

In defence of good planning: planning practice, the learned profession and unifying action through reflexive lifelong learning

Article

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In defence of good planning: planning practice, the learned profession and unifying action through reflexive lifelong learning

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Abstract:	The need for ongoing learning and reflection and discussion of why, how and what it is that is being brokered through lifelong learning is presented. The nature of lifelong learning is considered, not only how it is offered and received, but also conceptualisation in a learned profession and what linkages to initial planning education are maintained. We feel this is particularly germane given the increasingly politicised environment that planners operate in and which can shape behaviours and professional culture. Such reflection is required in a time where robust defence of good planning appears ever more necessary .

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Viewpoint: In defence of good planning: planning practice, the learned profession and unifying action through reflexive lifelong learning.

In a previous commentary in this journal, the authors discussed planning education and the need for greater collaborative effort. We called for a greater understanding of who is best placed to do what in the realm of professional development and education. In that piece a case was developed that ‘this key aspect of the profession needs to feature ‘mutual learning’ and the development of a shared understanding of ‘professional development’” (Maidment and Parker, 2023, p.258). As part of that assessment we sought to position lifelong learning as a crucial and iterative phase in a professional planner’s development. Such learning builds on a formal initial planning education where theory, ethics, and a range of knowledge and understanding is developed within and across a set of ‘learning outcomes’ which are typically co-developed with accrediting bodies.

This contribution highlights not only the need for ongoing learning and reflection across a career span but to open-up discussion of *why* and *how*, as well as *what* it is that is being brokered through lifelong learning. In this piece we consider not only how the nature of lifelong learning is offered and received, but how it is conceptualised in a learned profession and how linkages to initial planning education are maintained. We feel this is particularly germane given the increasingly politicised environment in which planners operate, **and which can, itself,** shape behaviours and professional culture.

In the UK context, **as well as** in other countries, dominant political-economic forces have shown that they can and do choose to pillory planning systems and planners on a regular basis. The defensibility of planning practice with learning, exchange and the culture of the profession becomes a key issue. In the UK, perhaps in particular, a chronic **gaslighting**¹ of planners **by politicians** is apparent (Parker, Wargent and Street, 2021). Thus, the ability to understand and defend the profession may be usefully linked to ongoing learning, sharing and consolidation of what it means in practice to be a good planner and, conversely, what it is that wider learning and association (and resultant attitudes or disposition) can provide to help create defensible practice. As we put previously, the continually evolving scope of planning means that planners ‘*require new technical skills and knowledge, but also re-emphasise a need to maintain discussions about how professional attitudes may be eroded or otherwise affected and what it means to be a planner in the 2020s*’ (Maidment and Parker, 2023, p.258).

The commentary published in early 2023 did not **fully** pursue the contextual and ‘political’ aspect **of how that could be practiced**, and we wanted to come back to this theme here; given that we ended the previous article by warning that ‘*the wrong balance of responsibilities could serve to relegate planners to be servants of the change happening around them at a time when shaping and directing change has never been more critical to the future quality of the places that we inhabit*’ (ibid, p.269). The incipient argument is that issues concerning the very standing of planning and planners rest on knowledge but also

¹ The term ‘gaslighting’ refers to a form of psychological abuse where, through repeated questioning over a period of time, public perception and understanding of the target, can be undermined.

on shared knowledge and understanding. These understandings may be put into motion to shape better places but also to defend principles of good planning in the first place. This, on a deeper level, re-opens the question of what is meant by 'practice' and specifically what denotes *professional* practice. Moreover, such points raise questions about how the profession talks to itself, and how the twin influences of values and planning culture(s) are present within such conversations.

