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Theory versus Practice in Planning Education: The View from South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the ongoing debate between theory and practice in planning, using the example of South Africa. Based on survey responses, it discusses how planning education in South Africa is perceived to prepare students for practice. While we acknowledge that the majority of respondents view their planning education positively, the results reveal challenges regarding the practical application of theory, especially in the case of land-use management. We then respond to calls for contextualised practices of knowing, emphasising the 'local' in planning education so that theory and practice can be combined across contexts.

KEYWORDS

Planning education;
planning theory; planning
practice; South Africa

There is a lively debate among practitioners and scholars about a perceived gap between planning theory and practice (Ozawa & Seltzer, 1999; Kunzmann, 2011; Whittemore, 2014). This debate is particularly significant in planning education where questions are raised about the content of curricula and the extent to which graduates are adequately prepared for the workplace (Frank, 2006; Hurley *et al.*, 2016; Taşan-Kok & Oranje, 2017). Some academic planners are accused of being increasingly detached from frontline practice, being overly focused on abstract theory and failing to teach the necessary skills for the workplace (Durning, 2004). Conversely, others argue that it is unhelpful to expect degrees to create 'oven-ready' planners without giving students adequate understanding of the wider (theoretical) context in which the profession operates (Friedmann, 2003; Olesen, 2018).

These debates become more urgent when considering the situation beyond Western Europe and North America (Yiftachel, 2006) noting that most planning theories originated in the global North. It has often proved entirely inappropriate to apply these ideas to the very different sociocultural contexts of the global South. Of course, the global South is itself no monolithic entity, with different nations and parts of nations facing very different challenges. Here, therefore, we limit ourselves to exploring how the tension between theory and practice in planning education plays out within the context of South Africa.

South Africa (SA) has a unique set of challenges growing from its legacy of colonialism and apartheid (Schensul & Heller, 2011), with continuing endemic poverty, extreme economic inequality and spatial division. Policymakers and planning practitioners are dedicated to overcoming this problematic legacy, but there are also pressures on local and national governments to attract investment and compete globally, which have implications for the planning and management of South African cities. The profession is thus tackling a complex set of problems, some familiar to practitioners in the global North, some relating to broader questions of development in the global South and cutting across both public and private sectors, and some very specific to the South African context.

This has raised questions about the skills and competencies needed by South Africa's graduate planners and whether they are being adequately prepared to take on these varied and complex challenges (Todes *et al.*, 2003). In this paper, we seek to address these questions by presenting the findings from one of the largest surveys undertaken to date of the South African planning profession. The survey was conducted in June–August 2017 as part of a large ESRC-NRF project exploring the education of South African planners. The 219 responses include 5.6% of all registered candidate and professional planners in South Africa. A series of 89 follow-up interviews were undertaken with planning professionals and educators February–May in 2018, producing one of the most comprehensive overviews of the state of the profession in South Africa to date.

The overall conclusion from the survey is that the majority of respondents felt that their planning education adequately prepared them for the workplace. Nonetheless, considerable room for improvement was identified and this paper concentrates on the findings around the balance between teaching theory and practical skills. Those who received their education at 'conventional' (i.e. elite) South African universities identified overemphasis on thinking/theoretical skills over practical skills. For those who had attended technical universities, concern was shown about the perceived lack of theoretical grounding. This suggests that planning educators need to explore complex and adaptable approaches that bring practice and theory together in both the conventional and technical universities, treating them not as standalone subjects but as an interdependent whole. Consequently, this paper builds upon calls to develop contextualised 'practices of knowing' (Davoudi, 2015), insisting on the importance of the 'local' in planning education in order to bridge gaps between theory and practice in socio-culturally distinct contexts.

Contextualising the Theory versus Practice Debate in South Africa

Teaching Planning Theory

The value of planning theory is frequently questioned by practitioners. Sanyal (2000, 2002) discusses a colloquium held with North American planning practitioners in 2000. None of the practitioners present could identify any planning theories used in practice, especially in respect of assuming an ethical position in decision-making processes. Instead, practitioners argued that they learned through 'doing.' Responding to Sanyal, Friedmann (2003) championed the role of planning theory in defining what planning 'ought to be' (see also Alexander, 2003). Nonetheless, Frank (2006), in her review of the global literature on planning education, highlighted a move to more theory-driven,

research and academic-led work. Indeed, he argued that the gap to practice will widen if the performance of planning academics is purely evaluated on their academic research. Kunzmann (2011) went further, arguing that planning education in Europe is already retreating into an ivory tower. He placed the blame for this on an increased pressure to publish, particularly in English.

