

Title of Case Study

Group work: Making it real, making it fair - a local planning assignment in partnership with a local authority

Summary of Case Study

A new group assignment within the Town and Country Planning unit was developed to enable students to explore a complex set of decisions. Students had already studied various current planning issues. The challenge was to integrate previous learning and to apply it to a real-life situation.

Key Words

Employability, Group Work, Employer Engagement

Key Points of Good Practice

- engagement with professionals
- real life problem solving

Description of Implementation

An innovative comprehensive planning project was developed which would enable students to explore a complex set of decisions in a real life setting. The assessment was part of the third year Town and Country Planning unit taken by environmental and geography students.

In the first part of the unit, students study various current planning issues, such as sustainable transport, providing new sites for housing and town centre management. This is underpinned by earlier units at levels one and two. In the second assignment, students were asked to use this knowledge to prepare planning proposals for a specific urban area. A key feature of this exercise would be for students to integrate much of the information they had previously learned and to apply it to a particular location.

Discipline/Course/Subject area: Town Planning

Institution(s): Manchester Metropolitan University

Impact:

The practice was introduced:

- within a course unit/module
- across a degree programme/s
- across a faculty/school/ group of departments
- across the institution as a whole
- in collaboration with other higher education institutions

Length of time project has been running: 2 Years

No. of students: 55 per year

Level/Year of students: 3

No. of staff involved: 2

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Co-Authors:

There have been long-standing links between the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences and Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) through placements and guest speakers. The solution for this student centred assignment was to enter into discussion with SMBC to develop a project based around a local shopping centre.

A key part of the assignment was for the students to work in groups in order to replicate a professional planning team and to add more depth to their final reports. This comprehensive planning project has run for two cohorts of students (academic years 05-06 and 06-07) in slightly different formats. Many of the changes introduced in the second year were based on student feedback and related to the groupwork element of the assignment.

The area chosen was Heald Green in Stockport, a local centre which has faced serious competition from nearby out of town retail stores. Through traffic to Manchester Airport and the M56 motorway is also a problem for both shoppers and residents. The area is predominantly middle class and the housing is good quality, but there are issues of affordability. It is on the airport/city centre rail line, but the station is dated and drab. Therefore the issues were complex and there was no easy, formulaic answer.

The assignment was for groups of five students to each produce a set of proposals and an action plan for Heald Green centre. It was run by two members of staff. Students were guided through a basic planning process. They had to understand national and regional planning policies, determining which were relevant to the problems of their study area. They collected local data and looked at good practice elsewhere.

Background information had been obtained from the local authority and was made available via the student intranet (WebCT). Relevant policies were also made available with electronic links to government webpages. Other secondary data e.g. Census of Population, were available on-line. The students were briefed by both academic staff and an experienced officer from the local authority. They were shown how to access electronic Ordnance Survey maps using the University of Edinburgh Digimap service. Paper copies of action plans for other centres were distributed. They had to carry out their own data collection specific to the study area and to produce proposals. The data collection requirements were deliberately changed from one cohort to the next to avoid plagiarism. The first cohort interviewed local residents and shopkeepers. This dataset was made available to the second cohort, whose primary data collection was to carry out environmental surveys.

The project operated during the spring term. Students had regular tutorials, but were expected to have a high level of autonomy. Each group produced a report and the culmination was the presentation session in front of academics and local authority staff. The report was worth 60% of the assignment and the presentation 40%.

Perceived Benefits

For Students ...

They gained a number of high level skills from the project. Negotiation, minute taking and reflection were new challenges within the group. Most had to learn how to access and annotate electronic maps.

Students had to collect and analyse survey data from a range of respondents often using persuasion to elicit responses. It was a good opportunity to apply knowledge from other units e.g. regarding crime and defensible space. They gained an appreciation of the requirements of an outside organisation, which would serve them well if they decided to follow a future in the town planning profession.

Exposure to real-life problem solving.

For Teaching/Support Staff ...

It was a very rewarding exercise to run, because you could see students bringing together many of the things they had already learned. If they were not making the links, it was easy to prompt them. It developed an existing link with an external organisation.

Issues/Challenges

For students ...

