

8-1-2012

Extension Projects in Community Planning Classrooms

Katia Balassiano

Iowa State University, katiab@iastate.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Balassiano, K. (2012). Extension Projects in Community Planning Classrooms. *The Journal of Extension*, 50(4), Article 11. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol50/iss4/11>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

Extension Projects in Community Planning Classrooms

Katia Balassiano

Assistant Professor

Community and Regional Planning

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

katiab@iastate.edu

Abstract: *Using client-based Extension projects in university community planning studio courses is an expedient solution that matches needs with resources. However, the decision to partner should be based primarily on students achieving expected learning outcomes. Cautious Extension agents will rarely introduce students to wicked problems or expose students to the mechanics of project initiation, and yet this is exactly what community planning studios should be doing. This article offers recommendations to help determine the selection and structuring of Extension projects for use in the classroom.*

Introduction

Partnerships between university Extension and university community planning programs can efficiently satisfy the missions of both organizations (Kotval, 1993). Extension agents know what communities need, and planning program courses can serve as vehicles for harnessing student energies to meet that need. Students, in turn, are offered opportunities to put skills learned in the classroom into practice. Because most accredited planning programs already offer such practice-based courses--"studios" or "workshops"--using a client-based Extension project would appear to accomplish several goals common to Extension and academia. However, as Kotval pointed out, this model has several challenges to overcome, including the following.

- Communities often lack an understanding of what makes a valuable student project;
- The interests and needs of the Extension agent and those of the faculty and students are often mismatched;
- The faculty, students, and Extension agent may not have the time necessary to properly manage the project such that all are satisfied with its outcome; and
- Faculty and Extension agents may have unrealistic expectations of each other's contributions.

Although I am a proponent of such partnerships and believe the challenges listed above are surmountable, I argue that the relationship is even more complicated. Based on my experience as a community planner who has benefited from Extension services, a planning studio instructor, and a faculty advisor of a student organization that provides planning and design services to communities, I outline two additional concerns in this article. One builds on Kotval's first challenge, i.e., not only do communities occasionally put forward projects that lack academic value, but Extension agents may be tempted to select "tame problems" for expediency's sake.

The second challenge involves the logistics of initiating a project. Traditionally, the Extension agent (if one is involved) and/or the course instructor selects the studio project and negotiates tasks, costs, timeframes, deliverables, etc., prior to introducing the project to the students. Restricting student involvement may be efficient, but it also conceals an important process from the students, who will need the skills necessary to initiate projects themselves upon graduation (Ozawa &

Seltzer, 1999).

Differing Motivations: Extension and Student-Centered Programs

Challenges facing effective partnerships arise because the motivations of Extension programs and urban planning programs differ. Extension agents need the students' work to be accurate and responsive to the community client. In fact, student work often contains mistakes or presents an incomplete perspective. Errors reveal what the student still needs to learn or that more practice is needed. Mistakes are often indicators that students are being pushed slightly beyond their capabilities or comfort zone. As Haines (2002) reports when using students to assist in the University of Wisconsin's Center for Land Use Education projects, "much time and effort was required to review and evaluate their work."

Client communities do not want incomplete or lopsided reports with errors. Nor is it in the Extension agent's interest to disseminate such work. Of course, student-prepared deliverables can be corrected prior to submission, but such a task could become more troublesome than to simply have a professional do the job in the first place. So, to create less work for themselves, Extension agents may be tempted to select projects for use in studio courses that are less complex.

Selecting "Tame Problems" for Planning Studio Courses

Beyond the mechanics of getting a project done correctly and to a client's satisfaction, another temptation the Extension agent faces is selecting "tame problems" (Conklin, 2005), i.e., the opposite of Rittel and Weber's (1973) so-called "wicked problems." Rittel and Webber characterize wicked planning problems as follows:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad.
4. There is no immediate or ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation;" because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The planner has no right to be wrong.

Problems dealing with climate change and energy production are wicked. Such problems are difficult to address incrementally and often impossible to solve outright. And yet universities need to train planners to cope with such problems. Using only tame Extension-based projects in urban planning studios may limit our students' capabilities with wicked problems. Kotval suggests that communities often ask for students to administer surveys or create databases and that these assignments will not make for a "valuable project." An even more common and much more complex studio project—the development of a neighborhood plan—may not even be sufficiently challenging.

