

SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY

The researchers reported that SEA is of potential significance in promoting more sustainable communities because of its basis as a legal requirement, but found that the focus of attention at present emphasised instrumental or single loop learning associated with making modest adjustments to plans. Nonetheless, they believe that could change and that the learning potential of SEA could be increased by using the above framework in developing appraisal methodologies that are more supportive of individual, organisational or social learning and transformatory or double-loop learning. Such methodologies would incorporate learning through all learning styles, including experience, observation, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation.



Learning Through Appraisal in Spatial Planning

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Creating Space for Reflective Learning

Key Policy Implications

- The statutory requirement to undertake Strategic Environmental Appraisals (SEAs) creates significant potential for change
- SEAs currently achieve modest adjustments/modifications to plans, but could achieve more fundamental/transformational change
- Professionals involved in Strategic Environmental Appraisal might learn more (and the SEA achieve more) if the SEA process incorporated opportunities to learn using a full range of learning styles
- The establishment of multi-disciplinary teams can also enhance learning in SEA.
- There is a need to further experiment and be creative with SEA methodologies to maximise the benefits for sustainable development.
- More time is required to build experience of SEA before judgement can be reached on its efficacy.

Key Words

■ Generic Skills ■ Sustainable Communities ■ Planning ■ Environmental Sustainability

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Background

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is now a formal requirement in all member states of the European Union. In England, this European Directive is reflected in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Regulations 2004. Taken together these require that Sustainability Appraisals (incorporating SEA) form part of the development of most spatial planning documents.

Researchers have suggested that Sustainability Appraisals have the potential to contribute to wider community engagement with sustainable development, to increase understanding of sustainability issues and to promote the gradual greening of policy over time.

The development of more participatory models of appraisal has stimulated interest in the learning dimension of appraisal, acknowledging that appraisals take place within specific contexts, using a variety of methods and learning.

Approach

Drawing upon different adult and organisational learning theories, this research provides an analytical framework for learning through SEA that was tested with peers and professionals. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives distinguished different levels of learning, while Kolb's Experiential Learning theory defined a four stage learning cycle and associated learning styles, which were used to better understand individual learning:

Learning outcomes and learning styles are important elements of the framework for learning

- a) *accommodators* These learners prefer to act on feelings rather than on logical analysis; rely on people for information rather than on their own technical analysis; get involved in new experiences and are good in carrying out plans and tasks;
 - b) *divergers* These learners prefer brainstorming sessions; are good at viewing concrete situations from different points of view; adapt through observation rather than action;
 - c) *convergers* These learners are best at translating theories into practice; good at solving problems and making decisions; prefer dealing with technical tasks and problems, but shy away from social and interpersonal issues;
 - d) *assimilators* These learners are best at understanding a wide range of information and at organising it into a concise logical form; their strength lies in inductive reasoning.
- (Kolb, 1984)

Argyris and Schon's theory of organisational learning, particularly the identification of single and double loop learning, presented a useful means of assessing change through learning, where single loop learning generates operational changes to routinised work practices and double loop learning generates more fundamental questioning of prevailing routines, values and traditions.

Case studies were selected from Southampton, Ravenna (Italy) and Brunswick (Germany). The case studies were all examples of good practice in Strategic Environmental Appraisal in medium sized city regions during 2005/6.

Fieldwork included reviews of the context of the appraisal. Key actors were interviewed about their background, involvement in the appraisal process, the context of the appraisal, its

methodology and learning outcomes. Interviews were followed up with questionnaires relating to individual and organisational learning styles. Case study participants, consultants, academics, and officers from regional, local and national government discussed the data at a workshop.

Findings

Incorporating all learning styles helps to maximize the learning that takes place

The researchers found different learning styles to be dominant in different case study areas and suggest that learning may be maximised by designing SEA in ways that cover all learning styles. The organisational context was also found to be important in facilitating learning. For example the existence of sustainability teams in

Sustainability teams generate opportunities to build on SEA

Ravenna and Southampton which worked alongside the planning teams was associated with beneficial learning experiences, by providing staff with the remit and time to reflect and build upon the SEA.

The research proposes a framework for understanding learning in SEA:

Levels of Understanding	Individual	Organisational	Social	Types of Learning	Transformatory Learning ----- Instrumental Learning
Evaluation	<i>Know why</i> Questioning underlying principles	<i>Know why</i> Integrating principles into Organisational culture	<i>Know why</i> Changing values and behaviours	<i>Know why</i> Double Loop Learning	
Synthesis	Changing values and behaviours	Changing norms and practices			
Analysis	<i>Know how</i> Adjusting the Plan	<i>Know how</i> Adjusting the Plan	<i>Know how</i> Adjusting responses to Plan	<i>Know how</i> Single Loop Learning	
Application	Adjusting SEA Process	Adjusting SEA Process	Adjusting input to SEA process		
Comprehension	(Development of individual/organisational capacity – initially likely to be a few 'experts')				
Knowledge acquisition	(Legal/administrative/political procedures)				
	(Familiarity of terms and concepts) <i>Know that</i>				