Community engagement and student supervision: The experience, the learning and the politics

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Introduction

This paper reports on the author's experience while organising a collaborative learning and teaching exercise with the shire council of Goomalling, a small town in Western Australia's rural wheatbelt settings. The exercise involved over thirty undergraduate planning students and two academics from Curtin University engaging in a planning exercise with the small rural community during the first half of 2007. The opportunity came about when the shire council's CEO approached the university seeking help in deciding the fate of the Throssell Street site, a piece of land marked for development on the edge of its township. The council offered logistical support in the form of arranging and providing transport, accommodation and meals during the field visits. This led to students of the Planning Report unit looking into the problem as part of their coursework requirements with a view to facilitate the resolution of the planning dilemma.

The Planning Report is a third year undergraduate core unit that aims to develop students' skills for the preparation, undertaking and presentation of collective research on a planning topic and then to synthesise and present the research and findings in a comprehensive planning report. Students are required to observe and describe a real-life case, reporting on the various processes carried out in completing the assigned task. Students are required to study, analyse and synthesise discrete research on an issue and present that in a comprehensive planning report. It is intended to emphasize to students the various skills involved in carrying out independent research and its reporting as they follow a directed and structured research agenda and prepare a finished report on predetermined research topic and research questions.

The nature of the planning problem that Goomalling presented provided a good opportunity to emphasize the aspect of community involvement in problem identification and its analysis. In order to acquire an insight into the local problem, extensive interaction with both the shire council staff and the local community was sought in addition to library research. The community engagement component was thus emphasized in the developing of the brief for the collaborative exercise. It was decided that students should be allowed to engage with the community under minimal supervision, having been given the basic direction for the investigation. The challenge for the students was to report on their findings from library research as well as their interaction with the community in a technical report and using the information gained through the experience to develop solutions to the problem identified.

The students' involvement in the task spread across the semester and included two separate visits to the area and the holding of extensive meetings with the community, including a community visioning exercise and a follow-up meeting. Students researched social, economic and environmental issues affecting the overall region while the complexities of the controversy surrounding the subject site were

investigated through contact with the council staff and the local community. The relationship between the local community and its leadership was also investigated.

Before embarking on the collaborative learning exercise, the author (unit coordinator) met with the CEO of Goomalling to clarify the expectations of both the university and the council shire. The CEO conveyed the council's desire "to have a fresh set of eyes look at the issue and recommend how to deal with the site". This was followed by writing up a task brief detailing the terms of reference for the exercise/ project. It was agreed that the group of students enrolled in Planning Report unit will carry out independent research, engaging with the community in the process. The deliverables thus included a report to be submitted to the council that would seek to define the problem, present background information and analysis of the issues involved and provide a set of options that could be considered for dealing with the site.

In addition to these deliverables to the council, each student was required to prepare a full report defining the problem, explaining the issues and suggesting alternative options to resolve the controversy over the subject site. This report was not to be provided to the council but formed a major assessment component for the unit. The assessment criteria for this component focused on report writing skills related to the

structure, layout and logical consistency of the report, emphasizing the need for clarity and articulation of ideas.

The council through its CEO offered to introduce the student group to representatives of both sides of the debate over the within the community over the controversial site, including special interest groups and volunteer associations such as the Tidy Towns Committee and local nature conservation groups. The community engagement process was well publicised by the council and the number of participants in the community meetings was significant with over 60 community members drawn from a total population of 1200 for the entire shire.

The aim of the collaborative exercise was to facilitate discussion within the community about relevant issues and prevalent view points. It was intended to help the community, including the council, move towards the resolution of the problem from a triple bottom line perspective, in line with the council's stated policy objective. The collaborative exercise provided an opportunity for students to facilitate the community's investigation of various aspects of the problem and their interpretation so that the problem of dealing with the subject site could be resolved. The exercise by itself was, however, envisaged as a small part of the larger process of the community's search for acceptable consensus solutions. The main learning outcome for students participating in the exercise was envisaged in the form of valuable hands on experience of dealing with the community in real-life settings and reporting on the information gained through the experience in a structured planning report.

In the following sections, the paper will highlight the pragmatic, logistic and political considerations that shaped this exercise in collaborative learning. It will also describe the changing dynamics between participants during the course of the community engagement activities. The paper seeks to draw useful lessons from the experience for planning academics.

