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Places For Continuous Learning On Spatial Planning Issues - Reflections On An Experiment

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Abstract

Ever since the eighties, spatial planners have been approaching planning processes as learning processes. In this article we argue that such learning processes not only require a trajectory that helps groups to reflect in and on their actions, but also a trajectory that helps these groups to learn how to participate in such reflections. We refer to such a trajectory as a Place for Continuous Learning. The aim of the article is to explore how to develop such places. Over a period of 18 months, we conducted our own learning experiment and facilitated, on the one hand, three participatory processes in three European countries that each address the societal issue of retrofitting suburbia, and, on the other hand, organized a series of three Collective Learning Workshops in which we invited the main facilitators of these participatory processes to exchange experiences. Together these participatory processes and workshops made up our Place for Continuous Learning. The article first discusses the design of the experiment. It then summarizes the actual workshops and ends with formulating a number of principles on how to develop Places for Continuous Learning.

Keywords

Participatory planning, strategic planning, collective learning, social learning

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1. Learning about learning in spatial planning

In 'Planning as social learning' John Friedmann looks back on the first twenty years of his planning practice and discusses how he "*discovered that planning was not so much concerned with the making of plans as with 'mutual learning', was less centered on documents than dialogue, and was more dependent for its results on the transactions of individual persons in specific settings than on abstract institutions*" (1981: 1). He calls this style of planning 'transactive' and refers to the underlying model as 'social learning'. Friedmann's article is basically a political manifest in which he redefines the role of planners from being bureaucratic experts involved in rational blueprint planning to planners as 'facilitators and mediators of group-based practices' supporting a planning 'from below'. Friedmann sees social learning as a process to empower those individuals and groups that are being marginalized by traditional planning processes.

Two decades later, Louis Albrechts looks back on twenty years of strategic planning (making up most of his planning career). Just like Friedmann, Albrechts begins his article with positioning strategic planning against traditional land-use planning, arguing that it is a 'negotiated form of governance' with the aim to 'provide a framework' that can guide actions (2004: 749). Like Friedmann, he stresses the importance of 'open dialogues': "*As it is impossible to do everything that needs to be done, 'strategic' implies that some decisions and actions are considered more important than others and that much of the process lies in making the tough decisions about what is most important for the purpose of producing fair, structural responses to problems, challenges, aspirations, and diversity*" (2004, 751). The making of these 'tough decisions' requires civic support and the involvement of as many socio-cultural groups as possible. To structure this strategic process, Albrechts suggests to work with a 'four track approach': the first track points at the need to develop a vision, the second at the development of short-term and long-term actions (in line with the vision), the third at the need to involve key actors in both the vision and the actions, and finally the fourth track points at the need for a more permanent process involving the broader public in major decisions (2004: 752).

One could argue that the first three tracks are a good summary of the arguments of Friedmann: a collective embarks on a common planning project and learns from the dialogues that unfold along the way, while negotiating alternative future visions, while searching for consensus around concrete action plans, etc. In our reading, the fourth track adds something new to Friedmann's model of social learning. Albrechts refers to this track as a permanent and inclusive empowerment processes in which all participants "*learn about one another and about different points of view, and they come to reflect on their own points of view. In this way a store of mutual understanding can be built up, a sort of 'social and intellectual capital*'" (2004: 753). This means that, in this fourth track, there is no common planning project that triggers a dialogue, but just a collection of individuals that at best share the will to learn about the dynamics taking place around each of them. Whereas track 3 is about learning to understand a particular situation, track 4 is about learning to think in generic situations. Whereas track 3 is about learning to arrive at a consensus (over a vision or an action), track 4 is about learning to reflect over consensus making strategies. Whereas track 3 is about learning how to involve a particular underrepresented socio-cultural group, track 4 is about learning how to keep learning processes democratic and open. In short, whereas track 3 is about social learning, track 4 is about learning how to learn collectively. The aim is not so

much to make a group reflect on how to collectively address a particular (planning) situation, but to make a group reflect on the capacities that are needed for a collective to learn, on the stages that a dialogue needs to go through in order to support a durable collective reflection process, on the mechanisms that may slow down or speed up a dialectical and iterative learning process, etc.

Albrechts (2004) ends his article with formulating a number of preconditions for strategic planning to work: active involvement, open dialogue, accountability, collaboration, and consensus building, but apart from that remains rather vague on how to translate his fourth tracks into planning practice. The aim of our article is to try to imagine how to actually implement a planning process in which social learning (track 3) and collective learning (track 4) continuously reinforce one another and as such support planning professionals in 'making though decisions'. In order to achieve this, we decided to set up an experiment CAPA.CITY [1] in which we involved academics and practitioners from three European countries, all with an expertise in developing and facilitating participatory planning processes. The aim of our experiment was to construct a 'place for continuous learning' that would allow these academics and practitioners to learn from each other's experiences in facilitating participatory trajectories. The article first positions the concept of 'a place for continuous learning' within literature on learning. It then discusses the design of the experiment, summarizes the results and ends with a reflection on how planning professions could start to engage with Albrechts' four tracks in their daily planning practice.

