

## **Redesigning the course Theories of Urban Planning and Governance**

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### **Introduction**

The course “Theories of Urban Planning and Governance” is a part of the landscape architecture study program, formally as a part of the specialization in urban design.

Landscape architects are typically employed at architect firms, or as urban designers or planners in the public sector (municipalities, regions, ministries), which their education should prepare them for. Candidates should be able to design, plan, project and manage urban areas from the local to the regional scale. That includes that candidates should have an understanding of the political processes and governance situations in which the plan or project is embedded, as well as understand the different stakeholders involved, the historical and normative foundations of planning etc. Theories of Urban Planning and Governance was developed to teach urban design students this last part.

The course was offered for the first time last year 2011-12, and did not work out quite as intended. This paper will investigate possible reasons for the problems we encountered in the first year, and come up with some suggestions on how we can improve the course in the future.

### **Problem definition**

There were a number of problems with “Theories of urban planning and governance” when it was offered for the first time. We intended that the

students should work with the somewhat challenging theoretical content of the course in a group assignment, applying theory to a real life case throughout the course in order to stimulate a deep learning approach (Biggs & Tang 2007). However, the students did not begin to work on their group assignment until the very last moment, and we learned too late (just before exam) that they had not understood some of the main ideas in the theory – or at least found it very hard to relate the theoretical concepts to the cases. The students also performed rather poorly at the oral exam which took a starting point in their group reports where it appeared that most of the students had applied a surface approach. In the evaluations students pointed out that the course presupposed knowledge they did not have, and that the group assignment was a good learning tool, but had cost a lot of time, they did not feel they got credit for, since the report was not part of the final grade. Furthermore, there was a very low number of students. This year this last problem has increased: only seven students signed up for the course, and it was therefore transformed into a supervised assignment, which only two students have chosen to do.

This project aims to redesign/adapt the course based on the experiences and evaluations from last year. I will first consider the alignment between the course content and the previous parts of the study program. Then I consider to redesign the group assignments to consist of smaller tasks which can be used for formative assessment earlier in the course in order to both improve learning outcome and for the teachers to have a better idea of what the students find difficult and how we can adapt our teaching to accommodate this early in the course. Thirdly, I will shortly reflect on some of the possible reasons for the low number of students and what can be done about it.

Because the course is not running as intended it will not be possible to implement the changes I suggest for the course before next year, and I have consequently not been able to get student feedback or test the effect of the changes for the purpose of this assignment.

## **Constructive alignment**

According to John Biggs and Catherine Tang (2007) as there should be alignment between the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the course, teaching and learning activities (TLAs) taking place during the course and assessment of the course, so that students in fact get to practice and are as-

sessed in what the course intends the students to learn. Furthermore should the course be aligned with the ILOs of the study program in order for the individual courses to provide students with the skills, knowledge and competencies expected of a candidate. While this seems obvious, it is not always the case. Insufficient constructive alignment is likely to cause insufficient learning (Biggs & Tang 2007).

## **Alignment with the study programme**

Since the students in our course complained that “Theories of Urban Governance and Planning” presupposed knowledge, they did not have, it is worthwhile to look into how well the course content is aligned to the mandatory courses in the study program. In Figure 1.1 the mandatory courses for the landscape architect degree (Urban design) is shown. It can be seen that the course is intended for the end of the program in the final year just before they begin to write the final thesis.

