

## AESOP Excellence In Teaching Award 2024 - commendation



### Building competence of participation in planning

- Module-based teaching in/for/on knowledge, skills, and experience

#### Abstract

The course is an elective interdisciplinary course for students in spatial planning education. It contains three modules covering three aspects of participation competence: knowledge of, skills in and, experiences with participation. Different study backgrounds have been reflected in their learning activities and through peer-to-peer learning.

The course is theoretically grounded in the theory of multiple learning loops that not only includes the students, but the educators and institution as well. Students learn through reading and reflection of theoretical concepts, practical case studies and experiencing a real-life case, running a participation activity with children and/or youth.

The students have to deliver a range of assignments reflecting the aimed learning outcome for each of the three linked modules. The feedback from students, based on course evaluations, and surveys before and after the course, indicates a significant learning curve, particularly in practical applications, compared to theoretical learning alone.

Terje Holsen, Anja Standal, Elin Børrud.

SITRAP - Centre for integrated and transdisciplinary teaching in planning, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU)



## Context/institutional setting and students enrolled

The course is developed and run by SITRAP Centre for integrated and transdisciplinary teaching in planning at Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). It has been offered to participants with different program backgrounds (e.g. urban- and regional planning, landscape-architecture and land tenure studies/real estate development.)

The course has enrolled students from year 2 until year 5 (masters), as well as from PhD-level. The teaching evaluated to date has assessed approximately fifty students, of which just under half have completed all three modules.

The modules are designed to cater to different programmes that deal with different aspects of spatial planning within the faculty (i.e. property, real estate development, urban and regional planning, landscape architecture etc), as well as other educational programs outside the faculty. The graduates will benefit from the practical learning aspects of the module as well as the training in critical thinking.

The modules focus on how to think about and develop skills in implementing participation in planning processes, context understanding and critical reflection around the meaning and value of participation.

## Description of course/module(s)

Each module comprises 5 credits and is assessed as pass/fail.

- Module 1 introduces relevant international and Norwegian theory on participation in planning, anchored in the Norwegian planning system and participation with children and young people. The students must familiarize themselves with literature and produce a written assignment, developed from course content and illustrating their own reflections on the course material. Each student must describe their own learning in the form of a reflection note comprising a self-directed study of literature, theory seminar and written assignment.

- Module 2 provides students with training in participation methods and skills and management of participation processes in planning processes, initiated by both public, private, and non-profit organizations. It provides the students with concrete practice in leading meetings, implementing activities, and collecting and interpreting data. The teaching focuses on the student's reflection on their own learning. The module is carried out over a three-week intensive teaching period and can be digital or physical. The module includes activities by which the students can actively give formative feedback to the teaching during the course and can give each other feedback in groups.

- Module 3 provides students with practical and realistic experience as a process manager for a real-life participation study undertaken in collaboration with an external actor. Based on the case, the student must create an activity plan for participation that contains all components needed to carry out the scheme and a report describing results in participation processes. Undertaking and evaluating participation activities they developed and led, provides practice for critical reflection on the relationship between expectations in advance and achieved results. The module includes a range of task types and case owners - from insight work in a municipal planning process to e.g. the work of an interest organization. Module content is not a set syllabus or workload but tailored by case basis. Students must work as independently as possible and apply knowledge from module 1 and skills from module 2.



## Planning concept

Planning is understood as spatial planning, a systematic approach to shaping the built environment and managing land use. It involves identifying needs or challenges within a geographic area and developing strategies to address them. In spatial planning education, the focus is on formal, case-oriented processes that emphasize participation from stakeholders. This participation, whether through collaborative or participatory methods, fosters mutual learning and ensures that plans are inclusive and reflective of diverse perspectives. Planners must navigate questions of methodology, behaviour, and role, striving to achieve both process and outcome legitimacy. Learning in spatial planning occurs through collaboration, interaction with various actors, and reflective practice. However, transitioning from education to professional practice often requires bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. This educational initiative has been developed to prepare students for this transition by equipping them with the necessary skills and mindset for effective spatial planning practice.

## Learning and Capacity Development

The course has been developed and refined via several iterations in which the educators have tested a hybrid educational structure involving a range of types of learning activities. Students learn through reading and reflection of theoretical concepts. They also learn through practical but fictional case studies, developing core participation activities and testing these through communication and role-play activities and reflecting on the achievements of these. Finally, they learn from their experience of undertaking a real-life case, running a participation activity with children and/or youth. The course is interdisciplinary and for everybody that wants to develop skills, experience, and critical thinking into participation. Different study backgrounds have been reflected in students' learning activities and through peer-to-peer learning.

