



Challenges to teaching in lockdown create re-imagined opportunities for planning students

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Studying a planning degree at a time of lockdowns and other COVID-19 restrictions has presented both students and academics with challenges. Confronting these challenges has led us to re-imagine learning and teaching, and has also provided opportunities for students to develop alternative skills.

2021 began with a sense of optimism and a hint of caution. We had been teaching a hybrid of online and face-to-face classes since we gradually and carefully moved back to the campus after the initial 2020 lockdown. By mid-2021 we were tempted to believe that we would teach out the remainder of the year face-to-face with our students.

The lockdown restrictions imposed on Sydney on 26 June led to the University deciding that all classes would be taught online for the whole semester and the campus would be closed. The impact on the core units of the Bachelor of Planning (BPlan) is the focus of this article.

Restrictions and challenges

Unlike 2020 when we had to quickly scramble into fully online teaching in the middle of the semester, this time we felt more prepared as it was the mid-year break and we had done it before. Challenges still remained, particularly for the core planning units that focussed on learning practical skills that are central to good planning practice. They focus on learning outcomes for planning and development, strategic planning, planning and design, and planning experience, and are taught in the second, third and fourth years of the BPlan. These units are often taught in a studio format,

involving group work and hands-on tasks. Some of these practical tasks include attending planning panel meetings, preparing a strategic plan, developing a structure plan, work placements and community consultation.

How could we adapt our teaching practice to provide students with meaningful alternatives to field trips and other practical experiences of 'doing' that are so important to producing well-rounded future practitioners? At eighteen months into the pandemic and experiencing COVID-19 and lockdown fatigue, the challenges of engaging students in learning were heightened.

Re-imagining learning and teaching

Back in 2020 there were some well-worn phrases bandied about in University communications to keep us motivated including "necessity is the mother of invention". As irritating as it was to hear it many times, it did ring true. In 2021 teaching tools that had previously supplemented learning were now front and centre. There is a shopping list of tools available, many freely, that can be adapted for teaching. Teachers and students became adept at using and discovering new online tools for a variety of applications. The phrase "I'm just going to share my screen. Can you all see that?" has become a COVID-19 legacy I'm sure we have all uttered.

In order to provide as much of a 'live' experience as possible, I invited experts into the virtual classroom as an alternative to practical experience, and also to inform the limited practical opportunities available.

For example, in the fourth-year unit, *Planning and Design*, we had fortnightly conversations with experts from state and local governments which provided insight into current examples of planning in action such as the Snowy Mountains Special Activation Precinct, the Neutral Bay Centres Plan, and West Ryde Structure Plan.

Field trips had to be converted to the virtual kind, or undertaken in a scaled-down way within the local neighbourhoods where the students lived. Google, Google Maps and Street View were invaluable starting points for these tasks. Students learnt more about their own neighbourhoods and delighted in making new observations of the places they thought they knew well.



Figure 1: Image of Emma Booth, Team Leader Design, North Sydney Council (Source: Macquarie University, 2021)