2. A place for continuous learning

Both Friedmann and Albrechts refer to Donald Schön (1983) and his argument that learning requires reflecting while being in - the messy and situated - action. Defined as such, reflection is considered to be an internalized intellectual activity 'which only takes place within the mind of the practitioner' (Goh, 2019). In a review of literature on lifelong professional learning, Goh (2019) points at the growing criticism on this individualistic approach to reflection. She supports her argument by discussing two collective approaches to learning which she summarizes in two 'learning metaphors': the participation metaphor and the construction metaphor. In the first one, individuals learn by participating in collective dialogues and '*subjecting their assumptions to the review of others'* (Boud, 2010 in Goh, 2019). She gives the example of learning in multidisciplinary teams in order to stimulate reflection in workplaces. In the second one, individuals learn by 'constructing their own understanding' by joining a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) or an activity system (Engeström, 2000). Here she gives the example of learning via conducting an internship in an organisation. Goh argues that both approaches, participating and constructing, reinforce one another. She therefore introduces a third learning metaphor 'learning as becoming' in which individual empowerment (via participating in dialogues) triggers collective empowerment (via experiencing new practices) in turn triggering further individual empowerment.

If we try to apply this to Albrechts' model then a first conclusion could be that track 3 -social learning- fits the construction metaphor: all actors involved in a planning project form a learning collective. Track 4 –collective learning- complies with the participation metaphor: each actor reflects upon his own position by going into dialogue with actors involved in other projects. Interpreted as such, the two tracks can be understood as two different approaches to collective reflection, each with own theories, methods, best practices, schools of thought, etc.

A second conclusion is that we need to align both tracks in order to trigger an iterative process of individual and collective empowerment.
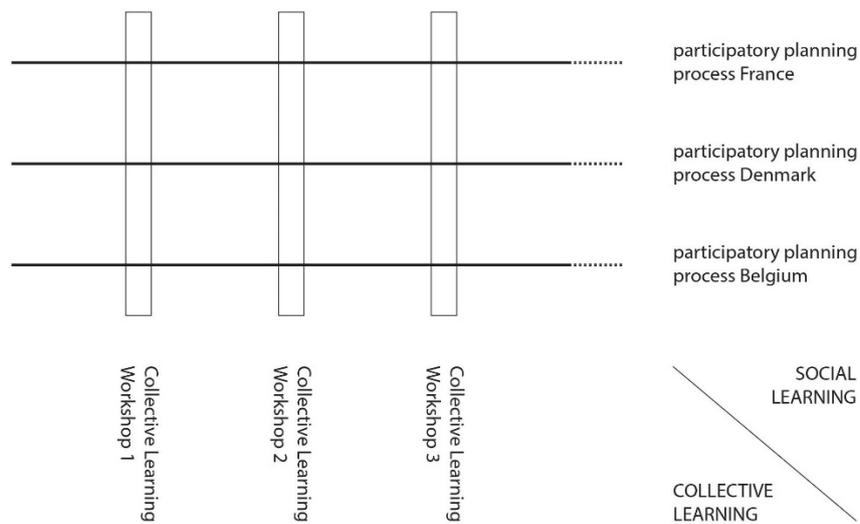
Figure 1 – the CAPA.CITY experiment as a combination of participatory planning processes and Collective Learning Workshops

We decided to test both conclusions by setting up a 'learning experiment'. On the one hand, we asked three collectives of academics and practitioners to each start up a participatory process. Each of these processes had to engage in an ongoing planning initiative, and as such involve municipal planners, citizens, experts, entrepreneurs, etc. In line with our previous arguments, each process relates to track 3 and triggers a process of social learning by engaging in a situated practice. On the other hand, we organized three 'Collective Learning Workshops' in which we invited the three collectives to exchange experiences. All three workshops took four days, ran over a period of one and a half year and were in turn organized at one of the locations of the participatory processes. These workshops relate to track 4 and trigger collective learning via critical dialogues. The aim of our experiment was to explore how to align both trajectories, the social learning in the participatory processes and the collective learning in the workshops, and create a true Place for Continuous Learning.

Given the situatedness of the three participatory planning processes, we will mainly discuss the experiment from the perspective of the workshops. How did we create the right conditions to trigger collective learning? How much attention did we pay to the particularities of the participatory processes? How instrumental did our reflections have to be? And how did we keep on learning as a collective?

3. Setting up an experiment

We started our experiment with agreeing upon three 'guiding principles'. Firstly, all three participatory processes should focus on the same 'tough decision' (Albrechts, 2004) in order to facilitate the exchange of experiences during the workshops. We chose to focus on the question of how to tackle the high societal costs of suburban developments (see later). Secondly, each of the three workshops should introduce another conceptual framework to

allow for a deep analysis of the three highly contextual social learning processes that the participants were engaged in. We chose for frameworks introducing 'collective reflection methods' (Brandt et al., 2013), 'learning stages' (Brown and Lambert, 2013) and 'collective capabilities' (Baser and Morgan, 2008). Thirdly, each workshop should adopt another collective learning protocol to make sure that the participants not only theorized learning approaches but also experienced them. We chose to implement 'analytical learning', 'project based learning' and 'experiential learning'.

We will now explain the three principles in more detail and discuss how we operationalized them in each of the three workshops.

3.1. The tough decision of retrofitting residential subdivisions

The first principle was to focus all three participatory processes on the urgent question of how we, as academics and practitioners active in the field of spatial planning, should deal with the increasing societal costs of suburban developments. Suburbia remains the preferred housing dream for a large part of the (West-European) population (Serre et al., 2019). But this mode of living comes at a high societal cost: the low density, car dependency and largely homogenous population trigger an ecologic, economic and social crisis (Campbell, 1996). This raises the 'strategic' question: should we, as a society, invest in the retrofitting of these suburbs, where the average cost per inhabitant is high, or should we invest in more central, accessible and dense locations where this cost is much lower? This question remains very abstract, especially for the inhabitants of suburbia (Van de Weijer and Van Cleempoel, 2015). It is our hypothesis that, in order to make these costs more tangible, we need to start up public dialogues and involve the inhabitants, organisations and local authorities that live and are active in these suburban environments, in a process of continuous learning.