One could therefore expect that the students have acquired most of the skills, competencies and knowledge expected from a candidate. Eg.in the purpose with the bachelor program it is stated that bachelors are able to “carry out projects in urban planning and landscape architecture, which includes the analysis of problems, propose strategies and solutions, and communicate these in a way where they can be part of a political process” ([http://www.life.ku.dk/uddannelse/studerende/studieordninger/Studieordninger\\_2012-13/Bacheloruddannelsen\\_i\\_landskabsarkitektur.aspx](http://www.life.ku.dk/uddannelse/studerende/studieordninger/Studieordninger_2012-13/Bacheloruddannelsen_i_landskabsarkitektur.aspx), my translation)

Nonetheless, judging from the exam performance the first year, and in part also from student presentations of texts the students lack practice in critical reading of academic texts. Judging from how they have approached the assignment they also lack tools to do analysis of political planning processes. Both of which are skills we had taken for granted when planning the course for the first time, but given how broad the education is (as is evident from Figure 1.1) where students both have to learn technical skills related to architectural design and drawing, as well as natural science in order to understand human interaction with ecosystems and landscapes, there may have been very little time left to learn critical engagement with socio-political theory and tools for policy analysis. Furthermore, students who have chosen to study architecture may feel that the core of their education is to gain the ability to master the design process, and not how the design will be received in a political context. They may therefore not have been

<b>Bachelor: Compulsory courses</b>			
Year 1	Blok 1	Plan & design	Naturgrundlaget 1: Den levende jord
	Blok 2		
	Blok 3		
	Blok 4		Naturgrundlaget 2: Vegetation og økologi
Year 2	Blok 1	Bypolitik	Byplananalyse
	Blok 2	Miljø- og planlovgivning - natur og by	Fagets videnskabsteori - landskabsarkitektur og bydesign
Year 3	Blok 1	Byplan - projekt	
	Blok 2	Byplan - strategi	
	Blok 3	Bachelorerhvervsprojekt, landskabsarkitektur	
	Blok 4	Bachelorprojekt	
<b>Candidate: Compulsory courses</b>			
Year 1	Block 1	Theories of Urban Design	Urban Ecosystems: Structures, Functions and Designs
	Block 2	Urbanism Studio	
Year 2	Block 2	<i>Theories of Urban Planning and Governance (Not mandatory)</i>	
	Block 3	Thesis (30 or 45 credits)	
	Block 4		

**Fig. 1.1.** Schematic overview of the study program with the specialization in urban design.

particularly motivated to learn the skills that our course presupposed, when they (maybe) had the opportunity. The question is then: Have they learned policy analysis methods at all? Have they learned to engage with academic texts from the social sciences in a critical way? Or have the TLAs so far in the in the program mainly been design oriented?

In Figure 1.1 I have highlighted the courses which judged from the title might provide the students with the analytical skills we observed lacking as well as practice in critical reading of academic texts. Looking through the different course descriptions of the highlighted courses students should be able to do policy analysis since they according to the descriptions have practiced stakeholder analysis in “Bypolitik”, agent and user analysis in “Byplananalyse” along with more spatial analyses, and engaged very specifically with the context for planning in Danish municipalities, planners roles etc. in the course “Byplan-strategi”. Critical reflections of academic texts have according to course descriptions been practiced at least in “Bypolitik”, “Fagets videnskabsteori - landskabsarkitektur og bydesign” and ”Theories of urban design”. These courses along with the practical experience they get from the internship taking place in “Bachelorerhvervsprojekt” should have given the students all the prerequisites necessary to follow

our course. While the theoretical content in our course is unfamiliar, they should possess the knowledge, the skills and the competences to engage with it having completed the bachelor degree.

The problems the students experienced in our course do therefore not appear to be a result of insufficient alignment with the study program.

However, students may have other backgrounds besides urban design, which may not have given them the necessary prerequisites to follow the course. Actually most of the few students on the course the first year had other backgrounds. But these students did not do worse than the landscape architecture students, so the problems are likely to be internal to the course. Furthermore, given the low number of students signing up for the course, we are not going to discourage students with other backgrounds from attending the course, we must simply teach the course better. In the following section, I will discuss how we can do that.

## **Internal alignment: ILOs, the written assignment and assessment**

In this section I will shortly concern myself with the ILOs and the TLAs of the course but I will mainly concern myself with one of the teaching-learning activities: the written assignment, because the assignment was the student activity which worked least to its purpose. I will describe what the intentions were with this TLA and how it worked out in the course.

