

Expanding Experiential Learning in Australian Planning Schools

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Abstract

Recent reviews identified the need for development of new skills and qualities in graduating planners in Australia, including collaboration, communication, critical thinking and understanding complexity (Gurran et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2009). Students can construct such knowledge, skills and values by means of direct experience in a real world context, through a purposeful process of engaged, active learning known as 'experiential learning' (EL) (Kassem 2007, p2). Learning in an EL context is dependent on a meaningful interaction between quality experiences and personal reflection of those experiences (Fowler 2008; Harvey et al. 2010). To date, the criteria used by the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA), the national accrediting body, to assess planning schools, has not given adequate weight to the contribution made by EL in student learning and development of graduate attributes.

This paper reports on a multi-university project with two main goals: to document and improve EL practices in tertiary planning schools in order to enhance student learning; and to ensure that planning education is relevant to a global future, in collaboration with PIA and industry, by recognising the value of EL in the planning school accreditation process.

The project commenced with a baseline survey of Australian and New Zealand planning schools to identify the extent of EL. In the second stage, the project team developed and tested activities and assessment methods over two semesters in five Australian universities, based on a collaboratively developed EL framework of principles and criteria. The main project output is a freely available online toolkit of resource materials for use by planning educators to credibly extend the use of EL and improve assessment of student learning. Importantly, the project outcomes benefit planning schools and practitioners around the globe where educators aim to facilitate students' and graduates' continuous learning and adaptation to a rapidly changing world. This paper focuses on recommendations to the accrediting body, PIA, about how to adequately recognise and evaluate the benefits of EL for planning graduate attributes.

Context

To prepare students for the complex world of planning is challenging. Planners need to have spatial, economic, social, legal and political understanding to be able to positively contribute to the built and natural environment. They need to be able to work in multi-disciplinary teams, and embrace continuous learning as they adapt to a world of uncertainty.

Recent reviews have identified the need for development of new skills and qualities in graduating planners in Australia, including collaboration, communication, critical thinking and understanding complexity (Gurran et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2009). Students can construct such knowledge, skills and values by means of direct experience in a real world context, through a purposeful process of engaged, active learning known as, 'experiential learning'"(EL) (Kassem 2007, p2). Learning in an EL context is dependent on a meaningful interaction between quality experiences and personal reflection of those experiences (Fowler 2008; Harvey et al. 2010). Thus, we argue that to grow future planners, educators need to expand the provision of EL approaches to teaching and learning.

Professions around the world, such as medicine, engineering as well as planning, require their tertiary education programs to produce their future employees so that new graduates have the skills and knowledge to carry out a certain level and range of work. There is also growing evidence that students, particularly in applied fields of education including urban and regional planning, nursing, teaching, social work, engineering and management, benefit from the incorporation of experiential learning into curricula and programs (Elwood 2004; Davis 2006; Fowler2008; Trigwell & Reid 1998). Professional bodies review the curriculum, faculty expertise, and evidence of teaching outcomes to assess if they meet required standards of content, and teaching and learning. Program reviews generally take place every five years, depending on the accrediting body. Students not only accept, but also expect that the profession is guiding their education so they will be employable and contribute to the future.

To date, it could be argued that the criteria used by the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA), in its Accreditation Policy (PIA 2010) to assess planning schools, has not given sufficient weight to the contribution made by EL in student learning and the development of graduate attributes. EL is generally only referred to as work experience or a practicum and is seen as desirable but not essential.

This paper briefly describes a multi-university project with two main goals: to improve EL practices in tertiary planning schools in order to enhance student learning, and to ensure that planning education is relevant to a global future. Project participants collaborated with the PIA in order to inform the planning school accreditation process about the benefits and importance of EL in training future planners. The paper proposes that an activity has to display certain attributes in order to be considered EL. These attributes need to be demonstrated in courses throughout the planning curriculum, and made evident during the planning school accreditation process. Thus, the intention is that EL be embedded in PIA accreditation criteria.

Australian Planning School Accreditation Requirements

Curricula and pedagogy in Australian planning programs are guided by the PIA Accreditation Policy (PIA 2010). The current policy provisions reflect similar developments which are occurring in the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI, 2012) and the American Planning Association (APA 2012) which expect planning programs to establish relationships with professional planners and provide a variety of practical experience opportunities (practicums) which may result in 'professional placements' (RTPI) or 'internships' (APA). All professional institutes recognise that work experience may not always be available. However, it is expected that a good planning program should be able to offer some kind of alternative experience if work placements are not offered within the program.

In Australia, several studies have identified the importance of practical experience in the education of planners. The 2004 National Enquiry into Planning Education and Employment (PIA 2004, p17) recognised that young planners in particular value the inclusion of a compulsory work experience as part of a planning degree. Gurran et al. (2008) go further,

recommending industry support for work placements, scholarships, and cadetships. They believe that

it is critical to ensure that students engage with some form of meaningful professional experience and have the opportunity to reflect on this experience during the course of their planning degree. Alternative models to structure this experience deserve further discussion and debate, in the context of PIA's educational policy and accreditation requirements.' (Gurran et al. 2008, p 44).

The current PIA accreditation policy does not specifically refer to EL but provides for practical experience to be gained using a variety of learning activities, including practical studies of a supervised nature, structured workplace placements, or appropriately supervised projects. The structure and approach to all practical experience is of concern to the PIA, which differentiates between professional work experience and work integrated learning in its accreditation policy that states:

Where professional work experience is a formal requirement of a qualification, the Visiting Board will evaluate the quality and supervision of the work experience. It will seek to ensure that it assists in the acquisition of core knowledge and skills. Where a program does not include a formal requirement for professional work experience, the Visiting Board will consider prepared, supervised, and reflective work-integrated learning that forms part of the educational curriculum to demonstrate how skills, knowledge and competencies obtained through work experience are acquired'. (PIA 2010,p8).

