

Adaptive Leadership and Social Innovation: Overcoming Critical Theory,
Positivism, and Postmodernism in Planning Education

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Abstract

It is an unfortunate fact that adaptive leadership and social innovation remain underdeveloped as tools for professional planners and others in public affairs. The assumption, however tacit, is that if plans are drawn up with enough rigor, if planners possess the correct set of skills, and if they remain true to the goals of equitability, collaboration, inclusion, diversity, multiculturalism, and access, the problems of leadership and social innovation will simply resolve themselves. Highlighting three theoretical foundations—critical theory, positivism, and postmodernism—the author seeks to provide a groundwork from which adaptive leadership and social innovation might be cultivated deliberately toward creative ends by professional planners and those in public affairs, rather than be left lingering in the background as mere ancillary functions to “best practices.”

Keywords: cultural humility, leadership, positivism, critical pedagogy, postmodernism

Introduction: Adaptive Leadership and Social Innovation in Planning Education

For the purposes of this article, *leadership* is taken to mean (1) the dissolution or transformation of “conservative” tendencies in a given sphere, and (2) the realizable articulation and development of alternative pathways for the construction of new institutions (established customs or practices). By “conservatism” I mean the tendency to conserve how institutions have been in the past and to resist change (a concept that will be explored in more depth later in the article). Within the planning literature, leadership has been taken largely as a facilitative endeavor. As in Forester’s (2013) recent *Planning in the Face of Conflict*, leadership is seen as a planning objective only in the sense that it brings people from different cultures and ways of being into relative consensus or helps to resolve conflict. This, however, is not the sort of leadership under review here. Though facilitative practices in planning processes represent an essential realm for discussion and development, they are not themselves capable of generating ideas outside of current paradigms, nor is that their intention.

For many urban dwellers, the decisions that professional planners and those in public affairs make on behalf of citizens are perceived as universal in shape and scope. For example, the idea that setbacks should be this way or roads this wide is not truth incarnate, but planners and others who shape the built environment tend to treat these conventions as true. In this context, planning culture in general can be defined as “the collective ethos and dominant attitudes of planners” (Sanyal, 2005). Yet, it is important to remember that planning is a cultural construct; moreover, planning is a required activity for most municipalities, an inevitable and mandatory (and purportedly necessary) process. Leadership is inevitable for the same reason: Whatever a planner plans, whatever the product of intercourse between a planner and a community might be, it is considered the general outcome of leadership. Further, leadership in planning is often conflated with terms like *management* and *power*, and is usually discussed in relation to skill attainment (e.g., someone has more or less capacity for leadership). Thus, leadership is often taken as an intrinsic characteristic or as an intangible byproduct of engagement, education, or procedure (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008).

I argue that such conceptions of planning leadership constitute a conservative ethos, one derived primarily from modernist, rationalist, and positivist pretensions. Leadership in common planning discourse and practice is of a fundamentally formalistic bent, assuming that new projects will be intelligible and manageable only through the established conservative values of commonsense rationality and collaborative processes built on the legitimizing rhetoric of spontaneous democratic social order and bureaucratic procedure.

Put simply, both leadership and social innovation are treated, in bureaucratic contexts, as inevitable constructs based on required professional planning procedures. Conversely, I maintain that leadership is a complex process of creating new processes and groups for collective action with little or no guidance from established norms; it is a fundamentally creative act, not a byproduct of a procedure. Leadership is an act (or an activity), not a title or position (e.g., a manager or boss) (Sanborn, 2006). Regarding collaboration, where one in power might be seen as managing a project, a leader would seek instead to establish frameworks in which participants intuit conclusions that support the leadership's goals without the need for direct management.