Durning (2004, p. 444) investigated whether planning academics and practitioners are actually two different ‘tribes’ in the UK, concluding that ‘the practitioner is coming closer to the academic, but the academic researcher seems to be moving, or is being driven, further away.’ She blamed these phenomena on the growing external pressures, such as the fact that academics working in applied disciplines, such as planning, are treated by universities in the same way as academics from more abstract fields such as sociology or anthropology in terms of job requirements, promotions, etc. For example, academics in both applied and abstract fields are often required to produce the same number of papers. In effect, this diminishes the ability of planning academics to keep touch with industry, and thus to keep their practice-based skills and knowledge up to date, due to their need to focus on research.

Hoch (2011) reflected on a survey with practitioner members of the American Planning Association where the theory was only deemed to be useful for a limited number of specialized scenarios, not on a day-to-day basis. He argued for the creation of theory that is useful for practice through the greater co-construction of theory with practitioners. Klosterman (2011, p. 326) similarly argued that theorists should:

... draw on the impressive body of knowledge the field has accumulated over the past thirty years to define new modes of intellectually rich and politically realistic professional practice that can once again excite students, guide practice, and garner political support.

He suggested that instead of focusing on writing for other academics, scholars should seek to develop new models of practice. Indeed, this idea of co-constructing relevant theory resonates with the concerns raised by Taşan-Kok *et al.* (2016) who noted that we, as planning educators, expect our students to fight for abstract ideals of social justice, yet the day-to-day reality requires them to be technocrats who have to achieve this within a market-driven political system.

In countries of the global South, planning systems have either been carried over from previous colonial governments or adapted from Northern contexts to meet the interests of local rulers (Watson, 2009). The challenge in the South, therefore, is to create a relationship between practice and theory that moves beyond a problematic historic legacy to generate insights that have value in specific local contexts (Oldfield & Parnell, 2014). This requires, however, that locally created theory not only pays attention to the specificities of the South but also avoids a ‘ghettoised empiricism’ that limits the scope of action (Robinson, 2002).

South African scholars have been particularly vocal on the topic of planning education and the relationship between theory and practice (Faling & Todes, 2004; Harrison *et al.*, 2007; Duminy *et al.*, 2014; Odendaal, 2012; Winkler, 2013, amongst others). Watson (2002) argued that a deeper interaction with practice from the ground up and discussions between scholars (particularly African ones) would assist in remedying the perceived gap. These arguments have, in part, been explored through the creation of the African Association of Planning Schools, which sought to create a planning curriculum that

was more responsive to the needs of African planners (Odendaal, 2012; Watson & Odendaal, 2013; Odendaal & Watson, 2018). Aside from a small study by Faling (2002), however, and prior to the research within which this paper is issued from, there has not been a dedicated large-scale study of whether South African planning practitioners feel they were well enough prepared by their planning education for work as a planning practitioner.

Planning as a Practice of Knowing

Davoudi (2015) provides a valuable framework for conceptualising the different types of knowledge that underpin planning as a profession. She reflects that the recent push for evidence-based policy in the UK reifies only one form of knowledge, over-emphasising a somewhat discredited mode of rationalist, instrumental thinking that conceals the subjectivity and compromise of policymaking. This critique has significant parallels with Mouffe's (2005) discussion of how ideas around the postpolitical have been used to undermine democracy by making illusory claims to purely rational, evidence-based decision-making.

Instead, Davoudi moves beyond only considering supposedly rational 'facts' to identify four key components of knowledge that form the foundation for practical judgement:

- (1) knowing what, i.e. theories/concepts
- (2) knowing to what end, i.e. moral choices
- (3) knowing how, i.e. skills/crafts
- (4) knowing by doing, i.e. action (Davoudi, 2015, p. 327)

Reflecting on the discussion above, there is a clear feeling among practitioners that planning academics spend more time on the first two components rather than on practical skills and action. Arguably, a much more integrated approach to these four domains of knowing is required in order to adequately prepare graduates for planning careers. The challenge for planning educators is how to shift from a position of simply transferring knowledge to students, to a more dialectic process of learning and the application of different knowledge domains to facilitate further learning. To some extent, studio-based teaching provides some of the answers to this challenge but is not, in itself, enough (see Winkler, 2013).

The demands of planning practice are also highly dependent on type and sector of employer, educational background, capacity at different levels of practice and even personal approach to problems and perception of decision-making processes (Watson, 2013). This requires professionals to be flexible enough to accommodate and adapt throughout the duration of their career as a planner (Davoudi, 2015). Planning education must, therefore, be equally dynamic, getting students ready for these changing demands. Although Davoudi was writing about a Northern context, these lessons are even more acute when applied to the global South (Watson, 2013).

