

Articles

A Praxis Model of Program Planning

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ABSTRACT

Praxis, or reflective action, is at the heart of the program planning process. Planners are involved in a continual process of constructing and deconstructing planning activities, reflecting upon these activities, and renegotiating and analyzing these activities. The praxis model presented in this paper fosters a spirit of critical reflection and action in the planning process. It also recognizes that those involved in program planning come to appreciate that values, beliefs, ideologies, and contextual factors are not only constructed, but are also culturally transmitted, provisional, and relative. This awareness facilitates their challenge of the taken-for-grantedness of institutional settings within which program planning is practised, relationships are mediated, and political and economic agendas dominate.

RÉSUMÉ

La praxie ou l'action de réflexion, est au coeur du processus de planification de programmes. Les planificateurs participent à un processus continu de construction et de déconstruction, de réflexion, de remaniement et d'analyse des activités de planification. Le modèle de praxie présenté dans cet article favorise un esprit de réflexion et d'action critiques dans le processus de planification. Aussi ce modèle reconnaît-il que ceux participant à la planification de programmes découvrent que les valeurs, croyances, idéologies et facteurs contextuels sont non seulement construits mais aussi provisoires, relatifs et transmis culturellement. En étant conscients de cela, les planificateurs peuvent plus facilement surmonter leur défi de milieux institutionnels pris pour acquis et dans lesquels la planification de programmes est exercée, les relations sont raisonnées et les agendas politiques et économiques dominent.

A number of writers, including Pennington and Green (1976), Brookfield (1986), Kowalski (1988), and Cervero and Wilson (1994), contend that planners reject the “wholesale” use of planning models because of their uneven fit with practice; Brookfield (1986) describes this dichotomy as theory-practice disjunction. The prevailing literature in adult education adopts a particular view of practice that is linear, one dimensional, and technical (Apps, 1985; Sork & Buskey, 1986). However, as more is understood about the complex interaction and mutual interdependence of contextual and personal factors that influence practice—and by which practice is influenced—this view may need to give way to alternative approaches of planning practice. One such alternative approach (complex, indeterminate, and interdependent) for conceptualizing planning practice may be found in the praxis model that builds on the work of Schwab (1969), Freire (1970), Elbaz (1983), and Sloane-Seale (1994).

Specifically, the praxis model presented in this paper supports my research (Sloane-Seale, 1994). Accordingly, I argue that praxis, or reflective action, is at the heart of the program planning process. Planners are involved in a continual process of identifying, developing, and planning activities, that is, constructing and deconstructing, reflecting upon, and renegotiating and analyzing these activities. The praxis model fosters a spirit of critical reflection and action in the planning process. Through its use, those involved in the planning process come to appreciate that values, beliefs, ideologies, and contextual factors are not only constructed but also culturally transmitted, provisional, and relative. This awareness facilitates their challenge of the taken-for-grantedness of institutional settings within which program planning is practised, relationships are mediated, and political and economic agendas dominate.

This study describes and discusses the potential of a praxis model for conceptualizing planning practice. First, I review the purposes and method of the study. Second, I present the findings related to the praxis model, identifying the various aspects of the model and how these aspects interact with the planning components. Finally, after exploring the implications of the praxis model, I then make suggestions for further research and give my conclusions. Insight into the theory-practice relationship, an understanding of how planners construct their knowledge of planning practice, and some suggested strategies for the continuing professional development of practitioners are also provided.

PURPOSES

The objective of this study is to confirm our understanding of the kinds of practical knowledge that planners in university continuing education units find useful and relevant to their decision making in program planning. As such, the study focuses on how planners deal with the critical decision-making aspects of planning practice, and how they acquire their understanding of the planning process. Based on these understandings, the comprehensive framework of planning practice is confirmed.