Democratic engagement would more immediately constitute a process of refinement than one of creation, where the goals achieved should represent the common good, which to the highest degree possible strives to achieve the goals of the entire community. While the product (or service) may indeed come under public scrutiny and change its form through a collaborative process, it requires the leadership of an individual or handful of individuals to get off of the ground in the first place. In this context, leadership is fundamentally innovative and not reliant on policy or obligatory bureaucratic systems for its generation. On the other hand, common past conceptions of leadership assume that interaction is necessary and change inevitable. Herein, I discuss leadership, as it applies to professional planning and/or graduate education in public affairs, as a process existing outside of bureaucratic decision making or any other requirement-fulfillment processes.

A robust literature on leadership has exploded in recent years and has been used to develop conceptions of leadership in planning. Indeed, this literature pervades popular discourse as well as academic fields, namely economics and business. In particular, the concept of "adaptive leadership" has become well known. Heifetz, Linsky, and Grashow (2009) defined adaptive leadership as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (p. 14). In other words, a leader must adapt to change in order to engage with "wicked problems"—which are problems that "cannot be definitively described" (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Embracing uncertainty is central to the concept of adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009; Highsmith, 2014; Obolensky, 2014; Salicru, 2017) since adaptive leaders must often change strategies in turbulent and difficult environments (Allen, Maguire, & McKelvey, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009; Highsmith, 2014). Moreover, they must embrace complexity (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). Indeed, the world is complex, and there are a whole host of "things" that one does not and cannot know. The key is not to pretend that one knows everything but rather to feel at peace with not knowing—a very Buddhist way of thinking (Heider, 1986).

From the philosophical perspective of adaptive leadership, there is no hypothesis, no known solutions, just a process and trust in that process. Adaptive

leaders can only deal with complex uncertainty and turbulence if they believe in the process (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). They might not know what the outcome of a collaborative process will be (Pillsbury, 2014), but they willingly embrace uncertainty because they trust what might come out of the process. For change to take place, adaptive leaders know they must move out of their comfort zones, which include past solutions, ideologies, their own cultural beliefs, and so on (Bernal & Domenech Rodríguez, 2012). The process *might* entail “regulating distress, creating a holding environment, providing direction, keeping people focused in important issues, empowering people and giving voice to those who feel unrecognized or marginalized” (Northouse, 2018, p. 274). I highlighted the word *might* in the previous sentence because the process might be entirely different. Again, adaptive leadership does not argue that solutions are known; on the contrary, it uses dialectics, is anti-positivist, non-deterministic, and non-universal, and adopts a dynamic and flexible approach. In addition, “an adaptive system will have a ‘sense and respond’ approach—a ... high degree of awareness to its local context as well as a high capability to change internally” (Obolensky, 2014, p. 92).

As the racial and ethnic composition cultural values of society change, adaptive leadership will be required as challenges arise around living, working, and learning together. As a concept, adaptive leadership allows those in urban affairs professionals to build relationships across cultures, ethnicities, and races, and to engage effectively with diverse individuals. Adaptive leaders not only know that is important to engage with people but they know why: The answer lies in better outcomes (Galuska, 2014). Diverse groups produce better ideas because they can generate a “creative response” to complex problems (Brooker, 2010). Individuals who add to the diversity of cities—namely those from underrepresented groups—can bring different and critical perspectives to decision making. Adaptive leaders do not use ordinary inference; they learn along the way about different points of view and ways of doing things, engaging in solutions with teams based on mutual learning. When circumstances change, adaptive leaders reevaluate their thinking and use this new knowledge to change strategies (Highsmith, 2014).

The intention here is to bridge a gap, to bring adaptive leadership concepts developed and practiced elsewhere into the realm of community and civic development. Importantly, professional planners should be relevant to communities in roles other than bureaucratic functionaries and managers, or impractical but opinionated theoreticians. It should be noted that this article does not intend to present a case against collaboration or participation, only to dismiss from the outset that these goals could be meaningful in themselves and not for the purposes of progressing toward some larger movement. This larger movement, this progression constituted almost entirely by innovative and adaptive leadership, is the focus here.

