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**Doing the real thing  
in collaborative planning education  
(BSc. Level)**

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Education and Culture

**Leonardo da Vinci**

**Enhancing Training on Collaborative Planning of Natural Resources  
Management**

## **1 Abstract**

In collaborative planning education the most exciting thing is to let students and teachers participate in real-life interactive processes. It means that students will act on the level of an information provider or even stake-holder. This poses a great responsibility on the educational institute involved, because student work will be used in real planning preparations and in real decision-making. In this paper the possibilities are presented from several examples in The Netherlands and the pros and cons are clarified. This presentation focuses on BSc. level education in the field of forestry, nature conservation, water management and rural development. In the workshop I hope to discuss this ideal in collaborative planning education with the audience.

## **2 CP learning in the Netherlands**

### ***2.1 CP education in brief***

In natural resources education NRE there is a growing need for students to get familiar with Collaborative planning principles as their future work environment is changing. Blueprint planning is becoming history and many spatial plans are subject to a collaborative process with a wide range of stakeholders. In this article I will try to show the efforts that are undertaken in Dutch education to involve students during their studies in real life interactive processes. In the workshop that I prepared I hope to discuss this approach with other educators. Let's try to discover when, where and how you can prepare students for their later participation in real life interactive processes.

### ***2.2 Aims for CP education***

In Dutch NRE education we hope to prepare students for two possible roles in an interactive planning process:

1. The specialist (forestry, spatial planning, hydrologist, etc) who is serving the process with the right information at the right time.
2. The assistant process coordinator, who is planning and guiding the interactive process.

Experience with a question put to interactive planning students about these two roles, most students choose to be the specialist (80%) and a minority sees itself fit for the process coordinators job. (20%) It must be realised that the latter job is mostly unobtainable for a young graduate. These students can start in an assistant process coordinators job. The students who choose for this advanced job perspective are mostly very socially aware and eager students with a lot of feeling for organising meetings, addressing the public and with oversight for social processes.

### ***2.3 Educational background***

#### ***2.3.1 Action learning***

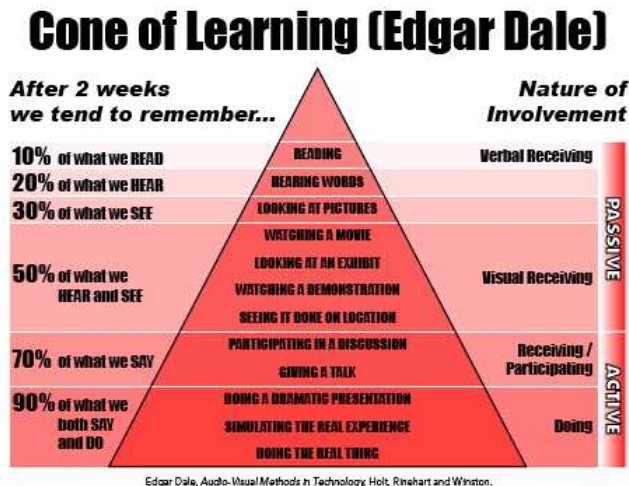
In Van Hall Larenstein University of Professional Education we started a new approach in learning about rural development. This approach is called Action learning for rural development. The aim of this approach is to involve students directly in real rural processes. We discovered that for this approach a new form of practical learning is needed that goes further than the traditional 6 months practical period in an institution outside school. We came up with the concept of a "Rural

workplace” (Plattelandswerkplaats) in a physical, but also virtual form. The physical form is a real laboratory located in a vacated church building in a rural setting. (Annerveensche kanaal) This workplace is a building with workspaces for students, meeting rooms, hotel facilities, transport facilities and most important: a dedicated staff of coordinators and specialists who guide the students in doing real work for local stakeholder groups on a long term basis. The virtual form consists of a coordinator, a team of specialists and a real rural casestudy with local actor’s involvement. Subjects that are studied are for instance a question from the village of Annerveensche kanaal to help the citizens with a Village perspective on future developments for the next 20 years. For this study villagers were interviewed, workshops for Mind mapping (a map of places with a special personal meaning) for the village were organised and prepared and scenario-studies were evaluated into real spatial development choises for the future. This interactive process is also done in a second village Gasselternijveen and more interested parties are identified. We call this approach action learning because students are involved in rural transformation processes in which both students, teachers, professionals, government officials and stakeholders are learning on the job, in an intensive learning environment.

