Teaching Professional Practice in Canadian Planning Schools

by Dr. John A. Curry MCIP

During a Time of Accelerating Social Change and Globalization, planners are being asked to address increasingly complex and diverse problems. To respond to these changes and to new demands being placed on the profession, planning educators must continually adapt curriculum in order to provide graduates with the current knowledge and skills necessary to carry out effective planning practice. In an effort to encourage discussion, debate, and feedback on how to improve planning education, this paper will review what Canadian planning students are being taught about planning practice, as well as the techniques used to communicate this information.

John Forester (1987) defines planning practice as "envisioning a problem situation, managing arguments concerning it, and negotiating strategically to intervene." Section 3.3 of the Canadian Institute of Planners membership manual (CIP 1996) states that planning programs should provide "the ability to synthesize planning knowledge and apply it to actual planning problems...through studio projects or workshops." The education provided to Canadian planning students will be examined within the context of these descriptions of planning practice.

Planning education in Canada is comprised of eight undergraduate programs and twelve graduate programs, with only the Université de Montréal and the University of Waterloo having both undergraduate and graduate programs. Seven programs are located in Ontario and three are located in Quebec. (No planning schools exist within Canada's northern territories.) In addition, formal planning technician/technologist programs exist in a number of colleges across Canada. Because these programs are not currently accredited by the Canadian Institute of Planners, they were not included in the study. Please refer to the sidebar, which lists Canadian university planning programs.

In January of this year, a ten-question survey was electronically mailed to the program chairs and professors responsible for professional planning practice courses at the eighteen planning programs recognized by the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP 1999). The survey was inductive in nature, with broad open-ended questions designed to determine
- the meaning of the term "professional planning practice" in the context of the curriculum of each planning program;
- whether the teaching of planning practice is concentrated in one or a small number of courses, or whether it is taught throughout the curriculum;
- topics and concepts covered by the course(s) or by the program curriculum; and finally
- the teaching techniques used.

All eighteen planning schools responded to the survey. The following sections present the results of the survey and highlight unique topics/concepts and teaching methods.

Describing Professional Practice

During the conceptualization of this research project, the author assumed that the development of a comprehensive definition of professional planning practice was possible. Upon further reflection, and after reviewing the comments of the survey respondents, the author concluded that a more realistic approach would be to describe the main themes that constitute professional planning practice as it exists today. These themes will not be static, but will evolve over time to reflect a changing planning environment.

Canadian planning programs describe the term "professional planning practice" differently, according to the context of their curriculums. The most comprehensive description, which was offered by the University of Toronto, states that professional planning practice entails "the practicalities of performing in the role of the planner." There are a number of elements embodied in this description: the nature of the relationship between planners, their clients (public or private) and their communities; the nature of their relationships with elected officials; the politics of planning (i.e., the various types and sources of power actually used by planners and the other stakeholders with whom they interact in the planning process); the ethics of planning; group dynamics and teamwork; conflict resolution; communication skills (oral and written); and time management. Other planning programs include elements of the above description, focusing predominately on simulating realistic planning settings, presenting ethical dilemmas, and discussing the professional norms and values that guide planners as they work.

Many descriptions stressed the important role that planners play both in the community political process and in the institutional environment. The descriptions offered by planning school representatives suggest that the objective scientific rational model of planner as technician has been replaced by a blended model of planner as technician and political process expert. To contribute to effective change, planners are now being taught communication and political skills. This broadening of the scope of planning education was evident at both the undergraduate and graduate levels of planning education.

How Professional Practice is Integrated into Planning Curriculum

The degree of importance that planning programs assign professional practice is demonstrated by the high level of integration of different elements of practice into the planning curriculum. Only one of the eight undergraduate programs and six of the twelve graduate programs stated that professional planning practice is taught in one or several courses. In most cases, planning practice is emphasized in the core (required) courses of the program. After reflecting upon a second question on the subject, all respondents concluded that, although specific planning practice courses were available, planning practice is one of the basic themes of planning programs and is an essential element of planning education. These responses indicate that most planning schools teach planning practice broadly throughout the curriculum.

Co-operative educational placements and internships also play an important role in preparing students for planning practice. Terms involving mandatory or optional co-op work are available at many planning schools. For example, the University of Toronto provides summer internships between the first and second year of its graduate program. Co-operative placements have been an internal part of the University of Waterloo's undergraduate program for years. Co-op work terms provide students with opportunities to test many of the concepts and theories they have learned, experience the day-to-day practice of planning, and determine whether they have chosen the correct career path before investing four to five years in an undergraduate program. Co-op students benefit the educational system when they use their new-found knowledge to challenge, inform, and ensure relevance in planning courses.
Topics/Concepts Covered

The complexity of planning practice is illustrated in the diverse range of knowledge and skills that planning schools are teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. This knowledge is organized into six themes: planning process, the politics of planning, professional ethics, written and oral communication, other interpersonal skills, and entrepreneurship. Each theme is briefly discussed below.

