

What to Take and What To Leave? Balancing Between Experimentation and Responsibility in Live Projects

Mohamed A. Salheen, Marwa M. Abdellatif, and Merham M. Keleg

Ain Shams University

Introduction

There is a growing interest in providing students with learning experiences, which link them to 'real life' settings, with opportunities to improve the life of 'real people'. In particular, experiential educational approaches such as 'live projects' and 'service learning' focus on the learning experiences acquired by students as well as services received by community^{1,2}. However, this is not always an easy mission. In their account on service learning, Dewar and Isaac³ pinpoint differences between learning through traditional university mode and learning through community service mode. Whereas professors determine the objectives of traditional modules and the whole teaching/learning process and outputs are controlled in classrooms; process and content of service learning projects are hardly controlled due to influences from external factors. Thus, it is quite difficult to clearly define the work at the beginning of the project and expect to stay stable until the end of the project^{4,5}. Accordingly, balancing between the mutual benefits of both students and communities is a keystone for the success of live projects (and similar experiential educational approaches). In attempt to address this balance, this paper reflects on the case study of 'Design Project at City Scale' as an attempt to discuss the relationship between the experiences students take with them and the impacts they leave in the place.

The Context

The 'Design Projects at City Scale' module is part of the elective modules hosted by ASU (Ain Shams University, Egypt) in the Integrated Urbanism and Sustainable Design 'IUSD' master programme. Whereas many educational modules follow the KSA model in which students are given knowledge, then trained on available skills to eventually their attitude would change; the IUSD modules generally attempt to reverse this model around. The prime focus of IUSD modules is to work on inducing the students' attitude to act as active agents, then to develop the student's capacity to work on their skills to eventually generate future knowledge. In this context, the modules tend to adopt a transformative pedagogical approach⁶.

For this specific module, the main objectives are to develop the students' individual and group knowledge, skill and attitude to rapidly understand complexity of urban systems and develop this understating into strategic and integrated development lines and projects. The model aims at developing the students' attitude to ask and question to actively act as positive change agents who are able to propose practical and progressive recommendations and measures. Due to its nature, the module is conducted as an intensive module, where the staff and students stay in the study area for two weeks. The module adopts the pedagogical approach of live projects learning to achieve its objectives. In effect, live projects learning and similar experiential educational approaches have become widely acknowledged for developing the students' skills to deal with complex situations^{7,8}.

While preparing for this module, the academic staff were confronted with issues such as which is the best methodology to deliver the module; what are factors for the achieving both the objectives of the students while attaining the expectations of communities and other stakeholders; what is the impact of our project on the community and; what is academic responsibility towards the community during the process of the project and afterwards. To address these issues, the staff devised a conceptual framework drawing on relevant literature as well as their previous experience. As delineated in

References

- ¹ Bradbury S, Papaefthimiou, E. Live projects don't work. So why bother?. Proceedings of AAE CONFERENCE 2013, [online] Available at: <http://architecturaleducators.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/bradbury-and-papaefthimiou-2013-live-projects-dont-work-so-why-bother.pdf> [accessed 25 April 2014]
- ² Furco A. Service-learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. In: Campus Compact (Ed.). *Introduction to service-learning toolkit: Readings and resources for faculty*, 2nd ed. Providence, RI: Campus Compact; 2003. P. 11-14.
- ³ Dewar ME, Isaac CB. Learning form Difference: The potentially transforming experience of community-university collaboration. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. 1998; 17: 334-347.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.337-338.

⁵ Hou J. Community Processes: The catalytic agency of service learning studio. In: Salama A. and Wilkinson N, editors. Design Studio Pedagogy: Horizons for the Future. Gateshead: The Urban International Press, 2007; p. 285-294.

⁶ Wink, J. Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the REAL WORLD. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon; 2004.

⁷ Forsyth A, Lu H, McGirr P. Inside the service learning studio in urban design. Landscape Journal. 1999; 18 (2): 166-179.

⁸ Sara R. Learning from Life – Exploring the Potential of Live Projects in Higher Education. Journal for Education in the Built Environment. 2011; 6 (2): 8-25 (18).