Planning in South Africa

To understand South African planning education and practice, it is necessary to identify two periods, pre-1994, and post 1994. In the pre-1994 period, roughly from 1880 onwards, planning was primarily focused on physical planning, namely layouts and Land-Use Management (LUM). LUM here refers to the full ambit of the development control process controlled by planners, including applications for rezoning, subdivision, deviances from zoning requirements (departures), consolidation and so forth. It excludes forward planning, and other forms of development control, such as authorizations under environmental or heritage legislation. Much of the forward planning that occurred in this period followed a 'blueprint' comprehensive approach, with hardly any flexibility. Furthermore, planning played a key role in creating 'racial zones' within settlements, defining where each race group was allowed to live. These racial zones resulted in mass displacement and relocation of the black population, usually to unfavourable locations. This pre-1994 period was thus marked by the use of planning as a tool by both the colonial and apartheid governments to enforce spatial segregation between different race groups, privileging the white minority over the black majority (Turok, 1994; Harrison *et al.*, 2007; Andres *et al.*, 2019).

Post-1994, with the fall of Apartheid, the role of planning changed substantially. While LUM remained a key part of planning work, a wider emphasis on strategic, collaborative and developmental planning emerged, with each municipality being required to develop a strategic plan (an Integrated Development Plan) for each five-year electoral term, along with annual reviews of the plan and budget. A spatial plan (a Spatial Development Framework), which was intended to be strategic rather than comprehensive, is required as part of this business plan (Harrison *et al.*, 2007). Through this, forward planning gained significant status in planning practice; however, the extent to which these documents have resulted in a tangible change to the spatial form of South African settlements is highly questionable (Du Plessis & Boonzaaier, 2015). This change in planning practice was a direct reaction to the apartheid period, with the intent of creating an inclusive and developmentally orientated state benefitting all citizens, not just a privileged minority. LUM, in contrast, has had limited transformation since the apartheid era, with many of the newly promulgated zoning schemes still using the same approach that was used in the 1950s in South Africa. In particular, zoning schemes still perpetuate the functional separation of land uses, sprawling suburbia, and a limited range of land uses that fails to recognize the livelihood role of housing in low-income areas (Görgens & Denoon-Stevens, 2013; Charman *et al.*, 2017).

Nowadays South African cities and planning are characterised by extremes. Urban areas fall into a continuum between middle and upper-class areas reminiscent of American suburbs, to informal areas which have little to no enforcement of planning regulations. Similarly, while metropolitan areas have a large number of registered planning staff (42 on average), smaller municipalities are typically understaffed, with the rural municipalities typically only employing a single registered planner for all planning work (Municipal Demarcation Board, 2012). This poses major challenges for planning educators expected to train planners able to work in a wide range of contexts, with highly variable levels of support in place.

Table 1. Response rate and margin of error for respondents by category of professional registration.

	Responses	Planners registered on SACPLAN database at the time of the survey	% of planners on the database who responded	The resultant margin of error with a confidence level of 95%
Professional planners	122	2245	5.5%	9.0%
Candidate planners	74	1262	5.9%	11.0%
Combined professional and candidate planners	196	3507	5.6%	7%
Technical planners	9	308	2.9%	32.0%
Total registered planners	205	3815	5.37%	7%
Not registered and unknown	14			

The values in italics are the combined values of professional and candidate planners.

Methods

This study followed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design. A survey was circulated to registered planners on the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN) and the South African Planning Institute (SAPI)¹ database, and was completed via an online platform (SurveyMonkey). Consequently, the survey link was sent to every registered professional, candidate and technical planner² in the country with a valid email address. In addition, the survey was also circulated to all past students who had studied planning at the University of the Free State and an invitation was sent to all those who had connected to the research project page on LinkedIn. Table 1 shows the number of respondents by SACPLAN registration category. With 219 responses, including 5.6% of all candidate and professional planners in South Africa, the survey is one of the largest ever undertaken with planners in South Africa.

The survey contained both open- and closed-ended questions. The latter used a variety of question formats, including a number of standard ‘yes/no’ questions, one rating question relating to planning core competencies (a four-point Likert with a not applicable option), one ranking question relating to technical skills, and a few dropdown questions. Numerous questions were also asked of respondents relating the type of work they are currently and historically have done, where they studied planning, and so forth. The short open answers were treated as frequency data and the long open answers were coded and used as quotes to unpack some of the wider dimensions of the quantitative findings.

It is important to note the low response rate from technical planners, which limits this study’s capacity to make claims about this part of the sector (noting that technical planners represent about 1/3 of the number of professional planners). The individuals who responded to the survey tended to be more professionally mobile; for example, of the 172 respondents who answered the question about which sectors they had worked in, only 26% had worked in just one sector, 35% had worked in two sectors, 26% working in three sectors, and 12% working in either four or five sectors throughout their career.

Table 2. Extent to which South African planning education is perceived to be meeting the needs of planners in South Africa.

Overall, do you feel your formal education and training prepared you for work as a planner?		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Yes	158	76.0
	No	50	24.0
	Total	208	100.0
Missing	System	11	
Total		219	

Survey Results and Analysis

The overall finding from the survey is that the majority of respondents (76%) felt the education and training they received prepared them for work in practice (Table 2). This finding is similar to that of Faling (2002), indicating that planning education in South Africa, overall, continues to prepare planners adequately for practice.