Theoretical framework

Collaborative planning is widely recognised as an effective means of bringing stakeholders together to resolve planning issues and to enhance deliberative learning (Healey 1998; Innes and Booher 1999; Margerum 2002). Collaborative and deliberative planning rely on effective communication and are compatible with 'communicative rationality', such as the principles of 'ideal speech' promoted by Habermas. One of the major strengths of this approach to planning is that it allows planners and the community to approach the problem from the same perspective of learning and discovery. It also tends to remove notions of hierarchy or expert status assumed by planners by demystifying the process.

This approach to planning emphasizes enhanced learning through collaboration. The planner's role as an expert is mostly replaced with that of a moderator and facilitator who pursues consensus through effective communication and dialogue. In seeking to promote a consensus view, collaborative planning could promote power sharing between all actors. Margerum (2002: 250) reports from literature "that consensus is important for effective process and to ensure that a substantial minority is not ignored". He goes on to qualify this by adding that "many authors suggest that complete consensus is not required" (Margerum 2002). In short, while recognizing that full consensus may not always be feasible, collaboration aims for consensus rather than settling for a majority view to ensure that inclusion within the community is maximised.

The case for linking planning education with practice is well established (Gunder 2002; Auffrey and Romanos 2001; Minnery 2000). Integrating planning practice and planning education helps to address the needs of the employers, community and the profession. Minnery (2000) argues that incorporating practice in planning education can provide the students with the opportunity to understand the work environment and help improve the planning system, contribute to developing and enhancing planning theories based on practical experiences, and fulfill the needs of the community and profession. Gunder (1998; 2002), similarly argues that planning education should promote students' understanding of human values, local truths and power in day to day life of professional practice while developing their creative abilities.

Benefits from using a collaborative approach in the professional context have also been extended to planning education and teaching. The collaborative approach to learning/ teaching is one where "dialogue is the principle mode of discourse" (Peters and Armstrong 1998), as in the case of collaborative and communicative modes of planning practice.

Students seem to gain more by collaborative learning than from traditional individual learning. Teaching in collaboration with external actors provides opportunities for students' exposure to actors in different contexts and to real life politics. Social interaction resulting from collaboration could therefore lead to advanced cognitive development, promoting higher academic achievement (Bosworth and Hamilton 1994; Bruffee 1999; Haynes 2002).

Collaborative learning can also serve to meet the 'community service' commitment of universities, often written into their mission statements. 'Community service learning'

focuses on the potential for mutual benefits for the university as well as the community. It envisages students going out into the community for enhanced student learning and the application of classroom theories in a real-world area (Roakes and Norris-Tirrel 2000). For planning academics this provides a great opportunity to expose students to real-life contexts. It allows students to undertake real-life learning-by-doing community engagement exercises while still under academic supervision with the possibility for guidance to be given as required.

Communities also benefit from such collaboration with universities. They stand to gain free or affordable professional advice and services from an independent third party that has sufficient collective expertise and is free from the influence of established power structures. Collaborative partnerships between universities and communities are thus advocated as a means to address community problems. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the US maintains that such partnerships benefit communities with limited resources by helping them to understand and improve their condition (US HUD 1999). The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Outreach Partnerships Centers Program has funded ninety-five universities as a way to develop linkages between universities and communities to solve urgent urban problems through research, outreach and exchange of information.

Participating students have been reported to pick up numerous skills useful to planners, such as those related to interpersonal dealings, group building and group management, inquiry, conflict resolution, synthesis and presentation of information (Bosworth and Hamilton 1994). More significantly in holistic terms, collaborative teaching/ learning is believed to better prepare students for the "real world" by teaching them the craft of interdependence (Bruffee 1999).

Collaborative learning/ teaching - benefits and limitations

To summarise, there are many benefits associated with this approach to planning education that places academic learning activity in a real setting similar to what practitioners may find themselves in. It offers a pragmatic way to address the theory-practice gap by incorporating community engagement into the curriculum, providing opportunities for learning-by-doing exercises for students. One of the most important assumptions underlying collaborative learning is that "knowledge is created through interaction, not transferred from teacher to student" (Enerson *et al.* 1997: 54). In planning education, this allows students to take the initiative in undertaking community engagement exercises in real-life contexts while still having access to academic supervision and guidance, either from the group body or the lecturer, as required.

Additionally, it can yield benefits for the client community. As the US HUD approach of promoting partnerships seems to imply, a community may be in need of professional advice to resolve a planning issue but may either not have access to the services of a public agency planner or may find private consultancy unaffordable. Collaborative learning exercises allow the community to be taken through democratic and consensus-building processes. It is implied that the mere act of engaging in such processes could work towards empowering communities to influence prevalent power relations.