The aim of our three participatory processes was to set up such 'retrofitting dialogues' in three existing suburban settlements. The first settlement, located in Aix-en-Provence, France, is a suburban cluster of 12 housing units for which the local planning authority recently approved a legislation that allows the densification of such settlements. The inhabitants are concerned about the impact of this legislation on their current mode of living. The second settlement, located in Viby Sjælland, Denmark, is a suburban village for which the urban development is guided by a long-term vision of tripling the current population from 5.000 to 15.000 inhabitants. Local organizations and entrepreneurs are currently involved in imagining how this growth may help to revitalize the town centre. The third case, located in Vosselaar, Belgium, is a suburban settlement. The local authority wants to transform the municipality into a 'green village' but cannot agree on how to do so. Within the settlement, a group of inhabitants is eager to experiment with alternative modes of using and managing the public domain.

Each retrofitting dialogue adopted another 'retrofitting perspective'. On the one hand because the teams that organized the dialogues possessed different expertise in facilitating participatory planning processes, on the other hand because we assumed that this diversity would help to increase the learning potential during the Collective Learning Workshops. In the French case, the organizers adopted a 'planning perspective' and explored how bottom-up retrofitting strategies such as soft densification could be an alternative for the unsuccessful top-down retrofitting strategies such as smart densification. The dialogues were structured around the soft densification approach, BIMBY ("Build In My Back Yard"), developed by the

professional partner in the team, Lab InVivo. In short, BIMBY consists of a series of protocols, relying on 3D modelling, that help and coach inhabitants who are willing to build new housing units in their gardens or backyards (Larsen et al., 2020). The Danish case adopted a social perspective and tried to relate to the (evolution of) demographic diversity within suburban developments, the (lack of) diversity of public space and the social role of organisations and entrepreneurs. Here, the dialogues adopted the principles of Asset Based Community Development Dialogues (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993) and were structured around an approach developed by the professional partner GivRum, who activates unused buildings and urban space in order to enter into dialogue with public institutions, private businesses and civil society over alternative futures. The Belgian case adopted a political perspective and tried to understand how to support inhabitant collectives in reclaiming a position in the ongoing debates on the growing societal costs of suburban developments. The dialogues were supported by an open modular construction model, developed within the OpenStructures project by the professional partner Intrastructures. This model allowed these collectives to explore alternative uses of public and private spaces by temporarily building and experiencing them.

In order to facilitate the exchange of experiences among the facilitators of these three social learning processes, we decided to organize each Collective Learning Workshop in one of the case settlements and structure each workshop around the adopted retrofitting perspectives (see Table 1).

3.2. Exploring collective learning

The second principle guiding our experiment was to explore one collective learning concept in each Collective Learning Workshop. For our first workshop we turned to the field of participatory design (PD) because of its long tradition of supporting Schön's processes of 'collective-reflection-in-action' (Robertson and Simonsen, 2013). Brandt et al. (2013), for instance, distinguish three clusters of methods to support such processes, namely methods that support telling, making or enacting. All three depart from a (partly) fictive universe within which existing rules and power relations do not count. Participants are asked to collectively explore this universe while they tell stories, make objects or enact scenarios. Going through this process may make them realise that the step from fiction to reality is not necessarily that big. We took these three clusters of methods as our first concept to explore in our workshop series. We further refer to them as enabling methods, as they enable dialogues about abstract and complex issues.

In our second workshop, we started from the argument that people learn continuously. They experience a problem, try out something, and solve the problem. But, for this process of trial and eror to trigger true learning, it should ideally follow a cycle of four stages: experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting (Kolb, 1984). An individual should not only solve the problem, but should also adjust his/her way of conceptualizing the world around him/her. Brown and Lambert, in their book *Collective Learning for Transformational Change* (2013) extend Kolb's model from individual to collective learning. Like Kolb, they argue that, in order to learn, a collective has to go through four stages: ideals, facts, ideas and actions. Stage 1, ideals, asks 'What should be?' and is based on the argument that translating different ideals into shared principles for action asks for mutual acceptance of difference. Stage 2, facts, asks 'What is?' and is based on the argument that identifying the supporting and impeding factors for collective learning means accepting different points of view. Stage 3, ideas, asks 'What

could be?' and is based on the argument that bringing together different creative ideas calls for the groups involved to celebrate their differences. Finally, stage 4, actions, asks 'What can be?' and is based on the argument that combining different contributions to collaborative actions creates a more effective method than any one part (Brown and Lambert, 2013, 17). This collective learning cycle is the second concept that we explore in our workshop series.

We borrowed our third concept from literature on capacity building, based on the conviction that a (retrofitting) project can only be durable if it is accompanied by a process of community capacity building (Verity, 2007). This literature defines capacity as the ability of a community to carry out a set of stated objectives. Capacity building then refers to the process of improving the ability of a person, group, organisation or institute to meet these objectives (Brown et al., 2001; Craig, 2007). On the basis of a comparative analysis of a series of capacity building projects in developing countries, Baser and Morgen (2008:33) argue that a collective should possess five so-called 'core collective capabilities' in order to keep on functioning as a (learning) collective: the core capability (1) to commit and engage; (2) to carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks; (3) to relate and to attract resources and support; (4) to adapt and self-renew, and (5) to balance diversity and coherence. We took these core capabilities as our third collective learning concept.