The Norwegian Planning and Building Act (PBL) imposes on municipalities an obligation to ensure that a minimum requirement is met in any planning case, but many planners and students desire more active citizen involvement. The module/course development was based on two hypotheses: first, a lack of practical skills in conducting participation processes, especially with youth, confirmed through early project discussions; second, a trend towards professionalizing participation experts, noted through field mapping. This trend, observed globally, risks diluting the intended purpose of involving external actors in planning processes, as economic interests may define assumptions without input from elected officials. In academia, practical training in planning is scarce compared to theoretical knowledge. The course has aimed to bridge this gap by providing students with real-world participation experience. It has been suggested that for participation to enhance planning outcomes, it must be seen as a multi-faceted learning process complementing theoretical understanding, a concept tested in the early iterations.

# Innovations in pedagogical/topical approaches

The combination of the different modules have included innovative content and pedagogical approaches for learning:

- Formative assessments throughout the different weeks of the course  
This assessment has contributed to students' participation about participation in planning – a double loop learning.

- Role-play exercises

Role-play has been used as an important tool to practice and learning from actions in a safe space, with fictitious cases. Students have got different roles, both formal and personal, in a participation activity for youth. The role-play has also been included as a micro-module as part of the ordinary study program – for a public meeting (1st year) and a workshop (2nd years). Actors have played different roles as well as the students.

- Communication exercises

As part of the process management course, we have included teaching about communication skills and creative cooperation. We have invited an actor to run this part of the module. This has included a range of exercises on how to communicate with different audiences and how to pitch a topic, such as:

- *role-play*, practicing behavioural codes with exercises related to acceptance and blocking, listening, and making offers.

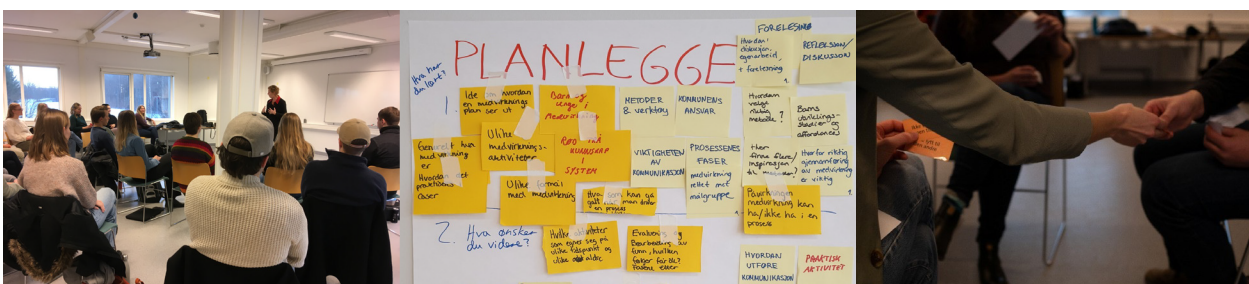
- *rhetoric*, the history of rhetoric and the connection between writing and speaking as well as rhetoric's 5 working phases: Inventio, Dispositio, Elocutio, Memoria and Actio with particular exercises in these.

This teaching component has been very well received from the students as vital learning that they have used immediately in other contexts as well.

- Practice in real-life case

The last module focuses on practical knowledge such as understanding work process, project management as well as building networks. It also has helped framing expectations and learning how to develop an activity from a brief.

The three last aspects have all contributed to a deep bodily experience of participation in planning. This learning from experience fed back into the theoretical framework which gave meaning for the students. By achieving this experience of participation from practice, it gives a greater prerequisite for understanding different planning theoretical directions such as collaborative planning and participatory planning. The theoretical study gives meaning to the practical implementation and experiences the students gain through practice.