However, collaborative learning/ teaching also has its limitations, similar to those found in the application of collaborative planning principles in professional practice. Baum (2000) points to gaps between the rhetoric and realities in university-community partnerships and emphasizes the need for starting partnerships with clarity in outcomes and resources while maintaining flexibility in the processes. It is very possible that the partners do not achieve the expected outcomes that have brought them to work together in the first place.

Current approaches, such as collaborative and communicative planning, suggest planning practitioners should be able to situate themselves within the context of the problem and engage with the community as facilitators, bringing various stakeholders together and guiding them to search for consensus solutions. However, in his study of twenty cases across Australia and the US where communities have engaged in collaborative planning, Margerum (2002) concluded that consensus was difficult to achieve. In reality, dealing with community still remains a difficult issue for many planners and it is a difficult skill to teach to students. Moreover, with considerably less controlled conditions compared to the lecture room or studio, and the element of spontaneity and unpredictability associated with community presence, a range of new challenges related to academic supervision appear.

The very strengths of this approach of teaching could also lead to difficulties. For example, collaborative learning/ teaching approach requires that "teachers must leave center stage and give up what Jane Tompkins has termed the 'performance model' of teaching, wherein classroom activity focuses on showing the students how smart, knowledgeable, and well-prepared the teacher is." (Enerson *et al.*1997: 54). Collaborative learning removes the teacher from the centre stage into a back seat, where the teacher facilitates rather than

performs, concentrating on creating a context within which active learning through discovery can take place. This demands a loose enough format to allow for spontaneity and variation the delivery of the content.

As students venture out into the community, external and independent actors provide the essentials of the real-life context and its power structures. It brings in spontaneity and variety that may inspire creativity and innovation. From the teachers' point of view, this also means lesser control on the extent to which the content is covered while the processes are emphasized. This makes the management of the learning sessions more difficult as unexpected developments and encounters can create delays and deviations for course objectives.

The promise held by US HUD approach to helping communities through partnerships with universities also needs to be treated with caution. It could be used by governments to cut costs by establishing dual standards based on the communities' resourcefulness. Under-resourced communities could thus receive student based or 'experimental' planning input in place of professional planning consultancies reserved to service the more resourceful communities.

Venturing out into the community

A day-long field trip to Goomalling, organised earlier in the semester, served as a reconnaissance survey. Students carried out a tree count on the Throssell Street site, plotting the locations of the red morrels and salmon gum trees. Volunteers from a local environmental group assisted students in identifying the various species of flora found on the site. Later, students attended a meeting with the community where representatives of proponents and opponents of proposed development on the subject site made presentations.

A three-day trip was undertaken later in the semester during which students conducted a number of community engagement exercises and workshops. The planned structured activities included presentations by the shire council CEO, councillors, members of the community and some representatives of interest groups and community associations. A well-attended community visioning workshop was led by the lecturers, with students facilitating the community members at the tables. Each table had three students, one serving as a scribe and two as facilitators. Students also served as resource persons. A number of brainstorming exercises and short problem-solving tasks were used conducted to encourage the community to move towards a shared vision. During the community visioning exercise, deliberate effort was made to promote consensus rather than opting for majority decisions. It was stated at the start of the community visioning exercise that it would deal with broader issues and medium to long term strategies rather than trying to solve the imminent controversy over particular development proposals.

The lecturers felt that the exercise went very well, providing an invaluable opportunity for students to get some first-hand experience in facilitating the exercise. The response of the community was reassuring as they seemed to participate with positive interest and most of them stayed back afterwards and chatted with students and lecturers. Students showed a great deal of enthusiasm and initiative for the tasks. For example, when they learnt about

some alternative sites with residential development potential they requested the shire council CEO to arrange a tour of the sites.

As an unexpected development, the author (lecturer) was approached by two representatives of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) staff who wished to make a presentation to the students. The students had just broken up into groups to work on finalising their preferred option for the subject site and to prepare presentation material. In view of the request, students were rounded up for the presentation. The WWF representatives used the opportunity to make a strong case for protecting the red morrel trees by disallowing any development on the subject site.