Of course, communities encounter wicked problems and will probably welcome any assistance they receive. The Extension agent working with an academic planning program must have the courage to accept such a project and then the unenviable task of communicating the likelihood of a product tentative (or lacking) in its recommendations. Client communities must be aware that the introduction of wicked problems in the classroom setting is both of critical importance to strengthening planners capabilities and that the teaching/student explorations will take up perhaps more time than the actual production of the deliverable.

Concealing the Project Initiation Phase

Besides complicating studios with a particular type of project, I want to introduce more complexity by suggesting students participate in the project initiation phase. Traditionally, planning studio instructors select projects. When planning academia and Extension have close ties, projects may be proposed by university Extension personnel (Kotval, 1993; Curtis & Mahon, 2010). Faculty or Extension agents secure the client and outline tasks, costs, timeframes, and deliverables. Most agreements are finalized prior to the start of the semester. On the first day of class, the instructor describes the project to the students, the students are organized into teams, and the research begins. To effectively incorporate experiential learning into university coursework, Curtis and Mahon (2010) recommend "clearly outlining the assignment's requirements and goals." They go on to recommend ways by which instructors may avoid overwhelming students.

The format Curtis and Mahon propose allows students to focus on improving research and writing skills. There will certainly be critical thinking involved, perhaps some design work, maybe a presentation or two, or a public workshop, and then the development of a report or other final product. The instructor functions in the capacity of team leader, so most communications with the client are channeled through the instructor. Glaringly absent from this model is student exposure to project selection, scope development, and contract negotiations, i.e., the mechanics of project selection.

Recommendations for Extension and Planning Programs

Partnerships between Extension and community planning should be pursued with caution. The many shared interests could lead one to think the relationship is practically symbiotic. However, such thinking underestimates differences to the detriment of the students' education. I argue that the students' interests should be at the center of discussions pertaining to the appropriateness of projects in studio courses. But adapting such a focus need not be difficult. The following questions could facilitate the use of an Extension project in the community-planning studio.

1. What departmental learning objectives will the project satisfy? Are there potential learning objectives that are unique to this project?
2. Will the project be structured such that students have an opportunity to take part in the project initiation and management tasks?
3. Will the project expose students to "wicked problems"?

All studio projects should meet departmental learning outcomes and thus be subject to faculty review. This is perhaps obvious, but given the autonomy of instructors coupled with the constant, pressing need for studio projects, it is worth stating. Even when the Extension agent is the course instructor, the task of selecting a project should be a faculty affair. Extension agents with teaching appointments admittedly have two masters; faculty input can help maintain a student-centered focus.

As for items 2 and 3 above, not every studio must satisfy both, especially if a planning program—like the one at Iowa State University—requires that students take at least two studios. If there are two studios, then one could be the more tame, introductory course, with the mechanics of client relations established by the instructor and Extension agent. Extension projects certainly could provide the experiential, real-world experience that students need, but they should find a way of exposing students to the complexity of tackling real-world problems, whether the problem is political in nature or of an environmental kind.

Wicked problems—in which students are also involved in project scoping—would require that instructors create a classroom experience that facilitates creativity beyond the clients' explicit needs. If the instructor puts the students' needs before those of the Extension client (as they should!), final reports or deliverables will likely include a description of ethical considerations, the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, lists of unknown variables that overshadow the development of recommendations, and tasks that need to be revisited repeatedly. Community clients who respect Extension's multi-faceted mission will understand.

References

Balassiano, K. (2011). Tackling 'wicked problems' in planning studio courses. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 31(4) 449 - 460.

Conklin, J. (2005). Wicked problems and social complexity. In *Dialogue mapping: Building shared understanding of wicked problems*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons CogNexus Institute. Retrieved from: <http://cognexus.org/wpf/wickedproblems.pdf>.

Curtis, K., & Mahon, J. (2010). Using Extension fieldwork to incorporate experiential learning into university coursework. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 48(2) Article 2FEA4. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2010april/a4.php>

Haines, A. L. (2002). Blended teaching: Land use planning education in Wisconsin and lessons learned. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 40(5) Article 5IAW2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002october/iw2.php>

Kotval, Z. (2003). University Extension and urban planning programs: An efficient partnership. Source: *Journal of Extension* [On-line], (41) Article 1FEA3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003february/a3.php>

Ozawa, C. P., & Seltzer, E. P. (1999). Taking our bearings: Mapping a relationship among planning practice, theory, and education. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 18: 257-266.

Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in the general theory of planning. *Policy Science* 4: 155-169.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the [Journal Editorial Office, joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)

© Copyright by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. [Copyright Policy](#)