Innovation: Veblen on the Evolution of Societies and Social Change

Thorstein Veblen's classic work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published originally in 1899, is an oft-cited economics reference that has to some degree spilled over into the planning literature (Veblen, 2009).¹ Perhaps the most critical component of this work is Veblen's theory of the evolution of social institutions (e.g., customs, habits, mores, traditions, etc.), though this element is often overlooked. Veblen's conceptualization of society's evolution or social innovation by way of the conservation of formal traits which may have worked in a given epoch only to be displaced later as changing circumstances render those solutions obsolete offers an excellent framework from which to conceptualize the ongoing processes of social change.

For Veblen, in the purest sense, societies change and evolve in a continuous struggle between conservative and innovative forces. It is important to note that the root of *conservative* differs from the popular use of the word (i.e., referring to politics or religion). Conservatism refers to the act of trying to preserve ideas and habits of the past and resisting change. Veblen argued that, over time, social institutions coalesce and ossify, becoming dominant governing modalities in people's everyday lives and interactions. These institutions quickly become antiquated, however, as the circumstances for their creation fade away and are supplanted by new and entirely different circumstances. Through this continually evolving process, "institutions must change with changing circumstances since they are of the nature of a habitual method of responding to the stimuli which these changing circumstances afford" (Veblen, 2009, p. 26). Since institutions, by nature, seek to support conclusions dependent on rapidly disappearing circumstances, society remains in a constant state of anxiety as it tries to define itself according to social institutions that, despite their loss of real-world, everyday relevance, remain dominant as modes for understanding the world nonetheless. As Veblen (2009) further explained:

Institutions are products of the past process, are adapted to past circumstances, and are therefore never in full accord with the requirements of the present. In the nature of the case, this process of selective adaptation can never catch up with the progressively changing situation in which the community finds itself at any given time; for the environment, the situation, the exigencies of life which enforce the adaptation and exercise the selection, change from day to day; and each successive situation of the community in its turn tends to obsolescence as soon as it has been established. When a step in the development has been taken, this step itself constitutes a change of situation which requires a new adaptation; it

¹ Quotations and page numbers are from the 2009 reprinted edition.

becomes the point of departure for a new step in the adjustment, and so on interminably. (pp. 26-27)

Because they intend to maintain old habits and ways of thinking, writes Veblen, “these institutions which have thus been handed down, these habits of thought, points of view, mental attitudes and aptitudes, or what not, are therefore themselves a conservative factor” (p. 27). To Veblen, conservation revolves around once useful but increasingly obsolescent methods and ideas that nevertheless dominate social thinking. “The evolution of society is substantially a process of mental adaptation on the part of individuals under the stress of circumstances which will no longer tolerate habits of thought formed under and conforming to a different set of circumstances in the past” (p. 27). As noted earlier, social innovation, as much as it can be seen as the creation of something new, might just as easily be seen as the displacement of antiquated institutions; however, this may not be an easy affair. “A consequence of this increased reluctance, due to the solidarity of human institutions, is that any innovation calls for a greater expenditure of nervous energy in making the necessary readjustment than would otherwise be the case” (p. 134).

It may appear obvious that wealthy individuals are perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of maintaining the status quo, have little or no reason to advocate for substantial social change, and offer substantial resistance when changing conditions present themselves. While it is true that some individuals in this category might be proponents of change (e.g. Elon Musk), it is arguable that changing the structure that allows them to accumulate wealth is not generally in their self-interest. Those at the poorest end of the socioeconomic spectrum have increasingly faced challenges, especially in the latter quarter of the 20th century and beyond. For example, “since 1975, practically all the gains in household income have gone to the top 20% of households. Since 1996, dividends and capital gains have grown faster than wages or any other category of after-tax income” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018).

