



## Reflection on planning practices: an important aspect of planning education

Raoul Beunen, Janneke E. Hagens & Jeroen M.M. Neuvel

Land Use Planning Group

Wageningen University, raoul.beunen@wur.nl, janneke.hagens@wur.nl & jeroen.neuvel@wur.nl  
+31 317 482697

*Planning education often has a strong focus on knowledge, methods, and tools about how to plan. However, spatial planning is also about studying and reflecting on planning practices. The ability to reflect critically on planning practices enhances the students' capability of understanding planning practices and consequently their ability to choose how to plan in a specific situation. Reflecting on planning requires specific theories, methods and skills that differ from those that focus on how to plan. In 2006 we developed a new course that provides students more insights into the broad range of knowledge useful for reflection on planning practice.. This course: 'Planning, knowledge & practice', has the objective to teach the students more about the literature and theories that are useful for reflecting on planning practices. Important issues that are discussed in the course are: the role of knowledge in planning practices, the role of power, the importance of context, philosophy of science, semiotics, and politics. These issues were illustrated with examples from different research projects. Co-operation with other research groups was sought to provide a multidisciplinary planning course. In this paper we discuss the philosophy of the course, the lessons learned during the course, and the balance between planning as activity and planning as reflection on that activity.*

**Keywords:** Planning education; Reflection; Curriculum; Academic; Planning Theory; Planning Practice.

---

### 1. Introduction

*When planning for a year, plant corn.*

*When planning for a decade, plant trees.*

*When planning for life, train and educate people.*

*(Chinese Proverb)*

In planning education, students learn how to create plans and how to facilitate planning processes. They learn how to take account of the different land use developments, how to comprehend differing spatial claims, how to generate planning alternatives, and how to organise planning processes. These aspects of planning education are strongly orientated towards the production and realisation of plans and take in the technical, the methodical and the ethical aspects of planning. It is about making better plans, finding better solutions and pursuing more democratic decision making processes. (cf. Alexander 2001; Ozawa & Seltzer, 1999). We refer to these aspects of planning education as planning as activity.

Next to planning as activity, we present planning as reflection as another important aspect of planning education. Educators can teach students how to study planning practices and how to reflect on these practices as well as on their personal action and thought. Reflection on planning is about studying planning situations and explaining what is going on: which people and mechanisms are at work and how different aspects are related to each other. Reflection on practices is an academic dimension of spatial planning education, based on diverse theories, mostly from outside the planning domain. Reflection can be done on the organisation of space, on

planning processes, as well as on planners and their actions. The results of reflection are input for planning debates about trends, deadlocks, drives and innovation.

There is no clear distinction between “planning as activity” and “planning as reflection” since they are thoroughly interrelated. The first, of course, is impossible without the second and with the insights of the second people are likely to give recommendations to improve practices. For example, Schön has already mentioned that practitioners ‘reflect in action’ and can be regarded as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983, 1987). The difference between both aspects becomes more clear in planning education because each aspect requires specific knowledge, theories, and skills. Planning as activity requires knowledge and skills related to the technical and procedural aspects of planning. This includes knowledge about planning objects, like for instance infrastructure, agriculture, housing, leisure, water management and ecology, and has a strong technical focus. Planning as activity also requires knowledge about the planning processes, the planning instruments, such as a SWOT analysis or analytical tools such as geographical information systems, the relevant institutions, and the involved actors. Furthermore, it requires general knowledge about politics and communication. With this body of knowledge and the accompanying skills the students are prepared to participate in and to contribute to planning practices.

The education of the reflective aspects of planning requires other knowledge and competencies. Students need to be able to understand what happens in planning practices, to understand for instance the role of plans and institutions, and the role of people involved in the planning processes. These competences should enable students to reflect critically on planning practices, enhances the students’ capability of understanding planning practices, and consequently their ability to choose how to plan in a specific situation.

A stronger focus on planning as reflection in planning education is demanded for different reasons. Even though, a strong focus on knowledge and skills related to planning as activity makes student directly employable at planning institutions. This strong focus on the planning as activity is also regarded as an important reason why planning often faces critics for it supposed “lack of scientific grounding” (Goldstein & Carmin, 2006). Putting more emphasis on reflecting on planning processes is a possibility to strengthen the scientific dimension of planning education. In this way planning education can also precede planning practice instead of simply following it (c.f. Poxon, 2001).

In addition, we notice in the debates about planning a growing importance for planning approaches that have as main objective to understand “real planning practices”. There is an ongoing discussion about how to understand planning practices and an increasing awareness of the role of knowledge, power and rationality within these practices (see e.g. Flyvbjerg, 1998; Fischer, 1990; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Van Assche, 2004; Watson 2002). Understanding planning practices is not only an issue for planning theorist but it is also an important theme for planning education. Teaching students to reflect on planning practices makes them more critical and realistic about planning as activity.