METHOD

The study addresses the decision-making process in particular practice settings; therefore, the focus is on the what, how, when, and why of practice. These questions look at process, rather than outcome or product, and focus on the mutual interdependence and interrelatedness of all phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). The conceptual framework presented in this paper evolved as part of an interpretive study (Sloane-Seale, 1994). The current study builds on this interpretive approach and on qualitative methods that are consistent with the epistemological foundations of this perspective in order to examine the planning practices of planners and the reasons they give for their decisions. These methods assist in understanding, interpreting, and constructing the meaning of the conceptions of practical knowledge and the components of planning practice (Patton, 1980; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Using a field-tested questionnaire guide (Sloane-Seale, 1994), two telephone interviews (approximately two hours each) were conducted with each of the 20 participants (14 females and 6 males). Participants were randomly selected continuing educators from the member institutions of the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education (CAUCE). The study was conducted in two phases, for a total of 80 hours. In phase one, the questionnaire guide was used to collect information about participants' planning practices and to explore the reasons for their planning decisions. In phase two, questions that were not asked or answered in phase one were revisited, and clarification and elaboration were sought. The study emphasized the participants' accounts, reported in literary prose style (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

FINDINGS

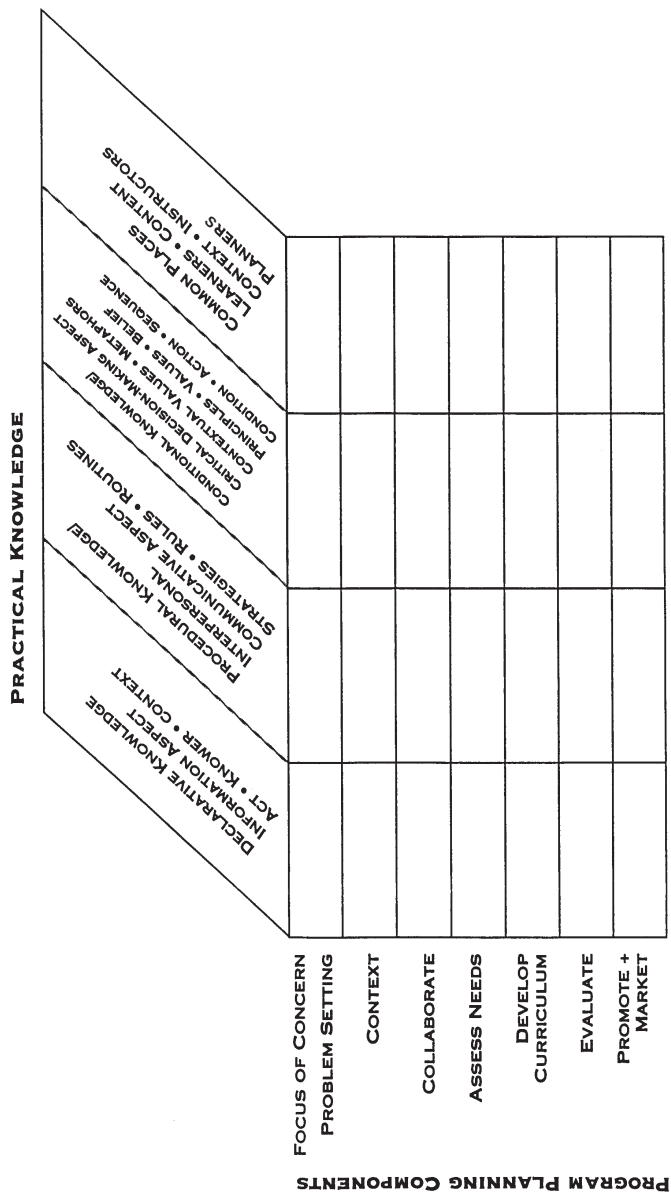
All of the participants held program development and administrative responsibilities; their research responsibilities (albeit broadly defined) counted for one-third of their portfolio. Of the 14 females, 9 held master's degrees, 3 held doctoral degrees, and 2 held bachelor's degrees. In contrast, of the 6 males, 3 held doctoral degrees, while the other 3 held a minimum of a master's degree. The degrees held by all 20 planners were distributed among the disciplines of education (including adult education), business administration, and the arts. The majority held degrees in education and business administration, with a few in the field of adult education. These demographics appear to be consistent with trends in the field of adult education that suggest many continuing educators who enter the field are from other disciplines, and males are often older and more educated than females (Apps, 1985). Conversely, females are younger and not as educated as their male colleagues.

THE PRAXIS MODEL

Because practical knowledge is understood to have an important influence on practice, for the purposes of this study it is defined as knowledge that continuing educators find useful and relevant to their decision making in practice. Practical knowledge is viewed not simply as "know-how" but also as containing both an aspect of theoretical knowledge and the continuing educators' personal and contextually related capabilities (for example, their intimate knowledge of their organizational context) (Sloane-Seale, 1994; Sternberg & Caruso, 1985).