According to Veblen (2009), “the abjectly poor, and all those persons whose energies are entirely absorbed by the struggle for daily sustenance, are conservative because they cannot afford the effort of taking thought for the day after to-morrow; just as the highly prosperous are conservative because they have small occasion to be discontented with the situation as it stands to-day” (p. 136). As such, “the outcome of the whole is a strengthening of the general conservative attitude of the community” (p. 136). Veblen noted that, while his notion of the conservative maxim might be interpreted as “Whatever is, is right,” in reality, due to the constant need for change and innovation in the face of stalwart conservatism, the more appropriate maxim for human institutions might read “Whatever is, is wrong” (p. 137).

This sentiment presents a fundamental challenge to faculty seeking to teach methods or the overarching goals of the field to students, especially in public affairs and planning curricula. On the one hand, some degree of structure must be brought into the classroom to create order and maintain focus on a knowledge base or a particular skillset therein. Yet, on the other hand, the instructor must also support a flexible curriculum that allows students to find answers relevant to their lives, their communities, and their times. As the preeminent critical pedagogue Ira Shor (1992) keenly surmised, education is “complex and contradictory” (p. 13). The next section turns to some of the complexities and contradictions of what might be called critical pedagogy in the planning and public affairs curricula, extending the notion of adaptive leadership in these areas.

Shor’s Critical Pedagogy: Dealing with Complexity and Contradictions

Although critical pedagogy offers some room for the cultivation of adaptive leadership, there are contradictions that are hard to overcome, at least in the field of urban planning and public affairs. I argue that the conservative ethos of academia in a way structures what critical pedagogy can be in planning and public affairs programs across the United States. Inside and outside the classroom, there are power dynamics that stand in the way of true critical pedagogy—from the existence of a professor/teacher relationship to a Black/White binary in U.S. cities to the mere existence of syllabi. For example, Candlin (1984) argued that the traditional syllabus is “concerned with the specification and planning of what is to be learned, frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for action by teachers and learners” (p. 33). Further, Oke (2011) maintained that a “negotiated syllabus” between the teacher and the learner gives the student a “great deal of control in the decision-making process” (p. 69).

If a predeveloped, static curriculum or syllabus is traditional in planning and public affairs, then there is little leeway for creativity in the classrooms of these programs, and the creation of critical pedagogies may seem a paradoxical affair in this case. For example, the era, circumstances, and culture in which a planning professor was educated, along with the program they attended, the geography, the political climate of their time, and their supposed knowledge of how cities work, may stand in stark contrast with their students, who grew up in an altogether different world. People are not the same, and the assumption that they are may manifest itself in unanticipated ways in the classroom. As discussed earlier, when an instructor in urban planning and public affairs is required to introduce a curriculum and syllabus long before the semester, this can impose alienating or otherwise disenfranchising information onto students from altogether different backgrounds and who possess entirely different interests than those of their teachers (Candlin, 1984; Oke, 2011; Shor, 1992). Worse yet,

not encouraging students to question knowledge, society and experience tacitly endorses and supports the status quo. A curriculum that does not challenge the standard syllabus and conditions in society informs students that knowledge and the world are fixed and are fine the way they are, with no role for students to play in transforming them, and no need for change. (Shor, 1992, p. 12).

In many classrooms, students are treated as passive bystanders to knowledge and learn not how to engage in the material or subject matter but how to submit to the whims of the professoriate. “Students learn to be passive or cynical in classes that transfer facts, skills, or values without meaningful connection to their needs, interests, or community cultures” (Shor, 1992, p. 18). In the modern classroom, even in some of the most engaging courses, “education is experienced by students as something done to them, not something they do” (p. 20). Shor further explained that

in traditional classes, affective and cognitive life are in unproductive conflict. Students learn that education is something to put up with, to tolerate as best they can, to obey, or to resist. Their role is to answer questions, not to question answers. In passive settings, they have despairing and angry feelings about education, about social change, and about themselves. They feel imposed on by schooling. They expect to be lectured at and bored by an irrelevant curriculum. They wait to be told what to do and what things mean. Some follow instructions; others go around them; some manipulate the teacher; still, others undermine the class. In such an environment, many students become cynical, identifying intellectual life with dullness and indignity. (pp. 25-26)

