



Ren Thomas, Visiting Assistant Professor

✉ Department of Planning, Public Policy, and Management, 119 Hendricks Hall, University of Oregon
☎ 541.346.3858 📧 rthomas5@uoregon.edu 🌐 www.renthomas.ca

Using Case Studies in the Canadian Teaching Context

Abstract

Case studies are widely used in both practical and academic planning. Case studies on local planning policies, processes, and governance structures are used in the development and testing of planning theories, planning research, and as a teaching tool in planning classes. Each year, hundreds of urban planners, architects, and urban designers visit international cities and return home with policy ideas that are studied, adapted, implemented or used as inspiration in their own cities through policy transfer processes (e.g. Spaans and Louw 2009, Thomas and Bertolini 2014). In turn, planning departments often host guest delegations from other cities and regions (Tan 2011). These transnational networks are important tools for policy learning and innovation (Stone 2004, Marsden and Stead 2011).

While there is an established body of literature on policy transfer and lesson drawing, there is little research focused on policy transfer processes in planning (Spaans and Louw 2009, Marsden and Stead 2011). As yet, there seems to be no discussion on using policy lessons to transfer policy ideas or concepts within the teaching context, or whether the barriers to policy transfer could apply in the classroom setting. This paper applies the opportunities and constraints in policy transfer to planning education, exploring the use of case studies as a source of policy ideas that could be used in Canadian planning courses. Since planning is context-specific, and there are acknowledged barriers to policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, Thomas and Bertolini 2015), it is critical to introduce students to planning through the use of case studies that use local governance structures and planning processes. Eliminating the contextual barrier can make it easier for students to understand, apply, and learn from policy concepts in the field.

In this paper, the author focuses on the contributions of 34 case studies to Canadian undergraduate teaching in planning. The cases range from research-based to practice-based, small centres to large metropolitan areas, and top-down to bottom-up approaches to planning problems. They are broken down into eight themes: transportation and infrastructure planning, natural resource management, community development and social planning, housing, urban regeneration, participatory processes, urban design, and urban form and public health. The paper outlines the ways in which these case studies can be used to teach students about plan implementation, integrating public participation, managing conflict and disagreement among stakeholders, and transferring policy ideas from one context to another. It concludes with presenting a potential methodology for measuring the ways in which the cases are used by instructors and students in planning, geography, and related disciplines.

Keywords: case studies, teaching, policy transfer, Canada

Introduction

There are a number of reasons why policy transfer processes are of critical interest for planners. Policy transfer, or learning from other' solutions to problems, is seen as a solution to multiple challenges faced by policy makers, planners, and politicians. New challenges such as climate change and rising income inequality may encourage policy makers to look for policy solutions in other jurisdictions to help develop their own (Marsden and Stead 2011). Conditions of uncertainty, such as lack of scientific consensus, political conflict, and policy disasters may also influence policy makers and public servants to imitate policies that have worked in other contexts (Dimaggio and Powell 1983). And in an era of increased competition among municipalities and regions (Florida 2002), planners and public officials may implement new policies or programs in an effort to attract new residents and businesses. International networks, enhanced by technological innovations, are critical to spreading new ideas (Stone 2004, Tan 2011).

However, it is not often easy to adapt policy ideas to the local context; policies are more likely to be transferred between countries that are "psychologically proximate" (Stone 2004). Uninformed, incomplete, or inappropriate policy transfer may occur (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). It can be difficult to transfer "softer" aspects such as ideas, paradigms, interpretations, and problem definitions compared to "harder" aspects such as instruments, legislation, techniques, and policies (Stone 2004, Pojani and Stead 2015). A planning issue could be perceived as a problem in one country, but not in another (Spaans and Louw 2009). It may even be necessary to "decontextualize" policy ideas to overcome barriers to policy transfer (Thomas and Bertolini 2015).

In this paper, the author uses these opportunities and constraints to policy transfer to discuss the use of case studies in planning education. The paper adapts the strengths and weaknesses identified in the policy transfer literature, which focuses on policy makers, civil servants, or political figures learning from international policy concepts, to planning pedagogy, focusing on Canadian instructors and students learning from cases within their context.