During the first two days, some students had been individually approached by various groups within the community who tried to convince them to support their position on the controversial site. This is an important point to note because there were ample opportunities for anyone or any group to approach the entire group of students (including the academics) outside the formal interactive sessions as the student group was stationed at one of the central community facilities for most of the time. Some groups, however, approached smaller groups of students in the streets or around the

pub. The lecturers made no attempt to intervene or regulate these contacts, mainly because they came to know about it very late. Even if regulation was possible, it was never intended to discourage such interaction but rather to keep track of the groups and their view points so that they could be included in the deliberations within the larger students' group.

The study area

Our collaborative learning/ teaching exercise was based around Goomalling shire, a typical small town in the wheatbelt about a two-hour drive away from Perth. The town has a grid-iron layout with wide streets. The shire's retail and community infrastructure are located on the main street parallel to the railway line that defines the north edge of the township. Almost the entire housing stock of the 300 to 400 dwelling units housing around 600 people comprises of single storey, detached units. All homes in the township are located within a ten-minute walking distance from community facilities. The local sporting facilities and clubs are generally of a better quality from among those commonly found in most wheatbelt towns with the town also boasting a swimming pool and go-kart track. The rest of the shire is populated by another 600 people living on farm properties scattered around the shire, taking the total shire population to around 1200.

Between 2001 and 2006, a slight decline in the number of houses was recorded (ABS 2006), however, the decline seems to have halted by now. While the "dying small town syndrome" has been reported in the wheatbelt, this town represents a small town community with a generally positive outlook. The shire council wishes to maintain the town's economic viability. It has also stated its intention to be guided by a commitment to the triple bottom line planning principles.

Socio-economic and demographic aspects

A survey of local businesses in 2006 found the shire's business community having a fairly upbeat assessment of its economic prospects, reporting that they were fully capitalised for the market (Shire of Goomalling 2006). The study concluded that population growth was necessary to provide the required incentive for growth and diversification of economy. Finding skilled workers locally was nominated as the most significant problem that businesses encountered.

Goomalling is by no means a sleepy backward town. Through community initiative and drive and a strong sense of volunteerism, the community regularly enters the 'Tidy Towns' competition each year, boasting some successes in recent years. It has also applied for and received State government funds for the restoration of a historic building in the township. It recently organised a study undertaken by students from another Perth based university to assess its potential to re-invent itself as a tourist destination and diversify its economic base.

The shire, however, has an aging population and decreasing young adult population typical of small wheatbelt towns. Lack of education and employment opportunities within the town tend to prompt younger members of the community to move to regional centres, usually not to return. The concern about the impacts of a decline in the town's population figured prominently during our interviews with the locals. This

issue was seen in terms of the difficulty of finding both skilled tradespersons and unskilled labour locally. The reason generally regarded as being responsible for the failure to attract outsiders into the area for employment and to retain the local youth, is the severe shortage of accommodation, especially the difficulty to find rental properties.

Social capital

There is a high degree of community interaction within the shire area and the social capital built over the years has resulted in a strong 'can-do' attitude, which community members strongly identify with and are proud of. The sense of voluntarism and community participation is evident within sporting groups, community groups, events organisation and working groups/committees. Strong connections exist between the township population and the local farming industry, businesses and service providers. A report on the shire's economic development strategy commissioned by the shire states that these connections are reinforced by an 'approachable' council which provides strong leadership, guides many projects to benefit the community, while empowering townspeople to positively contribute to the town (Shire of Goomalling 2006). The report claims that the close-knit nature of the community and their ability to show 'spirited endeavour' reflects the values that enabled the town's early development and therefore holds a special place in the local community's psyche. This community capacity is also believed to give Goomalling a comparative advantage over many other wheatbelt towns, which has played a role in its ability to attract facilities, external support and economic activity (Shire of Goomalling 2006).

Historically, when the last private commercial bank packed up its operation and left the town, the community rallied together and backed the council's call to set up a community (cooperative) bank, being only the second town in the region to do so. They also managed to secure and successfully maintain the services of a 24-hour medical facility within the town.

A study found the shire to be among the more proactive ones in the Avon Valley in terms of encouraging the growth of tourism in the area (Batt, M. *et al.* 2004). Recently, the Goomalling shire council arranged for a group of university students to assess the town's tourism potential of Goomalling. The collaborative learning exercise reported in this paper, has also come about from a similar initiative taken by the council's CEO.