The data also supported the three major aspects of practical knowledge (information or declarative, interpersonal communicative or procedural, and critical decision making or conditional) that describe effective planning practice, as previously reported by Sloane-Seale (1994). These aspects, extrapolated from the data (Firestone, 1993), were consistent with participants' accounts and reflected their methods of rendering their decisions as rational actions. In this regard, the following praxis model (Figure 1), which evolved from my previous research (Sloane-Seale, 1994) and which has been confirmed in the current study, is delineated and discussed.

Figure 1
A PRAXIS MODEL OF PROGRAM PLANNING



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Practical Knowledge - Horizontal Axis

As portrayed in Figure 1, the three aspects of practical knowledge (information, interpersonal communicative, and critical decision making) are presented on the horizontal axis. In addition, the last cell on this axis contains a component entitled the "common places" (learners, content, context, instructors, and planners). This component was supported by previous works (Schwab, 1969; Sloane-Seale 1994) and was seen as an important element of good planning practice in the eyes of the participant planners. On the whole, these planners indicated that planning practice revolved around the following key elements: "... the content to be presented, the learners to be served, the context in which the program is delivered, the instructors to deliver the content, and the planners to bring together these elements into an integrated meaningful learning activity."

Program Planning Components - Vertical Axis

The majority of the planning components represented on the vertical axis are consistent with those identified in the adult education literature (Sork & Buskey, 1986). Nevertheless, some of the components have received little discussion in the program planning literature in adult education, even though they were found to be critical to "good" planning practice and were supported by this study's data and previous research (Sloane-Seale, 1994); these included a "focus of concern," "problem setting," "context," and "collaboration."

According to the planners, "... a focus of concern speaks to a catalyst around which a planning activity is normally initiated, and the problem setting is the action that they undertake to define the focus of concern." They indicated that the context refers to both internal and external organizational and environmental factors. For example, the internal context was seen by this group to consist of the mandate of the unit, the financial requirements for cost recovery and contribution to the parent institution, the types of programs offered and the learners served, and the qualifications and knowledge of staff. In contrast, the external environmental factors they indicated included "... reduced government funding, competition from other providers, globalization of the economy, and technological change."

The study suggests that these factors not only have an enormous impact on program planning activities, but also define the nature of collaboration, partnership, cooperation, and /or competition with other units, organizations, community groups, and professional associations that affect

the working relationships whereby planning practices are constructed. These internal and external arrangements were often viewed by these planners as “strategic alliances” to be renegotiated to reap benefits (students, revenue, facilities, human and nonhuman resources, status, domain, power) from the environment. A “win-win” philosophy (consistent with the guiding principles of the field) was the *modus operandi* for the majority of those planners who engaged in collaborative activities.

Information Aspect of Practical Knowledge

As identified in Figure 1, practical knowledge consists of three interrelated and interdependent aspects of knowledge: information; interpersonal communicative; and critical decision making (Sloane-Seale, 1994). The data in this present study confirmed that in the information aspect, the planners “. . . collect, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate data related to the planning situation.” In order to assess the needs of a particular program or to select and identify content for a curriculum, these planners engaged in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing information directly from theoretical sources. For instance, some planners reported that they “. . . research materials on needs assessment, or take a course or workshop on the topic.” Others indicated that they collect information on needs and needs assessment indirectly from “. . . discussions with colleagues and peers” or tacitly from their “. . . own experiences, by trial and error, and/or observation over time.” One planner indicated that she works with content specialists to select and identify content for the curriculum. These data describe the situation, rather than tell planners “what should be done” or “what ought to be done.” The planners then use their values, beliefs, judgements, and understandings of the situation to make decisions about what needs should be met and what content should be selected and offered.

Interpersonal Communicative Aspect of Practical Knowledge

In the interpersonal communicative aspect, planners interact and communicate with colleagues and others to identify, develop, learn, or use strategies related to the situation. For example, these planners “. . . examine, understand, and interpret existing policies and procedures of the organization.” They also develop new strategies or use existing ones to assess learners’ needs and to select and identify content for the curriculum. One planner “. . . modifies and uses existing needs assessment instruments and strategies to assess learners’ needs.” Or, based on the context, another planner “. . . offers an activity as a trial pilot project to assess the needs for a program.” In this phase, planners use “how-to” knowledge of rules,

routines, and strategies to develop and use methods for assessing learners' needs and to identify content for programs. As well, they use their own interpersonal communicative knowledge, skills, and abilities to facilitate the process.