But first a short introduction to the ILO's of the course, since they may neither have been operational enough to guide TLA's, nor been properly aligned with the TLAs.

The course aim is that "Students will afterwards know and be able to use the knowledge about different forms of planning and governance processes in a critical-reflective way in their own design and planning practices." In terms of knowledge, skills and competences to be acquired, the course description was not very operational the first year. See Figure 1.2.

Keeping the rather poor performance of the students in mind, these ILO's have not aided the students very much in terms of specifying expectations or assessment criteria: E.g. When are central points of discussion within theories understood? What does it mean to use knowledge in a critical reflective way? A contributing factor to the poor exam performance may have been that the students have not had a clear understanding

Knowledge: Students will obtain an overview of advanced approaches, theories and discussions about (post) modern planning and governance processes, understand central points of discussion within the theories and in practice and their effect on the development of contemporary cities.

Skills: The students will be able to use the knowledge in a critical reflective way and to develop positions of their own. They will be able to show this ability in their way of handling and organizing planning processes in practice.

Competences: The students shall be able to use theoretical points of reference when making their own projects and when relating to issues of contemporary planning processes.”

**Fig. 1.2.** ILO's in the course description the first year.

of what was expected and the assessment criteria. That is why we have already changed the ILOs using verbs from Bloom's taxonomy (described in a previous assignment), and will further develop them in order to clarify both what students can expect will happen in the course and clarify assessment criteria, both of which is important in a constructively aligned course (Biggs & Tang 2007).

One of the main teaching activities has been lectures, and while we have quite successfully tried to engage students in discussions during these, the students may not have had sufficient opportunities to practice engaging with the theory in a critical reflective way. However, students have been given the task to present some of the texts in plenum and not least have they worked in groups on a written assignment, where they certainly were expected to use the theoretical content of the course in the analysis in a critical reflective way. We considered the written assignment as the main learning activity, which is why I the main part of this paper is concerned with the redesign of this element in the course and the possibility to use it for formative assessment.

The written assignment, where the students are to relate the theoretical content of the course to a contemporary planning process, should give the students the opportunity to engage with the course content in a deep way by reflecting on the planning process they engage with through the lens of theoretical concepts, as well as reflecting on the theoretical concepts through the lens of praxis.

The background for this idea is what John Dewey among other scholars has pointed out, i.e. that learning takes place in the context of what is already known, and that knowledge is constructed in relation to previous experiences. It is therefore important that teaching does not become a matter of transmitting abstract and universal knowledge but becomes related to the daily life experiences of the students and to practice (Dewey 2008, Innes & Booher 2010, p. 65, p. 26-27). For that reason it is important that the students learn to relate theoretical concepts and ideas to actual planning processes, and learn to use theoretical concepts to understand the politically imbued practices architects and planners operate in. This is reflected in the course aim (see above) The assignment is meant as a tool for the students to practice this critical reflective engagement with theory and the reconstruction of knowledge in relation to praxis as they experience it through their project work.

Our idea was that this should happen throughout the course to aid their learning; an idea that we introduced in the first lecture, as well as repeatedly during the course. Nonetheless, students did not really begin to work on the assignments before the end of the course, and it became clear when we read the assignments that they had found it difficult to engage with the theoretical concepts. The assessment was an oral exam taking its point of departure in the assignments and revealed that most of the students had not been able to use the assignment as a learning tool. They were able to describe the processes they had written about but were only to a limited degree able to reflect on the processes in relation to theory. This points to (at least) two issues: First, we discovered too late, that the students were not learning what we intended, second, that the students were not able to use the assignment as intended - maybe because they had not received appropriate feedback during the course? Gibbs & Simpson (2002) argue that the most powerful influence on student achievement is feedback. The logical consequence of this possibility is to use the assignment as a way to give formative feedback/assessment during the course and not just in the end.

