

SYMPOSIUM: ACTION–LEARNING IN CITIES (3 papers)

From the Studio to the Field: Learning and Teaching in Context

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Introduction

"The first few days in Kampala was the days of facing harsh realities. [...] The first visit that we had to an informal settlement was a slum that was called "Kivulu", a settlement under the huge threat of eviction, with lack of basic sanitation units and high density of the area.[...]. In one of the lectures that was presented by the representative of ministry [...] the new master plan of Kampala. It was basically a rip off of the developed cities master plans in the western world like Chicago, London and etc. with a lot of glass made high rises, huge highways and parks. It proved to me how the authorities are unaware of the realities of the city or even if they are, how easily they ignore the informal settlements and low income earners who are the majority of people living there." (From a UEP student's reflections, 2013).

This is the first week reflection made by a student that subsequently spent two months in Uganda doing fieldwork as part of an international master program in Urban Ecological Planning (UEP). This paper will reflect on my own teaching experience in the Global South and the discussion will be based on student reflections made during and after their studies. My main focus in this discussion will be built around the professional approach applied in the field where we tend to focus singularly on 'what we do', and thus ignoring 'the way we do it'. This is the common challenge I detect in the teaching environments of the Global North in spite of a growing interest by various student groups and organizations of engaging with the Global South. In this paper I would like to use the UEP experience as a basis for discussion in order to expose the shift in our approach 'of doing', and thus explore the potential of context-based 'living and learning' as a catalyst approach for local development. My own experience mirrors that of the top Norwegian athlete Tore Øvrebø. He sees insights (and thus knowledge) as the top tier of a ladder that starts with a physical and emotional 'sensation', which only through 'reflections' emerge as 'experience' - the prerequisite for gaining insights. In the end I would like to see if this way of thinking could be used as a basis for generating an approach that could be applied to other live projects irrespective of professional affiliation.

Context based teaching in UEP

"Fieldwork in study program always gives the unique opportunity to student to get a taste of what the world of practice is like." (From a UEP student's reflections, 2013)

For a number of years we've had the privilege of cooperating with the National Slum Dwellers' Federation, Uganda (NSDFU). Last year this relationship resulted in the students taking on feasibility studies and project proposals defined by ACTogether, the Federation's administrative & technical NGO. These were real projects where funding was already committed, or early-stage projects where the Federation was looking for alternative approaches and models. These challenges were taken on by a multi-disciplinary group of 23 master students, some with years of practice, some straight out of university, from altogether 10 different countries. 6 architecture & planning students from Makerere University were enrolled as NTNU students for this. This mode of learning "although [is] time consuming, asks students to function as participants rather than consultants" (Hoyt, 2006, p.23). 'Living and learning' processes in the field require a lot of energy and commitment, not only from students, but also from educators and local 'partners'. This is a learning journey full of sensational moments, reflection in action, experience in past and present, and insights you leave behind in the environments where you work.

Sensations

Sense of reality

"I see what I see clearly [...] - but what am I looking at?" (Hamdi, 2010, p.230)

"The area was filled with filth, children running around bare-chested with no shoes, mothers cooking on the verandas, floods and others. We wondered how they could afford to live the way they do, in fact, quick as we were, we started prescribing solutions to the so-called appalling situation. Here, we were dealing with symptoms rather than the primary cause" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2013).

Sensation is the first stage of impressions fired by the environment you are exposed to. The quote above is a typical first week's reflection. When exposed to unfamiliar environments the students tend to generalize and build perceptions on the first immediate impressions. It is essential for practitioners to be able to use this sensation-based process as a catalyst for 'reading it through'.

There are small 'tricks' we use the first weeks in the field that help to 'read' and understand. As students are eager to document what they see, they usually take pictures of objects - instead of collecting the story behind it. First rule: no cameras! To discover 'what is this picture about' in the first week is really challenging and it takes time to understand 'what you actually are looking at'. To access a community and then have time for observation is, of course, quintessential in learning. UEP has a long partnership with local NGOs and the students are always introduced to community members from the beginning.

This process of 'sensation' emerging from being in the field and given a professional task, not only challenges the students in relation to their own actions, but also raises awareness of the professional and ethical challenges surrounding their actions. It cultivates a lot of questions while giving few answers. Relevant here is a quote from The Carl Rogers Reader (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989, p.302): "only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered self-appropriated learning". Reading the students' reflections I am rediscovering, once again, these processes:

"There is no other way to better learn and fully understand the depth of problems and issues facing communities unless we immerse ourselves and become one with these communities. [...] It provided me with the opportunity to be part of a think tank from which a possible solution can be arrived at for the various problems for the people living in informal settlements" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2013).

Reflections

Learning process through discovery in action

"First, it's a very thick darkness with no light at all. The more we engaged the community, the more ideas we got, the more we understood them, the more our pre-conceived ideas were washed away or shaped and the more we felt like we were onto something" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2011).

I always wondered what would happen, and what we would do differently in the UEP approach, if we were to have only two weeks in the field. Are we then only into 'impulsive action' that comes from the first observations and perceptions? My teaching experience shows that it takes two weeks for the students to leave

the sensation-based level and start reflecting critically on their perception of seeing. In the end it is an amazing opportunity to have two months in the field where you teach, learn and discover. As part of the fieldwork learning environment, the students are to write weekly reflections as an instrumental tool in the 'living and learning process'. The students thus become more conscious of how the environment influences their thinking. Otherwise it is so easy to leap into the 'safe' (but often so dismally irrelevant) role of the professional and start 'doing' instead of 'thinking' - before doing. Every Friday we would have reading sessions based on the issues raised during the week. We discuss and reflect upon it together. This takes time from the project and sometimes builds up frustration because 'we have so much to do on the ground'. In hindsight, however, the students recognize its positive contributions to the learning process: *"The duality in our approach, with a combination of on-ground field studies and theoretical/factual lectures and readings, made my first visit to Africa into an in-depth analysis and a very special learning process" (from a UEP student's reflections, 2013).* In this process students become "reflective practitioners", as described by Schön (1987), and start to be more humble and think carefully about 'what you do is actually the way you do it'.