Critical Decision-Making Aspect of Practical Knowledge

Through the focused probing of the reasons behind decisions, important components of the critical decision-making aspect were identified, including the planners' understanding of economic, educational, political, and social values as they affect their planning practice. Also brought to bear on their planning practice, either implicitly or explicitly, were their "... principles of practice, educational philosophy, guiding metaphors, moral values, and the ideological character of knowledge."

As an example, based on a "grass roots" needs assessment process, a planner decides a program is required to address the needs of a group of Aboriginal students. However, the planner argues that a "... number of support systems and services (such as study skills, buddy systems, and child care) are required to ensure that these learners succeed within the formal institutional structure." Moreover, because of the financial constraints of the unit, decisions regarding "... social and moral values versus economic values have to be traded off." A learner-focused approach that not only starts with learners' needs but also views learners as a rich resource for learning is also critical for successful learning and teaching, as is a belief that "... teaching and learning is a two-way street."

Although these often problematic and contextual aspects of planning practice have received little attention in the adult education literature, they may be critical to planning practice (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Kowalski, 1988; Pennington & Green, 1976; Sloane-Seale, 1994). In this critical decision-making aspect, the planners in this study made decisions about "what ought to be done" or "what should be done" based on a process of challenging, reflecting on, making sense of, judging, and weighing the collected information, given their understanding of contextual factors and their own capabilities, values, beliefs, metaphors and principles of practice, and educational philosophy.

Nature of the Praxis Model

In the praxis model, based on declarative knowledge (information aspect), procedural knowledge of strategies, rules, and routines of practice (interpersonal communicative aspect), and conditional knowledge of

contextual understandings, judgement, and values (critical decision-making aspect), these planners mediated the gap between “what is” and “what ought to be,” that is, the theory and practice relationship, or the science and art of planning practice. These components of the praxis model are interactive, dynamic, and interdependent; as well, there is no specific start or end point in the model.

For instance, planning practice may begin with a “focus of concern” over declining enrolment and a concomitant decline in revenues in an existing program that lead a planner to investigate further to “define the problem.” In this regard, a planner with little knowledge, experience, and expertise of the evaluation literature and strategies may engage in research, reading, and a literature review to evaluate the program. More information may be collected by consulting with colleagues, peers, and others on the topic of evaluation (the information aspect).

The planner may also try to determine the policies, rules, and routines of the organization regarding evaluation practices. Identifying formal or informal strategies for collecting data from learners, instructors, advisory committee members, and relevant others (the interpersonal communicative aspect) and collecting, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating the data (the information aspect) are approaches that may be used.

Finally, the planner may try to understand the problem, weigh the evidence, judge contextual factors and personal values and beliefs, and try to make the best decision to either continue or cut the program given the data, strategies, and needs of learners, organization, and community (the critical decision-making aspect).

These interrelated, dynamic, and interdependent aspects may also operate independently. For instance, experienced planners may “. . . short circuit some of the finer details” of information or interpersonal communicative aspects and go directly to the critical decision-making aspect, and then “backtrack” to the information or interpersonal communicative aspects. In short, these planners often engage in a process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing planning activities to arrive at defensible conclusions in planning programs for adults. These activities suggest that effective planning practice requires a wide repertoire of knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

In spite of the importance of planning practice to the field of adult education, there has been little available data on the actual planning

practices of practitioners, on their strategies for their professional development related to learning and improving their practices, and on how they align their planning practices with theories in the field. The data of this study suggest that effective program planning may include defining and setting the problem, understanding the context, collaborating with partners, assessing needs, developing curriculum, evaluating programs, and promoting and marketing programs. To accomplish these planning activities, the planners in this study use a wide knowledge base to facilitate their practice, which requires a minimum level of education and expertise as described in the following section.

Educational Knowledge

The majority of the planners in this study recommended that a “. . . minimum level of a masters degree in education (with a major in adult education) or business administration” is necessary for effective planning practice. Given the changing nature of planning practice and contextual factors that impact planning, knowledge from both fields seems to be required. Also, a “doctoral degree should be required for those who intend to teach and conduct research in addition to program development.” However, since teaching/program development and research are broadly defined in practice, these planners believed that, at the very least, the knowledge, skills, and abilities related to research practices are essential for good planning practice. Their final suggestion was that “critical, soft (management and communication) skills and abilities” are important to effective planning practice.