This paper elaborates why reflection on planning practices is a useful, but complicated, element of planning curricula. This is demonstrated by our own experiences from planning education, at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. A supplementary course was set up next to the regular planning education program of the spatial planning master curriculum. This course, ‘Planning, knowledge & practice’, aims to provide students more insights into the broad range of knowledge useful for reflection on planning practices. These knowledge and skills strengthen the student’s abilities to reflect on planning practices.

The following section describes the course and the study program in which the course is embedded. In section 3 we present our experiences with the course. These experiences are discussed further in section 4.

## **2. The Planning, knowledge and practice course and the Wageningen spatial planning programme**

Planning is a broad domain and there are inherently smaller or bigger differences between the various European university departments that teach planning. These differences are well shown by the diversity of articles in planning journals and the presentations given during planning congresses, like the AESOP congress. We analytically distinguish between planning as activity and planning as reflection in our elaboration of planning education. In addition, there are other combinations that define a certain planning curricula. Some curricula concentrate on the spatial developments of landscapes and their people, others concentrate on the organisation and processes of space in policy context. Some studies are technically orientated while others are more socially rooted. It depends on planning groups, individual teachers and the zeitgeist which aspects gets the most attention in planning courses and curricula.

In the educational programme of the Land Use Planning group at Wageningen University the focus in planning education is traditionally on ‘how to plan’, which is expressed by various ‘planning as activity courses’. These courses integrate both technical and social insights about spaces and processes. Planning as reflection is

often part of these planning as activity courses, mostly encountered in evaluating activities. In addition, starting points for planning as reflection are encountered in the planning theory course. In spite of the inclusion of aspects of planning as reflection within planning as activity, the drive of knowing 'how to plan' mostly overshadows the added value of reflective issues.

The focus of the course Planning, Knowledge and Practice was explicitly on planning as reflection. The main objective of the course was to give the students insight into the literature and theories that are useful for reflection on planning processes. Different themes that were discussed include philosophy of science with an emphasis on the differences between modernism and postmodernism, the relations between science and practice, complexity and uncertainty, interpretation, knowledge, power, rationality, the politics of policy making and policy instruments. The main reason for introducing these relevant and inspiring knowledge and theories from other disciplines was to broaden the knowledge of students and to offer them alternative frameworks for reflection in their research. To provide such a multidisciplinary planning course, co-operation with other (research) groups was sought.

The necessity of linking theories with practice was an important starting point of the course. Theoretical insights, on the one hand, are useful because they help to understand a specific planning case: why do things happen as they happen? Insights and knowledge of planning practices, on the other hand, are useful for a better understanding of the theories. Therefore, many issues discussed during the course were illustrated with examples from cases from different research projects.

Generally, lectures were divided into two parts. The first part consisted of a presentation by a lecturer. In the second part, students' understanding was deepened by a debate in which students should reflect about the roles and activities of planners in the light of the perspective presented in the first part. Students prepared each class by studying the literature provided by the lecturer. The knowledge and theories discussed in the lecture and debate were related to specific planning contexts or issues.

Examination of the course took place by an essay assignment. Students had to write an essay about a specific planning practice, e.g. a specific project such as the construction of the track for the high speed train, or a contested land development project; or a specific spatial plan, such as the national report on physical planning. Students had to use the theories and knowledge discussed during the course to reflect on the planning practice of their choice. We organised a mini symposium where the students had to present and reflect on their case study. This symposium was also used to support the students with writing the essay. Both the teachers and the students gave feedback and comments on the case study and the presentation, which could be used as input for the essays. The final mark for the course was derived for two thirds from the students' essay and for one third from their contribution in the different discussions and debates.

### **3. Our experiences with the course**

A total of 15 students, 13 Masters and 2 Bachelors, participated in the course. They were enthusiastic about the course and positive about the discussions brought up during the course, mainly because they appreciated the realistic perspective on planning practices. Students have a good picture of how the "real world" of spatial planning works. This picture is based on the practical work in earlier courses, internships, stories of other people, and of course their everyday experiences. Students, very well aware of the gap between planning practices and planning ideals, appreciated that this course dealt with issues they know from real practices. The students also showed to be very aware of different viewpoints, of the political games, and how ambitions are influencing discussions and actions. Students were for example discussing among each other how their own backgrounds (e.g. agricultural) defines problems and solutions. Students also appreciated the focus on the many different sides of planning issues. They recognised that it is useful to study the consequences of different approaches, instead of limiting yourself to one unique method or one unique answer.