## Formative assessment

The central purpose of formative assessment (unlike summative assessment) is to provide the students with information on how they are performing *during* the course, in order for the students to use this information to learn and to improve their performance and for teachers to adapt teaching. Formative assessment furthermore helps to clarify what expectations are Yorke (2003), Biggs & Tang (2007), Lauvås (2002a), Black & William (2001).

However, the type of feedback and the manner in which it is given is important for learning to take place. It should not be overly focused on negative aspects, but be supportive and constructive criticism that helps the student to build internal standards with which they are better able to evaluate their own work, which are aligned with teachers' expectations. It is only possible to gauge if learning has taken place as a result of the formative assessment if the students get the opportunity to act on it (Yorke 2003).

Formative assessment can take many forms and be more or less formal. It can be written feedback, conversations, informal comments etc. It can also have the form of peer supervision, where students can assess the work of each other. It can also be combined with summative assessment, where the performance of tasks during the course becomes part of the final course assessment; although some authors warn against this, as the summative assessments tends to take focus away from the formative assessment. In particular if summative assessment has the form of a grade, there is evidence that students might not even read the feedback because they are so focused on the grade, and their own feelings concerning how their achievement has been measured (Lauvås 2002b, Gibbs & Simpson 2002). The form (written, oral, a combination) does not appear to be of consequence to the outcome as long as it is supportive and stimulates a focus on learning, and does not inadvertently discourage students. The student should have the opportunity to enter into dialogue about the feedback and how to interpret it (Yorke 2003).

Biggs & Tang (2007) talks about the importance of creating a comfortable theory Y climate, where teachers trust students ability to take responsibility for their own learning and there is room for students to experiment without fear of failure in order to motivate students to engage in deep learning. This includes that when students fail to meet teachers' expectations, feedback should attribute this to controllable efforts which can be amended, not uncontrollable efforts such as inability in order for students to feel that



it is possible to succeed (Black & William 2001, Gibbs & Simpson 2002). However, teachers giving feedback should not be so supportive that they fail to communicate what is lacking in the students' work, in which case the student does not learn what expectations are and will be rightfully disappointed if the teacher brings up the deficits in the summative assessment (Lauvås 2002a). A point to notice is that students may not be willing to use the feedback because, among other things, it is sufficient for them to just get by and they therefore they are not willing to or not in the habit of applying a deep approach to learning (Black & William 2001).

In addition, formative assessment by means of two-way dialogue also serves to provide teachers with detailed information on what aspects of the curriculum students find difficult, which relates both to content, to methods of analysis, using appropriate discourse for the subject, academic writing style etc. which can help teachers spending their resources where it is most needed (Yorke 2003, Lauvås 2002a,b, Askham 1997).

If the assignment in our course is to function as a tool for engaging the students in a deep learning approach and inspire to reflection of the theory in relation to practice, it is important it serves that function throughout the course and not just in the final week. And it is perhaps even more important that the students get feedback on the assignment during the course in order to avoid the situation from the first year where it turned out that it had not served very well as a learning tool. It would therefore be better to divide the assignment into smaller, progressive tasks to be handed in during the course. In that way the students still can get the benefits from engaging with the real word of urban planning and governance, while they get guidance and feedback regarding how they relate this engagement to theoretical concepts. And not least do we, the teachers, get timely information regarding where to focus our efforts.

In order for students to feel that they can experiment and that it is allowed not to do things perfectly in the first try, the assignment parts should not be part of the final, summative assessment. Instead the students should have the opportunity to act on the feedback later in the course.

As a consequence of these reflections we have divided the assignment into three parts in our new study plan, where teachers will give oral feedback to the first part, there will be peer supervision to the second part which students are supposed to present to each other, end then these two parts as well as the final part will be handed in as the final assignment, which is part of the summative assessment constituting 30% of the final grade. The idea is that the teachers give the first feedback in order to guide both the

assignment work, and to guide how to give feedback. This is meant to give the students some point of departure when giving peer-feedback at the second stage. Giving feedback to others will then hopefully aid the students in their self-assessment of their work before they hand it in for summative assessment.

