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‘Becoming Reflective Practitioners through Community Based Planning Projects’ Learning Connections 2019 Conference

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Introduction

Inspired by the influential ‘reflective practitioner’ ideas of Donald Schön (1983), there is an established pedagogical tradition in the University College Cork, Centre for Planning Education & Research, in active learning, and using real projects with real clients as a teaching methodology. In semester two 2019, the first year Masters in Planning students engaged with the Glounthaune community to identify the community’s values and aspirations. Concurrently, the second year students prepared a masterplan for a new town centre, drawing on field work, research and findings from the aforementioned community engagement process. Personal reflection was formally embedded in both processes: students considered their professional and personal skills including working together, dealing with communities; active listening and thinking creatively.

These reflections deepened the students learning through revisiting the experiences guided by a framework of prompted questions. In her discussion of the challenges in developing excellence in planners, Reeves (2009) insists that ‘*Planners need to demonstrate their ability to transform understanding into practical and achievable outcomes… Employers want to see more than credentials; they want to see people demonstrating competence. One’s ability to do a job depends on knowledge, skills and qualities*.’ Working on real projects with local communities while using reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) to revisit the experience further develops their competencies.

Method

On-line reflective journals formed an integral part of the pedagogical design of these projects. This teaching and learning recording tool illustrated how the students’ learning progressed during the project. It was especially useful for recording the observations and learnings of ‘quieter’ students.

To ensure adequate preparation, a variety of unmarked activities were undertaken with those students who would directly engage with the community. This included a site visit with local representatives, lectures on the theory and practice of community engagement, and a role play ‘practice run’ in studio where pairs of students facilitated a discussion on their theme- with the class and instructor posing as the community and asking realistic, challenging, questions. The marked elements of this project included group reports containing the findings of the event, and an individual reflective journal entry where both the event and group work were considered.

For the second years, their masterplanning project involved unmarked group work undertaken over a six week period, where students gathered baseline data and undertook analysis forming the basis of their individual projects undertaken over four weeks. At the end of each of the three stages

(research, analysis, plan), the students recorded a journal entry on that topic, led by a series of prompted questions, such as, '*what did I learn about myself, what skills have I acquired, If I were to redo this stage of the project, would I take the same approach*?'

Findings

On reviewing the student reflections, it became apparent how they inherently acquired skills of creativity, resilience, leadership and critical analysis, while also developing their interpersonal skills. Through collaborating with the local community, the first year students learned the value of joint working in analysing the context of a place and shaping the public realm. It also helped to reinforce the importance of the local voice in planning. One student recorded that:

> *'The night was also good because it helped me to empathise with people more and understand that some people can feel strongly about what could be considered small issues. It was interesting how to see people engaged with planning issues and how passionate they were about the issues.' (Student B, MPlan 1)*

The students also gained confidence in their abilities to work with their classmates and the public and demonstrate enthusiasm, energy and willingness to help and learn from the community of Glounthaune. Those second year students who were almost finished their Masters and were clearly beginning to identify themselves as planning practitioners. Critically, by requiring the submission of written reflections at each stage of this real-world project, the idea of reflective practice is firmly embedded as a core competency, and not merely an abstract pedagogical concept. The evolution of their skills is evident in their personal reflections, for example:

> *'I was very apprehensive about this module at the beginning because it meant pushing me outside of my comfort zone. I have learned so much and really enjoyed the practical side of the module, it was challenging but helped develop a deep understanding of how places are different and require lots of research and planning. There are some aspects of the masterplan I could have improved but as my first solo masterplan I think the guidance as well as self-learning created a strong proposal and vision for Glounthaune. This has really helped with my confidence and realised the skills that I have acquired throughout the two years will aid me in becoming an effective planner.' (Student O, MPlan 2)*

The combined use of formative as well as summative assessment was successful. Because the group work stages of the masterplan were not marked, the students were more creative in their analysis. They did not focus on what they thought the teacher wanted, and this led to a more collaborative and ultimately creative experience; there was also less competition between students who were also open to learning from one another. This was evident in their reflective journals, one student noted that:

'…the fact that these stages are "unmarked" is quite freeing. There is no pressure in terms of saying the "right thing" or making sure it looks polished and perfect. It allows us to explore and be creative with optioneering for when we get stuck into the individual parts which is really enjoyable as well as being an effective learning experience.' (MPlan 2 student D)

The students also learned to have more confidence in their own voice. For example, the group projects at analysis stage were structured so that each person had to put forward an idea for discussion. Within their reflection-on-action, and specifically considering this stage, one student noted that;

'...I need to work on is voicing my opinion more strongly. Even though I have been told by different lecturers to speak up more I did not fully appreciate what that meant until now. The most important thing I have learned from this part of the project was that I need to be able to defend my point of view better and to articulate it in a way that is persuasive and convincing. I did not fully agree with our shortlist of options for the site and while I voiced this opinion and suggested a site I felt was more suitable I did not push for it as strongly as I should have and probably backed down too quickly when it was questioned. This is definitely something I need to work on and practice and will be especially important for when I start working.' (MPlan 2 student J)

This student demonstrated an ability to identify to apply reapply prior feedback to a current scenario, recognise its reoccurrence and consider how they would adapt their behaviour before entering the workforce. This reveals their transition towards becoming a reflective planning practitioner.

Conclusions

This project allowed students to understand how planning challenges at European/global levels can be addressed within a local context. In this way, Glounthaune became a *local* laboratory for a *global* challenge. Aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and best practice planning, the students have community-based practice as an embedded competency, with an awareness that planners have an important role in operationalising sustainable development in real places. In practising these skills at a local scale in Glounthaune, students develop confidence in their abilities to apply walkable, ecological, inclusive, age-friendly, and sustainable principles to places of any scale, in any country.

McCarthy et all (2010) discuss the importance of using real world problems in class, they outline:

'The richer the course is in such illustrations, the more likely students are able to identify with the discipline and see themselves as practitioners who will be able to transfer their knowledge and understanding from the university to the world of employment and the community as a whole'. (The teaching- Research Nexus, 2008) (McCarthy et al, 2010, p.7)

Through real life projects based in the community the students take their learning beyond the classroom both in the subject they are exploring but also into their professional practice through their

enhanced capabilities, effectiveness and ability to reflect. Incorporating reflection into their assignments heightens the self-awareness of the soon-to-be graduates while concurrently increasing their confidence in their own abilities; essential skills for their professional careers.

This project was Highly Commended at the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) Excellence in Teaching Awards 2019.

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