COMMENTARY:

"I think that sometimes reading is overrated" – tactical, strategic and epistemological reflections on planning education

John Sturzaker, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author

John Sturzaker, University of Liverpool, Department of Geography and Planning, Gordon Stephenson Building, 74 Bedford Street South, Liverpool, L69 7ZQ, UK

Email: john.sturzaker@liv.ac.uk

Author Biography

John Sturzaker is a lecturer in Civic Design at the University of Liverpool. His research interests include the gap between planning policy and implementation and the responses people make to development proposals. He is increasingly interested in how planners perceive their role, and in how this impacts what they do.

Abstract

This paper uses the analogy of tactical and strategic planning to suggest methods for increasing the amount of reading done by planning students, inspired by data revealing disappointingly low levels of reading among students at one institution. The paper also advocates reflection on teaching and learning

practices at an epistemological level, questioning whether the teaching practices of planning scholars have completed the transition to a constructivist epistemology implied by much of the research within the discipline.

Keywords

Planning pedagogy, epistemology, independent learning, deep learning

Introduction

> I think that sometimes reading is overrated. I obtained a first class undergraduate degree at the University of Liverpool without reading extensively. It is not needed because exam and coursework questions tend to be very focussed on a particular topic that doesn't require extensive reading, although reading around the topic is useful.

This is a response from a student on a postgraduate planning course to an anonymous online questionnaire designed to investigate the reading habits of planning students at the University of Liverpool. The questionnaire was initially prompted by concern, based on evidence from assignments, that some/many students on such courses are not reading the material suggested to them by teaching staff (for example papers in journals such as this, books, reports, etc.), tending to rely to a considerable extent on regurgitating lecture notes. The questionnaire reinforced this concern, with most participants admitting to very low levels of reading outside class – far below the levels expected by this university.

However, just as interesting as this quantitative evidence was the qualitative commentary provided by some students, the above quote perhaps raising the most fundamental questions about learning and

teaching. To make an analogy with planning practice, when reflecting on our practices as teachers, and those we hope to encourage our students to adopt, we can think about changes in "tactical" and "strategic" terms. This paper draws on literature from the fields of both planning and education (and planning education) and argues that when considering changes to curricula in planning schools, it is necessary to take both a tactical and a strategic view. Developing this argument further, the paper concludes that it is also necessary to consider broader questions, i.e. to reflect upon the ultimate aim of what we are trying to do in epistemological terms.

Why is reading important for planning students?

Before discussing evidence from the literature on reading, it is necessary to briefly outline the context within which this paper sits – higher education in the UK – which has been described as being under a "neoliberal hegemony" (Brady 2012, 343). Brady and others (for example Hoecht 2006) are concerned at the shift in UK universities from a focus on learning to "a utilitarian preoccupation with extrinsic outcomes" (Brady 2012, 344), including degree classifications[i], which some fear now obsess students to the exclusion of perhaps everything else. This context is clearly of vital importance insofar as it frames the needs/demands of students and the scope of teachers to change their practice, and I will return to it in the closing sections of this paper.

For now, however, one key contextual change that has occurred relatively recently is that most degree programs in the UK are now typically taught in a "modular" style, with the curriculum divided up into a number of modules, each of which is assessed individually. Each module is accorded a credit rating, denoting the amount of study it is expected to require, for example a fifteen-credit module (of which students might study four in a twelve-week term) should equate to 150 hours of study (QAA 2009).

Given that a typical fifteen-credit lecture-based module in my department and university might include twenty-five to thirty hours contact time with a lecturer[ii], perhaps in the region of one hundred hours of this time is clearly expected to be independent learning of some form to bring the total quantity of learning to 150 hours. This independent learning could take a number of forms. The most obvious example, and perhaps also the easiest to identify and hence measure, is reading around the subject. I, and anecdotally other colleagues, frequently encourage students to spend more time reading in order to deepen and broaden their knowledge. This section of the paper discusses theoretical and empirical evidence that supports the claim that reading is of critical importance to students' learning both in itself and as a proxy for what is called, *inter alia*, independent or self-regulated learning; and that habits of reflective reading could help produce better quality planners.