Unfortunately, too few students had signed up for the course this year to carry it out in the intended form, so it has not been possible to implement these changes yet.

In the next section I will shortly reflect on two possible reasons for the low number of students because it is a major problem, and not just for our course but for other courses at candidate level as well. It may not be a pedagogical problem per se, but it does relate to alignment of the study program if the placement and supply of courses does not allow for students to follow courses which are important for their attainment of the knowledge, skills and competencies the program intends.

## **Recruitment**

There can be many reasons why so few students find it worthwhile to sign up for the course. As previously mentioned, they may not find it important in relation to their understanding of architectural skills to be concerned with governance and the political settings for planning. Or it could be because it is a new course which they have not heard of? It could be that the name “Theories of urban governance and planning” does not appeal? Or there could be other courses which they find more relevant which are offered in the same block? Perhaps there are simply too many courses offered for too few students to expect that more than ten students will choose a course? Or it could be that there should be made an effort to attract students from other specializations than urban design, or even from other study programs? I will only discuss a few of these questions of these questions in the following which relate to the management of the course and the study program, namely the placement in the block structure and the recruitment base.

### **Placement in the block structure**

Our course is not the only course at master level in block 2 which suffers from a low number of students. According to a colleague the problem is that a very large number of courses are offered in the block, and with

only a limited number of Master students a logical consequence is insufficient students for a number of courses. There are nineteen master-level courses offered in block 2 at the institute which is significantly more than in block 3 and 4 where respectively eleven and thirteen master-level courses are offered and slightly more than in block 1 where seventeen master-level courses are offered. Furthermore there are no compulsory courses in block 3 or 4 which claims the attention of most of the students in a year. That means that one way to attract more students which is worth considering would be to move the course to block 3 or 4 in year 1 of the master's programme.

### **The recruitment base**

With the merger between the former institute of Forest & Landscape and the former institute of Geology and Geography the course should not only rely on students from the landscape architecture program but also on students from the geography program. Already geography students occupy a large proportion of the students in some of the bachelor courses at the landscape architecture program notably the urban politics course where I have been censor the last two years. Here I have noted that most of the students actually chose topics that our course elaborates on for their exam assignments. I.e., there is apparently an interest among geography bachelor students in the content of Theories of Urban Planning and Governance. For that reason the course should also appeal to Master's students at Geography and at least an effort should be made to inform the geography students of Theories of Urban Planning and Governance.

### **Conclusion**

I have in the above investigated how Theories of Urban Planning and Governance can be redesigned in order to overcome three problems experienced in the first year of the course. The problems were that students did not learn what was intended, teachers became aware of this too late, and that too few students signed up for the course.

I have investigated whether the problems could be related to insufficient alignment between the course content and the study program, but this does not seem to be the case. By the time students take our course, they should

have acquired the skills, knowledge and competencies necessary. The problem of insufficient learning must therefore lie in the internal course alignment between ILOs, TLAs and assessment. A previous study of the ILOs revealed that they certainly could be operationalized more and better reflects what students can expect from the course and what they are supposed to be able to after the course.

A further aspect which could improve the learning taking place in the course is to divide the assignment up in smaller parts which could be used for formative assessment thereby providing students with feedback to improve their learning and teachers with knowledge to better adapt teaching to student needs. After considering the many benefits of formative assessment we have decided to implement this change along with revised ILOs when the course is offered the next time and we look forward to see if it improves learning outcomes.

In order to increase the number of students it should be considered to move the course to block 3 or 4 where fewer courses are offered, and no compulsory courses. This should increase the potential number of students. Furthermore an increased effort can be made to advertise the course to geography students in particular considering the recent merger of institutes.

All contributions to this volume can be found at:

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