Unsurprisingly, when asked to explain their answers, some of those respondents who provided a positive answer had caveats. As one respondent commented:

It did prepare me; however, the focus of my tertiary education only taught me how to approach the problem. Most skills required to complete the work was [sic] learnt on the job.

Another stated:

The degree . . . gave me everything I needed to become a professional planner. However, a practical land use component would have been useful as land use planning dominates my day-to-day work.

This theme of requiring acquire additional expertise in LUM and technical skills recurred through the survey responses. Nonetheless, many respondents also commented that many of the skills missing from their formal planning education were best learnt from practical experience.

Respondents were asked to indicate the usefulness of various skills and competencies taught in South African planning schools. These were taken directly from the officially recognized ‘core competencies’ identified by SACPLAN (2014, p. 12, p. 19–31) as being the ‘specific knowledge, skills, abilities, or experience that a planner must possess in order to successfully perform the work and activities that are central to professional planning practice’ in South Africa. Planning education programmes are measured against these competencies when being assessed for accreditation by SACPLAN and so the aim was to assess how these competencies were valued by practitioners.

Figure 1 shows participant responses to the question of competencies. The three competencies including the word ‘theory’ (social theories related to planning and development; settlement history and theory; planning theory) had the lowest mean scores in terms of value. Conversely, the two highest ranked competencies were decidedly practical in nature (land use and infrastructure planning; public policy, institutional and legal frameworks). However, it should be noted that even for the least valuable skill identified by participants, ‘social theories related to planning and development’, 33% of respondents indicate this as ‘extremely useful,’ and 36% as ‘useful.’ Thus, the competencies that directly mentioned theory were still seen as being useful by the majority of participants,

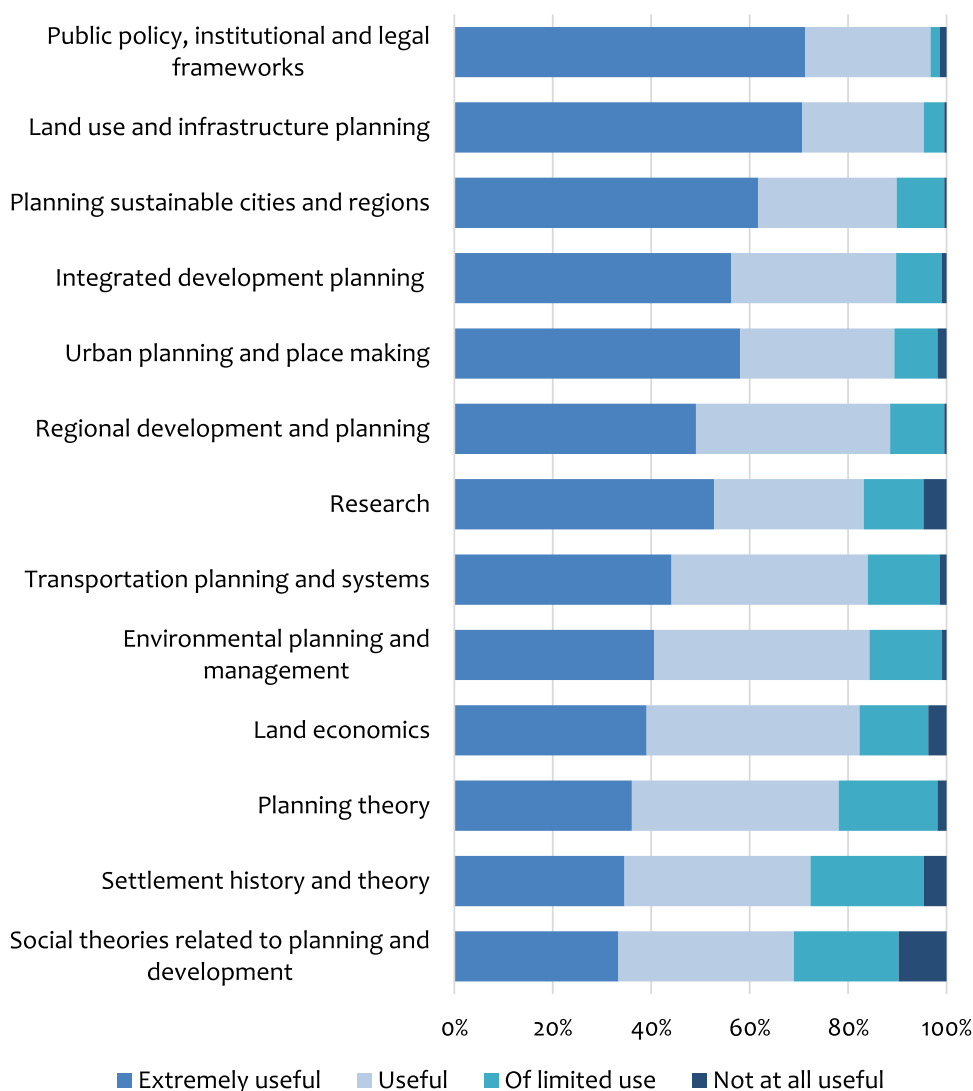


Figure 1. Perceived usefulness of skills and competencies taught in planning schools in South Africa.

but overall were seen as being less valuable compared to skills such as ‘land use and infrastructure planning,’ and the least valuable of the 13 competencies.

