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Event: AESOP Head of Schools Meeting 2025
Title: Engaged Urban Pedagogies in Planning Education
Transcript (cleaned version)

Thank you very much.

I am Dr Lucy Natarajan, Associate Professor at University College London. I'm really pleased to be here and to have the chance to talk about a book I co-edited with Associate Professor Michael Short. All of my research is focused on inclusion—of publics, civil society, citizens, and other stakeholders in the work of planning. I have always concentrated on the strategic side of planning: spatial plans, major infrastructure, and renewable energy infrastructures, which—as the Dean mentioned—can be problematic and conflictual, especially in coastal areas. This ties into the politics of legitimacy and of expertise in planning.

Today, as well as shamelessly promoting this book—which is a collaborative effort by many scholars reflecting on their teaching—I want to reflect on the themes of the conference and share what engaged pedagogy in planning means. In the opening chapter, we describe a distinctive educational practice linked to the built environment, where teaching and learning are shaped by ideas about co-produced places, rooted in participatory planning theory.

We started this project because we were missing the personal connections that teaching gave us during the lockdown. That inspired us to run a track at the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference, which many of you know. Since it was held online, it gave us space to reflect on what we were missing and how important those connections were—conceptually and practically.

The book includes studies across the broad field of planning—placemaking, conservation, strategic and neighbourhood planning, open design, real estate. I'll present some of those insights at a high level, focusing on inclusive practices in higher education.

We built a framework from our empirical studies, rooted in participatory planning and critical pedagogy. It focuses on three areas of education: curriculum review and design, teaching delivery, and embedding practices in wider contexts. In each area, I'll point to where academics are interacting with non-academic actors and discuss how these contribute to inclusion.

First, reviewing planning curricula: most of our teaching work is preparation. Inclusion needs to start there. Some chapters explored how students themselves can be included in this process—bringing in diverse knowledges and questioning what knowledge we consider valid in the classroom. For example, Yasmeenah and Kathleen Ortiz use ethnographic research on ethnic groups in society to reflect critically on curriculum content and teaching approach.

Simple classroom practices—like asking students to discuss racialisation and its lived experience—can help surface the urban issues they've encountered, the symbols or words associated with exclusion, and what changes they imagine or hope for. This opens critique of space, urban governance, and institutional norms. Importantly, it's about verbalising experiences and making visible the structures that marginalise.

As teachers, we investigate these issues with our students. We don't hold all the answers. Practices that recenter the "other" and symbolise solidarity tend to work best when embedded across the whole university, not just within our field.

This is challenging, but critical for pedagogy. Students come with different backgrounds, learning styles, and lived experiences. At UCL, many students are older than me, and have worked already. They know what they want to get out of their education. It's about centering the individual in our teaching—acknowledging what they bring and what they hope to become.

Conceptually, inclusion is also about acknowledging the provisionality of meaning—recognising that knowledge is always negotiated. That's hard to say as an expert standing in front of a class, but it's fundamental to what we do.

Of course, reviewing curricula in inclusive ways can feel risky. It requires active learning, co-productive practices, and scaffolding by teachers. Some colleagues say it's too much extra work—but we're not asking for more work, only reflection on what we're already doing: hand-holding, encouragement, going first in a discussion, even pointing students to existing well-being support.

Now to the second part: the delivery of teaching. This is where we look outward—from the classroom to the real world. Activities here are diverse, but all rely on interaction between university actors and practitioners in urban planning. This includes neighbourhood engagement, podcasting, collaborative methods like silvic sign methods, and guest speakers.

The goal is not just learning content, but learning how to collaborate while maintaining critical distance. The classroom becomes a "sandpit" for trial and error, guided by experienced staff.

I'll give one example: guest speakers. This is a common practice, but we argue it's a core form of engaged pedagogy. It involves three elements:

1. **Curation** – deliberately choosing who speaks and why,
2. **Knowledge sharing** – speakers are not just visitors but often return regularly and become part of the learning team,
3. **Research-led practice** – we use speakers to reproduce our research culture, align with module topics (e.g. regeneration), and introduce real-world tensions like financialisation in planning.

Letting guest speakers present their views can feel risky—it means letting go a little in the classroom. But it also creates powerful learning spaces.

The third area: embedding. This happens outside the classroom—when academics contribute to urban development processes or train citizens in research methods. These experiences often feed back into curriculum review and provide materials or relationships for future teaching.

One case from the book describes community research in Dunkirk, where academics help with soil remediation after industrial decline. Their position as neutral, trusted parties is key—especially in places where trust in institutions is low.

Another example: a board game in Newcastle, called *Kenny Planners*, used in schools. Planning students facilitate it, guiding schoolchildren through roleplay about local planning decisions. This builds soft skills, reflexivity, and new ways of imagining their professional identity.

Ultimately, what we're describing is an evolving pedagogy. One that creates space for flexibility, active learning, and performance of different roles. It supports mutual learning between students and staff, and it's especially valuable in a field like planning, where education and professional practice are closely linked.

Before I conclude, let me say a word on legitimacy. What we're doing with engaged pedagogy is building legitimacy through critical inquiry. We assume that authority comes from continual negotiation of knowledge. This is not easy, especially when the prevailing discourse around higher education is focused on pragmatic legitimacy—more students, more output, economic impact.

But that overlooks the value of the type of learning we do—learning that is provisional, uncertain, not easily quantified. Inclusion is not just about who is in the room, but about whose knowledge is recognised, and how we develop ethical, critical thinkers.

This pedagogy is live and evolving. It teaches soft skills, co-production, relationship-building. It helps prepare students to act as professionals and citizens in complex, contested environments.

If legitimacy debates ignore that, then we have a serious problem.

Thank you.