This was a different type of exercise than others they were used to and many were not familiar with report writing. Students had asked for more support. There was a delicate balance between pushing them into independent working and providing a lot of support. We redesigned the teaching scheme for the second cohort and allocated an extra week for tutorials.

We also created a MySpace page to encourage self-support in a medium which students already used. Some students used this to ask questions and put up photos of themselves on site visits.

Groups were chosen randomly. However, some wanted to work with friends or had developed 'baggage' by the third year of their course in relation to other students. It was explained to the students that this was like real life – you do not choose your colleagues!

The students were acting in a consultant's role in relation to the local council. As a result, they became quite protective about their ideas. Some students were unhappy about discussing their ideas in front of the whole

For Teaching/Support Staff ...

Most negative comments were about timing and groupwork. The project was the culmination of a third year unit and the presentations were around the time of the dissertation deadline. The complaints about groupwork were about equity of input and equity of marks. The third year marks are a considerable component of the final degree classification, so students wanted to be sure that they received high marks where they had made an effort, but that students who had not pulled their weight did not get marks they had not earned.

From the start, we instigated a process which aimed to minimise such problems. It was made clear to everybody that our expectations were high and that 'slackers' would not be tolerated. The presence of an external partner helped to give the exercise a professional perspective.

Every group had to produce minutes of each meeting (a proforma was given - see Appendix 1). This showed who attended each meeting, who agreed to which tasks and subsequent minutes showed which tasks had been completed. Minute-taking was a new, but valuable skill for most

class. Consequently, for the second cohort we deal with each group separately.

Advice to students to make sure that they get the most out of group work:

- This will be enjoyable if you put the effort into it – two years of good quality reports demonstrate that.
- It can provide excellent material for job or postgraduate applications – problem solving, challenging experiences.
- You will get a much better result as a group than you could ever get as an individual.

students.

Additionally, each student had to complete a reflective exercise individually after they had handed in the group report. In this reflection they had to state what contribution they had made to the whole group. An example 'Individual Assessment of Group Work' sheet is included in the Appendix 2.

For the first cohort, there were very few problems with students not pulling their weight and those that did occur were relatively easy to deal with. One student (out of 53) had documented mitigation and was given an individual exercise relating to the same area. Another student did not engage at all.

In the second cohort there were a couple of students who only partly engaged. This was less easy to deal with. The evidence from the minutes and the reflection enabled us to reduce the marks accordingly. The most difficult case was a student who did not attend all the student meetings due to mitigation. Confidentiality rules meant that we could not discuss reasons with the other students in the group.

Enablers that helped the project to work

The Planning Officer from Stockport Council was actively involved. This helped to set the professional 'tone' of the project.

Details of project evaluation (i.e. collection and analysis of student feedback)

The process for evaluating the unit was via an online questionnaire. Specific questions were asked about the Heald Green project and some generic questions (e.g. best bits and worst bits) could be used to make comments. The informal views of students were also gained and the Council were asked about their perspective on the value of the input involved.

There were many positive comments from both cohorts. Students enjoyed doing it. The feedback data backed up the feeling which staff had when they were observing the groups at work and the final presentations. There was also a wider value, i.e. two students pointed out that at an interview for a postgraduate planning course, they had used the project as an example of coursework they had enjoyed.

The process stood the test of time. An external examiner probed the mechanism for allocating the marks, but was satisfied that it was fair and just.

The Council were very pleased with the output. The students had a new perspective on the problems in the area and developed some innovative solutions. One of the second cohort students who intends studying postgraduate planning, now has a vacation job with Stockport MBC working on the

Possible improvements/enhancements (suggested by the case study provider)

We will have to change location for next year. The good relationship built up with SMBC probably means that they will recommend another centre for us to work on. Alternatively, we could do a plan for an area in Manchester. It would be an interesting experience for students to prepare a plan for an area they were more familiar with.

Whilst we were explicit about the mechanisms for allocating marks, some students seemed surprised that their marks were reduced for not handing in the reflection. Next time we will reinforce this message.

Points of advice for others who may wish to replicate the techniques used

There are many similar 'planning' exercises which you could find locally. The students who carried out this project were geography or environmental students, so they did not have detailed knowledge of planning procedures or legislation.