An interesting observation was that the students have a strong focus on the search for possible solutions. As a consequence they had less attention for the mechanisms that generate or triggered the problem and they neglected the fact that some problems cannot be solved. This became visible in the issues that were discussed. In discussions about problems related to water retention, for example, they see a planner as someone who brings expert knowledge, other knowledges and interests together and makes plans about future situations. Also a more facilitative role in which a planner brings people and ideas together and leads the process is a possible role the students see for a planner. In these cases they consider the possibilities of planning. However, sometimes they regard planning as a panacea for many problems, without discussing the limitations of planning.

Overall we noticed an overrating of the role of a single planner in the whole planning process and of the possibility to define univocal solutions or problems. We noticed that it is necessary to discuss the many roles planners can have. In practice planning students can become policy-maker, assistant of governors, consultant, politician, facilitator, researcher, etc. The definition of what a planner is and what he or she does differs largely

between the different roles. Each role requires different planning skills and offers different possibilities to influence planning processes. Each role requires reflection.

The way the students see a planner also became visible in the essays they wrote. The students were asked to use the theories discussed during the courses and in the articles we gave them to reflect upon a specific planning practice. For many of the students this proved to be more difficult than we had expected. For some reason a large part of the essays were limited to a description of the issues and the different viewpoints of the actors combined with something of a solution for the problems. The essays therewith lacked a more critical reflection about what was happening and did not discuss the relation with the literature that was used during the course. The essays were thus much more a description and a prescription instead of an explanation as reflection. We discussed the essays with the students and stressed again what we had in mind and what we were expecting. Some of the students put new effort into the assignment and used the feedback to finish the essay more to our expectations. The discussions and the essay assignment made clear that although the students showed that they had knowledge of different ideas and theories that are useful for reflection on planning practices, it proved to be difficult for them to apply this knowledge. The course showed a difference between learning the theories and using them to study and reflect on practices. Despite all the knowledge and insights into the different theories we got the idea that it is difficult for students to use them to gain further insights into the practices. Discussions and the essay assignment showed that the focus of students is largely on the action aspect of planning and not so much on the reflection part.

## 4. Reflection in planning education, a discussion

*We always plan too much  
and always think too little.*

*(Joseph A. Schumpeter, 1883-1950 Austrian-American Economist)*

In this section we will use our own experiences and ideas to discuss reflection on practices in planning education. We will discuss the following elements:

- the importance of reflection on planning practices
- reflection is a skill that requires training
- the balance between planning as activity and reflection

### *The importance of reflection on planning practices*

Why is reflection so important? In our opinion, planners (whether working as a practitioner or as a researcher) can do a better job if they a) have a better understanding of planning practices and b) have a better understanding of their own role within these planning practices. Within planning literature there is some discussion about the importance of reflection (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2006; Beauregard, 1998; Howe & Langdon, 2002). Yanow and Tsoukas, based on Schön's ideas about reflection, focus on reflection-in-action to show how planners know how to handle. Also Beauregard argues that planners are not rational, competent, and ideologically neutral actors, and pleads for more awareness of who planners are. Howe and Landon take a more theoretical approach and show how Bordieu's notions of reflexivity offer planning researchers new tools for understanding the nature and outcomes of planning practices (2002).

Reflection on practices is also important during planning education. Students often have to reflect on their personal action and thoughts as part of a course. They have to explain why they took certain steps, why they did use certain models, or why they made certain decisions. Such a reflection on their own work is important to better understand their personal action. Planners, however, never operate independent from a specific context, or independent from other actors. Planners can only reflect on their own role within a planning practice if they are aware of the context in which they act and make decisions. Planners thus need to enhance their understandings of how planning operates (Howe and Langdon, 2002).

The importance of reflection on practices has increased due to the continuous changing society, and mainly the changing role of the governmental organisations and the changing role of spatial planning. Planning has shown a shift from a more technically oriented science towards a more social sciences based science. Several planning departments have changed from architecture and design to public policy or public affairs (Goldstein & Carmin, 2006). The rise of collaborative planning, for example, illustrates this shift. Policy analysis, another aspects of spatial planning, has also been criticised for its positivist attitude (c.f. Allmendinger, 2002; Latour, 2004; Fischer, 2003). Policy analysis is not a matter of "speaking truth to power" whereby policy analyst present objective answers to policy makers but part of politics (e.g. Wildavsky, 1979; Fischer, 2003). Planners need to

be much more critical about what happens in planning practices and much more realistic about what can happen (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Poxon, 2001). Planners and planning students who have learned to reflect on practices can better fulfil this role. Critical planners with the skills to reflect on planning practices are very valuable for a wide range of employers (c.f. Poxon, 2001).