Scholars may find themselves in wholesale agreement with the criticisms of traditional classrooms offered by those advocating for critical pedagogy, and simultaneously find themselves disagreeing with the idea that any standardizable pedagogical method could ever be critical in a meaningful sense. Indeed criticisms of the traditional model, and advocacy for another model in its place, seems to me a misplaced characterization of the problem. In maintaining Veblen's (2009) conceptual metaphor, which posits on the one hand a tendency toward tradition and on the other a distinct imperative for social innovation, one might note that some models may be oppressive—not because of a flaw in their design but because they seek to preserve old ideals with questionable relevance.

Regardless of an instructor's intent, any form of “teaching to” a planning student might be seen as alienating them from their own developmental path because of the disconnect between teacher and student. “From such a point of view,” as the psychologist Jean Piaget (as cited in Shor, 1992) wrote,

even the most individual kinds of tasks performed by students (writing an essay, making a translation, solving a problem) partake less of the genuine activity of spontaneous individual research than of ... copying an external model; the students' inmost morality remains fundamentally directed toward obedience rather than autonomy. (p. 11)

The mere existence of a classroom, a space separate from the student, of a school, of a teacher/student relationship, presumes a power dynamic that cannot be overlooked. The successes experienced by Shor, as documented in his book *Empowering Education*, were not attributable to a particular model of design in the classroom, as he contended, but were more likely due to the vibrancy of social innovation generated by Shor's leadership and passion for engaging students in the subject at hand.

Ellsworth's Ask: Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?

Shor's (1992) aforementioned argument is supported by Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1989) essay, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." In 1988, Ellsworth perceived a racial crisis near her university necessitating, she felt, a special-topics course that sought to build an understanding of race relations in and with the broader community. For the course's design, given that the "literature on critical pedagogy represents attempts by educational researchers to theorize and operationalize pedagogical challenges to oppressive social formations" (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 298), Ellsworth employed what she considered to be a reasonable attempt at reconstructing the critical modality in order to better understand the racial tensions in her classroom. Yet, given the "literature's highly abstract language" (p. 299), she quickly found that the rhetoric of liberatory education had to be dismissed in order to move the course forward. As Ellsworth wrote,

when participants in our class attempted to put into practice prescriptions offered in the literature concerning empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, we produced results that were not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against, including Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and "banking education." (p. 298)

Only when she set aside the ideas of liberatory pedagogy—when she and her students moved beyond the idea that they *should* be something and that something specific *should* be taking place in the classroom—did the course progress.

None of this takes away from the fact that those advocating for a liberatory pedagogy have built a highly reasoned critique of the traditional classroom environment. The problem is that this pedagogy has now itself become the traditional model, and it may be wise to replace this model just as much as those from other eras; perhaps this is why the traditional/innovative framework seems

more plausible. Moreover, the cultivation of adaptive leadership, rather than “critical pedagogy,” could be a goal in the modern planning classroom, a sentiment distilled by Ellsworth (1989) when she wrote, “Critical pedagogues are always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change” (p. 310). The relationship between the teacher and student, and more broadly between the university structure and the student body, are constituent components of power relations in higher education and should be studied in just such a manner.

Positivism and The Postmodern Challenge

In 1979, the historian Lawrence Stone published an essay titled, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” which generated some controversy among professional historians at the time (Stone, 1979). In retrospect, the essay seems to represent an important marker for what Stone referred to as “the narrative turn” in historiographical research (Hyvärinen, 2010; Kreiswirth, 2000; Roberts, 2006). Stone argued that supposedly objective works were beginning to lose their footing and relevance in the field, not just because they failed to produce true accounts but because they simply never could produce such truths in the first place (Stone, 1979). Historical research, Stone argued, was inevitably guided by some “pregnant principle” (p. 5) containing an argument and theme, which inherently and inexorably biased the work. “Scientific history,” it turned out, was destabilizing at the time of Stone’s work and eventually shifted into what would later become understood as the broad-ranging shift toward postmodern thought (Stone, 1979, p. 6).