Soft Skills and Abilities

In regard to management knowledge, the planners indicated that important knowledge, skills, and abilities include, at the very least, an understanding of finance and budgeting. The ability to both understand and apply marketing concepts and to develop marketing plans that include a motivational orientation to learning and marketing data (demographics, geographics, and psychographics) are also essential for effective practice. With respect to communication and interpersonal skills, “. . . negotiation skills, along with political and strategic alliances abilities,” were seen to be critical. Finally, the data suggested it is taken for granted that planning practice requires knowledge of adult education, including the history of the field, the principles of adult education, adult learning theories, curriculum development, and an articulated philosophy of education.

This study reveals the implications of this shift in perspective on planning practice, as well as the impact of contextual and personal values on models of practice. For instance, based on an understanding and an interaction of the contextual and personal factors, a planner adopts a learner-, content-, or problem- (or eclectic approach) focused approach to planning practice. Further, the study suggests a comprehensive praxis model that includes a dynamic, interactive, interdependent process involving the components of planning and the planners' theoretical knowledge, skills, and abilities. These findings, grounded in the realities of day-to-day practice, integrate and summarize a wealth of planning experiences from which other practitioners can benefit. This study also provides direction for professional development for planners.

IMPLICATIONS

The study data suggest some implications of the praxis model for planners' ways of learning, for their critical practice, and for a deliberative planning process. Adult educators may find the praxis model useful not only for understanding models in the field, but also for making explicit their own implicit models of practice. Moreover, practitioners and researchers, through the use of the praxis model, may find a common language of discourse for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Planners' Ways of Learning

In regard to planners' ways of knowing, the data suggest that planners use a number of formal and informal strategies to acquire knowledge of planning practice. These strategies include: conducting research, reading books, taking courses; consulting with peers, colleagues, content experts, and others; using trial-and-error methods based on experience, role modelling, and observation; problem solving and experimenting; and coaching and mentoring. Planners may use one, all, or a combination of these interrelated and dynamic approaches, depending on their level of expertise, knowledge, and experience, and on the situational context. Because planners are normally in a specific planning situation, informal strategies are often their preferred mode of acquiring knowledge about the specific planning component and the cluster of activities related to planning.

Therefore, for an efficient and effective planning practice, planners are required to be, at the very least, self-starters, creative, innovative, flexible,

and resourceful. Since the acquisition of knowledge of planning practice is normally done on the job, a nurturing and supportive teaching and learning environment is conducive to acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities of “good” planning practice; such a supportive structure for continuing professional development therefore becomes a critical function of the continuing education unit. This structure may include financial support and encouragement for attending professional development opportunities, for developing and presenting ideas at conferences, and for coaching and mentoring systems within the unit.

Critical Practice

A body of knowledge has been identified as important for effective and efficient practice (Daniel & Rose, 1982; Rossman & Bunning, 1978). Houle (1980) and the Council of Europe (1980) have identified the need for this body of knowledge to address practitioners’ personal and professional educational needs; building on this, Brookfield (1986) stressed an educational agenda that fosters critical thinking. Even so, the importance of a body of knowledge that incorporates a discussion of practical knowledge of planning practices has been largely ignored in the continuing education of planners.

The study data suggest that a body of knowledge that fails to include aspects of practical knowledge is limited. In contrast, a model that makes explicit the information, interpersonal communicative, and critical decision-making aspects of planning (that is, the what, how, why, and when of planning practice) facilitates informed practice.

The aspects of practice that relate to ethical decisions in daily practice (that is, personal codes of ethics that conflict with organizational policies of cost recovery and income generation) are also often ignored in the literature (Apps, 1985; Singarella & Sork, 1983). Thus, a planning model that requires planners to identify the relevant facts, anticipate and generate alternatives, evaluate their consequences to solutions, and choose the “best” solution (the critical decision-making aspect of planning practice) not only facilitates ethical practice, but also reveals the extent to which planning practice conforms to ethical standards and helps establish guidelines for ethical practice.

In this process, the important role of values in planning practice becomes explicit. Values help to shape self-image and the perceptions of practice, as well as influencing personal and institutional goals that enable planners to determine the appropriate goals to pursue and the procedures to achieve

them. An articulation of values helps identify the conflicting values and goals of both the planner and the institution, helps challenge the myths and assumptions inherent in practice and forms of institutional structures, and leads to critical practice. The ideological character of knowledge also suggests the need to expose practice to scrutiny in order to uncover implicit political agendas.