In each Collective Learning Workshop, we explored one of the three selected concepts and tried to relate it to the concepts explored in the previous workshops (see Table 1). We started with the most 'operational' one, namely the enabling methods. More specifically we assigned each of the three enabling methods to one retrofitting case and asked the responsible researchers to actually apply the enabling method. The second workshop was organized around the concept of the collective learning cycle, quite literally, as we made each day fit with one stage. The third workshop was centred around the concept of core capabilities. The participants were asked to reflect upon themselves as a learning collective and screen their activities against the capacity building framework. Do we possess all five core capabilities? If not, how could we unlock some?

3.3. Experimenting with learning methods

Our third guiding principle was to structure each workshop around a learning method. In the first workshop we chose the principle of analytical learning. All participants were asked to look back on their retrofitting case and analyse the activities that they organized against a given framework. After this workshop, we felt the need among the participants to develop a shared language on collective learning and retrofitting. For this reason, we decided to structure the second workshop around the approach of project based learning (Frandsen and Andersen, 2019). All participants had to work on a common assignment which would facilitate the exchange of knowledge and ideas. After this workshop, we indeed did start to use a common vocabulary and felt that we were ready to develop a shared operational framework. So, we decided to try out yet another learning method, namely experiential learning. The participants not only had to work on a common assignment, but also had to actually implement (and experience) it with the help of prototyping tools.

Each method will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Note that the selection of methods was not planned in advance, but decided upon collectively when evaluating a completed workshop.

3.4. A place for continuous learning?

Table 1 summarizes how the three guiding principles result in three different Collective Learning Workshops, but at the same time guarantee that they add up as one place for continuous learning; a place that is both designed in advance and emerges along the way.

Table 1 - implementation of the three guiding principles in the three Collective Learning Workshops

	1st workshop, France	2nd workshop, Denmark	3rd workshop, Belgium
Retrofitting perspective	planning – soft densification	social – community mapping	political – reclaim practices
Collective Learning Concept	Enabling methods	Enabling methods + Collective learning cycle	Enabling methods + Collective learning cycle + Core capabilities
Collective Learning Method	analytical learning	project-based learning	experiential learning

What Table 1 also makes clear is that we could have adopted other principles to structure our learning process and that we could have chosen other retrofitting perspectives, collective learning concepts or collective learning methods. So, our workshop-series should not be read as a generic model, but as nothing more than an experiment in which a group of participatory experts collectively explores strategies for organizing continuous learning processes.

In the next section, we will report on each Collective Learning Workshop by answering the following set of questions:

1: What was the concrete assignment of the workshop? In other words, how were the retrofitting perspectives translated into concrete dialogue-sessions? And how did the learning method impact this translation?

2: What was the agenda of the workshop? In other words, how were these dialogue-sessions structured? And how did the learning concepts help to turn these dialogues into a continuous learning process?

3: What was the analytical framework that facilitated the learning process?

4: Which artefacts were used to support the dialogue-sessions and the learning process?

5: What were the final results of the dialogue-sessions? Which ones were generated by the agenda, and which ones were generated in spite of the agenda?

4. A dialogue over three Collective Learning Workshops

The first Collective Learning Workshop, the CAPA.CITY summerschool, took place in Périgueux, France from April 9 to 12 in 2018. In all, 18 practitioners and academics took part in this workshop. The second workshop, the CAPA.CITY winterschool, took place in

Roskilde, Denmark, from December 10 to 13 in 2018. In all, 25 practitioners and academics took part in this workshop. The third workshop, the CAPA.CITY autumnschool, took place in Turnhout, Belgium from October 14 to 17 in 2019. In all, 13 practitioners and academics took part. We will now reconstruct the course of each of these workshops on the basis of the set of five questions and summarize the main results in Table 2.

<u>4.1. Workshop 1: the CAPA.CITY summerschool</u>

Workshop 1 consisted of two parts that worked quite independently from one another. During the first two days, we invited doctoral students to collectively discuss their research on suburban retrofitting. On the last two days, we invited the facilitators of the three participatory processes, set up as part of our experiment, to share their experiences. In what follows, we will only discuss this second part given that the first one mainly functioned as a preparatory step to get familiar with the societal issue of suburban retrofitting. Moreover, none of the professional facilitators participated in this first part.

1: What was the concrete assignment of the workshop? As Table 1 illustrates, the first workshop adopted analytical learning as main learning method, took a planning perspective on the retrofitting challenge and explored the learning concept of enabling methods. We integrated all these principles and asked the facilitators of the three participatory processes to reimagine their social learning processes as if they each would have adopted one of the three enabling methods: telling, enacting and making (Brandt et al., 2013). We expected that this analytical exercise would help us understand the particularities of each enabling method and clarify the main approaches of the three participatory processes.

2: What was the agenda of the workshop? The dialogue-sessions were structured as an iterative process of analysis in groups and collective reflection. The three participatory processes each analysed their own trajectories and explored the enabling method which was assigned to them. During the collective reflection, they then compared their insights and, with each iteration, came closer to a common understanding of each other's approaches and of the three enabling methods.