### 2.3.2 Cone of Learning

I always like to look at the picture of the Cone of learning from Edgar Dale (ref@)), in which the retention percentage of experiences is sorted from different sorts of experiences. In this famous picture you can see that “We tend to remember 90%” from “Doing the real thing”. I am convinced that this counts for the student involvement in real life interactive processes: they will experience the difficulty of getting people on one line in decisions on spatial planning, the excitement in organising a workshop for real inhabitants, the development of all sorts of communicative skills. I would like to involve this picture in my story and in my workshop as reminder of the way we learn as a student, but also as an educator or specialist.

Figure 1 Cone of learning by Edgar Dale (Source: Audiovisual methods in technology, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, internet)



### **2.3.3 Elements of a CP process fit for the Real Thing**

In a Dutch textbook on interactive planning, there is a list of 10 aims for an interactive planning process.

1. Enriching the plan with the input of stakeholders: better alternatives, better local information, and better prerequisites.
2. Realisation of a higher planning ambition: more, better and faster (spatial) policy development by better bundling of ideas, time and money
3. Improvement of the process by improving the communication and involvement of parties involved.
4. Improvement of cooperation with external parties: better cooperation as a side product.
5. Improvement of local support for the plan and also support for the realisation of the plan.
6. Speeding up of the decision process.
7. Increasing the problem solving capabilities from society: stakeholders and local organisations take responsibility for their own problems and do not wait for governmental involvement first.
8. Improving participation and democracy: direct involvement from citizens or local representatives in local issues improves decisions.
9. Improvement of the internal organisation: in some governments the internal organisation is improved to deal with complex interactive processes with the public. This internal improvement can be seen as a side product, but sometimes it is used to force people to do their work differently and better.
10. Improvement of the image: the public office can get a better image with active interactive policy and good results.

When you involve students in an interactive process, they should always use this check-list to see what the process will be about. The choices from this list must always be very clear from the start, in order to avoid disappointments later on. When we look at the list as an overview of where we can involve students I would like to have your opinion in our Helsinki workshop. In my experiences in The Netherlands I can say that students are mostly involved in numbers 1, 2, 3 and 8. Ad 1. Students are very useful for getting specialist information on the table or helping local citizens to mobilise hidden information (interviews, mind mapping, visualisation workshops) Ad 2. Student involvement and also other specialist's involvement (educators and scientists) can give a boost to a local decision process, just by their enthusiasm and new and fresh vision on the problem. Ad 3. Students can be used to prepare meetings for the real coordinator with impressive visualisations (even 3D), films, slide shows, Marquette's, etc. They can also learn a lot from just dealing with the public in a workshop or meeting and improve on their communicative skills. They can be involved in devising invitations and evaluation and reporting. Ad 8. Students and teachers can help design an interactive process together with the official management and think on the basics of democracy and public involvement. In the Helsinki workshop I would like to invite you to share your opinion on where you would see further benefits for involving students and educators in real processes.

## **2.4 Examples of CP learning in practice**

### **2.4.1 External projects**

For many years our institute offered students a possibility to do a real job in the professional field in a group of five students for a period of 12 weeks for real money.

We called this assignment 'external project' because students were housed (if possible) on site and were involved with a real problem with a real contractor (Municipality, water board, NGO, etc) and with real stakeholders. Although some of these external projects were quite successful, many were disappointing. Disappointing in the project results or disappointing in the learning results of students. In some instances students were doing primary and preparative work for organisations like local action groups or NGO's to make a good bottom up proposal for a project that could be offered to a local government for a democratic decision. Although some of these projects did not reach a balanced enough perfection to be successful, all the students, teachers and stakeholders agreed that they learned a lot. With the up coming of collaborative planning education we decided that we could do a better job than these external projects: 1<sup>st</sup> we decided to prepare the students better in their knowledge in interactive planning and democratic processes in local government. 2<sup>nd</sup> We decided to strengthen the bond with local stakeholder groups in a more long term relation, because the collaborative processes took much more time than 12 weeks. 3<sup>rd</sup> We prepared facilities for students to be on site and do their work closely together with the local actors. (Housing, bicycles, PC's, information, etc.) 4<sup>th</sup> We tried to get a safety belt around the project in case things went wrong: professionals to back-up students and teachers work to guarantee certain professionalism in the results.

