PUTTING PRACTICE INTO THEORY: RECONCILING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE WITH EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper is based on our work with experienced professionals in the Practitioner in Residence (PIR) Program. The program allows an experienced urban practitioner to undertake a period of supported research in residence at the University of Sydney under the auspices of the Henry Halloran Trust. The aim is to enable professionals to impart their knowledge to other urban professionals and thereby inform their practice. The PIR writes from experience on a topic of concern, relating it to the literature in the field and arguing the case for change. Our PIRs bring experience to the project and, under guidance derive a principle/s that can speak to other practitioners in a well researched and grounded argument. Outside the institutional constraint of their office PIRs are able to bring the wisdom of experience to discussing the politics and pragmatics that contend with planning goals. The program is part of a broader Trust agenda to better connect Australian urban planning practice to the evidence base within urban planning research. Through the program we hope to produce research outputs relevant and accessible to practitioners. The paper discusses the dynamics of the PIR program, the necessary links between theory and practice and the problems of relevance and accessibility of planning research.

Keywords: action research, research led practice

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas tentang pelaksanaan *Practitioner in Residence Program* (PIR), yang melibatkan para profesional berpengalaman di bidang perencanaan kota. Program ini memberi kesempatan para praktisi untuk melakukan penelitian di bidang perumahan, dalam jangka waktu tertentu di Universitas Sydney, di bawah bendera Henry Halloran Trust. Tujuan yang ingin dicapai adalah menyediakan media bagi para praktisi untuk berbagi pengetahuan yang membawa dampak terhadap pelaksanaan tugas keprofesian yang mereka lakoni. Para peserta PIR disyaratkan menulis pengalaman yang dimiliki terkait topik yang menjadi perhatian mereka; mengkaitkan topik ini dengan sumber literatur yang relevan; serta membangun argumentasi bagaimana kondisi-kondisi yang berkenaan dengan topik ini bisa ditingkatkan kualitasnya. Dengan didasari arahan-arahan yang telah ditetapkan. para peserta PIR diharapkan mampu membangun ide-ide yang bisa dikomunikasikan dengan para praktisi lainnya, yang dilandasi oleh argumentasi serta alasan yang telah distudi dengan seksama. Mereka bisa mengungkapkan pandangan serta saran di luar batas rambu-rambu institusional, termasuk juga dalam mendiskusikan hal-hal yang bersifat politis maupun pramagtis yang bermanfaat bagi pencapaian tujuan aktivitas perencanaan. PIR merupakan bagian dari agenda besar yang dimiliki Henry Halloran Trust dalam menjembatani praktek perencanaan kota di Australia dengan fakta serta ide yang dibangun berdasarkan kegiatan penelitian. Program ini mengharapkan diproduksinya hasil-hasil studi yang relevan dan bisa diakses oleh para praktisi. Artikel ini mendiskusikan dinamika pelaksanaan PIR; hubungan penting antara teori dan praktek; dan permasalahan-permasalahan berkenaan relevansi dan aksesibilitas kegiatan penelitian di bidang perencanaan.

Kata kunci: penelitian berbasis tindakan, praktek perencanaan berbasis penelitian

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> *"In theory there is no difference between theory and practice,*
> *in practice there is." (Yogi Berra)*

Introduction

This paper is based on our work with the Practitioner in Residence (PIR) Program which allows an experienced urban practitioner to undertake a period of supported research in residence at the University of Sydney under the auspices of the Henry Halloran Trust (HHT). The outcome of this research is a paper presented in a public lecture and published by the Trust.

The Trust's agenda is to enable professionals to impart their knowledge to, and thereby inform the practice of, other urban professionals. The PIR writes from personal experience on a topic of concern, relating it to the literature in the field and arguing the case for change.

Related research undertaken by Hurley and Taylor for the Trust has supported the argument for experientially based research. Hurley and Taylor's research found that planners rarely refer to or consult published planning research in the course of their work, in spite of the fact that planners are educated in a University environment and thus tutored in the use of theory, research findings, journal articles and academic discourse.