3: What was the analytical framework that facilitated the learning process? In order to structure the analysis, we adopted the framework of Activity Theory, a theory that argues that all human activities are the result of collective action and are embedded within a given culture and a given history (Engeström, 2000). We asked the groups to specify the instruments, roles, rules and experts that they used in each of the activities that they've organized and plan to organize. This formed the basis for our collective reflection.

4: Which artefacts were used? The workshop relied on presentations (both by the participants and by invited lecturers) and fill-in templates (a/o based on the activity theory framework).

5: What were the final results of the dialogue-sessions? Workshop 1 resulted in three collective learning protocols, one for each social learning process, describing a number of activities, each time specifying the involved actors, their roles, the artefacts to be used, and the rules to be followed. The diversity of these protocols suggested a clear understanding among the participants of the enabling methods of telling, enacting and making.

A final note worth mentioning is that the workshop did follow the pre-defined agenda quite neatly.

4.2. Workshop 2: the CAPA.CITY winterschool

Workshop 2 consisted of only one part and involved both PhD students and the main facilitators of the three participatory processes (the same ones who also took part in the first workshop).

1: What was the concrete assignment of the workshop? The second workshop adopted project based learning as main learning method and took a social perspective on the suburban retrofitting challenge. In short, all participants had to work on a common planning assignment, namely to (re)design the town centre of Viby. Due to a considerable decline in commercial activities the planning authority and local community of Viby are faced with the challenge of identifying new activities that could lead to a revitalization. The point of departure of the workshop is that addressing this challenge requires a process of social learning in which a collective of citizens and public and private actors could explore strategies to trigger and supervise this revitalisation. The concrete assignment of the workshop was to develop learning protocols that could support such a process.

2: What was the agenda of the workshop? The aim of the second workshop was to explore the concept of the collective learning cycle of Brown and Lambert (2013). Each day of the workshop implemented one stage of this cycle. On day one, the participants visited Viby. They mapped the issues, the actors, their dwelling practices, etc. In short, they completed a first stage of the collective learning process: to collectively collect facts. On the second day, the participants had to decide upon the issue they wanted to work on and choose the actors they wanted to work with. In making these decisions, the participants were making normative choices on which re(designs) they wanted to promote as inputs to the revitalization strategy and completed a second stage of the learning cycle: to map ideals. On the third day, the participants started to design retrofitting scenario's, drawing out concrete activities and considering alliances with other groups of actors and institutions. In doing so they went through a third stage of the learning cycle: exploring alternative scenarios for the development of a place for continuous learning in Viby. On the last day, the participants discussed how to sustain their learning processes. They analysed the current learning culture in Viby and proposed how to tweak it to start implementing their scenario's. At the end of the day, the participants completed the fourth stage of the learning cycle.

Each day followed the same iterative process as in the first workshop. Throughout the day, the participants worked on the assignment in mixed groups with PhD students, professionals and researchers from the organizing team. Each day ended with a collective reflection. What was different from the first workshop is that we added a third stage to the iteration, in that we started each day with a synthesis, made by the organizers, of the dialogues of the previous day. This helped to keep the dialogues focussed on the common planning assignment.

3: What was the analytical framework? The workshop resumed the frameworks introduced in the first workshop, the enabling methods and the activity theory framework. Each of three groups had to again adopt one enabling method to complete the assignment. Together with the lectures and the active participation of practitioners, the frameworks helped the participants to gain a common understanding of the collective learning cycle introduced by Brown and Lambert (2013) and resulted in discussions on issues such as the impact of the composition of the collective on the design of the learning process, the interchangeability

of the 4 stages of the learning cycle, the role of the social and institutional context in which the learning process takes place, etc.

4: Which artefacts were used? The participants had to use templates to document and structure their design process and had to make posters to visualize their final retrofitting scenarios. The posters worked well, but the templates were considered too restrictive by the participants.

5: What were the final results? Workshop 2 resulted in three scenarios for developing places for collective learning in the centre of Viby, documented in a series of completed templates, schemes and drafts of posters.

It took a while before the participants adopted the concept of the learning cycle. At first, they mainly focussed on the planning assignment, on engaging in the ongoing participatory process: do we really know all the actors? Are we sure we understood what they need? Two of the three groups decided to go on a second site visit. In contrast to what we expected, the concreteness of the case seemed to, at first, hinder, rather than help the participants from focussing on the main objective of the workshop: to exchange experiences on organizing processes of collective learning. Only towards the end of the workshop, the value of the common case became clear, when the particularities of the situation at hand started to trigger collective discussion on the necessity to think in iterative learning cycles, in parallel learning trajectories, in learning alliances and networks, etc.

4.3. Workshop 3: the CAPA.CITY autumnschool

Workshop 3 again consisted of only one part and the majority of participants also participated in the two previous workshops, as such making up a true learning collective.

1: What was the concrete assignment of the workshop? Workshop 3 adopted experiential learning as the main learning method and took a political perspective on the retrofitting challenge. The workshop started from the observation that the dominant retrofitting strategies of densification and diversification are increasingly evoking Not-In-Our-Backyards reactions. This reminded us of the '60s and '70ies when planners and policy makers sanitized complete city parts because they were considered unhealthy, chaotic and ugly. Until the Right to the City movement gained momentum and citizens all over Europe started to reclaim their neighbourhoods from top-down planning. The third workshop stated that we are in need of a new movement, Reclaim the Suburbs, that would support suburbanites to start own retrofitting projects; projects that do reduce the societal costs of their mode of living, but also fit within their suburban housing dream: garage-box entrepreneurs, multi- generational villa-collectives, ecogarden networks, crowdfunded community services or renewable energy cooperatives. The participants were asked to collectively design reclaim practices that would fit in such a movement. There was no particular case. Participants were asked to bring own reclaim examples which we then clustered into prototypical reclaim practices. Each group worked on one of these clusters.

