

Urban planning for Landscape Architects – ambitions for a good learning context of a new course

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Introduction

In 2014, a major change in the bachelor programme in Landscape Architecture at the University of Copenhagen was implemented, effecting courses of the second and third year. The main rationale for the changes was two-fold: (1) the integration of different methods for mapping and designing and (2) a more equal structure between the two specialisations in the programme, Landscape Design and Urban Design. The prior was tackled by introducing a new course in Geodesign, which integrates the use of more analytical GIS tools (Geographic Information Systems) and more design oriented CAD tools (Computer Aided Design). The latter was tackled by significantly restructuring the Urban Design specialisation established back in 2008. This was also motivated from feedback by students who asked for a more coherent project course, similar to what was offered in the Landscape Design line. The five former mandatory 7.5 ECTS points courses of the Urban Design line were taken out of the programme and a new, project-based, 30 ECTS points course called ‘Urban Planning Studio – Strategy and Design’ (da: Byplan Studio – Strategi og Design) was introduced (see Figure 3.1).

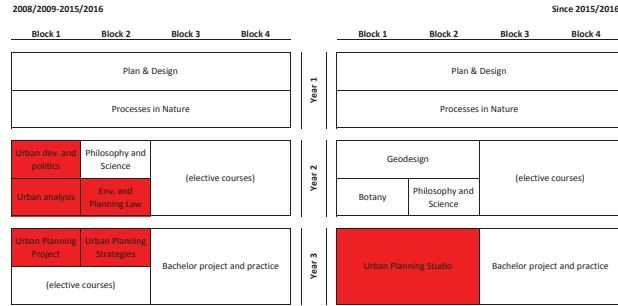


Fig. 3.1: Old (left) and new (right) structure of Bachelor programme in Landscape Architecture at University of Copenhagen. Courses of the Urban Design specialisation are highlighted.

I myself was responsible for one course and engaged in two others in the old specialisation. Together with several colleagues, I am now responsible for the new joint course, which has been held recently (Blok 1 & 2, 2016/17) for the first time. In this paper I elaborate on our main pedagogical ideas for the new course by reflecting on Biggs & Tang’s seven general characteristics of a good learning context (2011, chapter 4). I draw on experiences from the new and former courses. Before that, I review some literature discussing the core elements in urban planning education describing the general context of the new course.

Core elements in urban planning education

Urban planning in education and science has a rather ambiguous profile. This is caused by its double character as being a practice or profession (i.e. doing urban planning) and at the same time being a field of research. Research is further split into (1) research in practices of urban planning and therewith planning theories and (2) research into the phenomena related to the city and urban development, i.e. the actual subject of plans. Last but not least, urban planning builds on various other sciences and disciplines such as sociology, economics, geography, law, political science, environmental science, architecture and design.

The plethora of perspectives on urban planning is also mirrored in the great variety of educational programmes. There are some core elements, but a major part will be different from university to university. Edwards & Bates (Edwards and Bates, 2011) examined the core curricula of thirty planning schools in North America and not one of the nine categories of core requirements was present in all 30 programmes. However, ‘Planning History, Theory & Practice’, ‘Legal Aspects of Planning’ and general statistics are core requirements in almost all schools. In Denmark, there exists only one full degree in urban planning called “Urban, Energy and Environmental Planning” offered by Aalborg University. Otherwise planning education is typically part of other educations such as at the University of Copenhagen, where Landscape Architects in bachelor and master programmes can specialize in Urban Design and Planning, or also at the Aarhus School of Architecture.