This poses evident difficulties for the ambitions of the HHT agenda. If the HHT is to undertake planning related research to change planning practice, how can it surmount the apparent hurdle of planners' reluctance to read research? How can such research be effectively communicated to planners. Perhaps in practicing planners and planning theorists we have two mutually exclusive communities of discourse.

We are not under the illusion that the tension between academia and practice is a novel situation. The fascination with communication in the education of planners over past decades built on the work of Habermas, has at its heart the notion that ever widening gap between different communities of discourse in society must be bridged. Similarly the relation between theory and practice has been a perennial topic in planning education and extensively discussed in relation to the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis* particularly in the work of Flyvberg. In the two journals *Planning Theory* and *Planning Theory and Practice* no fewer than twenty articles published between 2000 and 2014 addressed *phronesis*.

Our observation that planners do not read academic research and our attempt to harness the practical experience of our PIRs is not a rejection of the virtue of theory in preference for the recounting of practice and cases. Flyvberg makes much of learning from cases as the foundation of experience and this focus in some ways reflects the theory/ practice relation as an opposition between the particular and the general. Given that the focus on Flyvberg , *phronesis* and cases has sometimes been deployed as a justification for practice over theory we thought it useful to revisit the idea of *phronesis* and make some observations on its status in relation to theory. There is also some irony in the popularity among academics of the rather abstract concept of *phronesis* to explain practice to practitioners who are already loathe to read journal articles.

These opposing imperatives of theory and practice in the PIR program are the subject of this paper and our conclusions fall well short of reconciling this opposition. Our intention is thus not to focus on the individual PIR's or their projects here but to draw generic lessons from the process.

Do Planners Read Research Papers ?

The Trust commissioned Hurley and Taylor (2014) to study practitioners' use of research papers. Hurley and Taylor's paper started from the assumption that evidence from research should be useful, if not essential, to inform good planning practice. Other research has indicated that practitioner's engagement with research is limited while 'rule of thumb' and practice examples dominate Hurley and Taylor's research involved the study of information exchange in the planning sector, interviews with planning professionals and academics and a focus group with planning professionals.

Some of the vectors of indifference to published research that they identify are that much research is difficult to access, is poorly tailored for use by a professional audience , the format in which the research is published is focused on academic journals, it is written in ways that make it relatively impenetrable and that much practical research remains unpublished. In addition following Allmendinger and Haughton 2012, Hurley and Taylor remark that the political nature of many strategic planning policy making documents render the relevance of an evidence base unclear.

> "In exploring the relationship between urban research and planning practice in the United Kingdom, Durning (2004:435) wondered whether planning academics and planning practitioners constitute "two tribes or a community of practice". Even a cursory assessment shows that the groups involved in potential information exchange around planning research operate within very different spaces." (2014:4-5)

Academic research, typically of a comparative nature directed to an international audience and an international publishing imperative, is difficult to apply to a specific context. Also academics find a risk to their integrity and the scope of their work in being too closely aligned with practice and research that is purely policy advocacy.

Hurley and Taylor found that reaching practitioners demanded some guidance on the credibility of research; that it should be audience focused, responding to the perceptions of practitioners and that it should distil the essential points for those who are time poor. It should also be curated to distil what was important and new (2014:17).

Educating Planners

The pressure on planning to redefine itself is relentless and is reflected in the perennial debates about the role of planners and the role of planning educators. Plowright and Barr (2012) argue that the tendency in Bureaucracy is to managerialism, to reject specialised knowledge associated with professionalism and move toward an elite form of generalism. Organisations move toward a similarity in structure and practice. They quote Exworthy and Halford (2002)

> "... the status and power of professionals may come increasingly to depend upon their ability to cast their goals and objectives in appropriate terms [and] managerial assets are becoming of increasing importance for career enhancement within the professions. (Exworthy and Halford 2002, 100–101) in Plowright and Barr 2012:3)

This role redefinition is also reflected in contemporary debates about the culture of planning as the central problem for the planning of cities. Cultural reform of planning is the subject of one of our PIRs and is a major focus of planning legislative reform in NSW and managerial reform in the NSW Planning Department. March, Hurlimann and Robins (2013) argue that planners are increasingly University educated professionals yet the kind of knowledge required by professionals is not declarative knowledge but competence.