This issue of theoretical versus practical skills came through frequently and strongly in the open-ended questions. As one respondent argued:

Some universities concentrate far too much on theory and do not consider the practical aspects of how this translates on the ground. Although some social theory is useful as background knowledge – there is far too much emphasis on settlement and social theory – we need planners to understand how to resolve current and plan for future problems when working in the field – too much theory and not enough practical does not fully equip planners to do so.

Another suggested that:

The most valuable take from the curriculum were the practical-based assignments where one had to “apply your mind”. Those assignments were very beneficial as they gave one a perspective on how things within the planning profession are done and in a realistic fashion as well. Practically creating land use applications, feasibility assessments and designing maps were among the few which I feel I will always remember as opposed to planning theories which are not always easily applicable or replicable in the work place.

As these quotes demonstrate, one of the most common concerns related to the use of theory without teaching how to apply it in practical situations (in other words ‘knowing what’ without ‘knowing how,’ to refer to Davoudi’s (2015) framework).

There were also responses that clearly spoke to the value of theory. One respondent suggested that planning theory gives, ‘a more rounded understanding of the profession.’ Another respondent argued that, ‘Planning theory helps in thinking of planning and its application in a different way.’ One of the respondents with a technical planning registration noted that:

... the Masters programmes in the country train their graduate planners to focus on policy-based planning and problem-solving, whereas graduates from universities of technology [have] technical ... acumen yet lack problem-solving abilities.

This indicates that the issue of practical versus theoretical skills may differ depending on the type of tertiary institution attended (‘conventional’ or ‘technical’ universities).

However, respondents’ definitions of ‘practical’ skills are somewhat ambiguous. In the dataset, it was clear that two different types of practical skills were being discussed. The first related to LUM and, to a lesser extent, legal skills, while the second related to technical or ‘hard’ skills such as using Computer Aided Drafting (CAD) and Geographical Information Systems (GIS). Regarding LUM, as one respondent explained it:

... no example was given of what is a land use planning application and what it entails. No education was given of the different government spheres applicable to the planning milieu and how a municipal/provincial authority evaluates an application – in other words what is a land use application and what does it comprise of!

The survey asked what types of work respondents were doing as part of their jobs. LUM was by far the most common type of planning work undertaken, with 50.2% of respondents at some point in their career doing LUM-related work as either the primary or secondary task undertaken in their employment (Figure 2).

Given some of the restrictions on the study sample – particularly the under-representation of technical planners – 50.2% is probably an underestimate of the proportion of planners who have worked in the area of LUM. Nonetheless, respondents identified this as a significant gap in their planning education. A significant conclusion, therefore, is that there is serious weakness within South African planning education around the teaching of LUM. Referring to the context of planning in this country, it could be argued that such gaps in the curriculum may explain in part why LUM remains relatively archaic in terms of approach (given the limited change in the content of zoning schemes from the 1950s to present). As important, it appeared that a significant number of respondents viewed LUM and theory as two different things. This is extremely concerning as the optimal state of affairs would see theory as a tool to guide LUM decisions. On the other hand, forward planning, which has had significant emphasis in