The controversial site

The Shire Council is faced with a dilemma about a parcel of land it owns on the edge of the township, commonly referred to as the Throssell Street site. The land, zoned low density residential, was demarcated into 35 lots in 1972 and a sewerage connection subsequently extended to the site in 1978. The subdivision was approved and incorporated into the town planning scheme (TPS) for Goomalling township. However, due to a gradual population decline in the following years, the site was left undeveloped. In 2005, as the population stabilized, the council considered to develop and bring the lots into the market.

The survey commissioned by theCcouncil

The council maintains that additional housing is a prerequisite to an increased population which would facilitate economic expansion and ensure the retention and expansion of social services within Goomalling. In view of this, the council began to move to bring the 35 residential lots into the market in 2006. However, it became aware of resistance within the community to the proposed development. This prompted the council to carry out an opinion survey within the community about whether or not to proceed with the development of the site. The survey elicited a mixed response from the community, with slightly more respondents in opposition to the proposal to develop the site than those in its favour. However, the council ruled that survey results were invalid due to the very low rate of return of the survey questionnaire.

In rendering the survey results invalid, the council also noted that some members of the community complained that the background information sent along with the survey questionnaire was rather heavily biased towards the option of not developing the site. Even a cursory look at the quality and content of the background material sent out with the survey questionnaire clearly shows which of the two sides had the more articulate author(s). The fact that the council allowed for extensive and extremely well-articulated documentation to be presented by the side that were seemingly opposed to its point of view while allowing those supporting its view to supply sketchy documentation is interesting. Perhaps the council did not expect any breadth of support to the views of one or two members within the community to amount to any significant opposition.

Subsequently, in 2007, the Council approached Curtin University for help in resolving the controversy. The stated purpose of the shire was to bring in a neutral third party to take a fresh look at the site and to provide an independent assessment and recommendation regarding whether or not to develop the site. The Council claimed it felt an obligation to consult the community and seek consensus on what to do with the site. It also expressed its commitment to the triple-bottom line approach in arriving at its decision about the site.

Opposing views

There are clearly two views on the way to deal with the controversial Throssell Street site. One group would like the lots to be sold for development to ensure the town's economic viability and thereby its survival. This group sees the town's economic viability (tied to population increase) as a prerequisite to preserving their way of life and continuing the farming tradition into the future. They advocate the expansion of the population base for the town's economic progress and to make a case for government support to maintain essential community facilities and services. They see the development as a means to enable the retention of youth as well as to attract new residents into the area. This group is convinced that failure to capitalize on the small window of opportunity to expand housing capacity would eventually force their children out of the area and out of their life style.

The other group is concerned about protecting the environmental values of the site. They insist they are not against development *per se*, but would not support

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development at the cost of environmental degradation. They believe that the long term costs of development must be taken into account. While they are supportive of the pursuit of residential options within the township, they maintain that the particular site should not be considered for development. The site still retains native vegetation including a stand of red morrel and salmon gum trees, considered rare to the area. It is therefore argued that the site should not be cleared of its significant remnant native vegetation.

It may be noted here that the status of these species of native trees was only brought to light in the Woodland Watch 2005 Survey (CALM/ WWF 2006). The council has since applied to the Department of Land Information to acquire a number of reserves to convert into freehold title to accommodate the population growth. Because these are vested reserves, a significant time lag is expected before the required processes could be completed to bring the land to market. As such the council feels compelled to expedite bringing the lots on the subject site into the market to meet the needs felt within the community.

The collaborative learning exercise

The role of the students in the collaborative exercise was envisaged as that of facilitator and observer. They were to engage with the community as they tried to resolve the issues and arrive at a consensus. As resource persons, they were to play a proactive role in widening the range of considerations and bringing in additional aspects, perspective and possibilities into the discussion so as to maximise the common ground and reduce the extreme or opposing views within the community. Their input of fresh ideas could potentially lead to innovative ways of perceiving and thereby solving the problem.

From the outset, however, it was realised that the collaborative exercise by itself would not necessarily achieve a resolution of the controversy, but would rather serve as a step in that direction. The exercise, limited to the duration of the teaching period of a semester, was envisaged as a small part of the larger process of the Goomalling community's search for a solution. The contribution by the students was seen as a means of widening the agenda and possibly opening up new ways of reducing conflict while maximising goal achievement by all parties.

The aim of the exercise was seen as promoting awareness within the community to relevant issues to gain a better understanding of prevalent view points over the controversy surrounding the site. The collaborative exercise was seen as a means to reinforce the triple bottom line perspective (in line with the council's stated policy position) in perceiving the issues and working towards the resolution of the problem. Students would thus serve as researchers, facilitators and observers in the search for acceptable solutions.