> " One reason for this is because practised professional knowledge is based to a large extent on functional ability (competence), while universities tend to find it easier and more economically efficient to teach declarative knowledge (Biggs and Tang 2007)............. Both knowledge types are important as the basis for professional competency......." (March, Hurlimann and Robins 2013:235)

It is these claims to a deficit in functional ability and the theory/ practice nexus that leads to a search for more practical knowledge. But as the authors argue both kinds of knowledge are important. It is also paradoxical, given these claims of overemphasis on declarative knowledge and the academic orientation of planning education, that planners still appear to show so little interest in research and journal articles.

What we can say about the role of the planner is that it is complex and accountable to many interests. Budge in 2009 argued that planners need to be both trained and educated. He alluded to McLoughlin's (1994) argument that education and practice had widely diverged and that the role of education was to 'prepare strategic social science-based policy experts with analytical skills'.

Budge contends that while planners need a grounding in spatial political economy and geography they need also to understand and engage with the practice of development control.

> ".... what I largely advocate, is to recognize that there is a core body of knowledge about cities, regions and the environment that will serve the planner well, whatever sort of planning they do. The real idea of planning is a way of thinking, acting and operating in a political economy that produces spatial outcomes. Planning courses need to embrace a set of values, skills, and capacities to equip planners to function effectively whatever aspect of planning they choose. ....This means grounding practice in method and research, with research focusing more on the realities of practice." (Budge 2009:13)

This brings us to the endless debate about what skills and education planners ought to have from the very pragmatic to the highly theoretical. Some fall on the side of planning as problem solving, where every step to improvement is another problem solved, some adhere to the more idealised view that an ultimate goal or reference point must inform a planning professional besides pragmatic and intuitive knowledge.

Phronesis/Practical Knowledge

The term *phronesis* comes from the work of Aristotle as one of three ways of knowing *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*. Flyvbjerg (1998) introduced the idea of *phronesis* and the virtue of the dense data case study in relation to planning.

> " This way of knowing, for which we, significantly, have no English form, is *phronesis*, knowing what to do in particular circumstances: that blend of knowledge, reasoning and skill that forms the basis for practice. This kind of knowledge does not lend itself readily to generalization because practice involves judgement as to what is particular and context-dependent. The dense data case-study is particularly suitable for the development of *phronesis* precisely because of its shortcomings as a source of generalization. "(Peattie2001:259-60)

The key to the relationship between research and practice for Flyvbjerg can be found in the following quote in his text *Making Social Science Matter* (2001). Here he argues that a distancing from every day events obscures and oversimplifies reality.

> " Phronetic research focuses on practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations . ... The description of practices as events endures and gains its strength from detecting the forces that make life work. "(Flyvbjerg 2001 pp 134-5)

Flyvbjerg is arguing for *phronesis* as the basis of a particular kind of or approach to research , but *phronesis* in Aristotle's estimation is more than an approach to research; it is a type of knowledge or understanding possessed by particular individuals . This is captured in Flyvbjerg's further statement .

> " Phronesis functions on the basis of practical rationality and judgement. As I have argued elsewhere, practical rationality and judgement evolve and operate primarily by virtue of deep going case experiences."(Flyvbjerg 2001 pp 135)

Cases

Flyvbjerg's thesis of *phronesis* is built around the notion of learning from cases and in a detailed argument he contests the notion that a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader class. He argues for the virtue of case studies as exemplars and minimises the difficulties in both logic and practice of generalising from the particular. The important point is that understanding through practice is the foundation for Flyvbjerg of social science research. He states