Teachers' role and learning to fail

In the beginning it is hard for the students to grasp the role of the teachers in these working settings where traditional authority 'collapses' once you say 'I do not have the answer to (all) your questions'. It 'hits the rock' even harder when you as a teacher start helping students "to develop a conformable attitude towards [the] unexpected" (Sletto, 2010, p.405). My role as teacher is carrying agency that mediates between partners in the field and assists students on their way to discover potentially 'right answers'. I really agree with my colleague that 'the way we learn is not by 'being told', but by 'being part of' (Skotte, 2011, p.42). It is therefore crucial to give space for students to experience, and be close when they really need us. Students are given a professional task and in response they come - over and over again - with a perception of the practitioner in the field as someone who should always know 'how to do it'; followed by the question of who decides and takes responsibility for it? In the end "You [students] have to make your decision and live by its consequences" (Skotte, 2014, p.45). *"Action happens in real time. There is no chance to foresee and little to review. [...] Getting a complete picture, to fully assess possibilities and consequences, is impossible. [...] In the latter case the action one takes will to a large degree be based only on what feels right there and then. This is what it felt like to work in the field. And I believe that this is what I have learned the most from" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2009).*

Experience

The role of professionals

Taking risks and responsibilities and at the same time being flexible, challenges our conventional role in the field: *"I got this project [...], I looked [at] it as a typical planning project but the more I learned doing the homework on it, it helped me in enhancing my knowledge and changed my perception towards how to deal with planning problems at a ground level"* (from a UEP student's reflections, 2013). Building relationships with people you work with, taking responsibility and making decisions that might even lead to 'failure' is crucial for a learning process. "As teachers we are challenged to prepare future practitioners for 'messy' planning processes" (Sletto, 2010, p. 403), "where they must build partnerships through effective communicative strategies" (Wiewel and Lieber 1988, cited in Sletto, 2010, p.403). And students clearly identify it *"We need to incorporate the people and the place in our plans because the problems of today's cities require collaborative approaches like having an open minded approach of frank questioning, political creativity, tolerance and understanding"* (From a UEP student's reflections, 2013). This leads to recognizing the power embedded in local knowledge and it takes time to reflect and thus experience it through your own 'skin'. *"It was harsh to see their reality and how things that are so simple and not even a thought in our society can be so crucial a point in another."* (From a UEP student's reflections, 2013)

Recognizing the power and local knowledge

"[...] ingenious ideas they have, especially in artificial charcoal making where they use waste materials to earn a living, but most importantly they have a wealth of practical ideas that actually work" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2011).

To recognize the power of local knowledge – and thus learn from it – you need to experience it, relate to it, and be given responsibility as part of the process. Through the assignments given by our local partners, students were confronting a professional challenge where they had to act strategically and responsibly towards the people they work with. As Nabeel Hamdi argues: "The expert comes to be seen as a special kind of person, rather than that every person is a special kind of expert" (Hamdi, 2010, p.145). Once recognized, the strategic potential for local development emerges.

"Communication between local authority and the community is important. I think we often believe that people who are not professionals wouldn't understand the process, so there is no point in trying to explain it to them. But I think not knowing anything is worse than not understanding everything" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2013).

From these self-learning discoveries you start to reflect and refer to your previous experience in the present. Students see and draw parallels in their experience, start to recognize that approach is independent of the context and has the potential to make a strategic impact in the future of their professional practice, irrespective of place.

"Above all, this field-trip gave me in-depth understanding of housing for low income earners. Believe I can make a positive change when I return back to Nepal. I must admit that my thinking has changed due to what I learnt in Uganda" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2011).

"Another important experience from Uganda semester is how one can grasp an apparent overwhelming problem. I got used to identifying a starting point without a clear idea about the end result and that design processes could incorporate the unforeseen and other sudden and unexpected possibilities" (From a UEP student's reflections, 2012).

Insights

"EXPERIENCE + REFLECTION = GROWTH"

"As [the above] quotation suggests, we do not actually learn from experience as much as we learn from reflecting on experience (Posner, 2005, p.21). For educators, the most important thing is to catch this 'growth' process of learning. Reflections are the most heavy and critical part of this process. It consumes time and energy and asks us to sit down and critically think about what we just experienced. There is not so much excitement in this learning process as there is in a 'hands-on' approach, but it is important to show that this is the way we learn and understand our role in practice. In the field, growth happens individually and professionally and I believe if we are able to guide students thought this journey of reflection to experience and discovery of insights, we are part of a great achievement.

Being able to reflect upon sensory or intellectual sensations as a basis for personal experience will enable future development practitioners to apply an approach that is useful in any other context. Based on my experience, I believe that the UEP fieldwork approach is the best way for learning interventions to also carry an impact on local development. And that's what we are there for in the first place, isn't it?! A wider question would be if this approach could be applied independent of the organizational setting and with the minimum length of time in the field. In this symposium I would like to discuss the main aspects of this learning approach and its relevance in other live project practices.

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