

ENRICHING RELATIONSHIPS: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TOWARD SUSTAINABLE COASTAL FUTURES

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INTRODUCTION

Many coastal communities currently face the social, cultural and environmental challenges of managing rapid urban and industrial development, expanding tourism, and sensitive ecological environments. As such, they offer valuable sites for university planning and design education projects. Creating and enriching relationships between coastal communities and universities through a structured engagement process can deliver innovative new planning and design options towards sustainable futures. This paper presents the results of a review of lessons learnt from two such projects undertaken by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Schools of Design and Urban Development, and discusses their proposed application in a third.

QUT has formed partnerships in Queensland's Wide Bay-Burnett region, facilitating two projects in which senior landscape architecture and environmental engineering students worked within coastal communities. They produced design and planning drawings and reports outlining future options responsive to the communities' specific challenges. These projects create learning environments within which students and community can explore new ideas freely without commitment to their implementation. In such projects, however, a pattern can form whereby communities are consulted only at the commencement of a project. In this all-too-common scenario, teaching staff are focussed on the processes of student learning (Smith *et al.* 2005), while communities prioritise project outcomes. It is our premise that by enriching community partners' involvement in the design and educational *process* they come to value this role and that their input has an influence on outcomes. It creates an increased sense of identification with and some degree of ownership of the project outcomes.

Our students require a rich understanding of their project community and region, and we find this is best achieved through an ongoing conversational process between the differing forms of knowledge and capacities embedded within both the community and the university (Armstrong 1999, Thomas 2006). The result of such an enriched engagement process is the production of innovative and locally responsive outcomes, both in terms of design and planning proposals for sustainable coastal futures, and the pedagogical needs of the university partners.

This paper summarises our review of the engagement processes and outcomes in two coastal community projects. After a brief introduction to our project process and the specific projects, our reflective method of reviewing, evaluating and learning from each project is outlined. The lessons learnt are discussed in terms of process and outcomes and the potential application of these lessons in our third project in the Wide bay-Burnett region is outlined.

BACKGROUND

Our Community Engagement Process

Landscape architecture and environmental engineering students must learn to respond to the complexities of contemporary coastal communities and to perform an 'integrative and innovative role in the cultivation of equitable and sustainable regions'

(Farrant & Silka 2006). In these projects, they are asked to develop proposals achieving 'the best balance possible amongst, but not limited to, ecological health, enhancement of cultural heritage, manifestation of cultural values (particularly acknowledgement of the place of traditional owners of land), and the sustainability of urban development, local economic health, and the promotion of local distinctiveness' (Satherley & Dawes 2007). By engaging students with their project area community, we aim to offer 'opportunities for communities to develop innovative design solutions for sustainable livelihoods in the context of local distinctiveness and local capacity; a space to speculate on place making' (Thomas 2006). The process undertaken to achieve these aims is as follows (Dawes & Satherley 2008):

- a need is identified within a community relating to a place that specific groups and/or the wider community consider to be of concern;
- project partnerships are established, funding secured, and a project brief devised;
- students visit the project place, and meet partners and community;
- ideally such meetings are able to recur throughout the project, but not always;
- students produce design work which is presented to the community and project partners for discussion about possible futures;

Project 1: 'Access and Interpretative Plan for the Pasturage Reserve', Bargara (2007)

The ephemeral wetlands of the Bargara Pasturage Reserve on the central Queensland coast are a meeting point and bio-filter between intensive cane farming, urban development and the Mon Repos Conservation Park. As such it provides an exemplar of many issues currently facing coastal places. Our project brief was to prepare a range of strategic planning and environmental management options for the provision of public access to and interpretation of the natural and cultural values of the Pasturage Reserve. The project process involved two visits to the site by QUT students and staff. The first visit at the projects' commencement included a formal briefing session with project partners Burnett Shire Council, Landcare, and the Burnett Mary Regional Group. A couple of evenings were spent informally socialising with locals to gain some understanding of community values. The second visit at the conclusion of the project was to stage an exhibition of the completed work, entitled 'Future Visions for the Pasturage Reserve'. In this project, only this small amount of community engagement was undertaken due to budgetary limitations.

Project 2: 'Integrated Solutions to Sustainable Growth', Port of Bundaberg (2008)

The Port of Bundaberg project site, just north of Bargara, is another complex mix of port facilities, urban development, coastal conservation and agriculture. The project brief was to prepare a range of strategic planning and environmental management options for future urban and infrastructure development in the Port area. The project process involved three visits to the site by QUT students and staff. The first visit at the project's commencement included a formal briefing session with project partners the Burnett Mary Regional Group, Port of Brisbane Corporation, and Queensland Department of Local Government and Planning. Formal and informal community engagement facilitated by the Burnett Heads Progress Association also allowed students to gain some understanding of local values.