#### **2.4.2 Rural Development Workplace Annerveensche kanaal, province of Drenthe**

This concept was named the rural development workplace, because many of these projects were dealing with multi-stakeholder integral problems from the rural areas. With the help of a special lectorate rural development this concept was deliberated into a full service unit for rural development projects in the North of the Netherlands. The concept even won a Dutch innovation price for educational experiments in 2006.

To give you examples of subjects that were studied by students and teachers:

1<sup>st</sup> Performing a village scan on the physical and mental qualities of the environment for local inhabitants in Annerveensche kanaal. (Mental map) Inhabitants were asked to photograph and name personal local qualities and special places of interest in their lives and put them on a map in an interactive session guided by students. Students perfected all these ideas into a so called Mental Map. This map was used to name and prioritize desires of the village for spatial planning improvements in the village: e.g. were to build and where not to build some new houses, where to make improvements in traffic facilities, where to honour special places for the villagers into a nice place to be, search for new business or tourist opportunities.

2<sup>nd</sup>. Students are asked to explore the possibilities of the development of a new waterway in a small village called Zuidlaarderveen. This idea originates from a village scan, but it was more or less a wild suggestion. The students will perform a small search, together with the villagers into the physical, spatial, economic and social consequences and possibilities of this new waterway. They will present several alternatives and leave the decision to the villagers. When finished the villagers will formulate a proposal for a local government decision.

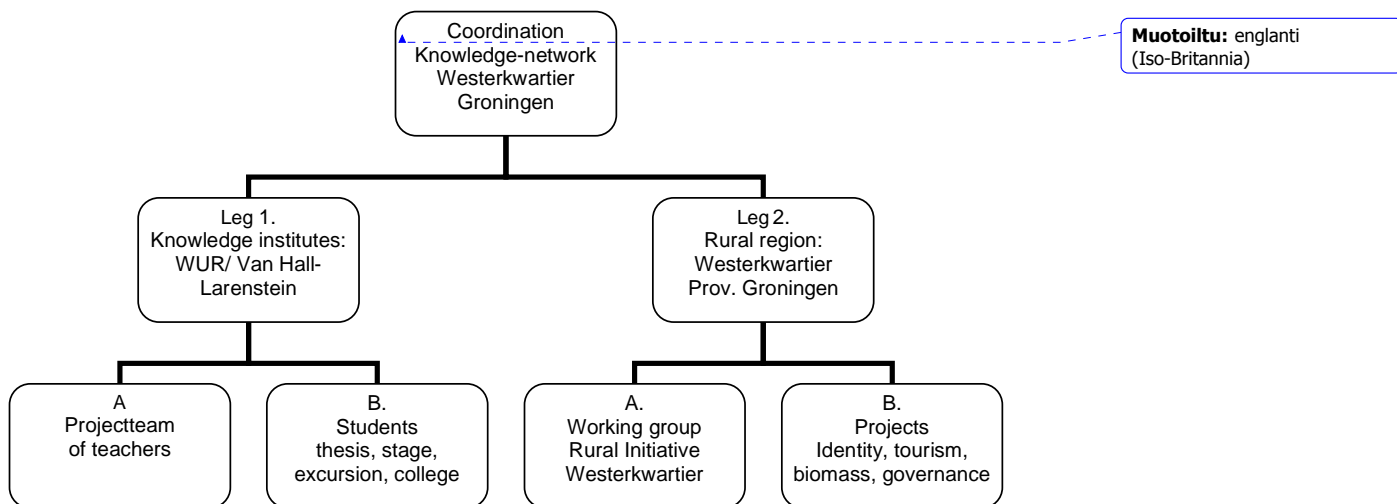
#### **2.4.3 "BRUG Bridge to the future" project Zuidelijk Westerkwartier, Province of Groningen (Quoted and adopted from source 2)**

The basic aims of the project are cooperation between knowledge institutes (Wageningen University and Van Hall-Larenstein University of Professional

Education) and the spreading of knowledge and continuity in the relation with a rural development area in the Netherlands.