, the framework endeavours to investigate the relationships between the initial learning-oriented and service-oriented objectives; the methodology of running the project and; the final outcome of the project and its impacts on both the students. The following sections discuss the application of this framework in the 'Design Projects at City Scale' module.

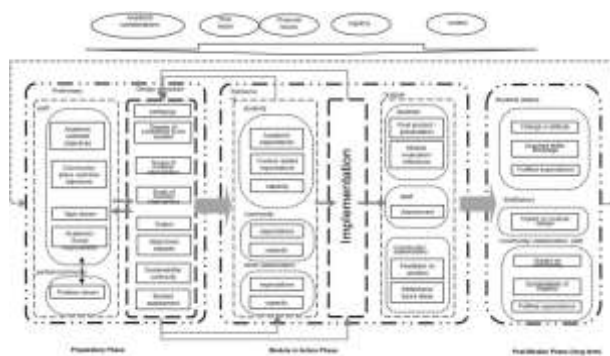


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of the Design Project Module

Pre-module Phase

Driven by the distinctive nature of the module and its pedagogical approach, the staff had to identify a study area as well as to design the module accordingly. The idea was to find a location with sufficient urban complexities yet not too complex that it could not be addressed during the short period of the module. Therefore, time of the module was an important factor to determine the study area. In addition, it was important to find a location where there is a local demand for conducting rapid urban assessment as well as proposing priority interventions.

Preliminary stage

After an extensive survey, Djerba Island was chosen as a case study for 'Design Projects at City scale' module for 2013. The Mediterranean Island is located in the Gulf of Gabes, in the south of Tunisia. Due to its magnificent nature, the island developed as one of the international mass tourist destinations since the 1960s. Tourism development is concentrated on the eastern coast of the island. Over the years, there has been no strict land use planning for island¹. On the other hand, the island has been the sanctuary for different ethnic and religious groups due to its remote location. For the centuries, both Muslim and Jewish communities have lived in harmony on the island. This diversity gives the island its rich cultural heritage. In addition, the island hosts distinctive cultural sites from different epochs.

The staff, then, travelled to the island on a fact-finding mission. Accompanied by a local expert, the staff visited some local officials, and community leader as well as members of the 'Association pour la sauvegarde d'île de Djerba' (Association for the safeguard of Djerba Island). This active association aims at conserving the unique heritage of the island. The association has been exerting efforts for international recognition of Djerba's cultural sites as well as for registering the island on the preliminary list of world cultural and natural heritage. It was apparent that the coastal areas have been suffering from rapid tourism development while inner heritage centres have been subjected to deterioration. The community and experts were concerned about their local identity and the negative impacts of tourism development and rapid urbanisation, especially under the absence of a master plan for the island.

Design of module stage

Based on this visit, the staff developed the design of the module. First, it was thought that it would good to work with the community to develop a strategic plan for the island. However, from a realistic point of view, such assignment would need more than the time of the module. Committed to balance between the learning-oriented and service-oriented objectives, the staff initially designed the module so as to give students enough time to conduct an urban profile for one of the historic centres on the island as well as to work with the community to develop priority interventions. The profile and interventions would then be handed to the community and relevant stakeholders to capitalise on for future development. In a way, the initial design of the module followed the *"consultant-driven" model of community-based planning in which experts 'lend their skills to community learners to assess their capacities and design strategies to increase their capacity to development. This model allows communities to acquire planning services efficiently and quickly'*²⁽³⁴³⁾.

Module in Action Phase

As planned, the module was conducted on the island, where the staff, students and local experts interactively worked together for two weeks. This phase was divided into three stages: refinement; implementation and; output stages.