2: What was the agenda of the workshop? The aim of the third workshop was to explore the concept of capacity building and to gain a common understanding of the five core capabilities that a collective needs to implement a durable reclaim practice. We again slightly adjusted the iterative process. We still started each iteration with a design session during which each group had to develop their a reclaim practice (in the same way that groups had to adopt the enabling methods in the first workshop or had to develop learning

protocols in the second workshop). But then we added a prototype session during which each group had to build their designed reclaim practice in full-scale using the Open Structures modular construction model. We then returned to our collective reflection session. Just like in the second workshop, we started each new day with a synthesis of what happened the day before.

3: What was the analytical framework? We again resumed the frameworks used in the previous workshops: the enabling methods, activity theory and the collective learning cycle. On top, we added a selection of literature on capacity building. In contrast to the previous workshops, we did not translate this literature into ready-to-use concepts and templates. The participants had to do this collectively.

4: Which artefacts were used? The participants had to use the modular construction model (that we introduced in 3.1) and posters to summarize their experiences and reflections. This did not work with all groups. One group got frustrated during the design session and decided to use the prototyping material to start designing, instead of just implementing finished designs.

5: What were the final results? The participants generated three learning protocols for reclaim practices, such as a protocol to start a collective housing project for elderly or a protocol to begin a collective gardening initiative. On the last day, the participants started developing a tool to facilitate social learning trajectories. This tool integrated the provided learning concepts and the literature on capacity building. The participants imagined that this tool could be further developed into a game that could support collectives to implement their reclaim practice.

This workshop did not follow the original agenda. The participants, for instance, did only one, instead of three, prototyping sessions, and shifted the focus from the development of reclaim practices to the design of an operational framework to facilitate social learning trajectories; a result that was not foreseen in the original agenda. All participants worked and lived in the same location and only left it once throughout the four days. This voluntary seclusion turned the workshop into a very intense experience.

4.4. A place for continuous learning?

Together, the three Collective Learning Workshops seem to function as a Place for Continuous Learning. The core group of academics and practitioners gradually developed a common understanding of retrofitting strategies and collective learning concepts, and finally decided to integrate their insights in a game that could assist others to organize their own social learning process.

Table 2 summarizes the main features of each workshop and illustrates the underlying transitions. The majority of these transitions was not planned in advance, but emerged spontaneously during a workshop or was decided upon by the participants at the end of a workshop. This suggests a level learning among the participants (or at least a will to explore alternatives).

Table 2 – main features of the three Collective Learning Workshops

	Workshop 1	Workshop 2	Workshop 3
1: What was the concrete assignment of the workshop?	Analyse the learning trajectory of three ongoing cases	Develop a learning trajectory for one common case	Develop a learning trajectory for generic (fictional) cases
2: What was the agenda of the workshop?	An iterative process of analysis in groups and collective reflection	An iterative process of design in groups, collective reflection and synthesis	An iterative process of design in groups, prototyping in groups, collective reflection and synthesis
3: What was the analytical framework?	Activity theory helped to gain a common understanding of the enabling methods	Activity theory and enabling methods helped to gain a common understanding of collective learning	Activity theory, enabling methods and collective learning, plus as series of key texts helped to gain a common understanding of capacity building
4: Which artefacts were used?	Templates to analyse activities	Posters to explain the scenarios for the common case	Prototyping tools to build the (fictional) cases and experience the collective learning process
5: What were the final results?	Three learning protocols, one for each case	Three complementary learning protocols, all for the same case	Three learning protocols, for generic reclaim practices, and a tool to facilitate social learning processes

Important to note is that we could have selected other parameters, and other questions, to describe the workshops, such as the role of the learning collective (Who are the participants? What is their learning history? Which roles did they take up in the workshop?) or the role of the workshop context (Where did the workshop take place? What was the impact of external lecturers? Did the site visits have an influence?). The point of the five questions was not to be exhaustive, but to illustrate a method to start designing, implementing and steering Places for Continuous Learning.

5. Reflecting on the Collective Learning workshops

After having framed the design of the workshop-series and described the actual workshops, we will now reflect on our CAPA.CITY experiment: how can it help us to create the right conditions for Places for Continuous Learning to emerge? We will base our reflections on the workshop features summarized in Table 2. In short, we will conduct two types of evaluations: one of each workshop and one of the overall trajectory. The workshop evaluations focus on

the relation between the five questions (and thus follow each column of Table 2). These evaluations were conducted at the end of each workshops - with the core group of participants – and influenced the design of the next workshop, and thus the course of the trajectory. These evaluations result in a first set of lessons-learned. The evaluation of the trajectory focuses on the evolution of each of the five questions (and thus follow each row of Table 2). These evaluation result in a second set of lessons-learned.

We will not reflect on the insights that our learning experiment generated among the participants on the retrofitting of residential subdivisions, as these insights are too much linked to the unique and situated social learning trajectories. In short, they a/o triggered new retrofitting alliances (e.g. involving an adjacent international company in the Belgian case); introduced new planning instruments (e.g. signing a Future Charter by all the residents in the French case) and innovated local planning cultures (e.g. setting up a steering group including residents, local businesses and the local authority in the Danish case).