However, these policy provisions would be significantly improved by the inclusion of criteria by which the quality of both professional work experience and work integrated learning alternatives may be assessed by Visiting Boards.

Study Methods and Outcomes Provide a Foundation for our Proposal

1) Benchmarking Survey

A baseline survey of all planning schools in Australia and New Zealand conducted by the project team in 2012 identified that EL was a key component in over 100 courses/units within the 18 out of 23 universities that responded. Teaching and learning activities involving EL varies widely, including work placements, design studio design, field trips and role plays. The number of courses assessing student learning from the EL activities varies depending on the particular learning activity; for example 11 out of 13 formal work placement courses and 18 out of 19 studio courses are assessed but less than half guest speaker activities are assessed in any way. Reflection is a key component of Kolb's (1984) learning model so both formal and informal assessment should be used to give students feedback on their learning progress and to gauge the benefits of an activity. Of further interest to the project is whether existing assessment methods are adequate for measuring the transformational learning that occurs in EL activities.

2) Trial and Test of EL Case Studies Against EL Principles

The project team developed and tested activities and assessment methods over two semesters in five Australian universities, based on a collaboratively developed EL framework of principles and criteria (presented later). The framework is founded on Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb 1984; Kolb & Fry 1975) in which learning is viewed 'as a process of experience, reflection, cognitive processing, and applying new knowledge in new situations' (Turunen & Tuovilla 2012, p. 116). The principles aided course designers to draw maximum EL benefit from a wide range of activities, including activities with less 'real world' integration, such as in-class role plays and guest lectures. Activities were evaluated by use of student

surveys and interviews with external participants, who were mainly professional planners. Based on this data, a number of case studies were developed that exemplify the relationships between EL activities, assessment and the EL principles.

3) Online Toolkit of Resources

The main project output is a freely available online toolkit of resource materials derived from the case studies. The intended audience for the website includes planning educators to provide them with resources to credibly extend the use of EL and improve assessment (see www.usc.edu.au/explearning). The toolkit is expected to be of particular benefit to new planning educators, and planning schools and practitioners around the globe who endeavour to facilitate students' continuous learning and adaptation to a rapidly changing world.

4) Recommendations for Accreditation

Members of the project team work shopped the outcomes to extract insights from the process so as to inform the planning school accreditation process delivered by the accrediting body, PIA. A particular focus was how to adequately recognise and evaluate the benefits of EL to planning graduate attributes. At the time of writing this paper, plans are to workshop the draft recommendations with planning school advisory committees, PIA state and national education committees, and a network of professional planners over the next few months. The outcomes will be reported at the ISOCARP Conference.

The remainder of this paper focuses on our project team recommendations for strengthening the accreditation process.

Implications for Accreditation

Based on the outcomes of this project, EL should be an integral element of each year of an accredited planning program. In seeking accreditation, a university needs be able to demonstrate how it is using EL across the four year program, with courses in each year building in greater complexity and exposure to real world experience. EL could be evidenced through a range of activities, from guest lectures, field trips, role plays, and design studios of a 'real' site or client. While study tours or international field trips would not be mandatory, their value as a transformative experience should be recognised. Early in a planning course, EL could include shadowing a professional planner for a few days, or experiencing a 'Day in the Life of a Planner'. The culmination would be a latter year structured work experience under guidance of a professional planner, accompanied by formal assessment.

Our team proposes that in order for an activity to be considered to provide EL, it should meet most, if not all, of the following principles:

- purposeful
- student-centred
- theory-practice dialectic
- real world context
- guided practice
- reflection
- evaluation, and
- community-university partnership.

Several of these principles are attributes of good learning and teaching, such as 'student-centred' and 'purposeful', but we suggest that others, such as a dialogical exchange between theory and practice, and 'reflection' are core to EL. The process of reflection involves an individual exploring their past or present experiences in order to gain new

insights and understanding (Boud et al 1989). Learning the skills of self-assessment through reflection of EL whilst at university establishes a lifelong practice for graduates to meet their own learning needs (Boud 2000). As such, either formal or informal assessment of student learning during or linked to an EL activity contributes significantly to effective learning. For example, a field trip or site visit that incorporates guided learning about planning issues or techniques (e.g. pointing out and discussing attributes of water sensitive urban design) could be classified as EL, but might not be assessed, other than through group reflection on observations shared at the end of the field trip. However, the field trip might be core to development of an assignment, a policy, code or design, which is then formally assessed.

Feedback from our student surveys of EL activities is that these learning outcomes cannot be achieved in any other way. Benefits of integrating EL throughout a planning education are that it:

- improves student confidence about having the skills to be able to deal with complex issues;
- exposes students to issues of diversity of communities such as age, gender, cultural, disability, and Indigenous; and
- contributes to graduate attributes desired by prospective employers such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking.

Developing effective EL activities, however, takes additional time and effort by educators. If this is not recognised in accreditation processes, then it can jeopardise uptake and integration of EL into planning curriculum.

Conclusion

Our principles for EL were used to improve course curriculum and assessment of student learning among the participating five Australian universities. A key outcome is a toolkit to assist planning educators nationally and globally to improve the integration of EL into tertiary planning education.

Such education supports, at an early stage of a planner's career, the PIA's objectives to instill lifelong learning concepts to continue to deepen the knowledge base of planners and planning specialists. An EL approach supports self-efficacy to focus, invigorate and position the profession to be committed to championing and delivering good planning (PIA 2012; PIA 2013).

As a result, we propose a series of recommendations that should be considered in a review of PIA's accreditation policy and would like to take the opportunity provided by the ISCOARP Conference to gain feedback from overseas colleagues.

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