Refinement stage

This stage was crucial for building consensus among the staff and students. This stage started with a discussion on learning objectives, expectations of the students and

expected benefits for the community. To follow, the staff and students along with the local staff conducted a transect walk along the island. This walk included some meetings with local experts and community members. It became clear that there is a real demand for a strategic plan for the island, which reflects the community's identity and needs. Subsequently, the staff and the students with the support of the local staff discussed the impact of the different alternatives for the output of the project on both students and community. One alternative was to conduct a site analysis for one area then developing interventions. This alternative was considered of great benefit to the students, but might not address the immediate needs of the community. The other alternative was to conduct a rapid urban assessment then produce an urban profiling report. This alternative was perceived more as a step in bigger project, and the staff and students were not quite sure to the impact of such report on the community. A third alternative was to work on developing a strategic plan for the island. However, as discussed earlier working on such plan would be difficult due to time constraints of the module. Eventually, a mid-point was reached. Confronted with the limited time span, expectations of the students and our responsibility towards the community; staff and students in this module decided to conduct an integrated rapid assessment for the island in a format a visual catalogue. This catalogue would be presented as a tool to provoke the community to think and negotiate the future of the development on the island. The module output was, obviously, shifting from direct service provision to a more capacity-building approach to development³.

Implementation stage

After refining the module, the implementation stage began with a one day of extensive desktop research on the island from various aspects. Resources included material bought from Tunis and; material provided by the local staff, local experts and the library of the Island association. This was followed by a one-day excursion to observe and document the significant natural, socio-cultural and urban features on the island (Fig. 2). Using the photographs and illustrations taken on site, the staff worked with the students to devise tools for reading the site in a swift yet strategic manner as well as techniques for compiling, analysing the data in innovative formats which would intrigue the audience. After a round of discussions, the team came up with the concept of dichotomies to portray the island in contrast. At the beginning of the second week, the students held an intermediate presentation to some local experts and officials as well as the staff to discuss the progress of the catalogue. This included discussions on the issues covered in the catalogue as well as the target group. It was agreed the catalogue would focus on three of the most significant phenomena on the island. These would give an extensive overview on the island and act as provoking items for negotiation. This decision was based on the fact that - within the time framework of the

module - students were eager to produce a meaningful product, which would trigger the community to question the future of the island. In addition, upon discussing the target group and outreach of the catalogue, the team agreed that a set of postcards would be produced. The idea was to produce a printed material that could be widely circulated among the community and tourists as well, to contribute to raising awareness on the future of the island. Based on the feedback provided, the students proceeded to finalise the catalogue and the postcards.



Fig. 2. A local fisherwomen (to the right) explaining local fishing techniques to the students
Source: IUSD team, 2013

Output stage

At the end of the two weeks, the students produced and printed a set of postcards and a visual catalogue under the title 'Negotiating the future – Observations and visions of urban phenomena of Djerba'. The outputs of the project were displayed in a public exhibition at the cultural centre of the island. The students presented visual illustrations and images, which reflect the dichotomies within the ongoing urban and cultural integrated dynamics of the community on the island (Fig. 3).

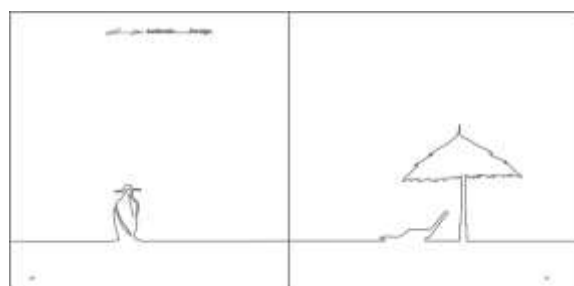


Fig. 3. An illustration by the students to show the concept of dichotomy
Source: IUSD Lab Cairo, 2013

Using a set of collages (Fig. 4), the students pushed reality to extreme in order "to question the urban future of the island and raise awareness amongst decision makers regarding their responsibility towards the development of the island"⁴⁽⁴⁷⁾. During the event, the students with local architects, experts, investors and community members discussed the catalogue, and

negotiated arguments on the future of the island (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. A photo collage by the students, where they push development to the extreme, when a glass skyscraper emerges in the pristine landscape of the island.
Source: IUSD Lab Cairo, 2013

The catalogue was well received by the local experts and community. According to the audience, this was the first time for a university team visiting the island to conduct a study with such scale and scope. Accordingly, the study was perceived as a step forward to provide the community and decision makers with tools for decision-making. This was seen in the light of recent changes of the Tunisian constitution, which would foster decentralisation. On the other hand, the audience pinpointed to the importance of conducting more in-depth studies as well as studying the island within its regional context.