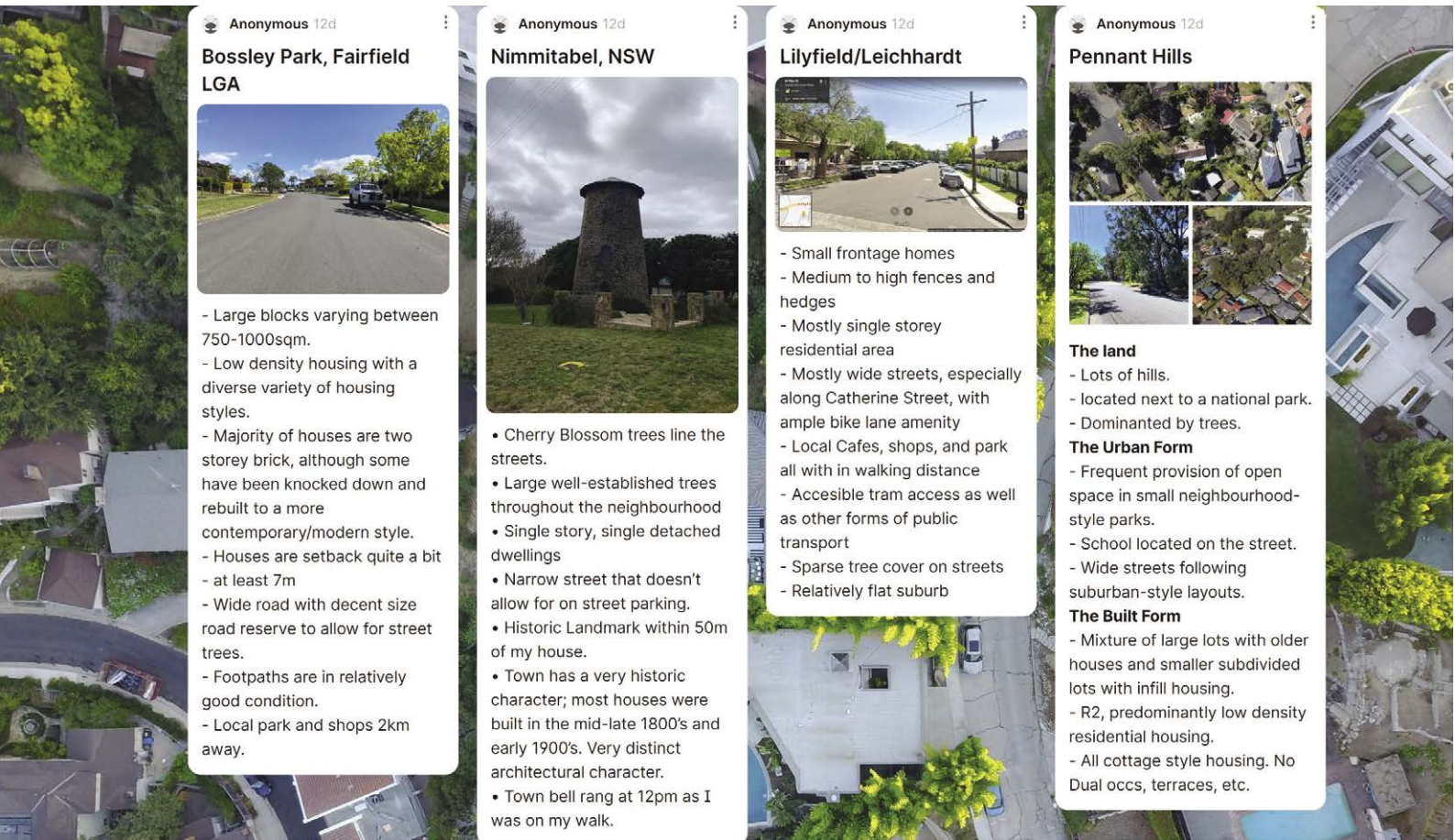


Figure 2: Student neighbourhoods – observing the everyday and recording using Padlet. (Source: Macquarie University 2021)

Providing practical workplace experience has been the biggest challenge. It has been met with creative thinking by teaching staff and placement partners. This has seen the establishment of 'planning consultancies' in which students work on a project as if working for a consultant to a planning organisation, such as Transport for NSW.

What does this mean for our students?

My experience of teaching in 2021 is that students, despite the changed teaching environment, enjoy learning. There has been a grieving process not unlike dealing with other forms of loss. In many cases there is an initial disappointment over lost opportunities, such as what students imagined as a work placement, or developing collaborative working skills through face-to-face group work, or building on fledging friendships for the first years. The online, or virtual, classroom challenges some students more than others. It's potentially easier to 'get lost' on Zoom and not participate in class discussion. It's harder to focus for longer periods and maintain motivation, and difficult to share ideas informally, or get one-on-one guidance. As one student said, ".....in my opinion nothing can ever beat face-to-face learning and organic discussions that happen in the classroom".

It's easy to spend time missing experiences that you expected to happen and never did. It's

much harder to focus on what's happening now with fresh eyes. Students were quick to change their expectations and come to the realisation that "this is it". Once they were no longer wishing for what could have been, they saw the possibilities of learning in a different way and made the most of it.

The hands-on skills that students may have either missed out on or had an online substitute have led to benefits in other important areas. There has been a much stronger focus on writing skills, a skill often lacking from planning graduates. Students have noticed improved time management skills and increased confidence as well as an enhanced ability to use communication technology. They are more assured at working autonomously and bringing creativity to class, having had more time to think more deeply on issues. This was illustrated nicely by the extraordinary level of engagement in student-led discussions on planning-related videos, blogs and podcasts this semester.

Conclusion

We're reassured by government that living with COVID-19 will mean no more lockdowns. It will mean a return to campus and face-to-face teaching, with all the possibilities that provides.

Graduates from the class of 2021 will be characterised by an inner strength and a positive attitude. They have had real

experiences with improved work-life balance and working from home. As two of my students said, "Being so familiar with Zoom through online teaching I was able to transition quite smoothly to a planning internship working from home" and "Online learning has contributed to employability as I'm confident working from home and can work reasonably autonomously."

Another student reflected that, "There are definitely benefits to working and studying online, such as forcing myself to be more organised, learning to work independently, and having a flexible working schedule..."

Our students, the future of the planning profession, are showing themselves to be flexible, adaptable, creative and resilient. They are taking nothing for granted. These students will enter the workforce with a new perspective on how we plan as they discover the possibilities of different futures to those we had previously imagined. ■

Linda Kelly MPIA is a lecturer in planning at Macquarie University. Linda has over 30 years' experience working as a planner in numerous Sydney metropolitan councils. She uses this practical experience to put students at the centre of her teaching and integrates reflective practice in the classroom to improve learning and teaching in planning.