Research Context

Case studies as a pedagogical tool

Case studies are widely used in practical and academic planning. Case studies on local planning policies, processes, and governance structures are used in the development and testing of planning theories, planning research, and as a teaching tool in planning classes. For instructors in community and regional planning, case studies can provide real examples of the theories, methods, or ideas presented in lectures and seminars. Studying cases can allow students to evaluate how the theories or concepts were applied to real world situations, helping students engage in the material actively rather than passively (Schwartz 2015). Because of their richness, including statistical data, historical information, policy context, and the experiences of the actors involved in the planning and/or implementation process, case studies offer a unique pedagogical tool for planning instructors.

As a pedagogical tool, case studies present students with issues or conflicts that do not have an obvious solution (Centre for Teaching and Learning 1994), and often illustrate the interaction between research and practice. Training students to become professional planners includes developing an understanding of professional ethics and the difficult choices between professional judgment and community or institutional goals (e.g. Campbell and Marshall 1999, Watson 2006, Vigar 2012). Cases often focus on this intersection, and allowing students to become more comfortable with "grey areas" in planning practice. Instructors can approach cases from different levels, e.g. understanding the main facts of the case and its application of a theory or concept discussed in class, role playing using the specific actors involved in the case, or discussing the strengths/weaknesses of the planning or implementation process.

Case studies highlight the multidisciplinary and mixed-methods approaches that practicing planners use in problem solving. For example, although students may take separate courses in land use policy, housing policy, and transportation planning, a case study on the implementation of transit-oriented development brings together all of these areas, showing how the actors in the planning process have worked together to develop a program or implement a plan. This can help students understand the roles they will play as practicing planners, and the roles of different levels of government, community-based organizations, businesses, and residents in implementing plans, policies, and programs. “Unsuccessful” cases may also be instructive (e.g. Maxwell 2004, Stone 2004), as students may be challenged to point out the ways in which the planning process could have been improved, e.g. developing better relationships with the community, consulting local political leaders.

Research case studies also offer the opportunity for Masters or PhD students to discuss the application of methods such as interviewing, focus groups, GIS, participatory planning, or statistical analysis. The role of the researcher and the analytic generalization of single-case, multiple-case, and cross-case study findings (Yin 1994, Flyvberg 2001) are also often discussed in research design and methods courses. Masters or PhD students may use completed case studies to conduct cross-case analysis or meta-analysis (e.g. Miles and Huberman 1994, Sandelowski 1997, Khan and Van Wynsberghe 2008) to find patterns across similar cases of planning process or policy implementation.

Case studies as a source of policy ideas

Case studies may be a valuable pedagogical tool, but can they be used to present policy ideas to undergraduate planning students? And if so, how would students use these policy ideas, since they are not yet in the position to apply the ideas to policy development?

Case studies are widely used in the discipline, but planning researchers and practitioners often struggle with adapting them from one political, cultural, or governance context to another, as discussed in the previous section. Much of the literature on lesson learning and policy transfer deals with politicians, civil servants, and policy makers attempting to implement policy ideas from one political setting in another (e.g. Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, Marsden and Stead 2001, Stone 2004). There little research on policy transfer of policy ideas in planning (Spaans and Louw 2009, Marsden and Stead 2011), and planners are just beginning to understand the limitations of attempting to implement ideas from other countries to their own (Pojani and Stead 2015). Can the policy transfer literature be applied to policy learning in the classroom setting?

Stone (2004) suggests that we can learn from more than one jurisdiction at a time and take away a few lessons, which can lead to hybrids and adaptive innovation to fit the local context. Rose (2005) states that learning is about both best and “worst” practices, and several other authors value negative cases in policy learning (Maxwell 2004, Stone 2004, Thomas and Bertolini 2014). We can imagine developing an exercise where graduate students learn about a few different municipal bylaws on secondary suites within the same province, and then develop an ideal “hybrid” policy that could be implemented in their own municipality. Case studies highlighting the successful implementation of such policies, or the difficulties in implementation, would be instrumental for this type of exercise in the classroom setting. Using cases in this way may help students to go beyond the mere copying of policy ideas from one context to another, without enough attention to the social, political, and ideological contexts in the transferring and borrowing countries. This tendency is noted among policymakers and civil servants in the policy transfer literature (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, Spaans and Louw 2009, Pojani and Stead 2015). Students are, then, acting in the roles of policy makers, planners, and politicians—while they will not immediately use the policy ideas in the development of plans or policies, training them to think critically about the possible barriers to policy transfer and to use international examples as learning and inspiration is an important in their career development in planning development.