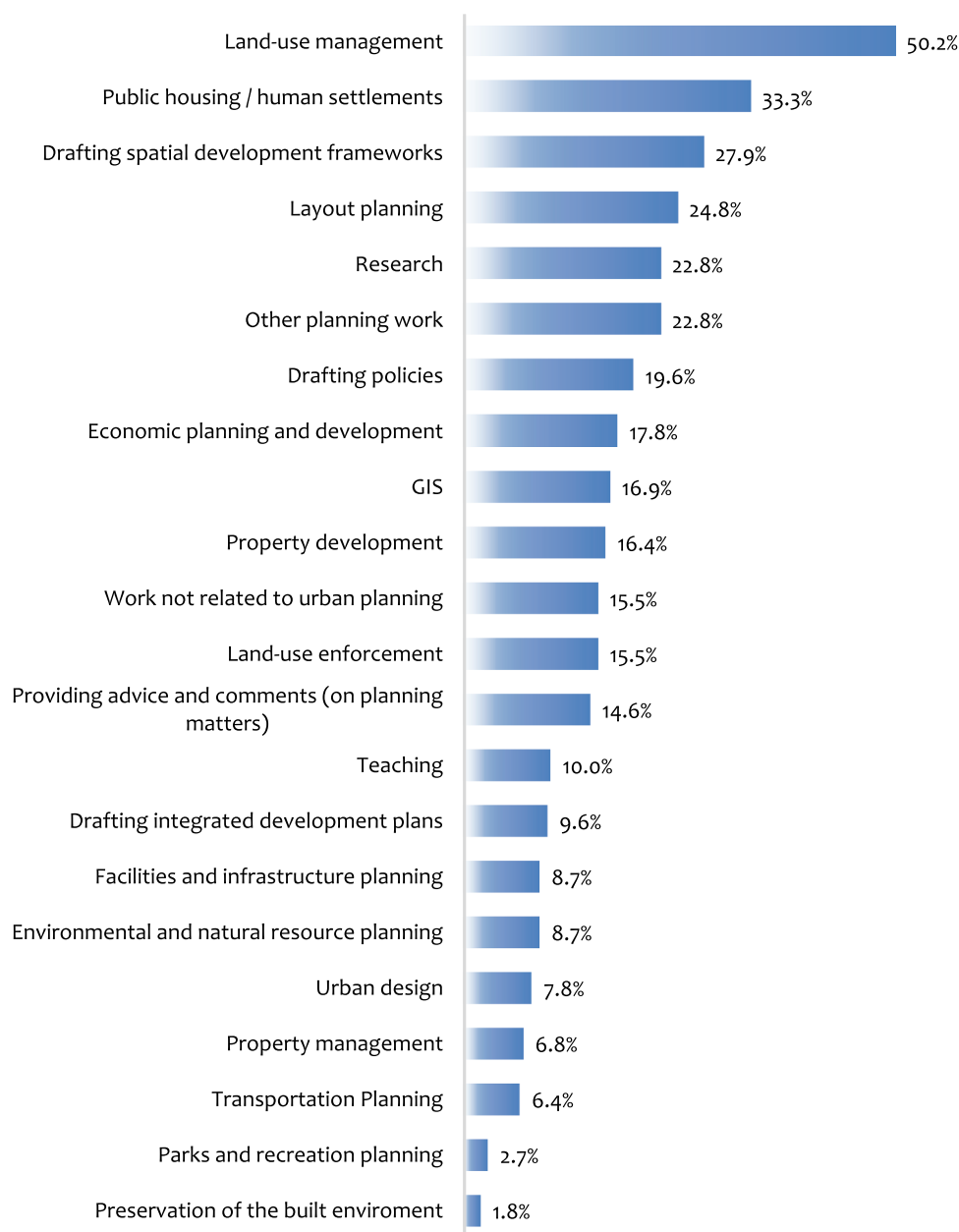


Figure 2. Type of work done by planners throughout their careers, as the main or second most common task in each job.

the South African planning education, has more easily embraced contemporary planning theories allowing more reflective, critical and localised thinking.

Figure 2 also reflects the diversity of work being done by planners in South Africa, with few planners doing one type of work throughout their career yet all have a 'planning' qualification. While half of the respondents had undertaken LUM work, the next highest

category, public housing/human settlements, had only been a primary or secondary task for a third of planners. Thereafter, the next four types of work had only been done by around a quarter of planners in their careers (22.8% to 27.9%), and the remaining 16 types of work varied from 1.8% to 19.6% of respondents. Most respondents had undertaken a variety of types of work. This diversity of tasks being undertaken by planners across public and private sectors of course raises significant issues in terms of the space within a single 'planning' curriculum to deal with such a wide range of topics.

The second type of practical skills identified by participants was technical or 'hard' skills. As one respondent explained:

During my studies, we were never thought [sic] how to write a motivational memorandum for an application, what is required when submitting an application, how to use a program like AutoCAD to draw township layouts or any basic drawing required when submitting a LUM application. When I started working I felt like anyone who has not studied Town Planning can do this because everything I do on a day to day basis I learned on the job.

The survey also asked respondents to rank a series of technical planning skills from most to least useful (Figure 3). As expected, report writing took first place (mean ranking: 2.43), followed by public speaking (3.61), and then GIS (3.67). Data analysis (4.46) was ranked marginally higher than CAD skills (4.84). This suggests that mapping is more highly valued than digital drawing or data analysis skills. This was, however, influenced