> " A focus on cases does not exclude the attempts at empirical generalisations typical of much of social and political science.....................
>
> Cases exist in context . What has been called the primacy of context follows from the empirical fact that in the history of science, human action has shown itself to be irreducible to predefined elements and rules unconnected to interpretation. Therefore it has been impossible to derive praxis from first principles and theory. Praxis has always been contingent on context dependent judgement on situational ethics." (Flyvbjerg 2001:136)

The traditional concern of generalising or theorising from a case study is that it is a sample of one. This is the basis of the argument that it may form the ground for a testable hypothesis but not provide one in its own right. A number of cases may form the basis of a

theory and indeed we in practice bring theory to cases. This is indeed what Flyvbjerg means when he uses the term interpretation: it is the deployment of a practitioner to the understanding of a particular case based on their experience. However some confusion is introduced by Flyvbjerg's liaison of cases and case studies.

A case study is a detailed documentation of a particular instance of a class of phenomena. Stake (1994) argues that a case study is both a product and a process of learning. It is the documentation of a particular instance and its emphasis is on what can be learned from that particular case. It is not defined by its methodology which may range from medical encounters to community studies and be both quantitative and qualitative. Rather it is defined by the decision to study what can be learned from a particular case. Stake distinguishes between the intrinsic case study and an instrumental case study.

> "In what we may call an instrumental case study, a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else." (Stake in Denzin and Lincoln eds. 1994:236-7)

We would argue that it is rarely the situation in the social sciences or even the applied disciplines, such as medicine, that we are looking at a case without seeing it as one of a class of cases and bringing to bear what Flyvbjerg calls "attempts at generalisation". In the human sciences and public policy unless we are able to generalise in some way based on theory or experience, cases will be no more than a story and a not very interesting one at that.

So Flyvbjerg has created something of a straw man by liaising the notions of cases, everyday practice and experience with the research based definition of case studies. A case is only one instance and to argue from that case in relation to planning and policy one needs both theory and experience that can situate the case within a more general frame of reference.

Peattie draws on pragmatic philosophy to argue that the outcome of Flyvbjerg's approach is to see progress as solving problems rather than reaching a predetermined goal.

> " This pragmatic, participatory view of progress proposes a distinctive view of the role of theory, and of the research on which theory is based. It does not eliminate theory, but it proposes that we shall require for practice another, an additional, way of knowing. ....There remains for us the task of deriving the techniques that can convey from case to case the practical meaning, at once moral, factual and skilful, that may accumulate." (Peattie, 2001:261)

While lauding Flyvbjerg's focus on the lessons of practice, dense data description and action Peattie returns to the question of generalisability of *phronesis*; that is, what and how can it teach others?

Crucially she argues

> " The planner works in a collective, a political framework, and must stand in a world of legitimating public purpose" (Peattie 2001:262)

It is not sufficient to simply problem solve. The planner must define and situate the problem, the planner must predict and project " in a framework of commitment". Without this process the planner will not garner wider support necessary to change the problem situation, to commit to a long term cause. Without the capacity to situate problems within a broader frame of reference, the planner will neither plan nor gain popular commitment to a plan.

So while we must research practice and endeavour to understand it in a pragmatic way, we must also have a rational framework within which we can generalise the lessons of practice. If achieving *phronesis* is our goal, ultimately it is bonded to *episteme* and *techne*.

PIR Papers

Underpinning our PIR program is the hope and belief that the issues which our PIRs address and the experience they bring to addressing them will strike a chord with planners in the field; that the PIRs will derive both practical and generalisable answers to some of the contemporary vexing issues of planning. There are few theoretical and practical issues that have preoccupied planning over the past decade with as much vigour as the question of communication.   Communicative competency is both product and delivery. The PIR's research must be something that the audience is interested to hear and it must be delivered in a way that reaches them. To effect change we must unleash the practical wisdom of our PIRs regarding issues of interest to those in the field and communicate it to their colleagues.

Planning Culture

The author of our first PIR Report on Planning Culture in NSW (Cirillo 2013) was a former Executive Director of Urban Renewal and Major Sites at the NSW Department of Planning. The NSW White Paper on Planning Reform (2013) echoing studies in the UK identified "Planning Culture" as being a significant factor in planning reform. The focus of the White Paper recommendations in relation to planners was to develop in practitioners a more cooperative, participatory, problem solving and pragmatic attitude.