A second visit mid-project involved a 'Futures Workshop' with students and community. This enabled the students to gain the benefit of local knowledge and experience in response to their work-in-progress, and to establish priorities for project comple-

tion. It strengthened the relationship between the community and the students. A final exhibition, 'Future Visions for the Port of Bundaberg' was held at the Port TAFE Campus upon the completion of the project. The increased amount of engagement in this second project was enabled by an increased project budget.

Project 3: Future Project in the Wide Bay-Burnett region (2010)

QUT and partner organisations the Burnett Mary Regional Group and the Port of Brisbane Corporation are keen to undertake a further project with a coastal community in the Wide Bay-Burnett region in 2010. Specific planning for this project will commence mid-2009, with the engagement process as a centrepiece.

METHODS: A REFLECTIVE APPROACH

The projects were evaluated using the iterative process of 'reflective practice' (Rudd 2007): lessons learned in Project 1 were applied in Project 2, evaluated, and further lessons learned to be applied in Project 3. In the *Pasturage Reserve* project, the views of the Bargara community were canvassed in the form of a written survey regarding the potential of the work displayed in the final exhibition. In the *Port of Bundaberg* project lessons learned from the previous project were applied within the limitations of the university program and budget. Data was collected regarding student and community views using structured and written surveys at both the halfway and end points of the project. The value placed upon engagement processes and project outcomes were each evaluated. The main results of these surveys and some written feedback from project partner organisations are briefly summarised in this paper, and the lessons learnt for Project 3 listed.

RESULTS: LESSONS LEARNED AND APPLIED

Project 1: 'Access and Interpretative Plan for the Pasturage Reserve', Bargara (2007)

Approximately 150 community members attended the 'Future Visions' exhibition and discussed the students' proposals with them. The community survey took the form of written feedback (33% response rate) which was predominately positive, including comments such as 'very creative and innovative design with melding of the history and other pertinent aspects of the area'. Some visitors suggested more community consultation was necessary, and many wished to view the exhibition over a longer period than the single day available.

Burnett Shire Council's Geordie Lascelles enthused: 'the unique workable ideas ... have stayed in my memory and offer real value to our community.' A Bundaberg Landcare representative and member of the Pasturage Reserve Steering Committee, was 'greatly impressed that the work addressed not only environmental aspects of the Reserve and its context, but also 'social, cultural and economic aspects.' Council amalgamations have unfortunately suspended the investigation of on-ground implementation of some of the proposed options. While the project outcomes were of a high quality, the relationship between the community and university could have been enriched through earlier opportunities for formalised discussions with the community.

Project 2: 'Integrated Solutions to Sustainable Growth', Port of Bundaberg (2008)

Learning from the Pasturage Reserve project, in the planning of the Port of Bundaberg project, we prioritised the enrichment of the engagement process, increasing

and formalising knowledge-sharing between the students and the community. Lessons applied included (Dawes & Satherley 2008):

1. Preparing students specifically for community engagement.
2. Recognising possible limitations to our understanding of engagement processes, we drew on the expertise of specialists in community engagement.
3. Increasing the formal opportunities for community participation through the addition midway of the 'Futures Workshop'.
4. Adopting again the successful strategy of a final exhibition.
5. Preparing better survey instruments to evaluate project processes as well as outcomes.

The benefit of engaging the community in the project process proved successful, judging by the enthusiasm evidenced in survey responses. The main results from these surveys are summarised below.

When asked to rate the importance of 'the process of engaging with students and the project,' (on a continuum from 'very important' to 'not important') all 14 community members attending the Futures Workshop responded that it was 'very important.' 'The educational value of the workshop' was rated 'very important' by 13, with 1 rating it between 'very important' and 'neutral'. Written comments reflected this high valuing of the engagement process, such as: 'The workshop was informative and interesting. I think the student participation helps us locals to focus on the spread of issues'; 'Good process for building local support and ownership for change'; and 'Good to see students involved in regional/local community issues'. One respondent made the following criticism of the informal community involvement on the first visit: that it 'lacked sufficient community input – it was more expert-based.' Community members were not specifically asked about the engagement process at the final exhibition, as many attendees had not been involved.

Asked to rate the importance (from 'very important' to 'not important') of 'the process of engagement between students and community members': all 12 students attending the Futures Workshop responded 'very important'. 'Spending 'class time in this type of educational activity' (from 'very positive' to 'negative'): was rated 'very positive' by 10, and between 'very positive' and 'neutral' by 2. Written comments also revealed the students highly valued the engagement process, especially as a provider of 'real' input into their design and planning thinking: 'It is great to have 'real world' interaction with real stakeholders, clients, partners on a real project'; 'I gained a greater appreciation for regional context – need to understand potential conflicts/mediums for growth'; 'It brings to the surface issues that would otherwise be left untouched. Gives a perspective of local ideals and the passion felt towards their landscape'. The structure of the 'Futures Workshop' received constructive criticism from 5 students with one issue in particular identified: that 'a better method of general decision making would improve the outcomes/results.' At the project's completion, asked to rate taking part in a community engagement project 'as part of your tertiary education' (from 'very positive' to 'negative'), 13 out of 26 students rated it 'very important', 12 rated it between 'very important' and 'neutral', and 1 rated it 'neutral'.