In making these linkages between the state of the profession, education / lifelong learning and practice, we look through the lens of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) as the foremost representative and accrediting body for planning in the UK. We argue that, in educational terms at least, institutions such as the RTPI have critical roles '*...in information, sustaining mutual understanding and orchestration of assessment of professional competence requirements as well as lifelong learning activity*' (Maidment and Parker, 2023, p.268). The RTPI has tended to offer formal lifelong learning via a range of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and professional association through events – in today's language both training and 'networking'. Before proceeding with the main argument we suggest that the 'objects' (or purpose) and the 'powers' of the RTPI's (2012) Royal Charter are relevant context here. The 'objects' are '*to advance the science and art of planning (including town and country and spatial planning) for the benefit of the public*'. (*ibid*, p.2)

This is accompanied by a set of express powers to further its objects, with four of those powers, as below, highlighting the criticality of knowledge, research, education and standards:

- *to further the education of persons intending to enter or to be associated with the planning profession;*
- *to devise and impose standards of knowledge and skill for persons seeking chartered membership of the Chartered Institute with a view to engaging professionally in planning;*
- *to further high standards of planning and high standards of competence among those engaged in or promoting education in planning, including ensuring that chartered membership of the Chartered Institute shall be open only to those competent to engage in planning or planning law;*
- *to further research and all such other activities as may contribute to the advancement of the knowledge and practice of planning and the dissemination of information appertaining thereto;*

(*ibid*, p.2 – emphasis added)

As such the RTPI is necessarily active in education, oversight of standards, competence and research – as well as sustaining a supporting basis rooted in professional ethics. In terms of the RTPI's ambition to fulfil its objects the Institute refers in its *Corporate Strategy* to employing '*...the RTPI's unique position as a learned society to promote good planning and lead on policy development and research globally to promote planning in the long-term public interest*' (RTPI, 2019, p.3) and, in reference to lifelong learning more specifically, argues that:

'We promote an ethos of life-long learning and continuing professional development. We ensure that the planning profession is exemplary, upholding the highest ethics and professional standards. We provide professional practice guidance' (*ibid*, p.3).

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How this is interpreted and delivered is of course an open question, but it is that very debate point that acts, if anything, to further enliven this **Viewpoint** piece.

Professional events as meeting grounds

In light of the above, we seek to explore the theme of education and leadership over the career span, starting with the question of whether contemporary approaches to lifelong learning via traditional or routinised CPD are well suited to this. In doing so, we build on the distinction between knowledges, skills and attitudes set out in the previous commentary, as the crucial building blocks for planning education, regardless of whether one is starting a career or is well established. Whilst our previous commentary sought to identify the appropriate roles for the university planning schools, **the** RTPI and employers in initial planning education, including emphasising the planning school role in addressing the ‘know why’; the theoretical principles of planning (Muldoon-Smith and McGuinness, 2022), this commentary argues that these more theoretical elements can become *more* relevant over the course of one’s career, as a basis for reflective practice.

Moreover, if there is general agreement over the basis and scope of initial education, there has appeared a chasm between the coverage and basis of education taking place in the lifelong learning phase. This strikes at the heart of what we mean by ‘practice’. Resilience of the profession – resistant to challenge but ability to change when judged important – **is crucial. This stands in contrast to allowing planning practice to be substantially influenced by politicians.**

While lifelong learning, as CPD², can take different forms the ‘offer’ appears to play multiple roles; characterised as *top-up, extension and deepening* of knowledge, as well as featuring benefits of association, sharing and professional consolidation and critique. Some of this will be needed to help guide planners towards leadership as we expand upon below.

There are very many events, conferences, seminars and awards that punctuate the yearly calendars of many professional planners. In the UK and Ireland each nation or region offers a programme usually under the banner of ‘CPD’ as well as one day conferences and other events. **Through its Core CPD Framework, the** RTPI defines Continuing Professional Development as *“the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout the practitioner’s working life”* **(RTPI, no date).** The main aspect which has received little attention is exchange and communication over culture, practice and professional norms.

This **perspective** supports looking critically, if sympathetically, at how CPD **(and wider lifelong learning)** is conceived, organised and delivered, and how this has changed in recent decades. Both the RTPI and Town & Country Planning Association are active in delivering regular events that fall into this category, along with a range of other providers, not least some of the barrister’s chambers focussing on planning law. For the RTPI this is linked to an organisational structure that divides CPD responsibilities between the central Institute and its Regional Management Boards/Regional Activity Committees; the latter are

² RTPI member networks and publications also form strands of RTPI work which have a basis in professional learning and, in the former, are deemed to hold transactional value for members.

responsible for organising lower cost CPD events, often online, which address themes deemed to be relevant to practice. It is worth noting that the subjects for these are typically derived from surveys of the local RTPI membership, introducing a democratic element to how CPD requirements are defined and addressed. To illustrate the scope and content offered a recent CPD list from one of the RTPI regions is reproduced in Figure 1 (and see the RTPI live table of CPD training accessible through: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/events-training-and-awards/rtpi-national-training/cpd-training-calendar>). Simultaneously, the RTPI recognise a much longer list of activities which may constitute 'CPD'³.