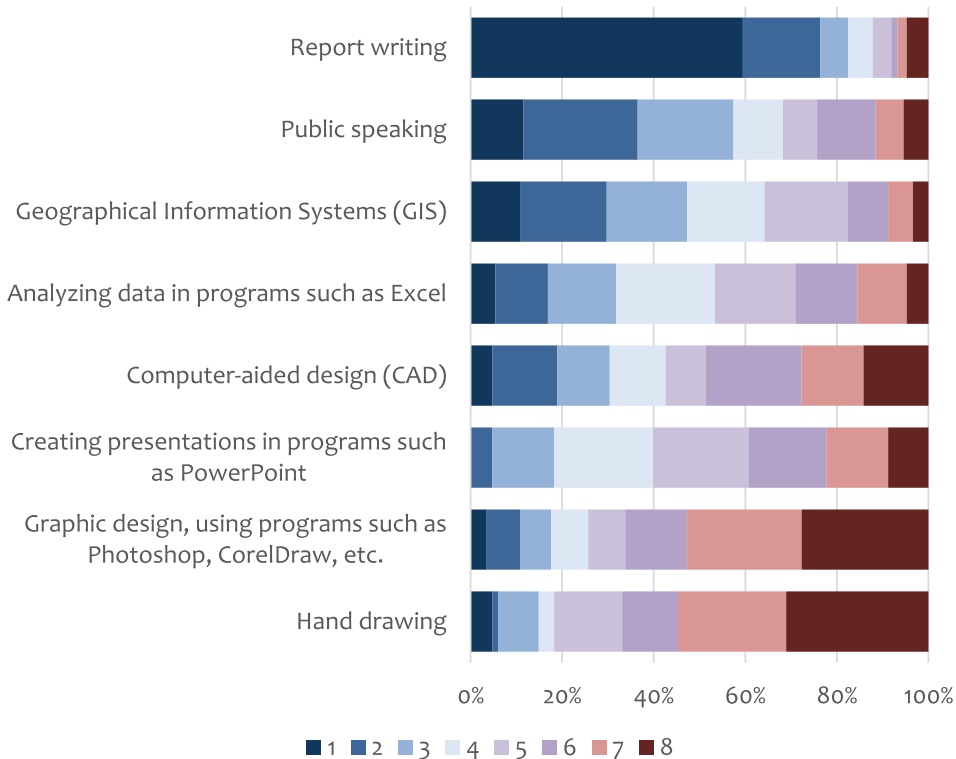


Figure 3. Ranking of technical skills by respondents where one is the most valuable, and eight is the least valuable technical skill.

by career stage, with planners who had less than four years of working experience valuing CAD more and public speaking less, while planners with four or more years of experience had reversed priorities. This refers to the nature of the tasks given to planners at different stages, with more senior planners likely giving far more presentations than younger planners; hence, the emphasis on public speaking, whereas younger planners likely undertake more of the desk-based work, hence the emphasis on CAD.

It is worth noting the significant diversity of opinions shown in Figure 3. With the exception of report writing, most respondents had quite varied views on the order of importance of skills; for example, as the second most important skill, 25% of respondents indicated public speaking, 19.1% GIS, and 14.7% CAD (with the remainder indicating one of the other five skills listed). Again, this likely reflects the wide variety of jobs undertaken by planners, with different types of planning work having different skill demands; hence, the wide range of opinions amongst respondents as to which skills are the most valued. Two further inferences emerge from this. Firstly, it is unlikely that all these skills can be taught in a two-year master's programme. Secondly, the importance of digital literacy to enable graduates to teach themselves such skills in practice if required.

Figure 3 is also significant as it highlights *which* digital skills are valued by planning practitioners. This is important in a Southern context where many planning students have limited exposure to computers, and thus have limited digital literacy. In a Northern context, a certain degree of expecting students to teach themselves the necessary programs can be expected. In a Southern context, the level of exposure to ICT beyond that of mobile phones is often worryingly low. Arguably, this means that if you do lay the basics at a university level of how to work with certain programs, such as GIS and Excel, the students will face considerable difficulties teaching themselves to work with these programs competently. Moreover, in South African universities, there is a stark digital divide between those with extensive ICT exposure, who usually come from privileged backgrounds, and those without these skills, who usually come from disadvantaged households (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010). This means ensuring that all students graduate with a basic competence in core planning software is vital, both to ensure that students have adequate digital skills to keep themselves up to date with the fast-changing world of technology, and also to ensure that a cycle of digital apartheid is not perpetuated within the South African planning profession.

Discussion

Summarising the survey results, three key concerns appear: the balance between theory and practice; the need for more applied theoretical work; and key skills that are underdeveloped in current curricula. Much like practitioners surveyed in the USA (Hoch, 2011), our South African respondents shared concerns about the overemphasis on planning theory in planning education. However, they were seemingly less sceptical of theory per se (in comparison to similar studies undertaken in the North), but rather noted that planning education was failing to show how theory can be applied to local contexts in order to help practitioners with their day-to-day activities.