It is worthwhile pausing to reflect on the use of a number of similar terms in the educational literature that all suggest a form of learning which is somehow more advanced than what is sometimes pejoratively called "traditional" or "didactic" learning. These terms, including deep learning, independent learning, reflective learning, student-centered learning, creative learning and critical learning are not by any means synonymous but a detailed discussion of the often subtle distinctions between them would be more at home in a specifically pedagogical journal, not in this paper. I therefore do not dwell on definitions of such terms, rather briefly present evidence that, whatever badge is attached to it, "advanced" learning is important in planning.

In practical terms, there is a considerable quantity of research which suggests that more time reading before or after teaching sessions can provide tangible benefits to students, as it gives them the opportunity to read and digest material and better absorb it (Hyland et al. 2008). Several studies have

found a clear link between independent or "self-regulated" study and academic achievement (Singh, Granville, and Dika 2002; Gibbs 2013; McMillan 2010).

Bather perceived a strong link between time spent studying independently and the quality of learning that could be achieved – "time limited studying yields more surface learning and less deep learning" (2013, 3). Bather's use of "surface" and "deep" learning here references the work of Biggs (1978) and others, who conceptualized learning in these terms – surface learning might involve the memorizing of important facts, etc., through "rote" learning; whilst "deep" or "meaningful" (Ausubel 1968) learning requires a greater level of *understanding* rather than memorizing. Bather suggests that more time spent reading can help students achieve deeper learning, but *why* and *how* they read must surely also be important. One way of thinking about this is to refer to Bloom's 'Taxonomy of the cognitive domain', with its series of levels of learning that increase in complexity and build on each other: from Knowledge, through Comprehension, Application, Analysis and Synthesis, to Evaluation (Bloom et al. 1956). It has been suggested that moving up Bloom's taxonomy is now a requirement to achieve higher marks in many academic programs (Allison and Pan 2011). As with Bather's assertion that spending more time reading in depth is more likely to lead to deeper learning, so perhaps more reading of different arguments, etc., could help students move to the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

Planning is of course a discipline where the link between academic life and professional life has always been strong. When questioned about the relationship between planners' university education and their on-going professional life, many practitioners complain that there is a gulf between what 'they' do and what 'we' do – there is a perception that much research and teaching in planning schools is insufficiently related to practice (Ellis, Murtagh, and Copeland 2010; Wu and Brooks 2012; Sturzaker 2011). Planning schools and their accrediting institutions are, therefore, under some pressure to

maintain or increase the practice-relevant content of planning degrees, perhaps at the expense of the more abstract or theoretical content (Sanyal 2002). John Friedmann (2008), writing in this journal, demonstrates the utility of planning theory for planning practice, and in a similar way it is possible to demonstrate the importance of reading, and/or the deeper or higher-order learning it is hoped to contribute towards, to professional planning practice. Current debates about the nature of planning as a profession emphasize the need for planners to think creatively (Bertolini 2012; Higgins and Morgan 2000), in part due to the social contingency of knowledge (Higgins and Morgan 2000; Sletto 2010), and the importance of "reflective learning… for full understanding of ethical issues and dilemmas" (McCarthy 2011, 39).

This brief review suggests that increasing the amount of independent learning which planning students do could have benefits for both their academic and subsequent professional practice. The next section of this paper explores how much reading, taken as a proxy for independent learning, students are doing – as noted above, there are other forms of independent learning, but reading is probably the easiest to identify and hence measure.

How much reading are (planning) students doing?

Experiential and anecdotal evidence suggests that some (perhaps many) students at my institution spend little time studying away from the classroom, suggesting they are not as engaged in their own learning as they might be. Evidence from Australia, the USA and the UK suggests that this problem is not unique to this institution (National Union of Students 2011; Rolfe 2002; Arum and Roksa 2010; Lingard 2007; Bather 2013). In this section of this paper I present data from a questionnaire designed to find out how much reading students on planning courses at my own university are doing.

The method chosen to gather the data was via an anonymous online survey. In order to increase participation and reassure students as to the anonymity of the survey, three undergraduate students were commissioned to help design the survey, promote it amongst their peers and collect the results. A link to the questionnaire was sent to all students on undergraduate and postgraduate planning courses at our university – a sample size of approximately 200 at the time – and sixty-five responses were received. It is important to recognize at this point that this sample relates to only one university amongst the many across the world which offer planning programs – so the findings of the survey may reflect the particular circumstances of this university alone, and/or the students who happened to be undertaking planning programs at the time of the survey (the spring of 2012). However, as outlined above, the data from the survey has not been used to make claims about the behavior of *all* students, rather to prompt reflection on the relationship between the learning behavior of students and the teaching behavior of lecturers (or perhaps just one lecturer – me!), so it is hoped that the small sample size does not invalidate the arguments made. Nevertheless, it is illuminating to briefly cover some of the key findings of the survey, as they help set up some broader questions.