During the course of the project, after the initial field visit had taken place but before the intensive community engagement exercise had occurred, the CEO conveyed the council's concern regarding the task brief submitted at the onset of the collaborative exercise. The Council insisted that the brief should be clarified so that recommendations by the student team must be limited to be either of two options:

'development' or 'no development'. This 'clarification' was suggested at a stage where it was difficult to re-negotiate the tasks substantially as the unit outline and logistics had already been finalised. The restriction on the options meant that the possibility of coming up with compromise solutions had been severely limited and students had to take sides in the debate.

This prompted a change in the original task for students. As a larger group, students would still play the role of facilitator and observer. As a separate task, however, they were to then break away into smaller groups with each group deciding between the 'development' or 'no development' option for the site. In justifying their basic stance, each group specified alternatives or other supportive measures that would be required. This allowed each group to come up with a desirable option that conformed to the triple bottom line objectives and which, in their opinion, could be considered as a candidate for a consensus solution. These options generated by the groups were to be presented to the community who could then use any of the presented options or their elements into consideration in their further deliberations. In this way, six smaller groups of students, whether favouring or opposing the site's development, could present their own interpretation of the issues and provide examples of possible options that could be considered in searching for a consensus solution.

Council's efforts towards building consensus

As the three-day community engagement exercises commenced, students and the community were informed about the Shire Council's offer towards a compromise solution. Aiming towards building a consensus, the council offered to develop 25 out of the total of 35 lots that were originally demarcated for residential development on the site. By sparing one end of the site and giving up ten potential lots the council believes it could retain the bulk of the red morrel trees on the site. A tree count carried out on the site by the planning students confirmed that this would save 65 percent of the red morrels found on the site in one compact cluster.

The Council's compromise proposal drew a range of responses. Some saw the council's offer as meaningless as they thought that the removal of a third of the site's vegetation would still destroy the ecological integrity of the habitat. Some of them also felt that once a part of the land was subdivided, the rest of the site would also be subdivided in a matter of years. Others saw in it a good political compromise which had great merit as a gesture to recognise the concerns raised within the community. Some within this group saw it as a good solution that would balance both development and conservation objectives. Others saw the benefit of the compromise even if the integrity of the habitat was compromised. They contended that by letting the cluster of trees stand, the aesthetic impact could be salvaged even if it did not have ecological significance.

However, it should be noted that these reactions were divided along the same lines as the original division between the support and opposition to the development. Also, these views were not expressed openly but came to the surface during debate over time. Another important detail to note is that we learnt much after the conclusion of the collaborative exercise, that the compromise offer by the council had not been officially endorsed by the council. In reality, at that instance the supporters for the compromise within the elected council were still one short of majority.

Defining the options for the site

On the insistence of the council, students involved in the facilitation of the exercise were required to consider only two options for the subject site. The first option was the Council's compromise proposal of developing 25 lots on the site referred to as the *'Development'* option and the second option to consider was not to develop the site, referred to as the *'No Development'* option. The rationale provided by the council was that these were the two options that would be presented to the councillors to vote on so that the impasse could be solved and the council could move forward either way.

Students carried out workshops and community engagement exercises that included presentations by supporters of each option, community visioning exercise and extensive question and answer sessions. In addition to facilitation and serving as resource persons for small groups, students were also assigned the task of arriving at their preferred option – choice between the two options. Students were allowed to build in provisions to make their preferred option workable and acceptable to both groups. Working in groups, students were asked to present their preferred option to the community and explain the process and rationale for their decisions. The idea was to provide examples of various ways of moving forward towards a consensus solution by adopting either option defined by the Council.

While the preliminary outcomes were presented to the community to inspire debate, students were aware that they were required to report on this and previous studies and analysis leading to it, in the form of a written report. That report was to be submitted the following week for assessment, as part of the academic requirements of the unit they were enrolled in. To enhance their report-writing skills, students working in groups employed various tools to aid their decision-making and also to help with presenting their analysis. These included multi-criteria analysis/ goals achievement matrix, sustainability assessment, SWOT analysis, etc.