The challenge Davoudi (2015) poses is to link theories and moral choices to skills and action in order to produce context-specific ways of generating knowledge. Reflecting on planning as a practice of knowing, however, brings up the thorny issue of the sheer

number of different tasks that planners undertake and the limited number of topics that can be covered in a time-limited degree programme. Planning schools can only provide a starting point for practice given the highly diverse and rapidly changing nature of planning work and local contexts (even within the same city). This issue is particularly acute in a context such as South Africa, and the global South more generally, where extremes of inequality require planners to work in a cultural context with aspirations to global status at the same time as tackling the unglamorous work of attempting to mitigate grinding poverty. The need to deal with increasing complexity has arguably led to systematic crises in planning theory, education and practice (de Roo & Silva, 2016), with repercussions in both global South and North.

For all that planners are managing a complex variety of different briefs; however, it is clear that LUM is by far the dominant task undertaken by South African planners. This survey demonstrates that not enough time was spent in planning education on preparing students for this kind of work. This then raises questions about which skills universities should teach and which are best taught by industry (cf. Fagan, 2009 discussing this challenge within the context of the legal profession). Nonetheless, it is clear that when reviewing curricula and the core competencies demanded by SACPLAN, planning schools need to reflect on whether more could be done to teach the practicalities of LUM, and how planning theory can be used in LUMS, such that students are better prepared for day one in their first jobs after graduation.

There is a caveat here around technical education. Although the survey had a lower response rate from technical planners, there was some evidence that those who had received a technical education often felt better prepared in terms of the 'hard' skills but lacked the wider theoretical context. The danger is that while technical planners might thus be better prepared to take on junior roles within planning offices, the lack of that wider context makes it harder for them to progress up the career ladder.

The question is about which areas to prioritise within curricula and how to provide space for the *why* as well as the *what*. Part of this is about managing expectations among students, explaining *how* a theoretical frame or concept could be useful in practice. But it is also about greater engagement between academics and practitioners, to use experience from practice to challenge existing theories and to co-construct new ones (Hoch, 2011; Taşan-Kok *et al.*, 2016). This engagement should provide a space for practicing planners throughout their careers to reflect on their work and how it relates to the current discourses in the literature. In essence, this is about giving practice and academia equal weight, with practice being the crucible in which theory is tested. Reciprocally, it is about promoting lifelong critical thinking and reflection among practitioners, with academia providing the intellectual catalysts to aid this process.

Conclusion

Overall, and building upon the result of our research, despite working in a rapidly evolving and complex field, planning education in South Africa is doing a remarkably good job of preparing students for practice. There are, however, some specific recommendations for improving planning education that emerge from this study. Overcoming the practice/theory divide is impossible without a much greater emphasis on applied theory – giving students the opportunity to understand *how* a theoretical position will

help them in day-to-day decision-making and practice. This is as true in the technical universities as in conventional ones, although they are approaching this challenge from different directions. Part of the response to this should come through a renewed commitment to continuing professional development, creating a stronger feedback loop between practitioners and academics to co-construct theories that better reflect local conditions.

One remaining question is whether a Southern-based approach to planning theory requires the development not simply of new theories but of new ways to teach theory in a Southern context. This is relatively new terrain for planning theorists and the work of colleagues in education studies (for example, Kanu, 2011) may point a way forward. This challenge will, however, likely require a vastly different approach to theorising, which emphasizes plain speech over complex writing and participation over neutral observation, among other challenges.

It is always difficult to strike a balance between different knowledge practices when designing a curriculum for such a hands-on discipline as planning. We would emphasize, however, that the survey showed very clearly that for all the variety of tasks undertaken by planners, LUM remains a dominant part of the profession. Many of the respondents felt that their degrees did not adequately prepare them for this specific task and that it had to be learned 'on the job'. Given that LUM remains the mainstay of the profession, it is apparent that it deserves greater consideration by planning schools. Indeed, reflecting on the overall theme of theory versus practice, this perceived knowledge gap suggests that land-use planning offers a prime topic for academics to try to co-create locally specific, applied theory in collaboration with practitioners working on the ground in their region.

Furthermore, what underpins knowledge gaps and reinforces the need for localised skills is the lack of opportunities for planners, in South Africa, to continue being trained post-graduation (Andres *et al.*, 2018). Due to a very limited offer for continuous practice development as well as lack of mentoring opportunities for early graduates, coupled with severe resource discrepancies between small and rural municipalities, on one hand, and those in the main urban centres (e.g. Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban), career development options can be very limiting. This gives more grounds to acknowledge the need for a localised practice of knowing in the country and push for a subsequent under-developed strand, i.e. the need for lifelong capacity development, as part of the learning curve.

Notes

1. The South African Council of Planners (SACPLAN) is the South African statutory body that registers planners and regulates the planning profession in South Africa. The South African Planning Institute (SAPI) is a voluntary association representing the interests of practising planners in South Africa.
2. In South Africa, the Planning Professions Act 36 of 2002 distinguishes between planners who have a diploma, and those who have a bachelors degree or higher, with the former being referred to as technical planners, and the latter being professional planners. Certain types of planning work can only be signed off by professional planners (in some parts of South Africa), given the more advanced level of training that they have received.

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