The data support the initial hypothesis that students are doing very little independent reading. We asked "For a standard 15 credit module, approximately how many hours per week, on average, do you spend reading before a lecture or seminar?" Seventy-six percent of students responded that they did less than one hour's reading[iii]. In response to a similar question asking about reading *after* a lecture or seminar, the results were marginally more positive, with thirty-six percent doing less than one hour, and forty-four percent doing between one and two hours. Looking at responses across the two questions, two-thirds of respondents do less than three hours reading per teaching session. Assuming twelve teaching

sessions per term (the norm on these courses), this is less than thirty-six hours per module –

substantially less than the one hundred hours identified as the expected amount above.

Interestingly more than three-quarters of respondents answered "No" to the question "Do you think you

currently do enough reading?" and "Yes" to "If you believed that reading more would lead to a higher

degree classification, would you spend more time reading?" This raises two interesting issues – firstly,

it reinforces what Brady called "a student obsession with degree classifications" (2012, 344), perhaps

indicating that it may be relatively easy to change their behavior if a clear(er) link between reading and

assessment performance can be demonstrated. Secondly, however, it points to a degree of cognitive

dissonance amongst the students. Since they evidently believe that more reading will *not* lead to a

higher degree classification, why do they feel that they do not do enough reading? The answer may be

that they are aware of an expectation (either explicit or implicit) that they should spend a considerable

amount of time reading, but choose to prioritize other activities.

So we know that the students who filled in the questionnaire, on average, did very little independent

reading; they believed that they did not do enough reading; and they would do more reading if they felt

that this would improve their degree classification. This data could be used to support arguments for

making both tactical and strategic changes to teaching practices to encourage more reading.

Tactical and strategic planning

If we define **tactical** planning as operating within existing parameters and focusing on, relatively

speaking, narrow and short term indicators, and if we believe that reading more is something that

should be encouraged (for whatever reason), there are ways we can amend teaching and learning practices to encourage students to read more.

The most straightforward way would be to improve the quality of advice we give to students – three-quarters of respondents to our questionnaire indicated they would spend more time reading "[i]f [they] were given more guidance by lecturers about what to read". Improving and targeting the reading lists might thus have a degree of effectiveness, particularly for conscientious students, and/or those with more "free" time. Such students may however be in the minority, as further responses to the questionnaire suggest, including "I only do general reading early in the term (when I have more time) or if I expect to be discussing particular book/article in class the next week." This suggests that increasing the "incentive" for reading or the "jeopardy" for not doing so is necessary to achieve more substantial gains.

There are a number of ways in which this could work in practice. One option might be for the emphasis to switch from post-teaching reading ("here are some references for you to follow up what we have discussed today") to pre-teaching reading ("you need to read this before next week's session"). The teaching session would then build upon the pre-reading, assuming a basic degree of knowledge, and discuss more advanced application of it. I have implemented this approach myself (as, of course, have many colleagues) in a first year undergraduate module that I teach, and have had relatively positive results – those students who did the reading demonstrated an improved level of understanding. Compliance was far from total, however, so another option might be to include some form of (formative or summative) assessment to ensure the reading had taken place – this might take the form of small group discussion, or preparation of seminar papers. Evidence suggests that formative assessment can help support self-regulated learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

In terms of our quantitative data, we presented a very specific option for how this might be done, asking the question "If you knew that a particular piece of reading would be discussed in class the next week, and that everyone would be expected to participate in that discussion, how likely would you be to read the piece concerned?" Ninety-three percent of students responded positively. Notwithstanding the potential for self-reporting bias here (Gosling et al. 1998), evidence from elsewhere shows that some form of follow up, whether a quiz or something more sophisticated, means that more students will "comply" with requests/instructions on the part of staff to do reading (Hoeft 2012).