The number of people at the start of the project is relatively small: three scientific staff, eight students from different disciplines and one project leader.

**Figure 2 Structure of the Bridge-project BRUG (Source Jifke Sol & Daan van der Linde, ALARPM, 2006)**



The project has a time structure that anticipates both on the academic year and the developments in the area. There is an ongoing interaction, which is being organised and coordinated. For this two “anchor points are needed” that form the link between rural development in practice and rural development issues from a more scientific approach. These points can be found in leg 1. and leg 2. In leg 1. we have the knowledge institutes, with A) a project team of 3-6 teachers, from different disciplines who understand the process of both rural development, the process of action research and they know and how to coach the students in formulating scientific research questions in this context. Also these teachers are willing to cooperate and to explore the latest developments in research and action. The students (B) in leg 1 are the learning actors, conducting research in the area. They are willing to explore the boundaries of their own knowledge and to learn in the field. They are interested and motivated. They are in at least their third year of study, starting the thesis period. Leg 2. is the rural area. The working group (A) consists of water- and nature reserve organisations, agricultural groups with nature and tourism activities, culture- and history oriented groups and administrative representation from the province and from four municipalities in the area. Besides these there are particular members, such as inhabitants from the area. They participate on a irregular basis, depending on the issues at stake. The organisational structure is network-oriented and informal. There is tendency to grow towards a more professional project-oriented structure in order to be an even better vehicle for rural transformation. Theme’s B) that play an important role in the area are landscape and nature conservation, the production and utilisation of biomass, water conservation, the development of a regional identity and tourism and governance issues. The central question is: How can we preserve the

landscape, how can we give farmers continuity, and how can we develop a vital livelihood? These questions are basic, multisectoral and integral. For instance: the landscape conservation by farmers (by way of maintaining the typical wooded fences) produces a lot of biomass material which can be burnt for local energy.. The landscape is historically interesting and parcelated on a small scale, meaning intensive work for present day farmers and nature conservers. In the meanwhile this type of landscape gives a particular identity of the Westerwartier area and attracts tourists. All this together gives an impulse to regional development. The main difference between the BRUG-project and the Rural Development Workplace is that the BRUG-project has a long lasting relationship (now 3 years) with a rural representative body in which this body has evolved from a group of initiative takers to a real representative organisation with a respected position in rural development decisions for the region. You could say that the project helped this group of local representatives with empowerment. The methodology used can be described as action research. In the Rural Development Workplace there is a more service oriented approach (short term) for villages and local governments. In some instances these villages have empowered themselves to get their wishes on the local government agenda. The long term aims is to build a name as a trustworthy service organisation for anybody who needs advise in rural matters.

## **2.5 Lessons learned from these collaborative process projects:**

### **2.5.1 Expectation management:**

All parties involved must express and discuss beforehand what they expect from the process. It is disappointing afterwards if expectations are not met. Involving students and teachers in real life stakeholder issues can be enriching for all parties (young persons opinions can be refreshing for an old debate), but also pose a thread. Unexpected outcomes could hinder a process later on.

### **2.5.2 Good preparation:**

- A good selection of projects beforehand. If too many risky decisions are involved (e.g. financial positions of individuals, old disputes between parties, too many sensitivities between parties) it is not wise to involve students. In some instances it is also clear that a project can be handled better by a professional consultancy firm, because it would be false unfair to disturb the advisory market with free or cheap student work with uncertain results.
- A good preparation of local government: if local government is still in favour of top down approach, than you should not provoke them with bottom up decisions from villagers. If local government or local civil servants are willing to listen to bottom up results (see number aims 1 and 2 from Elements of a CP process fit for the Real Thing), than you can start.
- Expert advise as a back-up and professionalisation: there must also be some sort of professional expertise brought in the process on the research methods / action research methodology (source 4) to get better and quicker results. The organisation or institute as a whole must learn continue to learn from these processes to get better and better at it. (See monitoring) Experts from scientific institutes as a back-up mechanism can also get some trustworthiness into the process. In return these scientists get a lot of experimental data on interactive processes. In the rural development workplace we use a lot of experts on cultural history, spatial planning

procedures and process management to help teachers and students to get a better start.