Figure 1: RTPI South-East England region CPD programme 2023

Webinar	
•	Minerals Planning, 15 March
•	Neighbourhood Planning, 5 July
•	What does 'good design' mean to a planner, 11 July
•	Waste Planning, 18 July
•	Planning Practice – Codes, Ethics and EDI, 15 November
In person events	
•	Planning Inquiries (afternoon session), 21 March, Winchester Guildhall
•	Making good places – Reimagining, Build and Transform, 10 May, Milton Keynes
•	Planning for water, 19 June, University of Brighton
•	Heritage and Conservation, 27 September, Canterbury Lodge Cathedral
•	Biodiversity Net Gain and Nature Recovery, 11 October, Reading Town Hall
•	CPD Day, 1 November, Guildford Pavilion, Surrey
•	Housing - effect of changes in the planning system, 22 November, Horsham
•	Community Engagement, 7 December, Oxford

(Source: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/find-your-rtpi/rtpi-english-regions/southeast/southeastevents/> - last accessed 26/10/2023)

Some topics are recommended to be revisited regularly, with ethics and environmental planning notable, and these appear indicative of the awareness not only of change but of a need to bolster or even re-orient practices in these times. While few would argue with the value and relevance of the topics that appear – that is the 'parts' - what of the whole? What is absent is a sense of the overarching purpose in terms of professional identity, values and purpose. It is this which requires careful and ongoing consideration of what it means to be a good planner – a professional planner - interpellating the objects and powers conveyed by the RTPI's Charter, absorbing the broader evolution of planning as an intellectual discipline and reflecting on the day-to-day responses of individual planners.

Planning as a profession is still a work in progress and many over the past decades have queried both the distinctiveness and purposes of planners, beyond simply implementing national policy (Davoudi and Pendlebury, 2014; Reade, 1987). While we do not pursue this question here, it is clear that planning does not enjoy unquestioned support, deep understanding or even clear definition in the eyes of the public, or indeed amongst other professions. This should position what we are arguing here as ever more important, rather

³ See: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/membership/cpd/sources-of-cpd/>

than diminishing its significance, particularly as the ability of the profession to influence its public image is critical to its standing and role in delivery.

One perspective on this issue linked to the crucial importance of reflection as part of planning practice, was indicated by the 1950 Schuster Committee who recognised, ‘...that the Town Planning Institute’s Summer School has done valuable work but we believe that it falls short of what is required’ (MTCP, 1950, p.58). As a middle-ground the Committee proposed a four to six week, university-facilitated summer school and whilst summer schools in the UK never extended to that advocated length, the annual planning Summer School was a key feature of the CPD agenda until 2013, allowing practitioners to leave behind their jobs and organisational settings for a week and engage intensively, surrounded by peers and this gave an opportunity for some critical distance⁴. The depth and immersiveness of such events are difficult to replicate but perhaps there is something to draw on there. Without romanticising such events, this raises an interesting point of comparison with the one day and half day thematic events that now dominate the lifelong learning offer. This leads to questions of how this can encourage fragmentation of the knowledges involved in being a professional planner. Rather than taking a more synthetic approach, planners are able to take a half day course on the latest addition to the system but lack necessary space to consider how the matter fits into a wider system, or issues connected to it. This type of approach can divorce necessary self-reflective space to consider integration with day-to-day processes and practices, nor the reflexive space to look outward and consider what it means for the wider discipline and whether it adds to the quality of planning outcomes.

One possibility that should be given serious consideration is that the accredited University Planning Schools might also offer recognised CPD opportunities for practitioners. While some universities may find this challenging (largely to do with costs and workloads we suspect), there is real merit in thinking about what aspects of initial planning education (and corresponding Planning School responsibilities) should be maintained and extended into CPD and lifelong learning. Particularly, this might encompass skills relating to analytical, theoretical and conceptual activity, as applicable to ‘practice’, and also other generic skills that may well be sourced through universities, such as leadership training or project planning. The key point here is to maintain standards via a critical and reflexive disposition across the career span.