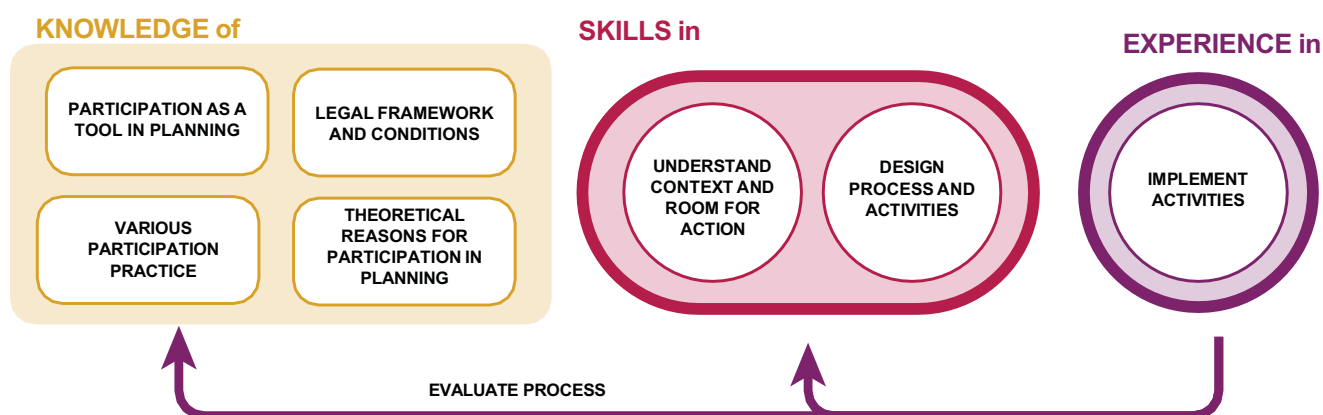
# Theory and practice integration

The model below describes these components that together define what we have conceptualised as “Participation competence” (Medvirkningskompetanse), a core competence for planners today. It consists of theoretical knowledge of participation, skills in process management and context understanding and finally experience in participation practice in a real-life case. The feedback-loop binds the three modules together. They present the experience of evaluating the process and bringing the achieved knowledge back to both theoretical considerations and critical reflection as well as process management skills.

The course is theoretically grounded in the theory of multiple learning loops that not only includes the students, but the educators and institution as well. The module-based course embraces the learning that participants in the participation process achieve, as well as the planners, politicians and other actors that decide. In addition, it develops theoretical reflection and practical skills in project management for the students and further develops the theoretical and methodological aspects of the theme. Finally, it gives an institutional learning outcome for educators at the university, both internally and externally.

By educating students in participation competence, we prepare for both theoretical discourses and practical process management. They reflect on the reasons for participation as well as handle a practical case with a case-owner in time and space.

Participatory competence is based on a double learning effect; those affected by the planning will be able to learn something about the purpose and rationale of the planning, and those who plan will learn something from those who become involved. A third effect is the mutual learning that arises from the dialogue between the actors, and a fourth is how this learning is understood and incorporated into the ongoing planning process. The concept of loop-learning is inspired, among others, by the thinking of Argyris and Schön (1974), Bateson (2000) and Senge (2006).



## Learning objectives

The students expected learning outcome per module is:

**Module 1: Participation (with children and young people) as theory and policy**  
When the study has been completed, the student should be able to describe expectations and pitfalls for participation in planning, as well as have knowledge of participation methods for working with children and young people and be able to reflect on challenges regarding this target group.

**Module 2: Process management**

When the training has been completed, the students should be able to create a plan for participation activities in a planning process and a concrete scheme for participation in a specific matter and be able to communicate this to others. Through practical exercises, the student must experience what the process manager's role is in participation processes and be able to reflect on the learning outcomes of the experiences.

**Module 3: Participation in practice**

Students must have experienced how theoretical ideals and intentions about participation in planning can be safeguarded in practice. They must have gained insight into their own role as process manager and the ability to communicate with "real" participants. They will learn to draw up a plan for the activity, experience how it is to implement the plan and evaluate it in a written final report to the case owner/client.

## Student assessment (assignments)

The students complete a range of assignments reflecting the aimed learning outcome for each module:

In module 1 the students delivered a reflections on a set syllabus of theoretical texts about participation in planning. This could be a description and interpretation of each of the texts, a reflection note, essay, or an academic article. The scope was approximately 3000 words, maximum 10 pages. The text could be written individually or together in small groups. The requirement for passing was a submitted text which showed that the student had read the set syllabus and was able to convey the content in an academic relevant way.

In module 2 the students created a scheme for participation in a planning process, before/during/after a participation process. Requirements for passing were participation, submission, and dissemination of a participation plan, as well as participation in exercises such as process manager and delivery of a reflection concerning the learning outcome.