*Reflection is a skill that requires training*

The course showed that students showed a great interest in understanding planning practices, but that it is sometimes difficult for them to reflect critically on practices next to giving a solution. Reflection on practices is new to them and differs from previous assignments. Students have learned how to make plans, how to find solutions, and to be critical on their way of planning. Nevertheless, they have not learned so much about how to give a critical reflection on planning practices. As we have argued before such reflection requires other knowledges, other tools, and other skills.

Students' difficulties with reflection can be explained by the Dreyfus learning model (see e.g. Flyvbjerg 2001). Having knowledge about reflection does not mean having the competence and experience to do reflection in a specific case. 'Novices' learn about certain rules and characteristics, in our case concerning reflection, but find it hard to perform them in/on a certain situation. Most of our students are 'novices'. In addition, some students are 'advanced beginners'. 'Advanced beginners' show recognition of the reflection rules and characteristics within their specific planning case; insights are described in context rather than separately listed. A further stage would be to become a 'competent performer', who still has to make the transition from rule-based performing to showing overview and prioritizing between knowledge. A 'competent performer' is a rational problem-solver. This problem-solving characteristic is observed as a dominant skill of our students. Notwithstanding its practical use for well-defined tasks, this type of problem-solver still lacks the intuition and judgment to go 'beyond analytical rationality'. Further stages in the Dreyfus learning model are 'proficient performer' and 'expert'. These stages are not yet applicable to our students since they require experience and mature intuition (Flyvbjerg 2001). Nevertheless, we should learn students about the advantages of going beyond traditional problem-solving and teach them how to reflect on planning practices. Reflection offers planners the possibility to approach issues from a different perspective than the perspective from which the problem is formulated. Such a new perspective is often required to deal with problems. Because reflection is a skill that requires training it is important to introduce reflection in an early phase of the study programme. Teaching reflection include teaching about knowledge and theories for reflection and training reflecting in different assignments.

*The balance between action and reflection*

Including reflection on practices into an educational programme is not just a matter of adding something to the current programme. Choices have to be made about the content of courses and educational programmes. It is impossible to deal with all aspects of spatial planning in detail. Choosing for certain aspects of planning implies limiting the attention for other aspects. Designing educational programmes and courses is about finding a balance between the different aspects of planning. Including reflection thus requires a revision of the programme and it implies that choices have to be made about what to incorporate and what not. Such choices are subject of discussion and different people are likely to have different ideas about them. Study programmes can only be changed gradually. It is impossible to change several courses at once.

Finding a balance between planning as activity and planning as reflecting on that activity is complicated by the fact that both aspects are interrelated. Insights and knowledge of planning practices are useful for understanding theory while theoretical insights provided a better understanding of planning practices. This is for example well illustrated in Flyvbjerg's book *Power and Rationality* (1998). The planning case of Aalborg with all its aspects and the power games played are very recognisable and provide a basis to understand the theories of power and rationality and the necessity of such theories for understanding planning practices. The theories on the other hand do provide further understanding of the specific planning case: why do things happen as they happen? During our course it seemed that students automatically use their "planning as activity" skills to approach planning practice. The students tried to find solutions instead of making a more thorough analysis of why and how specific problems are defined and by whom. This shows that it can be difficult to switch between different perspectives on planning practices. The different aspects of planning should therefore not be separated too much. Students should be made aware of the different perspectives in an early phase of the planning education programme.

Students need to learn "planning as activity" in close relation with "reflection on planning practices". It is not a matter of substituting the one aspect with the other. Besides, both aspects are important for the students curriculum.

### 3. Final remarks

*Knowledge is a treasure,  
but practice is the key to it.*

*(Thomas Fuller 1608-1661, British Clergyman)*

In this paper we distinguish between planning as activity and planning as reflection on that activity. Planning is about making better plans, finding better solutions and pursuing more democratic decision making processes as well as it is about studying the planning practices and their outcomes. The difference between these two aspects is not clear as they are thoroughly interrelated. The first aims to improve planning practices while the second aims to get more insight into these practices. The first, of course, is impossible without the second and with the insights of the second people are likely to give recommendations to improve practices.

Reflection provides insights into planning practices but does not automatically lead to guidelines for action.

Planning education very often has a strong focus on planning as activity. This can largely be explained by the history of the field, architecture, urban design and the close link with a strong government (Allmendinger, 2002). But times are changing and therewith the role of governments and spatial planners. These changes bring along new challenges for planning education. Planners need new and other competencies to fulfil their roles in society and this requires continuous adjustments to the educational programmes.