5.1. Reflections on the workshops

The first series of reflections focusses on the relations between the five questions: for instance, did the artefacts (question 4) support the learning method (question 2)? We already partly touched upon some of the insights in section 3.

During workshop 1, the CAPA.CITY summerschool, the participants had to look back upon their own social learning processes (question 1). They mainly worked in groups, consisting of the main facilitators of each process (question 2). At the end of each day, they had to report on their analysis to the other groups. The analytical framework and artefacts (questions 3 and 4) were developed to support this iterative reflection-on-action process.

Looking back on the workshop, we realized that analysis inevitably triggers design, especially considering that the cases are ongoing. The participants were asked to bring their project planning, including both completed and planned activities. The workshop made them evaluate their past actions and reconsider future actions. It triggered them to formulate criteria against which to evaluate possible next steps. But, whereas the analysis in groups seemed to suggest learning, the collective reflections remained quite superficial. The participants were so much occupied by their own trajectories, triggered by the analytical frameworks, that they had difficulties to engage in the trajectories of the other groups. The amount of learning concepts (activity theory and enabling tools) further complicated this engagement. All the energy of the participants went to understanding these concepts.

So, the main lesson learned from workshop 1 is that the analysis mainly triggered learning within the groups, but not so much between the groups. This was a/o caused by the fact that the collaboration between the academic and professional partners in each participatory process was still new. The joint reflections and presentations did contribute though to a greater understanding of each other's processes (and concerns) and thus started to generate mutuality and a sense of being a collective. At this stage, we started developing common conceptualizations across the participatory processes by co-writing articles.

For workshop 2, the CAPA.CITY winterschool, we decided to explore the learning potential of designing, rather than analysing, and adopted the pedagogic approach of project-based learning. In order to increase the degree of collective learning, instead of mainly learning

within groups, we decided to make the participants work on one common assignment (question 1). They still had to work in groups, still regularly had to report on their designs (question 2), but we decided to also introduce moments of synthesis during which we, as organizers, highlighted similarities and differences between the approaches of the groups and as such tried to challenge the collective reflections. We kept on using the frameworks from workshop 1 (question 3), plus an extra one that explicitly focussed on the design of collective learning trajectories. We also recuperated the same artefacts, plus an extra one: posters on which each group had to synthesize their insights in order to support the collective reflections.

When analysing workshop 2, we realized that the common assignment facilitated the exchange of insights between the groups and triggered experimentation as each group wanted to do something different. The participants complained that the learning frameworks were too linear and the templates too rigid, so they developed their own. This gave us the feeling that we, for the first time, were acting as a learning collective, and not as a group of researchers discussing collective learning. At the evaluation, conducted at the end of the workshop, participants generally appreciated the interdisciplinary backgrounds of the group and thought that we had succeeded in finding a common platform to engage in reflective conversations. At the same time, as explained in section 3, the concreteness of the assignment initially seem to hinder some of the participants to focus on the process of collective learning. They kept on fishing for contextual details, returning to Viby in order to understand the actual dynamics, taking up their role as spatial designers instead of participants in a collective learning process. By the end of the workshop, the contextualization did help to gain a more complex understanding of learning processes, specifically on the variety of roles that different actors could take up in different phases of a learning cycle.

So, the main lesson learned from workshop 2 is that our project-based approach did trigger learning at the level of the collective on how to organize a participatory process, but that the concreteness of the assignment hindered meta-reflections going beyond the particularities of the project. This may partly be due to the fact that half of the participants did not participate in the first workshop and thus missed some of the common references on collective learning. The one thing they had in common was the concrete assignment. So, they dived into it.

For workshop 3, the CAPA.CITY autumnschool, we decided to no longer work on a real-life case, but to define our own assignment with the participants as main actors (question 1). They had to play a collective and develop their own reclaim practice. We hoped that, by adopting this approach of experiential learning, participants would no longer feel the urge to first have to understand a case in all its details, before being able to reflect on collective learning. Participants still worked in groups and we kept the iterative process of design, reflection and synthesis (question 2), but we added a fourth step, prototyping, to support the collectives to actually perform their reclaim practice. We kept the frameworks from the previous workshops and again added one new framework (question 3), capacity building, to allow the participants to analyse their own behaviour as a collective. We provided artefacts to support the prototyping process (question 4).

Already from day one, we realized that we were really functioning as a learning collective. Participants learned both in small groups and collectively. We also realized that this learning was not so much triggered by the prototyping, but was a result of the common workshop history of the majority of the participants. This became most apparent on the last day, when

the participants started to integrate all their insights into one artefact: a prototype for a game, a result that we were not expecting when preparing for this workshop!

So, the main lesson learned from workshop 3 is that our experiential approach did support learning about learning, most probably because the majority of the participants already had a shared learning history.

5.2. Reflections on the trajectory

The second reflection focusses on the evolution of each of the five questions. Except for the analytical frameworks (question 3) these evolutions were not planned at the start of the experiment, but emerged throughout the trajectory as a result of the above workshop reflections. We therefore assume that these evolutions are an indicator of collective learning among the core group of participants.