Respondents considered an understanding of planning process to be a central element in effective planning practice. Topics such as project and program planning, site planning, and urban design process are commonly incorporated into Canadian planning curricula. Modes of public participation, as one element of planning process, was mentioned on numerous occasions as essential knowledge for planners who strive to operate effectively in the current environment of diverse community interests.

The description of professional planning practice provided by the University of Toronto highlights the importance of comprehending planning politics and finding ways to operate constructively within a political environment. Planners must deal with external politics at the neighbourhood, community, regional, provincial, national and international levels, but they must also deal with the internal politics of their own organizations and institutions. Ways of understanding planning environments (which involve activities in municipal administration, private practice, senior government, small-town and rural settings, and community development), as well as the administration of planning work in these environments, are topics taught at various planning schools.

To prepare planning students for the ethical dilemmas and challenges they will confront, all schools provide instruction in professional ethics and planning law. Fathoming the complex political and ethical environment, while acting as both professional advisor and upholder of the public interest, is possibly the most difficult personal conundrum facing planning students as they launch their careers.

Planners communicate constantly, both orally and in words and images. Planning students are receiving ample opportunity to develop their writing skills, which have been the traditional focus of academic evaluation. Yet, increasingly, opportunities for graphic and verbal communication skills are being included in the curriculum in the form of projects involving writing terms of reference and proposals, responding to calls for proposals, and preparing professional reports. Students are receiving real-life experiences in the classroom. They are also developing expertise in graphic communication through the use of computer programs such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS), Computer Aided Design (CAD), and presentation packages. Valuable training in team-work and group dynamics is also offered by many planning schools. By practicing written, graphic, and verbal communication skills, students are learning to construct and present effective and complex planning arguments.

Many important communication skills, such as negotiation, facilitation, mediation, conflict resolution, creative problem-solving, and creative decision-making, are working their way into planning curricula. The added skills of facilitation, mediation, conflict resolution, and creative problem solving are enriching the repertoire of tools to plan effectively. For example, educators in the Environmental Planning Major at the University of Northern British Columbia involve students in researching downtown revitalization, facilitating community planning workshops, and attending and participating in community planning and development meetings. These students observe, and participate in, the highly communicative process of planning, and experience the complex political and ethical environment in which planners practice — an environment which many students find difficult to understand in a classroom setting.

A recent development in planning education is the teaching of entrepreneurship. Twenty years ago, most planning students found employment in government organizations. Today, a very different employment market exists, with many planners spending most or all of their careers working as consultants in the private sector or for non-governmental organizations. Less than half of the planning schools indicated that they offer instruction in starting or managing a planning firm. Those that did indicate training in entrepreneurship cited business planning, promotion, marketing, financial planning, and management cited as the most common topics taught. Entrepreneurship training may be one of several areas in which planning schools can prepare students for the working world. Another possible area for consideration in planning curricula is career and employment planning.

Teaching Techniques Used

Along with the traditional formal lecture and seminar, educators are employing new and innovative techniques that bring experiential learning into the curriculum. Team teaching, panel discussions and debates are used to enliven the classroom environment. Students are going on field trips to planning departments and community development agencies, and practitioners are being invited into the classroom. The learning experience now extends beyond the university environment and into the community, as students are encouraged to attend public and municipal council meetings, to volunteer on committees, and to provide technical/facilitation assistance to community-based workshops. Many planning schools involve practitioners directly as curriculum advisors, student mentors, and teachers. These are examples of active learning, but none of the respondents mentioned that active learning was an explicit element in their planning program development.

Studies continue to be a popular method for providing experiential learning. The studio/workshop-based format includes the use of such teaching techniques as individual projects, case studies, role playing, design charrettes, hands-on practical exercises, group projects with real clients, written reports, and oral presentations. In many schools, project teams are assigned a "resource person" drawn from the world of practice. Student teams are encouraged to use visual methods to convey quantitative and qualitative information. They may present and defend their work before a panel of assessors that includes the client and other stakeholders. In a number of cases, audio-visual recording of student presentations is used to provide direct, unbiased evaluation of presentation skills.