Since practicing planners often have difficulty overcoming differences in context, it is presumed that students, with their limited work experience, find policy transfer to different jurisdictions even more difficult. Canadian undergraduate students can perhaps best understand how projects/policies/programs are initiated,

developed, and implemented through the lens of cases in rural areas, towns, and cities in their own provinces. A major challenge in teaching planning in the Canadian context is the difficulty in finding Canadian planning material for lecture development and reading lists. There is a tendency to rely upon American theory and scholarship, as it is geographically, ideologically, and culturally similar (Stone 2004) to Canada. However, in the following discussion, it becomes clear that it is critical to introduce students to planning through case studies that use governance structures and planning processes based in their own political, cultural, and planning context.

Removing the context barrier

To use the US as an example “lending” country for policy ideas, with Canada as the “borrowing” country, there are a number of critical differences between the two countries that could act as barriers to policy learning. Undergraduate students new to planning in Canada need a primer on the discipline, but also the local planning context and regulations. For example, Canada’s legislative structure means that planning is not only the responsibility of the municipalities, but also of the provinces. The country’s rural history has contributed to a governance system that does not recognize the economic and social importance of cities. The balance of responsibility usually rests with the federal and provincial governments; provinces have the responsibility for creating municipal and regional institutions, such as metropolitan transportation authorities. Because the provinces have the responsibility for property rights and land use, they have each developed Planning Acts that describe the activities and procedures that municipalities must follow, such as the development and regular review of Official Community Plans, the rules for public consultation, and the coordination of municipal planning with provincial policies. The Planning Acts describe how land uses are regulated and the tools that can be used. Municipalities regulate land use within their jurisdiction by preparing Official Community Plans and zoning bylaws, ensuring they conform to the relevant Planning Act and any other provincial legislation related to planning.

In many areas of planning, the cooperation of all three levels of government is required. For example, the federal government has the responsibility for the National Housing Act and the development of national policy on affordable housing, the provinces develop housing plans and policies, and municipalities determine the number, location and type of housing units needed within their jurisdiction. Health is a provincial responsibility, but most provinces have delegated authority to metropolitan public health authorities to help municipalities and regions deal with everything from delivering healthy communities programs for recent immigrants to encouraging built form based around non-motorized transportation. But the balance of power means that provincial and federal governments have far higher taxation ability and revenues, and fewer responsibilities than municipalities, who must constantly demand funding to provide basic services. Lack of collaboration and cooperation on these multi-level planning issues is a real barrier to policy implementation. Case studies can be a critical tool used to illustrate these roles and relationships to students, so that they can understand the possibilities for policy intervention in planning.

A number of other critical planning differences exist between the US and Canada, notably the legacy from British common law that prioritizes the public good over individual property rights. This means that although zoning developed along the same general lines in Canada and the US, the Canadian Constitution does not spell out personal property rights and the limits of state intervention; under the Constitution Act [1867] municipalities were deemed to have the statutory power to regulate land use. This gives zoning bylaws in Canada more scope; the only issue is whether the bylaw is discriminatory in pursuing the public interest (Hodge 1985). Canada’s planning history differs substantially from the US in its more limited demolition of urban neighbourhoods in favour of public housing projects during the 1950s and 1960s, meaning that examples such as Toronto’s Regent Park are less common. More limited construction of highway infrastructure resulted in fewer instances of displacement and other impacts on the character of urban neighbourhoods during the postwar decades.

These differences, in addition to Canada’s rapid increase in immigration during this era, have led to very different spatial, social, and ethnocultural patterns in Canadian cities, which make it difficult to transfer

policy ideas from American planning literature and case studies to the Canadian context (Walks and Bourne 2006, Thomas in press). Without detailed examples, it can be difficult to explain to students that issues of spatial mismatch or neighbourhood diversity are different in Canada because of its historical, cultural, and political differences from the US.