The NSW planning system has seen little comprehensive or coherent reform in forty years of massive urban development social change, densification and urban sprawl. Yet Cirillo noted the apparent emphasis on the transformation of the culture of planners as distinct from the culture of planning was viewed as a resolution to the complex conflict driven competing goals of a planning.

> "The culture of planning at local government level must embrace some simple contemporary and 'corporate' principles of good customer service and efficient project management if the culture of the planning system in NSW is to improve............this is simply a question of good and responsible management rather than the need to reinvent (with great fanfare) 'planning culture". (Cirillo p21)

He argues that

> "This local development adjudication process has led to a tangibly hostile decision making culture where decisions can often be swayed on the basis of which 'side' can generate the most noise and numbers on the floor of a council meeting." (Cirillo p22).

In Cirillo's analysis planning system characteristics which frustrate the expectations of all the players are attributed to the culture of planning where it appears the culture of planning is a euphemism for the professional execution of statutory obligations.

Communities of Practice

The author of our second PIR Report on Communities of Practice (Proctor 2014) was previously an asset manager working in Housing NSW and is President of the Australasian Housing Institute. The paper is a passionate and carefully documented assessment of the practical difficulties and possibilities of information sharing between housing asset managers to realise improvements in their professional practice.

> "Given that the value of social housing assets is approximately $100 billion nationally, and the annual budget for asset portfolio maintenance and upgrading is about $1 billion, just a 1% improvement in asset utilisation would provide a $1 billion benefit to the economy."(Proctor p5)

The search for a community of practice derived from a recognition of the systemic failure of housing agencies to enable an understanding of best practice to be shared among housing asset managers. Our practitioner deployed a detailed knowledge of practice and the field together with an engagement with the literature to produce a report that speaks to an immediate and pressing issue for practitioners.

The paper draws extensively on the literature on Communities of Practice, the experience of practitioners and personal knowledge of the complex structures and institutional relationships in the provision of social housing in Australia. It concludes with a proposal to develop a Community of Practice among housing asset managers in Australia

Panelisation

The author of our third PIR Report on Panelisation (Stone 2014) was previously with the Department of Planning where she headed teams responsible for planning policy, systems and reform, environmental impact assessment (EIA) and other planning and environmental policies, particularly relating to infrastructure and industries.

The report assesses the increasing use of panels by NSW councils over the past 15 years in the development application (DA) processes – both "internal" panels and "independent" panels comprising of external experts and community representatives. The author argues the collaborative approaches have provided increased transparency, integrity and rigour in the development assessment process.

> " Over the last 18 years, officers and councillors from 20 council have been "ICAC-ed" and six councils have been sacked . Though not all these incidents related to development approval processes, it does demonstrate the difficulty in minimising or avoiding corruption risks at the individual level as well as more broadly across councils' systems. There is a range of potential risks of conflict of interest and corruption for councils in their "management", "consent authority" and "community advocate" roles." (Stone p33)

and

> "To some, the DA process is seen to be planning policy on the run. In a way, the need for panels as an independent arbitrator at the DA stage is a barometer on the weaknesses in the strategic planning process. ....The feedback from independent panels can also play an important role in improving the strategic planning framework for local councils. In this way, they can assist in the move towards more transparent, efficient and effective planning in NSW " (Stone p76)

This landmark report deploys the author's experience in planning, policy development in government and active engagement in local politics together with historical literature and ethnographic research to detail the history and politics of planning assessment panels, their current contribution to the improvement of development assessment and their potential contribution to future planning in NSW and elsewhere. The report recognises the systemic difficulties posed by a tendency to regulatory capture, local political role conflict in adjudication and representation and the discretionary erosion of strategic planning.