> *Supporting Option A (the 'Development' option)*
> Supporters of this option recognised the concern within the community about the socio-economic viability of the shire and the need to capitalize on the small window of opportunity for the town to expand its housing stock. Additional housing was also seen as a means to expand the council's rate base and for the economy to expand and diversify. They feared the economic decline of the shire and a further withdrawal of social and community services from the township, threatening the town's very survival. To make their option attractive to those concerned more with environmental protection, they suggested the creation of a nature reserve, the setting up of active parks management plan, and the introduction of strict development controls and sustainable design guidelines to ensure that the remaining vegetation on the site received minimum stress.

> *Supporting Option B (the 'No Development' option)*
> Those favouring this option were concerned about the loss of the red morrel trees which has come to symbolize the environmental vulnerability of the place. They feared that environmental degradation already caused due to

extensive land clearing for agriculture would further intensify if remnant native vegetation were interfered with. With only 5.4 percent of the native woodland left in the entire wheatbelt, they warned against any loss to the integrity of the 'threatened ecological community' that the red morrels could potentially be classified as. To make their proposal acceptable to others, they proposed a search for alternative residential development sites in and around the township, including rural-residential options. Some groups sought a strategic plan to ensure their development phased over time. They suggested ideas for the development of eco-tourism potential of the area.

The conclusion that the overwhelming majority of student groups arrived at was to support the *'No Development'* option. They contended that even though the subject site was originally considered suitable for residential development in the 1970s when environmental concerns were either not known or not considered as significant, the currently available information cannot be ignored. They referred to basic principles of sustainable development such as the need to err on the side of caution.

Consensus view or majority view?

Five out of the six groups of students recommended that the proposed development on the controversial site should not proceed. A majority of those present at the meeting seemed visibly happy with the results. These opponents of development saw the majority view of students as a vindication of their own position. Some of them congratulated the students on arriving at the 'right conclusion'. On the other hand, it also caused those in favour of the development to stage a silent walkout in protest.

They meeting was reminded that these students had based their decisions on the limited information they had access to in the short time and that it was simply an academic exercise intended to show how the facts and values could be seen and interpreted. A couple of members demanded a show of hands there and then to decide the issue. They were reminded that those present in the hall did not necessarily represent an unbiased sample and so it would be a futile exercise. At that point, a significantly large group of people who had been rather quiet throughout the evening got up and left the meeting. During this time, a few comments were made from the floor that openly criticised the councillors for the first time.

This was the closest the meetings got to an open confrontation between the groups. Soon afterwards, before the meeting was concluded, a member of the more vocal group made a short speech to record the group's appreciation of the good leadership provided by the CEO and the local councillors. Those who stayed back afterwards for chats with students were all opposed to the development. It was noted that the composition of the audience attending the community gatherings on the two evenings, at the community visioning workshop and the evening where the specific site was discussed, was significantly different. There appeared to be many new faces among those present on the second evening. This could be explained by the fact that the day before, the elected councillors and council staff had volunteered to stay away from the last meeting to allow community members to feel less inhibited in expressing their opinion.

The mannerism displayed by the community during all meetings had been similar except for that of the last session, following students' presentation of proposals. In hindsight, it appears that despite deep differences in opinion and unresolved issues, opponents took care not to get into direct confrontation. As both sides were careful not to confront each other, accusations were avoided and claims were not challenged. Even when opposing views were presented, friction was consciously minimised by omitting the more contentious details. The debate thus became constrained, amounting to more or less the repetition of points made in the background information sent along with the 2006 survey questionnaire. Margerum made a similar observation in his study of communities engaged in collaborative planning projects across Australia, noting that:

> .. groups had problems confronting conflict when it existed. For example, several participants .. made conflicting statements about a land use strategy, but no one openly acknowledged the conflict or attempted to address the differences. As a result, the discussion circled around the issues and the meeting ended without a clear recognition of the conflict, let alone a resolution. (Margerum 2002: 246)

This could be a cultural phenomenon resulting from having a close-knit community where getting along is crucial. While on the surface it would appear to promote a consensus view, the situation is more likely to result in a sizeable minority having to go along against their will. This could represent a case that post-modernists warn against, where 'consensus' is created and imposed by the power structures or the majority. This is very different to an evolved consensus promoted by collaborative and communicative planning.

Conclusion

This paper described an experience revolving around a collaborative learning exercise that took planning students out of their lecture halls and into the community. University students, under supervision of academic staff, carried out consultancy and facilitation role, engaging the community in visioning exercises and information sessions to ascertain their values and perceptions. The information collected during the process was used by students working in smaller groups to inform their own decision about the site's development options that could be considered as a candidate for the consensus option This latter outcome was, however, limited somewhat by the requirement imposed by the council that student recommendations should be limited to two options – either the 'development option' or the 'no development option'. Working within this constraint, students attempted to apply 'standard' decision-making techniques to try to come up with various solutions to present to the community for discussion.