Reflection on planning practices is an important and valuable aspect of planning education since it strengthens both the academic as well as the practical skills of students. It requires different tools, different knowledge, different theories, and it requires training. Strengthening the academic dimension of planning education is an important issue for planning schools. We have presented this as a shift in the balance between action and reflection. Such a shift brings along some obstacles, problems and it takes time. Planners often have a close connection with planning practices and a strong focus on possible solutions. This makes reflection difficult. But it is also difficult to reflect on something you do not know. Reflection requires knowledge about theories and knowledge about practices. Reflection requires training and it is a skill that students need to strengthen during their study. Reflection is thus a competency that should be included in the different stages of the educational programme. Important is a continuous interaction between planning as activity and planning as reflection.

Accreditations and visitations of educational programmes are used to control the quality of educational programmes. The academic dimension of planning education is an important aspect of these accreditations and visitations. Analysing and reflecting on practices are important academic skills that need to be included within planning education. In our opinion this offers good possibilities to improve and emphasise the academic dimensions of an educational programme.

Changes in society and in the scientific community urge the need to have a continuous discussion about the curriculum of planners (e.g. Friedmann, 1996). This curriculum cannot be fixed, but needs to be adapted to changing circumstances. Adaptations of the educational programmes are necessary because both planning practices as well as the ways in which we approach and study planning practices continuously change. All these changes in both practice and theory have their effects on planning education. In the current debates about planning we notice a growing importance for planning approaches that have as main objective to understand “real planning practices” (see e.g. Flyvbjerg, 1998; Watson 2002). Although there is an ongoing discussion about how to understand planning there is increasing awareness of the role of knowledge, power and rationality in understanding planning practices. In our opinion these aspects need more attention in planning education. Our current society requires critical planning students who have learned to reflect on planning practices and on their own roles within these practices.

Reflection is a skill that requires training and a skill that needs to be taught in close relation with “planning as activity” skills. Reflection is not something extra, but an essential part of spatial planning. Planning education should therefore make students aware of the relation between “*planning as action*” and “*planning as reflection*”.

## Reference list

- Alexander, E.R. (2001) What do planners need to know. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 20 (3): 376-380.
- Allmendinger, P. (2002) *Planning Theory*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Beauregard, R.A. (1998) Writing the Planner. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. 18 (2): 93-101.
- Fischer, F. (1990). *Technocracy and the politics of expertise*. California: Sage.
- Fischer, F. (2003) *Reframing Public Policy: discursive politics and deliberative practices*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making social science matter: why social inquiry fails and how it can count again*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998). *Rationality and power: democracy in practice*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Friedmann, J. (1996) The Core Curriculum in Planning Revisited. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 15: 89-104.
- Goldstein, H.A. & Carmin, J. (2006) Compact, Diffuse, or Would-be Discipline? Assessing Cohesion in Planning Scholarship, 1963-2002. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26 (1): 66-79.
- Hajer, M.A., H. Wagenaar (Eds) (2003) *Deliberative Policy Analysis. Understanding Governance in the Network Society*. University Press, Cambridge.
- Howe, J. & Langdon, C. (2002). *Towards a Reflexive Planning Theory*. *Planning Theory* 1 (3): 209-225.
- Latour, B. (2004) *Politics of nature: how to bring the sciences into democracy*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Ozawa, C.P. & Seltzer, E.P. (1999) Taking Our Bearings: Mapping a Relationship Among Planning Practice, Theory, and Education. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 18 (3): 257-266.
- Poxon, J. (2001) Shaping the planning profession of the future: the role of planning education. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*. 28 (4): 563-580.
- Schön, D.A. (1983) *The reflective practitioner*. Basic Books, New York.
- Schön, D.A. (1987) *Educating the reflective practitioner*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Van Assche, K. (2004). *Signs in time: an interpretive account of urban planning and design, the people and their history*. Wageningen: Wageningen University.
- Watson, V. (2002) Do we learn from planning practice? *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 22 (2): 178-187.
- Wildavsky, A. (1979) *The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*. Houndsmills, MacMillan Press.
- Yanow, D. & Tsoukas, H. (2006) *Acquiring expertise in professional practice: reflecting on the role of reflection-in-action*. (Downloaded June 2007) Available: [http://www.cis.wur.nl/NR/rdonlyres/9042CA85-9F3C-4E87-A1E7-5A5F7AAA6B39/35366/DvoraYanow\\_paper.pdf](http://www.cis.wur.nl/NR/rdonlyres/9042CA85-9F3C-4E87-A1E7-5A5F7AAA6B39/35366/DvoraYanow_paper.pdf)