

Award Winning Teaching Practice – Part I

Francesco Lo Piccolo, Chair of AESOP prize jury

Andrea Frank, CEBE Deputy Director for Planning, Housing, Transport

The following contribution from Deborah Peel and Paula Posas is the first of a series on award winning teaching practice in planning education. Each contribution will feature a description of the award winning entry from the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) annual Prize for Excellence in Teaching. Planning education and teaching in the broad field of planning is one of the main activities of AESOP member schools. The aim of the award, first established in 2002, is, on the one hand, to recognise and celebrate good and innovative practice in teaching to be found at its member schools and, on the other hand, to stimulate, promote and encourage the development of planning modules or sets of modules that apply new pedagogies, theories and/or technologies/techniques in ways that enhance students' learning and preparedness for their forthcoming practice. The prize extends to teaching practices in continued professional education for practitioners if delivered through a member institution (see Box 1 for criteria and guidance).

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA and GUIDELINES

Planning is seen in a wide perspective. The jury expects that nominations will be a critical and constructive contribution of teaching: they will inspire and foster curiosity, rigour, creativity, critical thinking, and the building of lifelong learning habits.

Planning courses, or modules, or an integrated series of courses or modules of maximum length of two semesters, can be nominated. The nominated course should:

- define the course/module perspective of the concept of planning;
- be taught in a creative and high quality pedagogical way, which engages the students in dealing innovatively with planning problems;
- prepare students to be excellent theorists and practitioners.

Only AESOP member schools can be nominated for this prize. The course must have been successfully implemented for at least one year. Applicants can either be:

- a planning school;
- a planning department within a university; or
- a group of teaching staff or an individual belonging to an AESOP Member school.

To improve the dissemination of the award winning practices, AESOP and CEBE agreed to publish a write-up of the award winning modules and teaching units starting with the winning entry for the 2008 AESOP Prize for Excellence in Teaching. In view of

the 2008 congress theme of 'Bridging the Divide – Celebrating the City' the jury was specifically looking for planning modules that clearly and consciously integrated elements linking the spatial dimensions of planning with matters of social equity and diversity in order to promote social inclusion and cohesion amongst diverse groups. In other words, AESOP was looking for examples that explicitly raise ethical issues alongside – or as part of – developing students' technical skills in designing socio-spatial interventions, which aim to heal social divisions and conflict.

The course selected for the 2008 AESOP Excellence in Teaching Prize (*Aspects of Effective Communication*, developed by Deborah Peel and Paula Posas at the Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool, UK) provided a particularly noteworthy approach to help students gain a better understanding of how the discipline of spatial planning can help to alleviate social, economic and environmental problems. Social inclusion is the underlying planning concept, which, in this module, is embodied in the positive duty to promote disability equality.

The idea, which lies at the heart of the module is to encourage an experiential understanding of social inequity, both at the level of the built environment and in terms of how disability is understood. The module sought to help students to envision what an inclusive city might be like. Not only were students encouraged to bridge a divide in their understanding and experience, but also, through the experience of the project, students were invited to be imaginative in building a more inclusively designed environment.

The rationale and stimulus for the module design stems from wishing to embed a more sensitive understanding of how planning practice mediates the use and experience of the built environment *at the very beginning* of the students' programme of study.

The module teaching seeks to make the issues 'come alive' for the students. Theory and practice are linked by working with a specific client group, 'Moving on With Life and Learning', a charity working with adults labelled as having learning difficulties. Working with a client group for whom 'learning difficulty' is such a central issue represents an important opportunity to explore the feasibility of a learning partnership jointly addressing the learning needs of both groups.

The approach is innovative because, while planning engages relatively easily with visible issues of physical disability, the issue of learning difficulties is rather more invisible. This initiative is, therefore, a direct attempt to be more inclusive in communicating and understanding planning with a specific, often overlooked, community. This context served to help the students to gain a fresh, and shared, understanding of the potentially *dis*-abling nature of the built environment.

The sensitivities developed through the co-production of learning in this environment provided a thought-provoking method for raising awareness of 'hidden' issues, for generating greater self-awareness, and for questioning the potentially disabling

consequences of societal action. Given the sensitivity of the problems to be addressed in this pedagogical situation, an important part of the module's delivery was that the project explicitly used the principles of action research, so that the insights for theory and practice emerged from the work itself, deepening professionally responsible reflexivity through critical reflection, self-accountability and self-evaluation. As a consequence of this approach, the course provides an evidential base on which to engage in the dissemination and sharing of practice, making a valuable contribution to teaching and learning within the wider planning academy and community.

The courage required to engage in this type of co-production of knowledge, to bridge the gaps and build the bridges was deeply appreciated by all the jury members.