We will first reflect on the evolution of the assignment. As Table 2 suggests, the assignment grew more generic, from three ongoing participatory processes, to one shared real assignment, into prototypical situations. The three participatory processes, which we organized as part of our experiment, returned in all workshops, but each time took on another role. In workshop 1, the processes were the main focus of the collective reflections, in workshop 2 we mainly adopted the underlying participatory approach, whereas in workshop 3 we only used them to define prototypical situations and to validate the developed game-prototype. In hindsight, the role that 'a personal case' (i.e. a case of a participants) plays in a continuous learning process, could be used as indicator for the level of collective learning: the more participants are able to let go of their own case and the more energy they invest in collective reflections, the further they are in the 'learning about learning' process.

Secondly, we will look at the evolution of the agenda. A first observation is that each workshop extended the learning iteration with one extra step. A second observation is that workshop 1 followed the agenda quite neatly, workshop 2 reshuffled it slightly (with some groups conducting extra site visits and interviews) and workshop 3 almost put it aside (e.g. there was only 1 instead of 4 prototyping session). This increasing level of 'improvisation' stands in sharp contrast with the level of detail of the agendas, with workshop 3 being the most detailed. Could it be that the more confident participants grew with the concept of collective learning, the less they felt that they needed an agenda to structure their reflections?

Our third reflection looks at the evolution of the analytical frameworks. As we made clear in Table 2, each workshop resumed all frameworks from all previous workshops, plus one. This incremental approach helped to grow a common understanding, among the participants, of the underlying learning concepts. In the end, they were able to position these concepts against one another, pick out those concepts that helped them and develop an own vocabulary and framework around them. As pointed out, this incremental approach was planned at the start of the workshop trajectory. What was not planned is that, in the first two workshops, the frameworks were made operational for the participants, whereas in the final workshop the participants had to do this themselves, on the basis of a collective reading session. This change was triggered by the resistance, during workshop 2, to the rigid learning concepts and templates. In retrospect, the degree of operationality of the frameworks could be seen as a third indicator of collective learning: the less the participants depend on operational concepts and templates, the further they are in their learning process.

The fourth reflection looks at the evolution of the artefacts. These changed from templates into posters into prototyping material. Whereas the templates did work in workshop 1, they were considered too rigid in workshop 2. In reaction, the participants proposed to work with open posters. But, their open character made it difficult to document and compare insights. So, we decided to work with open-source prototyping material in workshop 3, so intuitive in use that it allowed for a diversity of explorations. This time, the participants agreed to collectively develop a new artefact, a game prototype, consisting of templates and rules to use the templates. So the trajectory started and ended with rigid artefacts, be it that the first one was introduced at the start of a workshop, whereas the last one was developed during a workshop. So maybe this continuous alteration between directive and open artefacts is an indicator of collective learning? At first a collective uses rigid templates to be able to have a conversation over individual experiences. At a later stage the collective develops their own templates to 'test' whether they are really developing a common learning language or not.

The last reflection looks at the evolution of the results. These grew more coherent and consistent: from three very detailed learning protocols for three separate social learning processes, to three fictional learning protocols for the same case, to one generic learning protocol (the game), formulated as a series of questions. Could it be that the degree of applicability could be yet another indicator of collective learning? The more the results relate to specific cases, and thus the lower the applicability, the less advanced the learning trajectory? And the more generic the results, and thus the more they can be applied to other cases, the further the participants are in their learning trajectory?

6. Conclusions

According to Albrechts (2004), the core of strategic planning lies in the making of tough decisions of what to (not) include in the planning process. To facilitate this decision making he proposes to organize planning processes along four tracks of which the two last ones involve learning. Albrechts (2004) envisages this learning as mundane activities blended with everyday practices. He remains rather vague on how to achieve this. A review of literature on lifelong professional learning argues that, in order to both empower individuals and collectives, we need to consciously integrate two approaches to collective reflection; one in which the participants learn by collectively experiencing a (planning) practice (i.e. track 3 – social learning) and one in which they learn from confronting this practice with other practices (i.e. track 4 – collective learning). We conducted an experiment to explore how planning professionals could start designing such integrated process and referred to it as Places for Continuous Learning. On the one hand, we set up a series of participatory processes tackling those 'though decisions' that are needed to strategically address the societal issue of retrofitting suburbia (i.e. track 3), and, on the other hand, we organized a series of Collective Learning Workshops for the main facilitators of the participatory processes to exchange experiences (i.e. track 4).

We conclude this article, not with a blueprint for how to implement the four tracks into planning practice, but rather with a set of indicators which can help individuals and collectives to check whether they are still learning. We propose to formulate these indicators as a series of questions, one for each of the reflections that we made when evaluating our experiment.

1. how attached is each participant to his/her personal case?

2. how close does the collective stick to the agenda of the learning activity?

3. how operational are the concepts that the collective discusses?

4: is the collective still exploring new artefacts?

5: how applicable are the results of the learning activity?

Learning collectives could ask themselves these questions, each time their dialogue gets stuck (track 4) or their practices are paused for too long (track 3). Depending on the answer, they could then decide to try out another learning method, supported by another type of assignment, a matching agenda, an extra analytical framework and supporting artefacts. In this way the collective can proceed their dialogue and continue their practices, in order to make the tough decisions that they are confronted with, either as a small community or as a society as a whole.

As a final note, we did engage a diverse public in our participatory processes, but only planning practitioners and academics in our workshops. This differs quite a bit from Albrechts's ambition to 'involve the broader public in major planning decisions' (2004). We are convinced that our main conclusions still hold when we would invite a more diverse public to our workshops. We only need to adapt the formats, artefacts, etc. And this is only a question of setting up more experiments.

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