Back in 1995, the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), where Aalborg University, Aarhus School of Architecture as well as University of Copenhagen are full members, has defined a threefold core of the planning education (Dühr, Colomb, and Nadin, 2010, p. 24):

- Theoretical and practical knowledge on the **desirability of legitimacy of and conditions for purposeful planning** intervention
- Theoretical and practical knowledge on the **preparation and advancement** of such interventions and on judging the effects thus generated
- Technological knowledge and **skills to actually engage** in planning activities in real life situations

Davoudi (Davoudi, 2015) pointed out that good planning is a combination of different kinds of knowledge and skills and called it as being “a practice of knowing”, i.e. it ranges from knowing on theories or concepts, to knowing on the ideology behind (moral choices), knowing how to do things (crafts, skills) and doing them (action). Not least, a key element in planning practice is the application of practical judgement (e.g. what works what not) which builds on wisdom and experience. Planning has thereby a lot in common with other disciplines as law, politics or design, as pointed out by Alexander (Alexander, 2016).

Although AESOP’s threefold core and Davoudi’s five kinds of knowledge and skills are referring to a whole programme in urban planning, both are a great inspiration for the newly established course. While we certainly have managed to include knowledge on theories and concepts, on moral choices as well as on how to do things in the courses of the old special-

isation, actual application and ‘building up wisdom’ from that had minor focus, at least not as a direct activity. This might be grounded in the structure of the courses, where it is difficult to come the ‘whole way round’ in a relatively short period of time. A basic premise for the new course was therefore to be project-based (or problem-based), where academic knowledge comes in at times when needed for application in or reflection of the project work. This is especially important since urban planning has transformed in the past decades from a more technical practice to an activity strongly interlinked with and dependent on social and political dynamics in the city (Jørgensen and Ærø, 2008). In teaching practice, this is not always possible and challenged when student projects develop in different directions. Still, for this very first round of teaching the course, it was important for us to agree on this general course ambition.

Ambitions for a good learning context

Biggs & Tang (Biggs, 2011) identified seven characteristics for a good learning context. In a previous edition of their book (Biggs and Tang, 2007), they had identified only five characteristics which shows that a good learning context is difficult to base on checklists only. Still, the characteristics provide a great framework to discuss the wider course setup. The characteristics are:

1. Metacognitive control, reflective learning
2. Relevant learner activity
3. Formative feedback
4. Appropriate motivation
5. A base of interconnected knowledge
6. Social learning
7. Teaching quality

Metacognitive control, reflective learning

The first characteristic for a good learning context (Biggs & Tang, 2011) is giving the students control over their own learning and being reflective about it. The main characteristic of the new course is that it is project-based,

i.e. that within the frame of the specific sub-assignments, the students control themselves how and when the work has to be done. Some of the assignments are more specified beforehand, others are more open which has mainly to do with a certain progress in the course. E.g. in the beginning the assignments are more specific so that we can relatively fast come to some first results which we can discuss in the course, while later on students can decide the content to a large extent themselves and only the overall format and deadlines are given. Another key point for reflective learning is to make clear from the beginning, where the activity is supposed to end so the students can argue for their decisions and deal with various challenges along the way.

Relevant learner activity

The activities in the new course vary from lectures (held by teachers or students) to exercises and individual and group project work. Lectures by teachers are kept to minimum, mainly supporting the work on assignments and introducing topics. To discuss course literature, reading seminars are held where students present a text followed by group discussions around given questions. The core of the course, the project work, is structured into several assignments as shown in Figure 3.2. All assignments are done in groups, though with shifting team members. In the first block (week 1-9) the assignments are collected in individual portfolios, while in the second block one joint group project is handed in followed by an oral defence.

Week	Assignments	Other activities
1	A1: Urban structure	3 day field trip to Danish case city
2		
3		
4	A2: District analysis	1 day field trip to Danish case city
5		
6	A3: Scenario, vision and strategy / Portfolio	Vision workshop in Danish case city
7		
8		
9	<i>Examination week block 1 (evaluation of written portfolio A1-A3)</i>	
10		3 day international study trip
11	A4: Plan and Design	Critique with guest (practitioner)
12		
13		
14		
15	A5: Implementation and evaluation	Critique with guest (stakeholder)
16		
17	Finish Project	
18	<i>Examination week block 1 (evaluation of project report and oral exam)</i>	

Fig. 3.2: Assignment structure

Formative feedback

The third characteristic is to provide formative feedback, which means feedback during learning - opposite to summative assessment at the end of the course. In our course, there are several occasions where students present their work in written or oral form during the course and get feedback from teachers or fellow students. Furthermore, there are several supervision meetings in each group work. However, a challenge for that issue is the limit resources (time) of teachers to give formative feedback, which is rather time consuming. A strategy would be to include more peer feedback from fellow students (The University of Edinburgh, 2010) which we did not use in this first round – not least because the very clear assessment criteria which are necessary for peer feedback were partially still in development during the course.

