Enhancing experiential learning in planning education through an online toolkit of resources

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Abstract: This paper reports on the development of an online toolkit of resources to support the use and assessment of experiential learning (EL) across planning programs. Planning graduates face diverse workplace demands with expectations to address the local and regional implications of global trends, integrate technological advances with existing planning processes, as well as interpret and integrate changing legislative and institutional arrangements. Planning education is about educators, practitioners and students coming together. Equipping students for increasing complexity and change requires planning educators to design programs that facilitate the learning of personal and professional skills and both broad and specialised planning knowledge. Planning practitioners, in partnership with educators, make further valuable contributions by providing a range of 'real world' learning experiences where students can directly develop new skills, knowledge and qualities. Experiential learning allows students to develop confidence within a safe environment through a series of activities and reflection that link theory to practice. However, developing EL learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment can be demanding and time consuming for planning educators. In response, the Experiential Learning in Planning Education: Resources and Tools for Good Practice research project developed an online toolkit of case studies and associated resources to assist planning educators and practitioners in their application of EL. These case studies, developed by the partners in the project, explain the rationale of using particular EL activities based on a set of EL principles; how these activities are assessed; and reflections on how they could be improved for future use. The case studies also include numerous 'how to' resources, such as checklists and handy hints for organising activities, evaluation tools and examples of students' work. Furthermore, the toolkit website is an interactive and 'living' repository where additional case studies by other EL users can be included to enhance the diversity and richness of the resources available. The toolkit is expected to particularly benefit new planning educators but should also be of interest to planning schools and practitioners around the globe who are endeavouring to facilitate students' education in a rapidly changing world.

Key words: Experiential learning, planning educators, toolkit, planners, case studies

Introduction

Planning graduates face diverse workplace demands with the expectation they will find their professional role in addressing implications of global trends, integrating technology, and the interpretation of changing legislative and institutional arrangements (Sullivan & Rosin 2008; Savage et al. 2010). Equipping students for increasing practice complexity and change requires planning educators to design programs that facilitate the learning of personal and professional skills and both broad and specialised planning knowledge (PIA 2004). A review of planning education by Gurran et al. (2008) recommends the extension of core knowledge areas to include increased practice application. Learning in this environment enables students to develop consistent practical judgement (Sullivan & Rosin 2008) and to engage more fully with their discipline, as well as foster higher order skills and enhance their employability (Barraket et al. 2009). Planning practitioners, in partnership with educators,

make further valuable contributions to a range of 'real world' learning experiences where students can directly acquire new skills, knowledge and qualities.

This paper introduces an online toolkit of resources that promotes experiential learning as a pedagogy suited to delivering the requirements of competent planning graduates. Structured around 17 different case studies, the online toolkit is designed to assist educators to design and deliver good experiential learning practice.

What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is a process of actively engaging students in authentic encounters, together with purposeful reflection that consolidates personal learning relevant to future experiences (Saddington 1992; McGill & Weis 1989; Kassem 2007). How students process their experience through reflection is critical to producing learning (Boud et al.1985; Fowler 2006). As such, Love et al. (2001) in their study of the graduate readiness for work in the construction management industry conclude that there are some skills, such as time management, professional judgement and interpersonal communication that can only be learned by experiential learning. Furthermore, transition to work through EL can take place not only within work-integrated or work-based opportunities outside the university but also in the university classroom (Savage et al. 2010). Additional insights from Moon (2004: 113) suggest that:
- experiential learning takes effort;
- learning can occur from some experiences more effectively than from others; and
- experiential learning should explicitly recognize the subjective nature of experience.

Experiential learning allows students to develop confidence within a safe environment through a series of activities and reflections that link theory to practice, however, developing EL learning outcomes, teaching activities and suitable assessment tasks can be demanding and time consuming for planning educators.

Context and Methodology

A pilot study in 2009 at the University of the Sunshine Coast identified the need to improve existing use of EL activities and the development of robust resources in the following areas:

- Making the learning goals clearer;
- The need for educators to negotiate learning goals with students;
- The importance of guidance from educators to students on application of theory to practice;
- Recognition that students enjoy real-world experiences;
- Reflection is enhanced by dialogue;
- Community-university partnerships enhance student performance.

