

A Conversation on Action Research in DUSP

A Brief History of Practice-based Work at DUSP

In the 1960s, a required studio course was the model for giving students the opportunity to apply their acquired planning skills in a classroom setting. In response to student and faculty dissatisfaction with the limits of the studio, which were not client-based or tied to real problems in the world. From that dissatisfaction grew four modes of engaging with communities: client-based studio courses, student initiated fieldwork for course credit, faculty-led client based research assistantships, and a community-fellows program that brings community practitioners into the university. These modes of engagement were not designed to be action-research necessarily, but rather emphasized reflection as a tool for learning from action. Donald Schön and Marty Rein challenged the faculty on this point. They asked, ‘how do you learn from your own engagement in the world?’ How can we be more explicit about the theory of how we learn? While we have done a good job of really developing our modes of engagement, we have not moved much farther toward answering these questions.

Since their initiation, the practice-based studios have evolved considerably. Tunney Lee was hired in 1971 to run the first community-based studios that worked directly with communities to solve real-world problems. Around that time the department also began to actively recruit minority students. More recently, these studios have developed into the DUSP Practica, which have a rigorous set of requirements to ensure that they produce high-quality work directed by a clearly defined client. In addition, DUSP has recognized the value of sustained engagement in communities, committing to multi-year engagements with specific neighborhoods. Through sustained engagement, students and faculty are able to develop relationships with community practitioners on both a personal and professional level, which allows them to understand the complexity of social exclusion and to contribute to longer change processes.

Action, Research, or Action-Research?

The tension between engagement and research emerged as a key theme of the discussion. A number of faculty advocated for deepening engagement but keeping it distinct from research activities, using it to solve unique problems directed at specific community audiences. This is the model adopted for much of the practice-based work undertaken at DUSP from practica to service-learning activities, to the original community fellows program model, and it was argued that maintaining independence from the constraints of a research project and the arrogance of expert knowledge is important for the model’s success. Within the process of engagement, reflection is the primary method by which learning is realized and made useful to project participants. Other faculty argued that DUSP ought to place a stronger emphasis on research – however loosely adapted from the scientific method – that would create replicable results. The benefit of such rigor is that DUSP would be able to generate a body of knowledge that could be communicated to a larger audience, tested by others, and could inform planning practice more generally.

Despite the disagreement, some faculty advocated for an action-research framework in DUSP that deliberately united the two modes of knowledge creation. For Dennis

Frenchman, research and practice and completely mixed up and intertwined. His first week in academia was also the week he started working as a practitioner, so the two have never been separated, and he is looking to bring them together in more meaningful ways. Through sustained engagement with China, students have opportunities to participate in really meaningful projects that promote fundamental change in government planning policies. Despite this, he finds that the work is not generating as much as it could and is beginning to wrap research questions around the courses so they can generate larger lessons in addition to the client products. He advocates embracing action-research as a paradigm more fully in order to strengthen the existing engagement.

Learning as Looking Back: Reflection vs. Research

Reflection emerged as the primary method for learning from action – a principle that has been core to DUSP since the days of Donald Schön. However, Alice Amsden pointed out that the commonality between reflection and research is the emphasis on looking backward in order to draw lessons and learning. The primary difference is that research is done with an eye toward transparency and replicability such that the learning generated enters into a conversation that extends beyond the context of a single community or a single university and can be tested and examined more broadly. The risk of focusing on research and replicability in engagement, however, is that most situations in planning are not replicable and that learning can quickly become models to be applied. This codification of research knowledge can be incredibly counter-productive in complex planning contexts. In these cases, students' experience working in the specific context is valuable because it teaches them how to work in the midst of uncertainty and how to move forward without having all of the solutions. The process of learning by doing is really important for the work of planning.

Recommended Readings:

Scott, James. *Seeing Like a State*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Knowing what we know: analysis vs. insight

Research represents an analytical mode of learning and knowledge generation. Neuroscientists at MIT have demonstrated that while humans may solve problems using analysis – the research model – they can also solve problems using insight, associated with a different area of the brain. The insight mode of problem solving is actually much faster than the analytic and is used particularly in situations that are new and unfamiliar – where no previous experience leads to a direct solution. This insight mode of problem-solving, called synthesis in the design field, is a critical component of the design process, and is important to foster within DUSP students.

Recommended Readings:

Lehrer, Jonah. "The Eureka Hunt: Why do good ideas come to us when they do?" *The New Yorker* July 28, 2008.

The changing pace of change

Using reflection and methods of learning in action are critical now because the pace of change is changing. Communities are faced with multi-faceted crises encompassing housing, environmental degradation, jobs, and healthcare. They are at a critical juncture in which they can no longer apply the same strategies and solutions to the problems at hand. They need to move beyond the model of specialization and fragmentation of disciplines and find methods to address the current crisis in a unified manner. Old models of community organizing and political action are no longer sufficient for generating meaningful change in communities. New mechanisms for sharing knowledge and learning are needed so that action-research knowledge sharing is not delayed by the extended peer-review and publishing process.

Balancing Doubt with Confidence: The Students' Perspective

The DUSP education is excellent at fostering doubt in its students. It teaches them not to make assumptions and to question any pre-packaged solutions or conclusions. It is very good at this. However, students would like to balance this doubt with confidence in their ability to articulate a framework for the DUSP approach to planning that allows them to understand their doubt and use it deliberately. Although elements of action-research and engagement are taught in a variety of courses, DUSP has no coherent message about this approach to planning, and it does not provide an overview of the various reflection and engagement approaches that students could employ in their practice.