So we could change our teaching tactics to encourage more reading. However, it has been widely recognized for some years that assessment "strongly influences what students attend to, how hard they work, how they allocated their study time, and what they can afford to get interested in" (Sadler 1983, 60), and our student responses emphasize this – "I am aware of how important reading is to achieving good standards of work but I will still only read when doing coursework" – and of course our cynical "headline" student thinks that "reading is overrated", and suggests that it is possible to achieve high assessment marks in coursework and exams without reading. If we choose to accept this reality this points to the need for more **strategic** action, perhaps by using the concept of "constructive alignment" (Biggs 1996) to strengthen the link between intended learning outcomes, teaching practices and assessment.

The learning outcomes chosen will clearly vary between educational institutions and between courses, but for those programs that are professionally accredited, there may be guidance from accreditation bodies. In the UK, this body is the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). The RTPI requires that within planning education, "Emphasis should be placed on the *integration* of relevant knowledge, skills

and values so as to produce *rounded appreciation* of how spatial planning can significantly enhance people's lives" (RTPI 2012, 4, emphasis added). Returning to our opening quote, the student stated that in their experience "exam and coursework questions tend to be very focussed on a particular topic". Given the discussion above on the link between assessment and student practice, it is axiomatic that if assessment does not require students to demonstrate the capacity to integrate knowledge (which requires them going beyond what they might be told in lectures), many of them will not see any reason to do so. Learning outcomes and assessments might thus place more emphasis on, and/or give more credit for, demonstrating evidence of thinking which is analytical or evaluative – which in turn must require students to read more, and reflect upon that reading, in order to provide the broader base from which to demonstrate these higher order skills.

The tactical and strategic actions discussed here are relatively straightforward to implement, and many colleagues in planning schools around the world already use similar methods in their teaching. But there is a third tier of reflection, "above" tactics and strategy, which planning scholars and practitioners are often accused of neglecting (see for example Campbell 2006; Fainstein 2010) – what is the ultimate aim of what we are trying to do? As in the mainstream planning discipline planners are encouraged to ask whether what they do is "in the public interest," or is focused towards delivering "justice," there is also a need to reflect on what we are trying to achieve in planning education. Given that, as noted above, the data in this paper is limited to the university in which I teach, and may not be replicated elsewhere, this reflection might best start at the personal level.

A personal epistemological reflection on teaching planning

Why do I want to encourage more reading amongst my students? Drawing on the literature discussed above, I feel that more reading is necessary to develop the critical and analytical skills that are generally considered to illustrate "deeper" learning (Biggs 1978). But, more fundamentally, it could be argued that the tactical and strategic actions I outline above (and some of my own teaching practices) could be accused of treating students as inert receptors of knowledge – essentially reflecting positivist attitudes towards learning and teaching, whereby learning is assumed to be an acquisition process, through which students have information transferred to them by expert teachers. Such an approach seems hard to square with the evidence discussed above that students who are independent learners perform better, nor the current understanding of learning as a constructive process (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Of course, this notion of "constructed" knowledge itself relates to the epistemological shift from positivism to constructivism, with the latter emphasizing the connectivity of knowledge and context, individual determination of meaning, and "the solving of authentic problems provid[ing] evidence of understanding" (Hannafin, Hill, and Land 1997, 94).

A constructivist epistemological approach might suggest a more fundamental reflection on teaching practices – to again return to the personal, as my own scholarship reflects a constructivist way of thinking about the world, so surely should my teaching.

There is of course not necessarily an automatic correlation between the tools used to learn and the depth of learning achieved (Kember 1996; Po-Li 2011). Nevertheless, much teaching in planning schools across the world (Scholl 2012) reflects a view that active learning, through studio- and/or project-based learning, is an effective way to achieve experiential learning, one of the key aspects of a constructivist approach to education, subject to careful consideration of process and focus (McCarthy 2011; Balassiano 2011).

My teaching, and perhaps that of others, tends to be categorizable either as project-based or "traditional", and whilst I am involved in several project-based modules, there are some aspects of the planning curriculum where it is hard to see studio-based projects can be the (only) teaching method adopted. I am keen therefore to reflect upon how the non-project-based teaching I do could be refined to adopt some of the principles of constructivist pedagogy and hence also help students achieve deep/independent/critical/reflective/creative learning.