It is helpful to make links with local planners, but not essential. Many local planning documents are available online through the local authority websites or via the Planning Portal www.planningportal.gov.uk. The Portal is also a good source of information on the ever-changing planning system. It is always up to date and has some good, easy to read help e.g. the visual guide to Local Development Frameworks from the General Public part of the site.

The census data from the National Statistics website (www.nationalstatistics.gov.uk) on neighbourhood statistics is very useful. You will probably have to guide students where to find the different datasets as so many are available. The visual comparisons between your study area and national averages are interesting.

Digimap (<http://www.edina.ac.uk/digimap/>) was essential. Students with an Athens password can now access the maps without additional authorisation. We taught the students how to easily download and annotate their maps to display the spatial data they had collected as well as for their proposals.

Be very open and explicit about all the processes. If you run this towards the end of the final year, students will understandably become stressed about their marks. They deserve full explanations.

FURTHER READING

Relevant publications by those conducting the case-study

- Gibson, C. (2006) Making it real! Designing and implementing a real life student assignment in partnership with an employer. *Paper presented at the Higher Education Academy Conference, University of Nottingham and Conference Proceedings, 3-5 July 2006.* URL: www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/conference/papers

Publications in the research literature

- Boyd, W. E. (2002). Integrating praxis and scholarship: The geography discipline network key skills in geography in higher education guides. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 26 (1), 110-121.
- Boyle, A., Maguire, S., Martin A., Milsom C., Nash R., Rawlinson S., Turner A., Wurthmann, S. and Conchie, S. (2007). Fieldwork is good: The student perception and the affective domain. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 31 (2), 299-317.
- Livingstone, D. and Lynch, K. (2002). Group project work and student-centred active learning: Two different experiences. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 26 (2), 217-237.

Cross references to other materials/resources in the topic area

- Planning Portal
www.planningportal.gov.uk
- National Statistics for census data
www.statistics.gov.uk
- Placecheck website: www.placecheck.info
- local and regional authority web sites

Appendix 1

Manchester Metropolitan University
Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences



LAND USE PLANNING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GROUP PREPARATION MINUTES

Use this sheet to record decisions and actions decided by the group for the second assignment.
Complete the relevant sections each meeting. This form should be submitted with the completed report.

NAMES:

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A USEFUL CHECKLIST FOR PROBLEM SOLVING!

1. Planning, determining and revising courses of action
 - a. Plan the order of activities
 - b. Plan who does what and when
 - c. Plan all resources needed for a task
 - d. Plan the arrangement of items
 - e. Plan how to find and present information
 - f. Plan for contingencies
 2. Monitoring: keeping track of progress
 - a. Check a person is performing task to standard
 - b. Check written information – source (plagiarism) and logic (does it fit the aims)
 3. Working with people
 - a. Help each other
 - b. Discuss with others how things should be done
 - c. React appropriately to complaints from others
 - d. Maintain equality of input
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Appendix 2

Manchester Metropolitan University
Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences



Manchester
Metropolitan
University

EG3219 Land Use Planning and Sustainable Development INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT OF GROUP WORK

To be submitted by email to c.gibson@mmu.ac.uk at the same time as the report.

CONFIDENTIAL (individual comments will not be disclosed to other students)

Name:

1. **Groupwork Assessment** makes performance expectations clear from the start. This section should reflect your opinion about group dynamics and the amount of work undertaken by the team members. It should be completed honestly to provide positive feedback.

a) How many of the group members participated actively most of the time?

5	4	3	2	1	0
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b) How many of the group members were fully prepared for subsequent sessions? (i.e. most of the time they had completed assigned tasks)

5	4	3	2	1	0
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c) Overall how effectively did your group work together on this assignment?

Extremely well	Well	Adequately	Poorly	Not at all
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d) Give one specific example of something you learned from the group that you probably wouldn't have learned on your own.

e) Give one specific example of something that other members learned from you that they probably wouldn't have learned without you.

f) Suggest one specific, practical change the group could make that would help to improve everyone's learning

2. **Groupwork Self-Assessment** – consider your own performance in the group

Fixed scale: 1 - Seldom 2 - Sometimes 3 - Usually 4 – Always

Criteria	1	2	3	4
Co-operation I worked co-operatively with other members of my group and was willing to help with any task				
Effort I contributed as much as I could to group discussions and to the work required				