Development of the Canadian Cases

The case studies were developed in response to the author's experience teaching an undergraduate introduction to planning course at the University of British Columbia, in the School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP). The course was designed to introduce students from a variety of undergraduate degrees (e.g. geography, business, landscape architecture, environmental studies) to the theory and practice of planning. As is common in many planning schools, SCARP masters students at the time (2008-9) could build their degrees around one of several areas of concentration. Accordingly, in order to introduce students to the breadth of the discipline, the course was designed around these concentrations. Due to the extensive literature in each of these areas of concentration (e.g. transportation planning, planning and public health, community development and social planning), it was possible to develop a reading list using articles and chapters from books. However, there was no one textbook that brought together all of these areas of concentration, or "subdisciplines" of planning, and it was difficult to find readings that were based in Canadian communities. This left instructors and students with the task of adapting foreign policy concepts to the Canadian context. In response to a request from Oxford University Press Canada, the author proposed the development of an edited textbook that would introduce students to planning using a case study approach, integrating cases from across the country.

A call for abstracts was distributed widely through social and professional networks with the aim of attracting both academic and practicing planners from across the country. Sixty-six abstracts were submitted, broken down into 21 research case studies (those that aimed to explore a particular phenomenon using a research methodology) and 45 practice case studies (with the goal of describing in depth an existing plan, project, or implementation process, often based on personal involvement in the case and descriptive or analytical data). The final group of 10 research and 24 practice case studies were chosen based on their potential:

- To teach undergraduate students about planning
- To discuss the roles of, and relationships between, different actors in the planning process
- To discuss Canadian governance frameworks
- To take a critical stance on planning
- For the policy ideas to be adapted to a different municipality/region/province

Twelve cases are set in large municipalities, seven in mid-sized cities, six in small cities or Aboriginal/First Nations communities. Nine focused on provincial policies or programs, or were multiple-case studies or case comparisons (e.g. comparing cultural planning processes across three municipalities). The cases are broken down into eight themes: transportation and infrastructure planning, natural resource management, community development and social planning, housing, urban regeneration, participatory processes, urban design, and urban form and public health.

The structure of the book, *Planning Canada: A Case Study Approach*, includes a planning fundamentals section (introduction to planning history in Canada, introduction to planning theory), eight sections containing three to five cases each, and a glossary of terms. Many of the case studies incorporated more than one of the eight themes, and the section introductions emphasize the multidisciplinary approaches of many of the cases. The language used throughout the book is appropriate for third and fourth year undergraduate students with no background knowledge in the discipline.

Understanding How the Cases are Used

The book (and e-book) can be used in a variety of different ways. It can be used in its entirety as an introduction to the history of planning, planning theory, and an introduction to the main “subdisciplines” of planning. The primary intention of the book is to allow instructors to teach entirely from a single volume rather than having to piece together a reading list from peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. This would be ideal for an introductory course taught in planning, geography, urban studies, or another discipline where there is no prior knowledge of the discipline. In this way students can understand the basic foundations of the discipline and then see examples in the case studies. The chapters, or sections, can be used separately in courses introducing a particular subdiscipline, e.g. a course on planning and public health could use the urban design and public health section. This conforms more to graduate-level teaching, where students have the opportunity to specialize in a particular area of interest and can do more in-depth analysis of the planning processes, debate the issues, etc.

Similar cases can be compared, e.g. cases on developing and implementing cultural plans in Hamilton, Moncton, Kelowna, and Kingston, or cases highlighting public participation in the development of Vancouver’s Greenest City Plan, Winnipeg’s CentrePlan, and Sudbury’s Downtown Master Plan. This would allow instructors to encourage students to see patterns such as the importance of community partnerships in plan implementation. Managing conflict and disagreement among stakeholders could be debated through the use of cases such as Hamilton’s fifty-year struggle to build the Red Hill Valley Parkway, the redevelopment of Montreal’s Quartier des spectacles, and the planning of the US Embassy in Ottawa—all of which resulted in less than optimal planning results partly because of poor relationships among the actors involved and poor communication between them.

But a more applied use of the cases would be in simulating policy transfer processes. In this application, students would play the roles of policy makers and municipal/regional planners in learning from policy ideas. Could the process of mapping social vulnerability to climate change in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia work in a small Manitoba town? Would Saskatchewan’s ambitious Housing Plan be possible in a province with slower population growth? Would Whistler’s workforce housing solution work in a resort municipality in Quebec? Instructors could develop an assignment where students researched local and regional policies to determine whether a particular policy solution could work in their own city, and if not, why not? What particular community, legal, geographic, or other differences act as barriers to its adoption and implementation?