An important role for this plays also the physical setting. As this is a ‘Studio’ course in the Landscape Architecture programme, we are lucky to

have one room which is only used by us for the whole course period. That means that we can have posters and other course results displayed in the classroom for longer periods that makes it easy for teacher and students to refer back to previous work done.

Besides the course internal feedback, there are also several occasions where the students present some of their work on site. In 2016/17 the municipality of Hillerød, 50 km north of Copenhagen, was chosen as study case. A first field trip to the town was concluded with a short exercise on potentials and challenges of the city, which was presented to planning practitioners from the municipality the same day. Later we returned to Hillerød with scenario posters and invited to a small exhibition in the town's library where many students for the first time got the chance to talk to ordinary citizens from their professional viewpoint.

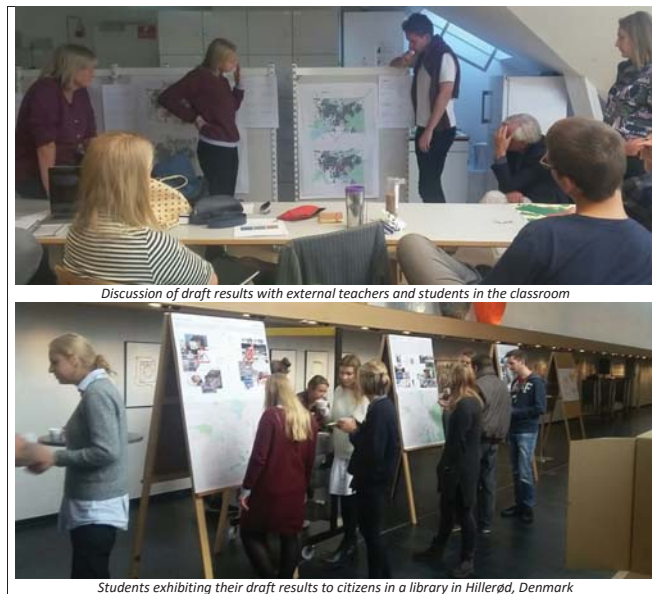


Fig. 3.3: Internal and external feedback session (Photos: Christian Fertner)

Appropriate motivation

The Intended-learning outcomes (ILO) of the course (block 1 and 2) are thought to be the primary element to align expectations and motivate. They are

- To understand complex problems in urban and landscape planning and development in a Danish town,
- To be able to communicate those to others in text, diagrams, maps, drawings, photos as well as orally and
- To develop visions and strategies which tackle the identified problems.
- To understand how visions and strategies can be implemented and
- To design concrete interventions

The ILO's mirror the main idea of the course, namely that the students get in touch with all relevant phases of an urban planning process, including (1) scoping the problem, (2) conducting analyses, (3) forming scenarios, visions and strategies, (4) planning and designing proposals and (5) working with implementation and evaluation. This was also the reasons why part of the programme was changed and the current course was established. In the smaller courses a comprehensive approach was not possible, making it difficult for the students to see how the different phases are related.

Another motivational element is that we try to come close to actual planning practice. That means that, although we incorporate theoretical readings and discussions, all is centred around the students' project work embedded in a real life case. We were in close contact with planners from the municipality and besides a first study tour to the city in the beginning of the course where we met various stakeholders, from the mayor and various civil servants to representatives for local associations, we returned to Hillerød several times during the course for fieldwork and exhibitions.