Bjørn Sletto in his work on what he calls "service learning" emphasizes the importance of a collaborative learning environment, where "teachers must strip away their authority, empowering students to challenge dominant ideas and reminding them that they are independent, active producers of knowledge with the agency to affect positive social change" (2010, 405). That quote comes in the context of applied field projects, but is surely also valid when thinking about classroom based work. There is no doubt that this requires a change in the attitude of teachers, which is not always easy to achieve. But it would seem to be necessary – empowering students to take control of their learning requires teachers reciprocally giving up some degree of control.

Encouraging critical thinking is also something that is easier to talk about than to do. One body of writing which advocates a radical approach in this direction is *critical pedagogy*, a concept developed by the Brazilian Paolo Friere in the 1960s (cf. 1970). Critical pedagogy involves challenging the socially constructed reproductions of power, sometimes perpetuated through education (also see Bourdieu 1973, and his "symbolic violence"). Friere also challenges the approach of analysis whereby the object of study is removed from its usual context in order to analyze it, because he emphasized the

importance of context – something that is increasingly recognized in planning scholarship (for example Roy 2009; Healey 2006).

A similar concept to critical pedagogy is transformational learning – described as a "comprehensive, idealized, and universal model" (Mezirow 1994, 222) of learning, involving challenging the frame of reference of learners. Transformative learning is advocated in the built environment field by writers such as Newton (2009) because in contemporary professional life, specialist knowledge is less important than it once was (Eraut 1994). Moving towards transformative learning might imply a more radical re-structuring and re-conceptualization of teaching modes and methods (Bramming 2007), and a change in focus so that "content is replaced with process as the driver of learning" (Newton 2009, 109). This is perhaps where we return once more to the experience of studio-based projects, where the specifics of the project (the content) usually matter less than the experience of solving a problem, and/or helping a community develop ways to solve a problem, often whilst working in a team (the process).

Conclusion

This paper was prompted by a study of the reading habits of students on planning courses at an RTPI accredited, Russell Group university[iv]. That data showed that those students are doing very little reading, which I have taken as a proxy to indicate that they cannot be said to be independent learners. The literature discussed in the second section of this paper suggests that this is not encouraging behavior, and limits the potential of our students to achieve what has been called "deep" learning (Biggs 1978).

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I have reflected upon a number of fairly straightforward methods that I, and others, could use to encourage students to read more, categorizing them as either 'tactical' or 'strategic' in nature. This paper does not seek to decry these approaches, and it is important to note that they can be very effective in achieving their intended aims. What this paper argues for is reflection on those aims themselves – or to put it another way, what is the epistemological justification for our teaching practices? One would be hard-pressed in 2014 to find many leading scholars in our field who would argue for a positivist approach to planning theory, but there may be a tendency amongst some of us to practice planning education differently. It is important to stress that this is not an issue of importance only in abstract, theoretical terms – it cuts right to the heart of questions about the education planning professionals need if they are to thrive in the increasingly complex world of the 21st century.

Using the methods of, for example, critical or transformative learning does not necessarily fit well with an instrumental approach to education, which as noted above is perceived as being the dominant force in higher education in the UK, from both the perspective of students and institutions. Concerns about measurements and metrics, whether final degree classification or performance in league tables, are not immediately compatible with a desire to encourage critical reflection amongst our students. But as a recent editorial in *Planning Theory and Practice* said, "teaching at its best is about more than transmitting knowledge, it can and should be about exploring the boundaries of knowledge and even transforming what we know" (Campbell 2012a, 352). Many planning scholars would agree with this, and also that planning students should leave universities able to think for themselves and challenge others about the *why* and the *how* as much as the *what* and the *where* of planning issues – much as we as scholars try, as it has recently been put, to move from *is* to *ought* (Campbell 2012b).

Acknowledgements

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Notes

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[i] Degrees in the UK are issued according to their "classification". For undergraduates, they are ranked as Third class (40-50%); Second class lower (50-60%); Second class upper (60-70%) and First class (70% and above). For postgraduates, they are ranked as Pass (50-60%); Pass with Merit (60-70%) and Pass with Distinction (70% and above).
[ii] Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is fairly typical amongst comparator institutions in the UK.
[iii] In hindsight, we would have included a "none" option, as my suspicion is that some students may not do any preparatory reading before teaching sessions.
[iv] The Russell Group is the informal grouping representing the 24 top universities in the UK, akin to the Ivy League in the US.