This shift was common throughout the academy in the 1970s and 1980s. Fields once seen as stable began showing cracks, and the safety and stability of objectivity began to be questioned. In anthropology, for example, Geertz (1989) attacked the perception of objectivity in ethnographic research, remarking that those works that sought to maintain the idea of an objective researcher “all tend to come down in one way or another to an attempt to get round the un-get-roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade, that they are the describer’s descriptions, not those of the described” (pp. 144-145). Similarly, in literary studies, Fish (1982) attacked his field for maintaining claims of objective understanding in literary texts: “The choice is never between objectivity and interpretation but between an interpretation that is unacknowledged as such and an interpretation that is at least aware of itself” (p. 167). While many of these criticisms were met with hostility, the general tendency has nonetheless been toward a far more organic and relativist sensibility within these and other academic fields.

Planning, however, does not seem to have fully experienced such a shift toward postmodernism. Indeed, Dear (1986) argued that postmodernism—that is, questioning the grand narratives of modernism, including the logic of capitalism

and other accepted truths—only had a minuscule impact on planning theory and practice. Although attempts were undoubtedly made to curtail or otherwise alter the course of modernist ideals in planning—perhaps the most notable being Jane Jacobs’ (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—other fields by contrast were forced to recreate themselves in the wake of the postmodern challenge (Dear, 1986). Planning kept the modernist and bureaucratic system intact while otherwise sinking into the general malaise often associated with postmodern thought and its lack of direction and purpose.

Another notable attempt to resist the modernist ideal of absolute and reproducible answers to urban questions in planning was Linda Dalton’s (1986) cogent contribution to the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*:

When incorporated into organizations, rationality reinforces bureaucratic centralization, specialization, depersonalization, proceduralism, discretion, lack of accountability, and distorted communications.... Taken together, utilitarian and logical positivist notions of rationality constitute both a process for making decisions and a set of underlying characteristics or assumptions upon which choices are made—objectivity, analysis, and efficiency. (p. 147)

This attack on the modernist ideal of rational planning seems worthy of consideration; however, such critiques seem to have gone unheeded by the broader planning community. Within the academy, many planners have sought over the years to produce questions and then use established scientific methods to generate subsequent answers. As understood in a host of other realms, these research questions and scientific answers constitute a philosophical system designated as “positivism” (Comte, 1988). Incidentally, while terms like *thesis* and *research question* are used regularly by academic planners, universal answers will never be produced within the field (see earlier arguments on positivism posed by Fish, 1982; Geertz, 1989; Stone, 1979). Instead, one finds “a plurality of answers each with its weakness and strength” depending on the method and the worldview of the researcher, among other factors (Caldwell, 1984).

However, there is a certain comfort in positivist, objectivist, and bureaucratic thought that should not be overlooked as it seems to be this feeling of safety that helps to reproduce the problem (Dalton, 1986). While anthropologists, historians, and literary analysts seem to have revised their efforts, abandoned their positivist pretensions, and moved toward far more practical approaches, there was certainly a long period of readjustment and unease within these fields. Indeed, in response to Stone’s (1979) essay, the well-known historian Eric Hobsbawm (1980), though sympathetic to Stone’s message, quipped that “one is tempted, like the mythical Irishman, asked by the traveler for the way to Ballynahinch, to stop, ponder, and reply: ‘If I were you, I wouldn’t start from here at all’” (p. 8).

