

Pedagogy built on working with communities - a first semester core course

Ayse Yonder¹, Mercedes Narciso², Juan Camilo Osorio^{3*}, Eva Hanhardt⁴

¹Professor. Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York.

²Adjunct Associate Professor. Pratt Institute. Brooklyn, New York.

³Adjunct Assistant Professor. Pratt Institute. Brooklyn, New York.

⁴Visiting Assistant Professor. Pratt Institute. Brooklyn, New York.

** josorio@pratt.edu*

Preparing students for practice is perhaps the key challenge in planning education. Since the late 1990s, the issue of how to balance theory, methods, skills, and practice oriented courses in the core curriculum has been increasingly recognized. Partly as a result of the greater emphasis in the 2006 North American Planning Accreditation Board guidelines on plan-making skills, and partly in response to the increasing demand from students for hands on learning, by now, most planning schools have incorporated practice oriented courses into their core curriculum (Edwards & Bates 2011, Vidhardi, et.al. 2012). Depending on how each program defines what planning is or ought to be, the strategies to incorporate practice oriented learning into the curriculum ranges from special seminars or workshops, to internship requirements to studios (Lang 1983, Grant Long 2012, Vidhardi et.al. 2012). While studios are a key component of practice oriented learning, the attitude towards studio pedagogy has changed over time. As the focus of planning programs shifted away from the physical planning oriented education of the earlier years towards social science and research oriented education, studio pedagogy was abandoned in most schools, to be revived once again in recent years.

The role of studios in planning education continues to be a debated issue (Lang 1983, Higgins, et al. 2009). We argue that studio learning, if tied to working with a community-based client early in their educational experience, can help students learn to balance theory with practice, and “can be a transformative experience, forcing them to confront their own values (...)” (Le Gates 2014). As Forester argues in relation to a

critical pragmatic approach, it can help them learn to “think critically about outcomes as well as processes, about institutional and process designs, about power and performance (...) [and to] reconstruct possibilities where others might initially perceive or presume impossibilities” (Forester 2012). Working with community-based organizations, they learn that, “you have to understand that you don’t always need to accept laws and programs as they now exist. You have to understand the basics of what goes into housing finance, for example, but you also have to be able to craft your own programs, zoning regulations and land use controls, to deal with different problems at different times” (Shiffman 2007).

This paper analyzes the pedagogical approach used in “Fundamentals of Planning”, a first semester graduate core course at Pratt Institute’s City and Regional Planning (CRP) graduate program that evolved from a 3-credit lecture course to a 5-credit lecture course with a “mini-studio” component. The initial purpose of the course was to familiarize first-year city planning students with relevant historical and contemporary literature on the principles and practices of planning at different levels and in various functional areas. The course provides a broad overview of the literature on current planning practice in its political context, illustrating the range of roles that planners play in government, non-profit and private sectors. Special attention is given to community-based and participatory planning, and planning for sustainable and resilient communities. The purpose of adding the studio component was to enable students to relate readings to practice by working in small teams for a real client on a current planning issue, in a neighborhood of New York City -- and imprinting the students with the importance and validity of planning with and for communities. Students learn how to coordinate the creation of a comprehensive report documenting the results of the class, consolidating research findings and recommendations for the client. In so doing they learn the required skills in the actual practice of planning.

The studio project is selected each semester based on requests from community-based organizations that the instructors have worked with before. The instructors and representatives of the organization decide jointly on the deliverables to the client so that neither the curriculum requirements nor the client’s needs and expectations are compromised. Students meet the client at the beginning of the term

to hear firsthand about the issues they need to work on. During the first part of the semester, students survey the neighborhood and prepare an analysis of neighborhood existing conditions. In addition to basic technical and communication skills, this also provides them with an opportunity to learn how to work collaboratively and how to resolve the tensions of teamwork. When relevant, before developing recommendations for the issues identified, the class helps the client organize visioning sessions. Recommendations are presented to the client and community members at the end of the semester.

After a short discussion of the importance of the academic context in shaping the approaches to community engagement and service learning courses, we review the goals, structure, requirements and assessment procedures of the Fundamentals course. We then analyze the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach. The methodology involves a three-pronged approach. First, we analyze whether the course has met its learning objectives through a survey of students from a period of five years. This was an online questionnaire responded by 70 percent of the 145 students contacted. Second, through interviews with community partners from the same five-year period, we assess the quality and implications of the studio products for the community partners. Third, we analyze how the course fits within the broader curriculum and pedagogy of the program itself. We then consider the conditions necessary to replicate this approach in other academic contexts. The paper will contribute to the debates on core curriculum and studio teaching, as well as community-university partnerships.

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