In response the *Experiential Learning in Planning Education: Resources and Tools for Good Practice* research project, funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), explored and expanded the theoretical concept of EL and its role in meeting the needs of professional practice, both in work and university settings. The project built on existing scholarly literature (see Eyler et al. 1999; Coiacetto 2008; Billett 2011) and the findings of

previous reviews of EL practice (see Jones et al. 2009; Savage et al. 2010). A baseline survey of EL activities and assessment methods used in Australian and New Zealand accredited planning programs was the project's first major undertaking (see Slade et al. 2014 for further information about this survey). Secondly, the framework of EL principles (Table 1) developed in the pilot study were tested in the larger project. Many of the principles are derived from EL pedagogical studies. For example, the principles 'purposeful', 'student-centred' and 'evaluation' are not unique to EL but aspects of good teaching and learning practice more generally. The remainder are of particular relevance to EL practice. The project team suggests these eight principles form the basis for establishing and assessing the effectiveness of individual EL activities in tertiary planning education programs.

Table 1: Summary of the EL Principles Framework

Principles	Description
Purposeful	Clear goals, purpose of EL activity explained and understood
Student-centred	Students take an active role in their learning
Theory-practice dialectic	Apply theory to practice and vice versa
The 'real world' context	Students exposed to real world situations gradually over the years of their degree
Guided practice	Ongoing guidance from educators and practitioners
Reflection	Self-reflection on learning and reflective dialogue
Evaluation	Demonstrate how students learn and meet goals
Community-university partnership	Mutually beneficial partnerships

Source: Summarised from Baldwin & Rosier (in review)

Discussion at partner workshops further refined the EL principles framework, followed by testing of its applicability in genuine experiential learning activities/courses at the five partner universities (University of the Sunshine Coast; Griffith, La Trobe, Edith Cowan universities; and University of Tasmania) during Semester 2, 2012 and Semester 1, 2013. As a result, project partners developed 17 case studies in order to demonstrate how planning educators might improve their EL practice in order to better prepare students for professional practice. In turn, these case studies formed the basis of a readily accessible online toolkit of EL activities, assessment techniques, and other professional development resources (Table 2).

The Digital Toolkit

Toolkits have been used in education for some time, while digital toolkits in particular have been discussed in scholarly literature about e-learning design, quality and evaluation (e.g. see Conole et al. 2001; Conole et al. 2004). A toolkit is often a support mechanism that allows the user/s to pick and choose from a menu of practice problem responses (Conole & Oliver 2002). The strengths of toolkits seem to be in recording current practice/actions so process and resources may be transferable and repeated by others. This is more useful than providing everyone with the research and expecting them to individually experiment (Ehrmann 1998). Rather than determining one specific definition for a toolkit, the major focus

of attention relates to the toolkit's purpose. This toolkit provides an important diagnostic tool for users to find the most appropriate EL activities to use in their course/unit/paper. The standard format for each of the foundational case studies includes an explanation of the rationale of using particularly activities based on the EL principles framework; assessment types and evaluation methods; student feedback on their experience of the learning activity; and a critical reflection by the educator/s involved on how to improve the activities for future use. Further, each case study author shared accompanying 'how to' resources, such as checklists and handy hints for organising activities, evaluation tools and examples of students' work. It is also important to provide a mixture of text, images and graphics in presenting the information. Overall, this approach allows the user to choose examples and associated resources according to their individual needs.

The toolkit is available online at www.experientiallearninginplanning.com.au/ and has a feedback form so users can comment on its utility and make suggestions to improve the site. Planning educators can also request to submit new case studies from their own practice that demonstrate new forms of experiential learning.

Toolkit Case Study Examples

The case studies provided exemplars from a range of EL categories including 'Guest Speaker'; 'Field Trip'; 'Studio'; 'Simulated Project'; 'Work-for-a-Client'; 'Role Play'; and 'Practicum/Work Experience'. This section provides brief examples from some of these case study categories demonstrated in more detail through the presentation of the toolkit at the upcoming ANZAPS conference.

Guest Speakers
Using a variety of guest speakers introduces students to case studies of complex planning decision making and enables in-depth coverage of topics that complements the lecturer's expertise. Links can be formed between theory and practice as well as between the university and the community. In order for this activity to contribute to experience-based learning, the course-coordinator needs to provide guidance to the guest lecturer/s to ensure the presentation fits with learning outcomes and to ensure students have opportunity to reflect on the topic, whether through formative assessment or the contribution of the presentation to other parts of the course.

Field Trips
The four field trips range across a continuum of field activities from short site analysis trips that contribute ideas/material used directly by students in developing responsive plans, to a socio-economic and environmental set of comparative trips between urban and rural places, and finally, a three week overseas study tour. Often field trips as an EL activity contribute as one part of a broader course, for example a studio. The overseas study tour, however, in this case embodied the whole course.

