

University - community engagement in planning education: evaluating impacts on community

Andrea Frank^{1*}, Louie Sieh

¹*Cardiff University*

franka@cardiff.ac.uk

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1.1.1 Evidence suggests that in planning and urban design education, students can gain valuable insights into the complexities of practice through real world projects (Torres 2012). Consequently, experiential pedagogies including client-based projects are being re-integrated into professional degree curricula. In planning and urban design, there is an array of opportunities for potential interactions by students ranging from creating design proposals to developing regeneration strategies for communities.

1.1.2 A particularly promising activity is the engagement of students in and for community involvement, which is typically motivated by multiple rationales. First – from an educators' point of view, community involvement is part of the wider agenda of democratising planning activities and it has in many nations become a part of the statutory planning process. Thus, planners require training in community involvement facilitation and techniques which is difficult to teach through theory in a classroom environment. Second, resource-strapped communities and municipalities tend to struggle to find the resources to engage and involve community representatives and citizens. Mutual learning opportunities promise win-win situations where faculty and students will contribute to build essential participatory capacity while also taking advantage of a live learning environment in which participation techniques could be trialled.

However, it is well known that cooperation among communities and institutions including universities is not straight forward (Agnotti et al 2012). Social and cultural differences and expectations amongst such partners opens doors to tension and

potential conflicts that let some academics refrain from community engagement all together (Hollander 2011) while others advocate care: “What if bringing students and professors into neighbourhoods re-inforces the power and status of the professions and disempowers residents ...?” (Agnotti et al 2012, 1). Enhancement of student learning should not come at the cost of community members. Moreover, there may be even a risk that the university-community engagement in community involvement undermines statutory planning processes.

Truth is, that while student learning from community based, live projects is fairly well understood (Millican 2007) the value gained from collaborative university-community engagement including students supporting community involvement activities has been little explored – especially in the UK context. Studying the impact of students’ activity on the ‘real world’ is thus important to improve our understanding of how the divergent needs of the community participants and the academy can be managed and negotiated (e.g., Agnotti et al. 2011). Particularly, there is a need to establish better methodologies to systematically evaluate projects and experiences from the community perspective.

This contribution fills parts of this knowledge void by reporting on a small-scale study of impact of students conducting and facilitating community involvement as part of their degree studies in urban design and planning. A novel evaluation framework is developed and then used to analyse impact in three case studies identified in a survey of UK planning schools. Analyses of stakeholder interviews develop an understanding of the impact of the activities undertaken by students. Results suggest at least partial gains by some stakeholders but also a need to monitor and assess live project pedagogies carefully to ensure co-learning. Reflections and learning from this inform an initial set of recommendations aimed at helping to shape future engagement activities.

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