: ‘I feel this place is my home.’

After the event, trust and partnership has been built with local community and students were invited again to facilitate another two participatory neighbourhood planning workshop on the decision making of the new use of community centre. A documentary video¹ was made with help from staff and students of ECC department, to record the series of events and its significance in China.

7. Assessment and peer review

¹ Video of the Living Bank Community Project
 Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqE18zJTw4Y>
 Youku: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XODA00TAwODg4.html
 XJTLU Media Centre: <http://media.xjtlu.edu.cn/Play/686>



Figure 6: Left: students are delighted to use sticky notes to give comments to other groups
 Right: students are learning from each other by group peer review

At the end, the information collected at the neighbourhood event turned into part of the key findings of their group poster, in addition to the spatial analysis, road network, etc. The methods they have used during the events were not assessed but the outcomes generated from their methods were evaluated, which minimised the uneven outcomes caused by uncertainties, for example, some groups have fewer family members on the day, and different group has created their own methods which was impossible to define a clear marking criteria beforehand. Group peer review was undertaken to give students extra points or deducted points according to their contribution to the group. In addition, after the final presentation, teachers have invited all the groups to give comments to other group's work. Students appeared to have enjoyed the peer review very much and benefited from learning from each other.

8. Feedback: the first and second order effects of learning outcomes

Student feedback was collected via two methods: XJTTLU standard module questionnaire survey in 2013 and Survey Monkey in April 2015. Because the MQS at XJTTLU did not separate the workshop from the entire programme, only written comments related to the workshop have been used for the purposes of analysis. The purpose to have a follow-up feedback survey is to evaluate the second order effects of learning outcomes of this new pedagogy.

In the student feedback survey in 2013, many students had given positive feedback such as:

- 'what I enjoy most in this module is that I can work as a group and go to the local neighbourhood to participate some activities with the local residents'*
- 'workshop is the best! This module really put theory into practice.'*
- 'we can have real world practice, it's very helpful. I enjoy fieldtrip and the neighbourhood activity most.'*
- 'a direct contact with local neighbourhood and residents.'*
- 'I enjoyed the participation as groups and the involvement of local neighbourhoods.'*
- 'Everyone could participant in and the activities were interesting.'*
- 'Communication with local residents.'*

However, it is also found out that some students did not like live project because it is too stressful or they did not agree with the whole pedagogy, for example:

- 'it is unnecessary for us to 'play' with children.'*
- 'some of the procedures of class are too fussy. The teacher is too annoyed.'*
- 'I guess Ying Chang could relax herself a little bit. Sometimes she is too worried, yet it is not necessary.'*

The negative feedback could be a result as immediate emotional reaction after working under stress. Thus, we undertake another survey in 2015 for students both at XJTTLU and those who have studied at Liverpool for two years. Questions include the process, growth of social capital, skills, employability,

as well as the contribution to other modules in the last two years. By April 17th, there were 20 students who have completed the survey, seven of those are studying at Liverpool.

The table below has shown that higher credits are given to the active involvement, team building, usefulness to future career, less credits for improved communication skills and overall value of the learning process. Owing to it was a one-off activity, students did not feel strongly that they became closer to the community.

Table 1 Score from student feedbacks 2015

		Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Weighted Average	(Do not know)
<i>Involvement</i>	I have enjoyed the activity.	5.00%	0.00%	10.00%	40.00%	45.00%	4.2	
		1	0	2	8	9		
<i>Social capital</i>	Feel closer to my classmates	5.00%	10.00%	0.00%	45.00%	40.00%	4.05	
		1	2	0	9	8		
<i>Employability</i>	Useful for future career	5.00%	0.00%	15.00%	45.00%	30.00%	4	5%
		1	0	3	9	6		1
<i>Intellectual capital</i>	improved communication skills	5.00%	0.00%	25.00%	45.00%	25.00%	3.85	
		1	0	5	9	5		
<i>Learning Process</i>	Overall a valuable learning experience	5.00%	5.00%	10.00%	60.00%	20.00%	3.85	
		1	1	2	12	4		
<i>Community</i>	Feel closer to local community	5.00%	15.00%	35.00%	40.00%	5.00%	3.25	
		1	3	7	8	1		

About the question on to which modules this workshop has contributed, the answers from XJTU and Liverpool are very different. It seems that it has contributed to more various courses which are more project-based in Liverpool and more theory-based courses at XJTU.

Table 2 Related courses at Liverpool and XJTU

At XJTU	At Liverpool:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning methodology • Environmental sustainability II (rural planning) • Spatial design and the built environment I and II, • FYP • Planning Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ENVS384 Urban and Regional Regeneration Project • ENVS256: Urban Design • Urban regeneration project, urban design, it helps me understand the needs of community and the difference between Chinese community and UK neighborhood. • Environmental sustainability; • Urban regeneration

9. Conclusion

Transplanting new methods from the UK to China

All in all, the participatory neighbourhood planning workshop at Living Bank was a success to both students and teachers. Students valued it as a well-structured, well-organised and enjoyable learning process. The success of this experiment is also because the case study neighbourhood is already a very vibrant community with high level of trust among residents. The methods we learnt from textbook all proved to work well, for example, the trust building at the beginning, the innovative participatory methods, people skills etc. Students have learnt that local residents are really knowledgeable about their own neighbourhood and have learnt how to listen and respect their voices.

Real clients, work with uncertainty and work together

Students have shown positive attitudes and have taken active actions when they work with real clients and work with uncertainties. Every team had shown strong team work spirit to share the workload and tasks, help and support each other. Students, as a team, were able to think strategically, concisely, and carefully to make the whole programme to be implemented successfully. For example, students have shown very impressive ability to innovate new methods from other resources, including the use of Lego, iPad, and the costume play of Brother Mario.

In addition, from the supporting letter from students at Liverpool, students really have appreciated the collaboration between teachers and students because we have faced the challenges together, found the solutions and overcome the difficulties.

First and second order effects

The most interesting part is students' different reaction regarding their experience to play with children and work under stress. However, the follow-up survey shows that most results have turned into the positive side over time and students trust more after they found same pedagogy in other modules. As one student wrote in 2015:

'Real practice is really good even though it is tired.'

Sustainable?

The course was repeated in 2013-14 and 2014-15. Owing to the large class size of 120 to 130 students, it became impossible to organise neighbourhood consultation event as for 2012-13 cohort. However, the documentary video made from the teaching practice in 2013 became a useful reference resource and demonstration to other students. An appropriate size of class and good partnership with local community are crucial to achieve same quality.

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