Theory and The Pir

The three areas of practice that our PIRs have chosen all deploy theory. Cirillo's work could not address the question of planning culture without interrogating the literature and concept of the role of the planner and considering the relation between professions and the state. To do so would be to fail to situate the problem within its historical and instrumental context; it would be to deny that planning is a social construct with a purpose and a history.

Equally, to look at the social organisation of housing managers without again looking at the purpose of these functionaries, their powers and constraints, that is to say the structural and organisational context from which they derive their power and purpose, might fulfil some criteria of dense data but would be innocent of any intelligent insight.

Similarly studying the role of Panels in adjudication of planning decisions implies an understanding of the void which these adjudicators are intended to fill. It requires a grasp of questions of legitimacy, discretion and democracy.

Theory and practice are not the same thing but nor perhaps are they as diametrically opposed as we might like to suppose. The difference rests on a tendency to over intellectualise the nature of theory and to under theorise the nature of practice. Agents are reflexive beings and their practice involves some conceptual framework of understanding of the world; they bring insights to practice.

> "..all human activity is informed by theories about the way the world works. Humans as reflexive beings are constantly considering their actions and forming theories in the light of their experience, which then influence their behaviour." (Bounds: 2002: 1)

A resort to the idea of *phronesis* and dense data depiction without reference to instrumental rationality can only be sustained by an ideal type of practical consciousness, divorced from reflexivity. *Phronesis*, a logic of practice, dense data, thick description, the immediacy of experience, intuitive wisdom, all these things are real but they do not live in isolation from a strategic intention governed by instrumental rationality. This is the case in everyday life and it is even more the case in the professional life of planners. If every decision is

contingent, its contingency is also part of a continuum with a coherence amenable to explanation and ordering for understanding. This is the purpose of theory or *episteme* and it is indelibly linked to organising an understanding of *phronesis*, dense data and thick description to impart its lessons to others.

Discussion

The voice of our practitioners is one of wisdom and their writing reflects the fine grained observation to which Flyvberg alludes. The constraint of the HHT paper and the University context provides a discipline that enables their observations to be situated within the research on the subject while providing a forum for presentation that has the credibility to reach a wider audience.

It is a straw man to posit substantive and instrumental rationality as antonyms, they are not. They are ideal types and in the real world instrumental and substantive rationality must exist in concert. Our actions must be justifiable in relation to a broader strategic agenda and be coherent in the context of moral, political, spatial and social realities of the moment.

It is commonplace for anyone who educates practitioners or professionals to recognise that the socialisation of the workplace, of necessity, leads to emulation, repetition and pragmatism. The educated practitioner or professional brings to the workplace a repertoire of knowledge that must be selectively applied to cases.

Only in theory can we pose a concept such as *phronesis* as existing free from a theoretical perspective on the world and the professional's function. In reality the practitioner is always guided by the broader instrumental rationality of strategic planning and the statutory limitations on their capacity to exercise intuitive or pragmatic discretion. The problems we have identified in educating planners relate to the failure of academic research to reach planners or to affect their practice. This is in part a problem of communication, of content, of credibility, of language and of theory. It is a paradox that the strong focus on communication in planning courses has not bridged the engagement gap in planning nor the gap between planning researchers and practicing planners.

It is hoped that through the PIR program we are addressing directly the questions of content credibility and language. We are selecting experienced practitioners with credibility in their field to write on a subject of contemporary, pressing interest on which they are able to express their views in the language of planners.

As we have argued it is a misapprehension of the role of the planner to believe that their practice can be founded in experience divorced from theory. Much of the debate on educating planners has been about the theory/ practice divide and communication. *Phronesis* has been presented as a resolution to the theory/ practice divide by privileging practice but this is an illusion. A future directed profession, constrained in its statutory discretion cannot situate its understanding of its role within the narrow contingency of immediate experience.

The more ways we have to communicate the less we seem to do so. As Hurley and Taylor point out planning academics and practitioners are becoming two tribes with the

communication distance between them widening. In this, planning may reflect other contemporary social and political groups able to tailor their exposure to the media to insulate themselves from influences that contradict their world view. We are working to overcome this with our public lectures and web publication but there is still a way to go.

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