Conclusions

Although attempts have been made to define planning as a unique set of practical skills and knowledge, the diversity of topics and skills taught by Canadian planning schools demonstrates that the practice of planning is not a narrow profession. Many practicing planners continually pursue the new, the unique, the "cutting edge" ideas of society, and thus constantly recreate the practice of planning. The evolution of the profession, the original social needs that the profession was called upon to resolve, and the increasingly complex demands that the profession is attempting to address, call for generalists in a world of increasing specialization. To meet this need, planning students must be taught the wide variety of skills and knowledge discussed in this article.

The results of this research demonstrate that planning educators are using a wide array of traditional and innovative techniques to teach a variety of topics and skills. This diversity in teaching technique and variety in content may represent both a strength and a weakness of Canadian planning education. The strength lies in the way that planning educators are responding to the ever-changing realm of planning practice by providing students with current knowledge and skills. The weakness involves a patchiness in professional development in Canada. How do professors decide what to teach? Do students, particularly mature students with planning experience, have a say in course and program content? Do other practitioners have a say?

Facing the next millennium, Leonie Sandercock (1998, 225) envisions not only the need for technical and analytical literacy, but also the need for professional expertise.

Observations of a Practitioner and Educator

After twenty-five years in the planning profession, as a student, a practitioner, and most recently an educator, I remain a "passionate pilgrim" committed to the complexity, diversity, and constantly changing practice of planning. Occasionally I lapse into envy of many of my academic colleagues who spend their professional careers in the pursuit of focused, specialized knowledge. Their lives seem so simple. Then I go to a public meeting where citizens, passionate about their community and desiring change and evolution.

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For this reason, I constantly return to the writings of Joseph Schumpeter (1943), who coined the concept of change as a process of "creative destruction". Schumpeter was the first author to discuss entrepreneurial activities as necessary components of change (which can also be referred to as transformation or regeneration). Although he is most closely identified with the economic aspects of the "entrepreneur" concept, Schumpeter was concerned with the creative process involved in developing new combinations of resources that would throw aside the status quo and allow for social innovation, change and evolution.

Finally, I was trained as a social and economic planner, and then discovered the ecological elements of planning which require the integration of concepts of sustainability into our daily planning practice.
but the need for multicultural, ecological, and design literacy as core elements in planning school curricula. Educators will be hard-pressed to keep up with the constantly changing, evolving, and enriching practice of planning, particularly when they must work within the extremely conservative culture present in many universities, where changes to curricula can be excessively slow (Baum 1997, 26). In this environment of academic inertia, change may be facilitated by a closer working relationship between planning educators, and between these educators, the practicing profession, and the communities they serve.

The great diversity in the skills, topics, and methods used to teach professional planning practice emphasizes a need to share the experiences of teaching planning practice in schools across Canada. Canadian planning educators need to meet at least once annually, in order to confer and debate with practicing planners, community representatives, and knowledge-planning students. The Canadian Institute of Planners should create an environment at its annual conferences that encourages debate about planning education. This could be achieved by ensuring that education becomes a standard theme at national and affiliate conferences. Doing this may in turn generate the environment for debate on the value of continuing education, a topic which other professions are embracing energetically.

As with so much research, we end up with more questions than answers. In a rapidly changing world, planners must be politically astute, entrepreneurially active, and ecologically informed, and must pass these sets of knowledge and skill on to the communities they serve. The ultimate goal of planning education is to develop informed and ethical practitioners. To achieve this goal, strong links need to be developed between the academy, the practicing profession, and groups of community activists.

### Summary

This article analyzes data from a ten-question survey which was designed to determine how Canadian planning students are taught professional planning practice. The survey, which was electronically mailed to representatives of the eighteen planning programs at Canadian universities, asked respondents to describe what is meant by the term “professional planning practice”, the professional planning practice topics/concepts covered by their program curriculum, and the teaching techniques used. Conclusions identify a need for a closer working relationship between planning educators, and between these educators, the practicing profession, and the communities served by the profession.

### Bibliography


Canadian Institute of Planners Website: University Planning Programs

Recognized by CIP: http://www.cip-tcs.ca/index.html


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### Résumé

Cet article analyse les résultats d’un sondage contenant dix questions destinées à faire une évaluation de l’enseignement de la pratique professionnelle de l’urbanisme. Ce sondage a été adressé par courrier électronique aux responsables des dix-huit programmes d’urbanisme des universités canadiennes, leur demandant ce qu’ils entendent par « pratique professionnelle de l’urbanisme », quels sont les sujets/concepts de la pratique de l’urbanisme couverts par leur programme de cours, et quelles sont les méthodes d’enseignement utilisées. Les résultats de ce sondage font ressortir le besoin d’une collaboration plus étroite entre les professeurs d’urbanisme eux-mêmes, mais aussi entre les professeurs, les professionnels de l’urbanisme et les communautés qui bénéficient de leurs services.