Midway, 12 out of 14 community members rated the importance of 'the final project outcomes' (from 'very important' to 'not important') as 'very important', and 2 between 'very important' and 'neutral'. Similarly, 9 out of 12 students rated the 'importance of the final project outcomes' as 'very important, 2 as 'important', and 1 as 'neutral'. At the final exhibition, community members were asked to rate the quality of the student work (from 'excellent' to 'poor'). Out of 13, 9 rated it 'excellent', while 4 rated it be-

tween 'excellent' and 'neutral'. One written comment proposed the value of such a project to a community as 'seeding minds with possibilities'.

Burnett Mary Regional Group's Coastal & Marine Coordinator Sue Sargent commented of both projects that they have 'immediately resulted in educational and community benefits and will have marked economic, social and environmental benefits in the future'. Port of Brisbane Corporation's Environment Manager Brad Kitchen commented that the Port of Bundaberg project provided 'an exciting opportunity and one which allowed both the students and the community to think beyond the bounds of contemporary planning frameworks'. The corporation has stated its intention to use the final student work for 'further community in-house discussion and for consideration in future planning undertaken by the port' (Port of Bundaberg News 2008).

DISCUSSION: ENRICHING RELATIONSHIPS

While both project communities were similarly enthusiastic about the exhibited final work, in the view of teaching staff that produced in the Pasturage Reserve project was of an equally high quality in terms of design skill but was not as responsive to community knowledge and values as that produced for the Port of Bundaberg project. In the latter, students and community members surveyed placed similar value on the engagement process and the project outcomes, strengthening our belief that the balance between both should be enriched: the focus should not primarily be on outcomes. The quality of the relationships between all project partners is central to planning for sustainable futures, and while the outcomes the students deliver are valued, it is as much for their catalytic role as for their contents, as noted in the comments from Sargent and Kitchen. Recent literature (Collins *et al.* 2007, Ramaley 2001, Rudd 2007) supports our view that community engagement is 'not just about ensuring that our consequences provide a good outcome, the processes by which outcomes are achieved also count' (Garlick & Palmer 2007).

Lessons to be applied: Future Project in the Wide Bay-Burnett region (2010)

In the planning of this future project, we will further prioritise the enrichment of the engagement process, increasing knowledge and experience sharing between the university and the community. Strategies will include:

1. Continuing to prepare students specifically for community engagement.
2. Continuing to draw on the expertise of community engagement specialists to assist project planning.
3. Formalising opportunities for community input at the commencement of the project rather than having an expert panel followed by only informal community engagement.
4. Better informing the community of the time, budget and mobility constraints of a university project.
5. Where the aforementioned constraints allow, maintaining the successful addition of the midway 'Futures Workshop' and the exhibition.
6. Developing a more robust method for synthesising workshop results.
7. Continuing to improve methods of surveying the valuing of project process as well as outcomes.
8. Continuing to complete the project with an exhibition.

CONCLUSION

This paper has summarised our review of the engagement processes and outcomes in two planning and design projects in coastal communities. They have been a successful means of developing innovative responses to the challenges faced by these

communities seeking direction toward sustainable futures. The high quality project outcomes have offered a wide range of ideas addressing the spectrum of economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability. While our survey methods were not as well developed in Project 1, the results from both projects coupled with positive feedback from partner organisations have enabled us to learn lessons we can apply in our third project in the Wide Bay-Burnett region in 2010.

Our definition of a 'successful' engagement process is one in which our students begin to identify the complexities and values embedded in a community; and reflect this in their design and planning work. It is about more than the provision of consultative input at one end and project outcomes at the other: our reflective review of two projects demonstrates that effective engagement draws on and applies the knowledge and capacities of all participants throughout the whole life of the project. Community partners' involvement in the project *process* needs to be enriched in order to produce more locally responsive outcomes, and our students need to experience the engagement process as being of equal value to the final outcomes, as the university campus 'is in the world and the world is in the campus' (Farrant & Silka 2006).

The uniquely complex challenges facing coastal communities provide outstanding learning opportunities for students. This, coupled with an enriched engagement process, leads to the production by students of design and planning drawings and reports with which community members have a sense of identification. These can then be used to debate and negotiate future directions. In seeking to continue to facilitate this engagement and these outcomes, we will apply the lessons learnt so far, and continue our reflective process through future projects.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE

We have found that creating and enriching relationships between coastal communities and universities through structured engagement processes can facilitate the development of innovative new design and planning options towards sustainable coastal futures.

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