Reflection upon reflexion

The distinction between ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexion’, alluded to above, is worth expounding. Where reflection is more inward-looking, examining one’s internal thought processes, reflexion refers to a more outward-looking perspective, and consideration of how one’s actions impact on others and the broader context. Moving from the former to the latter aligns with our call to think about the role of lifelong learning in developing a stronger collective professional coherence, in addition to maintaining the skills and knowledges of individual planners. Linked to this, effective reflection and, more centrally, reflexivity in context, should involve the type of ‘double loop’ learning discussed by Argyris and Schön (1978). This features the identification and understanding of causation along with action to address a

⁴ After 80 years the Summer School was last held in 2013, discontinued on financial viability grounds, partly as a result of local authorities no longer being able to afford send delegates (The Planner, 2014).

problem, as opposed to 'single loop' learning, where adjustments to correct a mistake or a problem may feature, but where underlying causality is typically not addressed.

An important resource for the reflexive practitioner is the cohesiveness of knowledge and understanding of the principles of professional planning. In this vein, Schön (1987) highlighted how education and creativity in planning requires reflection and deliberation; to which we previously linked '*...parallel efforts to urge planners to be 'leaders' and [this] raises questions about the skills and knowledges required both to fulfil this role and to enable thoughtful planning practice*' (Maidment and Parker, 2023, p.257). Leadership is often cited as lacking but we may challenge this - lead what? There has to be a sense of moral and ethical direction that is both shared and championed for the profession to have standing, to demonstrate value: to be defensible. Leaving this solely or predominantly to the initial planning education period seems inadequate, or even reckless and we argue it weakens potential leadership capacities.

In raising the notion of the reflexive practitioner, we therefore pose the question: in what spaces do planners actually have the opportunity to consider whether 'good planning' is being delivered (and communicated) on a daily, weekly basis? Are 'we' good planners? Or do professionals know whether practice(s) measure up against the relevant charter, or indeed code of conduct? Quite clearly such documents are drawn with a broad brush; it is the policy and programming that must be examined. We perceive that lifelong learning when crystallised in events and self-reflection need a much better conceptualisation as well as linkage to core components of initial planning education. Events need to be geared to reflection and discussion which aid culture reinforcement, or positive change, and the development of the sense of unity of purpose in practice. This perspective sees lifelong learning and associated events as cultural reinforcement as well as 'learning'. Whether and how lifelong learning can be underpinned and co-created in service of goals beyond technical updating (important as that may be) needs greater attention.

This becomes more concerning in the face of a loss of space for professional judgement in the context of ongoing gaslighting, as well as serial reforms that involve the creeping codification of the system in England at least⁵; on what basis are planners able to take the creative leaps necessary to refute misinformation that is currently stifling the profession?

In a context where the profession continues to fight for recognition of the importance of its work, there is a danger of being semi-professionalised; characterised as a profession that exists to service others, rather than one that adds value through professional judgement. Already, this leads to uncomfortable questions around whether the increasingly tick-box process of Development Management requires the depth of skills and knowledge necessary to engage in the arguably more creative exercises of plan-making and providing client advice.

Once again, the question of 'practice' seems to lead back towards concern to foster greater cooperation, mutual understandings and the Partnership model - listening to the different planner inputs, including that of academicians who can aid the maintenance of the objects and first five purposes as expressed through the RTPI's (2012) Royal Charter. A reappraisal

⁵ This Viewpoint piece was drafted in the week that the 2023 Levelling Up & Regeneration Act received Royal Assent, along with provisions for Development Management policies at the national level; a further example of the system in England becoming more codified and centralised.

of the basis and execution of lifelong learning is needed if it is to be effective as a source of support, reflection and defence of good planning, rather than the useful but more limited technical updates or standalone presentations of projects. In effect we see lifelong learning as critical both to standards and to effective defence of a professional culture that is resilient to the corrosive effects of gaslighting and wilful undermining of practice 'for the benefit of the public'. This argument is linked to **questions about** what it means to be a 'learned society' and how such learning can, **if appropriately mobilised**, help to develop a greater unity of purpose and values in an environment which can all too easily be fractured and undermined by political mores.

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