### **2.5.3 Good facilities**

- Extra time for teachers to get involved: being with students, citizen meetings, travelling long distances from school is very time consuming. In Van Hall Larenstein we try to fund these extra work hours with rural development subsidies.
- A suitable and inspiring place for students to work and live: students have many side jobs and a rich social life these days. That makes it a little difficult for students to be expected to spend many nights from home in some rural area. For this reason the facilities must be attractive enough and the data gathering is best concentrated in two or three day periods away from home. Most interactive sessions will be in the evening hours, so for this you will need a local place to stay.
- A coordination person who will tie people together: you really need a person who can do the preparation job in situ, talk to a lot of officials, take care of the facilities, look after continuity, etc. In the rural workplace we are happy to have a motivated coordination person, who is willing to do tasks behind the scenes. This person must also be able to think into the ratio of a school organisation as well as think in terms of local government or stakeholders.

### **2.5.4 Good motivation**

- Motivated students who really want to be involved into interactive processes, with an open mind for the peculiarities of people. If you have doubts with the willingness of students to really put their minds to it you should better stop at an early stage. It is impossible to convince local people to share their ideas with unmotivated foreigners to the area.
- Motivated teachers who are willing to run an extra mile if needed. (Guide the process, but not determine the process, to give room for students to learn)
- Motivated local government and local professionals who are willing to wait for sometimes unexpected results.
- Motivated experts who are willing to spend their time with local citizens, students and teachers.

## **2.6 *Benefits from real life involvement of students in collaborative processes.***

- Students get insight in interactive processes and can get inside in the pros and cons of this bottom up approach.
- Students can get very internally motivated to because they are working for real people they can not disappoint.
- Teachers leave the school building and get deeply involved and motivated into the “real world of interactive planning” they are supposed to know so well.
- Students and teachers help local citizens to make better decisions based on better “local” data.
- Students can strengthen proposals and visualize alternatives with their knowledge of presentation software and techniques (GIS, PhotoShop, Video, etc.)

## Doing the real thing in collaborative planning education (BSc. Level)

- Students bring in young visions and ideas into local decision making. In The Netherlands a lot of government decisions are very biased by middle aged and elderly people. Young voters are difficult to involve in local decisions.
- Students from all over the country can enrich a plan with ideas from other regions.
- Educational institutes can learn from these experiments like the rural development work place or the BRUG Bridge to the future project and develop into a real expertise centre for rural development issues. In this way they play a significant role in developing the countryside with better information for better decisions.
- Students benefit a lot from the real life experiences they gained doing a presentation for a real audience, writing a real article in the local newspaper, doing real negotiations with parties, etc. Most students mention this in their evaluation sheets: we remember more from these experiences than from all the other subjects that we were taught. (See **Virhe. Viitteen lähde ei löytynyt.** Cone of learning)

### **2.7 Conclusions**

Doing the real thing for students in collaborative planning can be successful, as long as you are serious in your efforts and motivation and you are careful with the stakes and risks for the stakeholders involved. The concept of the Rural Development Workplace or the BRUG Bridge to the future concept can be useful for other educational institutes to explore.

### **2.8 Literature**

1. Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching by Edgar Dale, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963
2. Bridge to the future: embedding action research in rural development; Lessons from an educational university pilot in the Netherlands aimed at regional development in the province of Groningen, Jifke Sol (SOL, Wageningen), Daan van der Linde (Van Hall Larenstein University of Professional Education), Contribution to ALARPM 7<sup>th</sup> & PAR 11<sup>th</sup> World Congress, Groningen, The Netherlands, August 2006
3. De aanpak van interactief beleid : elke situatie is anders\Pröpper, I.\Steenbeek, D.\1999
4. De leefomgeving centraal: Action Learning in de werkplaats Plattelandsvernieuwing, Willem Foorhuis, RUG-publication Action Learning, 2004.

### **2.9 Workshop questions:**

1. Do you think this methodology could work in your country / situation?
2. Do you see threads or other objections that you fear from this method?