Fig. 5. One of the students with a local architect discussing the catalogue, at the cultural centre on the exhibition day.
Source: IUSD team, 2013

After presenting the catalogue, the students expressed their pride of accomplishing such a publication within two weeks. Interestingly, the interaction with a wider range of the community provoked the students to critically reflect on their work. Among ideas to improve

their output were: translating the catalogue to the local dialect or to French; reducing the abstract level of concepts featured in the book and adding some more descriptive text. Likewise, one of the students suggested producing posters with some graphics and phrases in local dialect to help build the capacity of the community when dealing with urban development issues. Furthermore, some students proposed ideas to improve the process. This included: getting more different groups of the community involved in order to read the island from the viewpoint of different generations and; engaging the school students in order to build their capacity to negotiate the future.

Post-module Phase

It has been almost six months since the module was conducted. Thus, it might be difficult to develop a full image on its long-term impact. Nevertheless, the following account draws on recent interactions with the students and the community.

Impacts on students

As discussed earlier, the core objective of this module was to induce a change in the student's attitude. On completion the module, the students reported developing a range of attitudes and skills. This included peer-learning, communication and negotiating skills. This concurs with the widely recognised benefits of live projects⁵. In addition, students repeatedly reported that they developed their ability to conduct field surveys and rapid mapping of new sites. Furthermore, some students expressed that the module influenced their fieldwork and analyses that they conducted a semester later for their master thesis research. Overall, it could be concluded that the module with its setting provided the students with a significant learning experience.

Impacts on community

With an understanding that the academic responsibility towards the community extends beyond the project phase, the IUSD team translated the catalogue to Arabic immediately after returning back to the University in Egypt. The idea of publishing the bi-lingual catalogue was to increase its impact, by widening its outreach among non-English speaking residents. Three months later, copies of the bi-lingual catalogue were handed-in to the officials, members of the association and some active community members. During an interview with one of the officials, he was impressed with the ability of the students to grasp the different facets of the island in such a short time. In addition, the translation of the catalogue to Arabic was highly appreciated from the community. It was received as a sign of serious commitment of the staff towards the community.

Furthermore, the module was an opportunity to establish a university - community relationship. Based

on the preliminary mapping of the island conducted during the module, the staff with the local experts and community members identified priority issues for further intervention. Subsequently, IUSD Lab embarked on a series of workshops to support the local community towards the goal of sustainable development on the island.

Balancing the Two Pans of Live Projects

In the attempt to balance the benefits of both students and communities, the presented case study exemplifies the interconnections between the objectives; the process of conducting the module and; the final outcome of the project. Due to the uncertainties and complexities facing live projects, the staff has to design the module in a flexible way. In the discussed case, the flexibility of the staff was based on their initial identification of the main objective of the module to be a change in the students' attitude. In addition, the refinement stage could be regarded as a crucial point, in which the objectives, process and output of the module

were interactively refined. The transformative model made the students engaged, feeling the ownership of the module and critically questioning their role and responsibility towards the community. On the other hand, the community showed an understanding to the time constraint and the fact that this was a students' project. They received the project as a step forward for a better future of the island. At the end, it is essential to note that the balance reached in this project should be framed within the context of conducting the module. Further research needs to be conducted on projects with more stakeholders involved and longer time spans.

¹ Bourse I. Profile of Sustainability in some Mediterranean Tourist Destinations - Synthesis: Djerba, Tunisia. Sophia Anitpolis: Plan Bleu. 2011.

² Dewar ME, Isaac CB, *op.cit.*, p.343.

³ *ibid.*, p.242

⁴ IUSD Lab Cairo. Negotiating the future – Observations and visions of urban phenomena of Djerba. IUSD Lab. 2013.

⁵ Sara R, *op. cit.*