There is an inherent lack of direction embedded in the postmodern critique that renders it worth rejecting. While many are likely to agree that positivism and modernity have failed to achieve their lofty goals—in contrast to Fukuyama's (1992) optimistic declaration of an impending “end of history”—most would probably also agree that the alternatives are not really alternatives at all but empty, relativistic chasms that provide no sense of understanding or comprehension (Fukuyama, 1992). Hence, a postmodern malaise seems to have surfaced. Beck (2003) compared the dead social institutions from previous generations that have a desperate hold on society to zombies; however, he also observed astutely that “there is coming into being a new system in which everyday practices involve an exceptional level of cosmopolitan interdependences” (p. 455). This optimism is also reflected in Bauman's (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, which illustrates the problematic simplified understanding of modernity presented here.

Stated briefly, to capture the new is to wrest practice from old standards; to innovate or create change is to abandon known solutions. To abandon the simple reified conclusions of modernist thinking may involve embracing, to a degree, some sense of relativism. Despite the sweeping rise of this space for social innovation and creativity born out of new technologies, in the postmodern context, it holds “no promise, no hope, only the working through of what it is that makes the present an endless prolepsis of ruin” (Rutherford, 2013, p. 9). Public affairs and planning may be left rudderless.

Concluding Remarks: A Path Toward Cultural Humility

The postmodern challenge initially manifested itself in the form of narrative. The solution has been to shift back to writers and the tools available to them as developed by the historical community in the academy. Adaptive leaders must acknowledge generally that there could never be one right way to see things but endless ways to see everything, as sentiment that supports Beck's (2003) notion of “cosmopolitan interdependencies.” Planners' interpersonal interactions with individuals, groups, communities, neighborhoods, cities, and regions, and those in public affairs are complex and diverse; they manifest themselves organically and should be dealt with in the same way.

Every community, every plan, every event consists of its own needs. All of those involved possess their own skills, talents, objectives, experiences, and worldviews. Adaptive leaders know that no two people, no two plans, no two instances will ever be the same, and interpretations of what worked and why are quite literally infinite in expression. As cities and the people in them are of infinite complexity, there is no overlapping universality or truth to cities. Statistics about individuals or groups—that is, demographics—do not necessarily represent how people live their everyday life on the ground. For instance, what does it mean to say that 20% of people are living in poverty? Is poverty in the context of Puerto

Rico the same as poverty in the context of Senegal? Does poverty for a Latino family manifest differently in Salt Lake City, Utah, than in Chicago, Illinois? However, problems can be identified and solved by adaptive leaders, planners, and urbanists willing to hone non-standardized skillsets and work within the planning community to create real changes on the ground. As with an artist, it is the development of adaptive skills that is important, not the truth of how or where to implement cookie-cutter solutions. Develop a set of tools, study a number of cases, document new cases—this is what planning could be: the art and science of affecting change.

Intercultural competency (also known as cultural competence), defined “as appropriate and effective communication and behavior in intercultural situations” (Deardorff, 2009, p. 2), is a way of preparing students to deal with complexity, take on adaptive challenges, and make progress in uncertain environments. The concept of intercultural competency has been also described as cultural or intercultural humility and is one aspect, among many, that urban planners must account for in the future, embracing process and pathways as opposed to grasping for truthiness and immediate answers. Bureaucratic meandering (or zombie planning, to borrow Ulrich Beck’s conceptualization metaphor) may interfere with high-quality education and professional practice in planning (Beck, 2003). Planners would be wise to consider engaging in neighborhood planning efforts; there, they may be able to provide open-minded leadership and exercise cultural humility. To borrow Jane Jacobs’ idea, planners should get rid of their “preconceived notions” and approach places and people with humility. Listening, observing the city and its inhabitants, recognizing that no individual has the answers or the ability to comprehend other people’s experiences are important skills that students should gain from planning and public affairs education. Programs must find the courage to normalize not-knowing (i.e., all of the answers or even all of the questions), foster adaptive leadership, and ultimately inspire social innovation and change.

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