Table 2: Summary of EL Case Studies from Online Toolkit

Activity	Case Study Details	Location in Program	No.
1. Guest Speaker	Advanced Planning Practice (USC)	Final Undergraduate	1.1
	Sustainable Environmental Management (UTAS)	Postgraduate	1.2
2. Field Trip	Introduction to Planning (ECU)	Early Undergraduate	2.1
	International Study Tour (La Trobe)	Middle & Final Undergraduate	2.2
	Environmental Planning/Urban Planning for Health (ECU)	Final & Postgraduate	2.3
	Change in Urban and Rural Australia (La Trobe)	Middle Undergraduate	2.4
3. Studio	Development Processes Studio (GU)	Middle & Postgraduate	3.1
	Children in their Environments (La Trobe)	Final & Postgraduate	3.2
4. Simulated Project	Introduction to Planning and Design (La Trobe)	Early Undergraduate	4.1
	Planning & Environmental Law (USC)	Middle Undergraduate	4.2
5. Work-for-a-Client	Planning Theory, Process and Applications (UTAS)	Postgraduate	5.1
	Public Participation (USC)	Middle Undergraduate	5.2
6. Role Play	Conflict Resolution in Planning (USC)	Middle Undergraduate	6.1
	Urban Governance and Planning Law (La Trobe)	Final & Postgraduate	6.2
7. Work Placement/Practicum	The Practice of Planning (ECU)	Final Undergraduate	7.1
	Planning Practicum (USC)	Final Undergraduate	7.2
8. Other	EL Activities in Classroom with Diverse Student Cohort (USC)	Middle Undergraduate	8.1

Source: Adapted from Baldwin et al. (2014)

Studio, Simulated Project, Work-for-a-Client

This series of case studies demonstrate the ambiguity and overlap between these three EL categories. The development studio provides an example of a planning design studio model while another case study includes a '*mini studio*' as part of a larger work-for-a-client project. These, plus other case studies that simulate a real experience through guided practice in a safe university environment enable students to respond to 'real life' planning situations characterised by complexity and uncertainty, being exposed to multiple solutions to unfamiliar problems.

Role Play

This category includes two case studies in which students embrace the roles of particular stakeholders involved in scenarios that can involve highly complex problems. The first case involves conflict resolution in planning while the second case requires students to participate as planners in a mock tribunal hearing, chaired by an experienced planner. Embracing a role can be an emotional experience for students. While some students thrive in the experience, others find it intimidating. As such, students need the guidance of an educator to steer them through the whole process and time to reflect constructively on the positives and negatives of participating in a role-playing experience.

Practicum/Work Experience

Practicums and other work experience activities are pinnacle EL opportunities where students transition directly into the 'real world' for a period without direct educator guidance. The toolkit case studies provide insight into two examples of work experience. The first example is a short self-organised '*Day in the Life of a Planner*' placement under the mentorship of a practitioner. The second example is a four-week practicum. Before this placement, students complete a 2-day block preparatory course, and then later reconsider issues in a post-placement debriefing session. A key EL outcome from both these work placements is that students generally find this type of activity very rewarding. Yet, even at fourth year, students still need assistance in being reflective mainly using guided tools, such as a reflective journal or diary.

Toolkit Usage

Google Analytics provides statistical data about use of the website. In the six months between mid-March and mid-September 2014 there have been 331 site users divided in two categories; 78.4% new users and 21.6% returning users. While there is consistent use across this period several significant peaks match times when project partners undertook wider dissemination events across Australia and overseas. Opportunity exists for other educators to add case studies to the toolkit. To date one of the project team has added another guest speaker case study and a number of planning educators across the globe expressed interest in contributing from their teaching practice.

Conclusion

This paper, in conjunction with the presentation at the ANZAPS conference, reports on the development of an online EL toolkit supported by relevant planning education resources.

Eight EL principles formed a framework, tested across partner courses/units in five Australian universities and written up as case studies. These case studies became the foundation of an online toolkit made available to assist planning educators to increasingly trial, adopt and increase EL techniques. Furthermore, the toolkit website is an interactive and 'living' repository where additional case studies by other EL users can be included to enhance the diversity and richness of the resources available. The project partners expect the toolkit will particularly benefit new planning educators but should also be of interest to planning schools and practitioners around the globe who are endeavouring to facilitate students' education in preparation for graduate roles in a rapidly changing and complex world.

Acknowledgement

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