The cases could also influence policy learning in teaching contexts outside of Canada. As a visiting professor at the University of Oregon, the author plans to use many of the cases in introduction to planning, housing policy, and land use policy courses as a means of illustrating comparative approaches to common problems. But for all of the reasons outlined earlier in this paper, context may act as a barrier: instructors in other countries may be unwilling or unable to integrate Canadian cases studies into their courses.

A potential methodology

As the textbook is adopted in more courses, it will be critical to understand how Canadian instructors in planning, geography, and other disciplines are using the case studies in their undergraduate teaching. In order to understand this, a possible methodology could include a survey for course instructors incorporating the questions above, an analysis of data from the publishers (e.g. downloads of the e-book versus the printed version, geographic distribution), a comparison of course syllabi that include the book (or chapters of the book) on their reading lists, and a web survey that instructors could distribute to their students. Possible topics for the instructor survey include:

- The type of preparation instructors undertake, such as preparing questions and prompts for students, anticipating where problems might occur, breaking the case into segments, or dividing students into groups (Schwartz 2015). Instructors may need to locate several similar cases to allow

students to compare them, or illustrate how the policy concepts relate to other lessons taught in the course. In methods courses, instructors may need to combine the cases with readings that describe particular methods in depth

- The type of preparation students undertake, such as establishing discussion guidelines, accepting that there may not be a “right” answer, reading background material on local planning regulations
- Techniques used to discuss the case, such as using open-ended questions, raising underlying issues such as equity or communication strategies, asking for benefits/advantages of different sides, or role playing
- Assignments or exercises developed using the cases, such as comparing a planning process across several municipal planning contexts or researching municipal bylaws
- Evaluation techniques, such as an quiz that determines what students learned, what could be improved, or whether they could apply what they learned in other courses

Possible topics for the student survey include:

- Knowledge they developed on their local planning context (e.g. regulations, social and political characteristics, responsibility of different levels of government), ability to use the policy ideas presented in the cases to develop their own solutions to local/regional planning problems
- Knowledge they developed about planning practice (e.g. strengths and weaknesses in planning processes, the role of the planner, the different planning subdisciplines, plan/policy implementation strategies)
- Knowledge they developed about planning research (e.g. how research methods can be applied, how the cases could be used to understand broader patterns)
- The incorporation of shared issues/theories/ideas from other courses (e.g. the importance of power dynamics in participatory planning, managing conflict and disagreement among stakeholders) in the cases, and whether this reinforced key concepts in the curriculum

Conclusions

This paper described the use of case studies as a pedagogical tool in undergraduate planning education and applied the opportunities and constraints of policy transfer to planning education, e.g. danger of incomplete or inappropriate policy transfer, ability to use policy ideas as learning and inspiration, difficulties in overcoming context.

Case studies are an ideal pedagogical tool to use in planning courses because they often illustrate the intersection between research and practice, present issues of professional judgement and “grey areas” in planning, discuss detailed planning processes, and illustrate the roles and relationships between the actors involved. Practice-based case studies illustrate how plans/policies/programs were implemented and can give students opportunities to suggest ways in which the process could be improved in the future. Research-based case studies show how planning methods can be applied, discuss the role of the researcher, and could be used to understand broader patterns if they were used as part of a case comparison. The entire book can be used to introduce students to the planning discipline, or sections or cases can be used on their own.

The real strength of using case studies set in the Canadian planning context is that students are easily able to apply policy ideas to their own local jurisdiction, allowing for differences between provincial Planning Acts. Because all of the cases are set in the same cultural and political context, it will likely be easier to students to adapt the policy ideas to their own cities. Students will be able to learn about the importance of “softer” concepts such as the importance of collaboration between levels of government in Canada, non-profit organizations, residents, and others in providing housing, funding transportation, or developing land use regulations. In this application, students act as the policy makers, civil servants, or politicians in the policy learning process, and they are (theoretically) using the policy concepts to generate their own solutions to

local problems. They will thus avoid copying or complete borrowing of policy ideas (e.g. Dolowitz and Marsh 2000).

In order to understand how the cases are used in teaching and learning about planning, a survey for course instructors, an analysis of publisher's data, a comparison of course syllabi listing the book or chapters in their reading lists, and a web survey for students could be used. Beginning in January 2016, these tools will be developed and tested as the textbook is adopted in Canadian undergraduate planning courses.

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