Deliberative Planning Process

This study suggests that this group of planners engage in a process of deliberative practical planning, which is understood as a human endeavour whose goal is to make the “best” decision based on an interlinking of theory and practice. This approach stresses that the complexity of planning is irreducible to technical rules, and it offers a comprehensive alternative framework for understanding the contextual and problematic nature of planning practice. These planners do not exclusively use any one model of planning (Schwab, 1969; Sloane-Seale, 1994); the traditional model, which represents one approach, does not serve the varied purposes of continuing education. Each approach suggests a different perspective on teaching and learning and on planning (Apps, 1985; Habermas, 1972), and a variety of approaches, based on deliberative practical planning, was employed by the planners in this study.

They deliberatively (intentional, systematic, and emergent) plan programs by shaping planning approaches to particular situations and purposes through their practical knowledge and the common places (learners, content, context, instructors, and self). A recognition of the uniqueness, complexity, and uncertainty of planning situations and the varied purposes of continuing education suggests that these different planning approaches must inform curriculum study. The praxis model incorporates both an understanding of these approaches and a framework for curriculum study.

This shift in perspective of planning practice is rooted in an interpretive paradigm that emphasizes the indeterminate and contingent (versus the certain and predictable) nature of planning practice. This shift also indicates the need for an understanding of perspectives (including positivist and critical) and the development of skills related to adaptability and flexibility that may be consistent with planning practice. It not only builds on the theoretical formulations of Houle (1972) and Boyle (1981) and the findings of Burnham (1988) and Sloane-Seale (1994) that indicate that the highly complex planning process presents a contrast to the simplistic and sometimes stark models of planning found in the literature, but also

suggests a language of discourse that may realistically and meaningfully represent planning practice and acknowledge its complexities. This language and its concepts may prepare planners with the insights to deal with the complexity, indeterminacy, and contingency of planning practice. As well, practical knowledge and its associated mode of understanding link the study of adult education with its practice.

The praxis model describes one way that this knowledge may be identified, described, and acquired. A description of this knowledge provides a comprehensive framework to address the complexities of practice. An examination of the three kinds of practical knowledge and their acquisition provides insight into the knowledge base of planners and associated planning processes, and it suggests a baseline of knowledge for planning practice.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study delineates practical knowledge as an essential part of planning practice that shapes that practice. Of particular interest are the interactive and dynamic relationship of the three kinds of knowledge that define practical knowledge and the way in which planners acquire and use this knowledge for practical purposes. Of further importance are the nature and character of the planning context, along with the interdependent character of planning. Thus, practical knowledge and deliberative planning are essential components of "good" planning practice. The nature of planning is also characterized by indeterminacy and contingency (complex, unique, and uncertain practice situations), which suggests a view of planning different from the prevailing one of certainty and predictability.

Based on what has been described in this study, further studies are needed to reveal the implications of this shift in perspective on planning practice, as well as the impact of contextual and personal values on practice. Given this shift in perspective, what new knowledge, skills, and abilities would planners require? Is the mark of an expert planner the selection of a view of planning that is consistent with a specific situation and specific learners? What is the relationship between a formal coaching and mentoring approach and an orientation system on planning practice? Finally, the study points to the contextual and problematic nature of planning and the ethical, moral, and ideological character of practice. Conceptual analysis that explores the ideological character of practice may illuminate how various forms of knowledge are controlled and maintained,

as well as an ethical model for practice. These endeavours are important to the study of adult education and planning practice.

CONCLUSION

The study promotes a fresh look at planning practice. It confirms that planning contains generic components that can be isolated, anticipated, and manipulated regardless of contextual and personal factors. It challenges the prevailing assumptions (predictability and certainty) associated with a traditional view of planning practice, while demonstrating that planning practice is an indeterminate, complex, and contingent process that involves judgement and values. Finally, the study suggests a need for a shift towards a more comprehensive framework of planning practice—an intentional, systematic, and emergent process informed by practical knowledge in which deliberation is central and leads to ethical and moral planning decisions. The praxis model offers the potential for such a comprehensive framework of practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to recognize Dr. W. S. Griffith, my thesis advisor, for his contribution to my work.

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