

What can we learn about dealing with complex issues from the way landscape architects think and act?

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Background

Stoas Vilentum is a Dutch Professional University which offers programs for professional development in bachelor and master level in education and knowledge management. There is a strong connection with agricultural professions and 'green' and ecological development. Questions our (upcoming) professionals deal with, become more and more complex. To come to durable answers different and flexible approaches are needed (Ruijters, 2011). Landscape architects form an interesting example in dealing with these kind of issues. They are confronted with questions in design which concern multiple stakeholders, points of view and multiple areas of expertise. (See: <http://www.iwanttobealandscapearchitect.com>.)

Explicating the experience or, what Dixon calls, common knowledge (Verdonschot in Ruijters & Simons, 2012) of landscape architects concerning the way they deal with complex issues can help young practitioners in developing their perspectives on their own professional practice. Interesting furthermore is how to translate the possible role model behaviour of landscape architects to establish far transfer (Verdonschot in Ruijters & Simons, 2012) so that young professionals can profit from this knowledge.

For more information, see: (in Dutch)
http://prezi.com/_ynsmk7ydfsk/epistemic-frame/

Methods

Open interviews were conducted with five landscape architects and an architect in explorative research. The respondents were challenged to elaborate on their approaches. Attitudes and ideas were explored and examples were asked to illustrate statements. Notes were taken and part of the interviews was recorded on audiotape. All interviews were written out. Furthermore, desk research took place on qualifications in landscape architecture and the base of knowledge. Also, perspectives on the profession of businesses in landscape architecture were explored.

Interviews were analysed using the arrangement of Schaffer (2009): skills, knowledge, identity, values and epistemology. Mostly stated principles were selected, the selection was tested with the involved architects, professors and management of Stoas Vilentum Professional University and adjusted according to their input. An additional question asked to the professors was: do you perceive relationships between the principles and the University's perspective on learning concerning ecological intelligence?

Results

The thinking and acting of landscape architects can be summarized in **eight principles**:

- 1. Connection and context:** solutions are hidden in the context.
- 2. Zooming and cocooning:** getting the holistic perspective by zooming in and zooming out.
- 3. Genius Loci:** getting to know the situation, what is the soul of a place?
- 4. Melting of expertises:** to have, maintain and use a network of experts. To guard consistency with a broad knowledge base,

- 5. To play with extra dimensions** such as time, growth, development.
- 6. Knowledge of self and authenticity** : to belief in one self and ones ideas.
- 7. Plea:** bringing others into your story using passion and enthusiasm.
- 8. Reciprocity:** to give and take, bring movement, give back to the environment.

Conclusions

It is possible to capture the thinking and acting of landscape architects in eight principles. These principles are a coherent whole, and loose power the moment they are approached separately. The principles are compared to the vision on ecological intelligence of Stoas Vilentum Professional University, and it is possible to make a connection between the two. Further analysis of data and results is needed so that findings can be justified on basis of pragmatism (Aken & Andriessen, 2011). Finding ways to use these principles in educational practice could enhance (upcoming) professionals in the way they deal with complex issues.

Further research focuses on (1) to which extent the principles are useful in addressing complex issues which are not design issues and (2) the development of a simulation game (www.stoasvilentum.nl/bleei, in Dutch) that challenges learners to experience the way landscape architects think and act with the aim to transfer experiences in the game to complex issues in their own practice (Stoppelenburg, De Caluwé & Geurts, 2012).

