

Linking planning pedagogy with practice and innovation: a workshop with practitioners to evaluate planning studio products

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Aim:

This paper explores the relationship between planning pedagogy and planning practice. It reports on a workshop with planning practitioners, which sought to evaluate the recent products of two planning studios in the Bachelor of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Queensland (Brisbane, Australia). The purpose of the **workshop was twofold:**

1. Examine what constitutes sound planning studio pedagogy in relation to what planning professionals expect from planning graduates when the latter enter the workforce. Are students being trained to meet the demands of the current job market? To answer these questions, studio products were evaluated both in terms of content and graphic quality.
2. Examine whether planning academia is at the forefront of innovation. Can planning practitioners learn from student ideas? What constitutes an “innovative planner” in the Australian, and more broadly, the Western context? Are planning studios more effective than traditional planning courses in fostering innovation and creative thinking among students?

Theoretical background:

The planning studio provides a quasi-world situation not offered by traditional courses, which employ a lecture or seminar format. It is a distinct pedagogical practice

that includes learning by doing. Students and instructors work together on a professional level (Fisher 2004). The studio focuses on planning-related tasks, issues, or challenges that involve creative thinking and critical analysis to produce a practical solution to a planning site (Higgins et al., 2009). More than an opportunity to reflection, it offers an opportunity for innovation. In planning programs, studios are generally considered a unique and valuable learning and teaching method to equip planners with skills such as project management, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership. This way future planners learn to deal with complex contemporary issues (Vella et al., 2014). Due to their participatory and collaborative nature, studio courses cannot be conducted online. They require class attendance and active participation and engagement.

In this paper we link the pedagogy of planning studio teaching with innovation. The current challenges facing Australian cities, including extreme car dependence, urban sprawl, and climate change, require innovative thinking in order to be tackled. “Thinking outside the box” has become a paramount learning objective for planning studios.

Method:

The workshop employed a focus group format. Questions adapted from Vella et al. (2014) were asked in order to guide the discussion. Mixed media were used to encourage interaction. In total, six student projects were selected for evaluation in the workshop. They included the two best projects (i.e. those which received the highest grade) in each of the two studios in the last three years. The workshop participants were employed in local government and planning firms in Brisbane and surroundings. These employers were strategically selected as they are likely to hire the planning program graduates of the University of Queensland. To complement the workshop findings, we analysed and compared the student evaluations (both quantitative and qualitative) of the two studio courses over the past three years.

Findings and Relevance:

This study confirms the relevance of studio teaching as a unique pedagogical practice to build problem-solving skills and foster creative thinking. The findings of this paper can help studio instructors enhance the learning outcomes and the employability

of their students and engage planning academics with the industry. However, these findings are also context-dependent to some degree. Therefore, a main recommendation for planning programs is to periodically organize these types of workshops with local practitioners.

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