Based on comments offered by students it appears that they valued the exposure and hands-on experience the exercise provided them. Some commented that they valued learning about community consultation techniques as much as report writing. All students said they had great fun during the outing which had a great sense of adventure and discovery attached to academic activity.

From the lecturers' point of view, the academic objectives set out for the course were generally achieved. There was ample evidence to suggest that students took ownership of the task and became involved in attempts to resolve the issue. At times, however, they had to be reminded to also detach themselves and prepare an objective write-up reporting on the complexity of the problems, processes, role of actors, their view points and their interactions. They also had to report on the use of various planning techniques to develop proposals for solving the planning problem. Overall, the experience of engaging with community through collaborative learning/ teaching was worth the extra effort involved in solving the logistics and responding to the client's (council's) expectations of outputs on top of meeting academic requirements of the course.

The collaboration provided the community the opportunity to share a vision and take time out to contemplate on how to improve their situation. Long term strategizing easily proved to be a positive experience as it involved no issue requiring immediate resolution. However, when the specific issue of contention – the controversial Throssell Street site – was discussed, the possibility of immediate confrontation came into play. The presence of the students provided a neutral third party facilitator and an opportunity to discuss issues in detail. The ensuing dialogue, however, was limited in its scope with participants keen not to be seen as confronting. This could be the main reason that prevented the evolution of a consensus view to the problem.

The Council seems to be satisfied with the comprehensive report handed to it as one of the agreed upon tangibles coming out of the semester long exercise. In addition to general research and analysis of factors affecting the area and the community, it contained the proposals by each student group to resolve the issue relating to dealing with the controversial site. In a meeting a few months after receiving the report, the CEO reported that councilors were happy with the conduct and outcome of students. On a down side, they were somewhat disappointed that the students, in their view, had given in to the pressure from a vocal minority. On a more positive note, it was reported that the council had, possibly influenced by the report, finally achieved the majority support among its elected councilors to actually push for the compromise solution.

The exercise may not have helped the community resolve the issue that originally brought the community and the university together. However, at the very least, it allowed the council to gauge the level of dissatisfaction or resistance within the community over the issue. Borrowing Arnstein's (1969) terminology regarding the 'ladder' of community participation, it could be speculated that perhaps the council intended the exercise to merely serve as a gesture of 'tokenistic' participation to placate the community and reduce tensions within, while it pushes ahead for the development. However, the handling of the original 2006 survey questionnaire mail out does not seem to support this notion. Another fact to consider is the voluntary offer by the council staff and councillors to not attend the last session to allow freer discussion by participants. Both these facts indicate the willingness of the council to at least have a debate. The council's compromise offer to try to save the bulk of the red morrel trees on the controversial site also suggests a commitment by the council to promote consensus. How well this has been executed, however, is open to interpretation.

The opponents appear to be a better articulated and organised group and turned out to be vocal during the last session. This was in line with the earlier observation regarding the background information set out with the council's 2006 survey questionnaire. The position of this group opposing the development was very well articulated in those documents in contrast to that of the supporters of development. The council seems to be of the view this group represent a vocal minority and it could perhaps explain why the council was rather generous in allowing them to include the extensive background material for the 2006 survey as well as to have a freer discussion in the last session. Clearly the council found them opposed to their position, but it most probably was convinced that the opponents formed a minority. Whether or not the council is right in its assessment is another matter. Perhaps, also, the 'majority' could comprise of those who have not formed any particular view on the issue. In that case, both 'sides' could be representing minority views.

Collaborative planning places importance on seeking evolved consensus through inclusion and communication. That seems to be a very difficult proposition to effect in practice. In this case the council's compromise solution was one example of attempting consensus. But it was not one that had evolved from deliberations or effective communication. On the other hand, it was interesting to note that whenever a party felt it had the numbers, they resorted to put the matter under discussion to a majority vote. The 2006 survey was apparently inspired by the council's confidence in the numbers in support of its view. Similarly, during the last session, when the opponents saw five of the six groups of students opposing the development, they demanded that the issue be decided by a show of hands. Clearly both groups did not oppose the idea of striving for a consensus view. However, in carrying out the exercise in problem solving, the majority view is a tempting short cut to a consensus view.

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