In module 3 the students planned and implemented a participation activity containing all the components needed to implement the scheme (inform, schedule, distribution of responsibilities, purchase of materials, obtaining premises, invitations, arrangements for post-work etc.). They implemented the participation activity, and after completed activity, they wrote a report based on the plan for the activity, as well as a reflection on their experience in collaboration and dialogue with participants and case-owners. The criteria for passing were participation, submitted report and reflection note.

# Student feedback

The course had a formal evaluation undertaken by the university. The purpose of this evaluation was to map how students learn participation with children and young people through practice, and as a contribution to the development of didactics within participation in planning. The purpose of this evaluation was to gain experience with how methods and process management for practice can be used as methods integrated in teaching (didactic perspective), and gain insight into multi-level participatory learning. Student participation in this evaluation was voluntary.

The data used as part of this assessment was:

- Reflection notes from the students after each module
- Survey for the students before and after practice
- Interviews with students after practice
- Observations of students in practice

The data were assessed and conceptualised according to the Didactical relationship model -a learning design relationship model focusing on the relationships between prerequisites for learning, setting framework, learning goals, content, learning process and evaluation.

The assessment showed that the students learn a lot about participation through practice from/about:

- Adaptability and flexibility in planning and implementation process
- Interdisciplinary cooperation
- Time management and organising
- Cooperation and role clarifications
- Establishing contacts
- (Challenging) recruitment processes
- Aims of participation methods
- Understanding the audience

The students got bodily experience in running a participation activity and process management for kids and youth which led to a deeper and better learning than the purely theoretical components.

The teachers did their own evaluation of their experience after the implementation of the modules. This is included in the evaluation documentation from the course.

Module 2 ran 2 times. Partly because of the pandemic, the first course had to adapt quickly to new requirements of digital teaching. As such, we got valid input on how to run the course both digitally and physically. In addition, the students delivered important feedback during the course through formative evaluation. This feedback helped improving the course, as well as giving us a good understanding on how the students learn. This learning of the didactics did directly affect how we taught in other courses in the study programme, and thereby contributed to an institutional learning outcome.

\*)The IGP-method is a method to promote co-creation, involvement and commitment from all the participants who are present in a meeting or in an assembly.

Our evaluation highlights some core topics that worked well:

- IGP (Individual-Group-Plenum)-method for interdisciplinary group learning\*
- Student participation, expectations, input and wishes, develops the course, and provide better learning,
- Role-play to practice process management
- Module-teaching (3 dedicated weeks)
- Defined teaching environment
- Communication exercises with an actor
- Check-in exercises

Some aspects have potential for improvement:

- collection and interpretation of data as topic
- Recruitment of students

Module 3 had 5 cases that have provided us with an opportunity to develop continuing supervision. The students work from the two first cases gave a good learning for us as teachers that we brought back to the students for the three next cases. As such, the cases have provided us with continuous learning and better supervision for the students.



## Lessons learned: Potential for wider application

The content of the course with its modules have a great potential for wider application both in and outside the university. We have developed a guideline document presenting the didactics of participation competence as well as examples of learning outcomes, learning activities and questions for reflection. The audience for this guideline includes organisations/ universities etc that are planning courses on participation competence – for example small day-courses in an organisation, modules in a continuing learning programme or course at a university as part the study program. In the development of the guideline, we contacted the different universities in Norway that educate spatial planners to give input and feedback. In addition, the teaching involved cooperation-partners that all deal with participation competence in different ways, The partners included:

- o KS, a municipal sector's interest organisation, development partner and the country's largest public employer organisation,
- o NBBL, a party-political independent interest organization for housing associations in Norway.
- o Spire, an environmental and development organisation for youth/ young adults
- o DOGA, a part of the government's instruments for innovation and value creation, focusing on good use of design and architecture in Norway.
- o NMBU, Centre for Continuing Education (SEVU)

At the university, the teaching provides the foundation for implementing the knowledge as a course in the current study programme. The modules can be adapted to run as one longer course or in parts offered for micro credits for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). However, there are potential barriers connected to the funding of the course. A potential way of handling this is to implement it as part of continuing education (funded by the participants) and assess the potential to combine regular students with students from practice.

## Key references/reading list

Argyris, C. and D. A. Schön (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*, Jossey-bass, Hoboken, NJ, U.S.

Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.

Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*, Doubleday, NY, U.S.