A final core motivational element is that we try to prepare the students for the bachelor project. The form and structure of the project they have to deliver at the end of block 2 is similar to what is expected in a bachelor project, besides that they typically do not work on that in groups but individually.

A base of interconnected knowledge

With 'creating a base of interconnected knowledge' Biggs & Tang (2011) refer to build on the existing knowledge of the students and furthermore organize the teaching in a way so that students can actually refer and connect

to other knowledge and thereby structure the new knowledge themselves. To get an overview of previous learned skills we asked the students to take a little survey regarding the courses they took the previous year. Besides landscape architects, also four geography students took the course, making it even more important to highlight different competences, not least for later group work. Connecting to existing knowledge is also a big part of single Teaching-Learning-Activities. Looking at the whole course, e.g. the exam of block 1, a portfolio of several assignments that build on each other followed by an individual reflection, should give the students the possibility to structure the gained knowledge in their own way. Still, this has to be done more systematic e.g. by relating to specific elements of previous courses and developing them further or taking a different perspective on them.

Social learning

Social learning refers to learning from each other in various kinds, with the possibility for the students to learn to see things differently and reflect on own interpretations. Almost all student work is done in groups of 2 to 4 persons. In block 1 these groups also changed regularly, increasing the possibility to add different perspectives on the same issues. This was also evident in the late group assignments where students referred back to previous results of different groups. However, group work needs to be facilitated (by the teacher or the students) which can take quite some resources. In an oral evaluation with the students after block 1, some mentioned that the shifting group work was rather exhausting. However looking at the outcomes it is clear that this mixing of groups really enabled them to draw on a great variety of different group work results for their final project. Another social learning activity were reading seminars where students presented an article from the course literature, a form of peer tutoring. Also here evaluations were mixed, e.g. mentioning that other students not always are as clear presenting specific content as in a lecture. Still, when presenting themselves, students highlighted that they learned a lot, referring back to the idea that the learning effect is highest when you have to explain something to another person (Biggs, 2011). Another social learning form would be peer supervision – the idea that critique from fellow students is taken more serious and can be better understood than from teachers (Race, 2001). We did not apply this systematically this time. Clarifying how the different forms of social learning should contribute to a positive learning effect is crucial.

Teaching quality

Being reflective on one's teaching practice is the last characteristic for a good learning context mentioned by Biggs & Tang (2011). Especially for a new course as ours this is essentially to maintain during the full course as we do not have any experiences of how things work out. Certainly, we can use experiences from previous courses – and did that while planning for the course by e.g. inviting other teachers for talks on their practices in project work, course work, exam etc. As the course is split over two blocks, the results of the obligatory written evaluation of block 1 were already available when starting block 2 and were used to adapt the second part of the course. As written before we also applied a longer oral evaluation at the end of block 1 as well as smaller discussion during the course. One element we are changing because of these discussions are the reading seminars and how they can be attached closer to the project work. Also various practical issues can be improved right away. Other issues regarding assignment structure and exam mode are to be developed after course end by joining up the teachers in the two blocks in an evaluation seminar.

Conclusions

In a big course as ours, filling a semester full time studying and trying to train the core skills and practices of spatial planning (Dühr et al., 2010; Davoudi, 2015), it can be sometimes difficult to keep the focus and provide a clear learning structure. The seven characteristics of a good learning context listed by Biggs & Tang (2011) are thereby a helpful tool to plan for and reflect on teaching. Certainly, there is much to improve around this course whereas the most important will be, based on the experiences of this first round, to clarify the learning goals. Beyond that, it is important to focus on the alignment of elements within the course as well as within the programme. A regular review of the curriculum is therefore at least as essential as the review of the single courses. E.g. Edwards and Bates (2011) suggest a review of the curriculum, also by practitioners, even every other year. The current restructuring was mainly driven by student's wishes, which is not a problem – the contrary –, but we could have tackled that wish earlier when reviewing the programme regularly.

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