

From Idea to Dissertation or From Practitioner to Researcher

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From practitioner to researcher

A practitioner of municipality planning lives in a system of hierarchical organisations and are often expected to work in a technical-rational way and give realistic alternatives possible to implement in a narrow future. In the past time planners were respected professionals in the local authority and in the duty for the politicians. But today in the post-modern era it is not that easy to be a planner, the planning processes are questioned and criticised not to be enough flexibel and useful in a new liberal society. In this questioning of the past and in a vacuum before something new, it is understandable that the practitioners ask the researchers how to handle the situation.

After 18 years as a planner in urban and regional planning I started for teaching at the newly established planning education at an also recently established small university in Karlskrona, Southern Sweden. During the years of teaching I had profited from my earlier experiences from practice and the new situation gave me motives to reflect over my earlier practice. The question started to grow, what is going to happen with the planning profession in the future, what knowledge and competence are going to be expected from the planners? My questioning got so urgent to me that instead of asking other researchers I started own research studies in which I have combined my interest for planners competence with a focus on sustainability issues in comprehensive planning.

Research is a quite different way of thinking than practice. The researcher doesn't accept the ordinary description or explanation to something without scrutinise both earlier knowledge and thinking about a phenomena or questioning the phenomena itself. Research is to study critically, test, develop ideas, theories, perspectives, way of observing and understanding phenomenon. To

describe the character of phenomenon and their relations does not automatically result in normative rules of how things are going to be done. The research result cannot just be given to the practitioners at once. Between the research study and practice there is another step, the planners has to analyse and pick up the parts of the result that is valuable and test it in an actual context.

In Sweden as in other European countries there is a big gap between theory and practice and both parts complain over the other part. It is possible to develop good relations and co-operation between the practitioners and the researchers. The researchers can give the practitioners tools for reflections of their work and give different perspectives. On the other hand the practitioners give the researchers necessarily empirical background for the research. The practitioners reflection in dialogue with the researcher can be articulated with a deeper understanding for the details in a wholistic situation.

The research gives the local phenomena an abstract analyses and it must be a dynamic cultivation, a giving and taking, a searching and reflecting of what the research can offer the practice and vice versa.. Sometimes this can be done in a real study project, but often it works out first after a project is finished in a meeting between the practitioners and the researchers.

Advantages

After you have been working with planning in the local authority or in a consulting company with municipal planning you have experienced how the society works both as a professional and as a citizen, what is possible to do and what is possible to change. When I started to teach for the first time in my professional life I had use for all I had learnt and worked with in the practice. Now in the PhD studies, that is even much wider in scope, I have much use of experiences both from the practice as a planner and as a lecturer.

If you have been working in different places you have experienced how irregular organisations can be and how depended they are of relations between the employees. The official and unofficial political processes in municipality form the basis of how the local authority works. I think you

must take part in and feel this with your body to really understand this, it is not possible just to study it in the literature. This sort of experience helps you to understand the theories of social constructivism, discourses, uncertainties and power.

Disadvantages

You have got many preconceptions on how things are. You are often socialised into a professional culture from which perspective you observe phenomenon. This culture, or paradigm, you have started learning in the planning education and it is stimulated inside the same occupational group in practice. It can be exemplified with short expert terminology that everyone in the same profession knows the meaning of. The socialisation can imply that you fasten to see things only in the perspective of that profession, that you are not enough broad-minded to see other perspectives, which is very important as a researcher. Sometime it can be easier for a young PhD student to be more open-minded and not be too realistic and afraid of, for example, starting major investigations and try new ways of thinking.

Identity

After many years in practice you are middle-aged with a longer experience of life, sometimes between many young PhD students coming directly from undergraduate examination. When I started my PhD studies I had been teaching at the university for six years, and had supervised several students in diploma work. Now it is an interesting experience to be at the student side, to handle the problems with sharpening the focus in the study and to be concentrated in writing. This is good experience to remember next time I am at the teacher side.

I have been working as a practitioner so long time that it has also taken some time to accept myself as a researcher, studying and analysing the planners from the other side. I have a field investigation with qualitative interviews with planners which in methodology is difficult as it is a study of colleagues with the problems of identity that follows.

Target groups

When you write you always have to ask which target group you are aiming at, as this also influences which type of language you are going to choose for the written dissertation. When you

have much contact with both the practice and research world it is even more difficult. Are you going to write for your practitioner colleagues in a language used in the practice or are you going to write in a more heavy theoretical language with risk to be read mostly by other researchers? You will perhaps choose the last of these in fear of not to be accepted in the research society.

References

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