

**Towards Greater Pragmatism in planning:
A Growing Challenge for Planners
(a Short Paper)**

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Abstract

“Research to date suggests that post-modern planning is about making connections among ideas and among people and that this connection process sets in motion a whole series of changes. Joint learning changes both accepted ideas and attitudes, and it can produce innovative approaches” (Innes; 1998). This quote encapsulates the notion of communicative planning as it underscores issues of about joint learning. The communicative planning process emphasises extensive communication and interaction with a community. These processes of interaction and mutual learning can lead to the production of innovative ideas that are so critical to problem solving and socio-economic transformation. . It is this process of interaction, connections, communication and mutual learning that represents some of the core foundational principles of pragmatic planning. Pragmatic planning employs the elements of mutual learning, and furthermore including the planners ‘expert’ knowledge to ensure that the best practical decisions are made.

1. Introduction

Sandercock (1995) points specifically to ‘listening to the voices of others’, thereby emphasising that communication is an avenue that assists planners to achieve maximum results. There are also other planners such as Healy (1997), Friedman (1987) and Habermas (1984) that have contributed significantly to the communicative approach. All these communicative theorists use communicating methods to ensure that the planner is equipped to deal with the wide variety and diversity of experiences and ideas that communities have to offer. Yet with this method comes many practical problems, for example there might be other constraints which tend to initiate against the use of the communicative approach such as time and resources. This paper argues that in the greater scheme of things, these constraints are a relatively small price to pay. The paper will seek to advance the view that pragmatism provides a better and more balanced decision making platform for a planner as it take into consideration communicative methods, stakeholders and resources like time and money. The paper will also seek to unpack the notion of pragmatism and some of its applications in the planning profession.

Planning theory in South Africa, particularly since the advent of democracy has progressed from the primarily top-down autocratic style of planning (e.g. master plans) to a much more pragmatic, more communicative centred approach that has of necessity been community based bottom-up. According to Muller (1980:10) this was done to reach out to communities with a view to enabling them “to exercise their right to self-interest and self-expression; their right to exercise choice and express preference, to make decisions and make mistakes, to explore and experiment, to play a productive part in the development of their living environment”.

Collaborative planning and communication with the community is pivotal bequeathing to a sense of ownership to a community. It is only through genuine interaction with the community that mutual or joint learning will take place. This experience then becomes the basis for knowledge that that will lead to creativity and experimentalism. The creative experience is enriched when the planner and the community use ‘joint learning’ to create new solutions to their contested spaces. ‘Joint learning’ is also important as it allows the planner to create practical solutions that are innovative and context specific.

In the same view pragmatism “emphasizes human experience, creative experimentalism and the importance of language, but it may provide a balance to a post-positivist or literary perspective that denies any role to science or to instrumental reasoning and modern science together with the other ways of knowing and experiencing” (Harrison, 2001; 70). It is clear then that from Harrison (2001) that pragmatism serves as a balance to collaborative planning processes. This is important as it is crucial for the planner to remain balanced in the ‘joint learning’ process.

Muller (1999) is of the view that planning at its core should seek to be more pragmatic. This paper will seek to illustrate how this can be done. First, a critique of the CHICA (Connectivity, Human, Interoperability, Collaboration, Accessibility and Spatial Re-Organisation) planning model will be provided. The CHICA planning model has been developed by Naude and Maritz in 2007 in their paper entitled “*The emerging potential for e-enabled improvements in rural collaboration and accessibility*”. The model represents a logical framework in which the more technically inclined planner operates. It also highlights some innovative ways of

incorporating pragmatic planning principles into the planning process. From a critique of the CHICA[S] model, new approaches and opportunities for the advancement of pragmatic planning are elaborated.

2. Pragmatism in Planning

“The planning profession is provided with conceptual bridge from analysis to implementation, from information to organisation, from cognition to action, and thus from the analysis of abstract meaning to pragmatic assessment of practical professional activity” (ibid.:157). Pragmatism, accordingly, can be seen as a goal or an ideal that will constantly be pursued. When pragmatic practice occurs new ideas will come from the process, as long as the desire to further the boundaries of ‘truth’ remains. This must be said from the beginning to ensure that the truth about the nature of pragmatism is realised, as we take a look at planning practice with the pragmatic lens.

“Pragmatism is a philosophic school that originated in the late nineteenth century with Charles Sanders Peirce, who first stated the pragmatic maxim. It came to fruition in the early twentieth-century philosophies of William James and John Dewey. Most of the thinkers who describe themselves as pragmatists consider practical consequences or real effects to be vital components of both meaning and truth.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatism> 02/12/2007). A fuller understanding of pragmatism can be found in the following quote in which Pierce defines the pragmatic maxim. “The method prescribed in the [pragmatic] maxim is to trace out in the imagination the conceivable practical consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct-of the affirmation or denial of the concept; and the assertion of the maxim is that herein lies the *zohole* of the purport of the word, the *entire* concept.” (Peirce, 1905, cited in Thayer, 1984,p. 493) These quotes on the origins of pragmatism are especially important; because they point out that the practicality of pragmatism is what defines its core role. Pragmatism then is concerned with practical outcomes. The provision of practical outcomes is the liberating factor of pragmatism. The meaning, therefore, is that pragmatism liberates the planner to act in a way that would offer the best practical solutions. Because pragmatism acts as a liberating agent, it

balances the planner to discern between using either principles that are top-down or principles that have been gathered through bottom-up communicative action.

2.1. Core Underpinnings

The idea of pragmatic practice is underpinned by the idea of the practical. In the opening paragraphs the idea of the 'joint learning' (Innes 1998), pointed to the learning experience the planner can have through the communication with the community. Yet some times the objectives of the community and all the other stakeholders are conflicting. The people being communicated to could be impulsive, emotional, forgetful, stubborn or dishonest. All these elements are needed to produce effective communication. There can be other occasions when the resources that are needed to finish a project are limited. Some of these resources that could be limited are time and money. Pragmatism will allow the professional to arrange all of these resources to ensure for the best possible pragmatic solution. Harrison (2001) poetically referred to this process as the romance and tragedy of contemporary planning. It becomes a relatively dicey situation for the planner because communication entails witnessing and empathizing with the community, and yet, the planner still has to focus on the outcomes of the process.

This does not necessarily mean that the "ideal" goals that have been set out by all the stakeholders have been realised. It just means that the goals that have been highest on the priority list of the planner have been achieved through what we now term the "pragmatic practice".

2.2. A Key Challenge

A challenge for pragmatism would be to know when the process that is taking place is pragmatic. It would seem that without the process being properly defined any action could be justified in the name of pragmatism.

2.3. Gaps

Planning might need a mediator to be able to tell if the process was actually pragmatic or not. The planner will have to ask himself questions and give truthful responses to these. This will require a conscience. This can be done by for example, responding truthfully to a checklist of questions as set out below:

- Is it really, addressing the core/real issues of the community?
- Is it context specific?
- Is it realistic?
- Are there enough resources like time and money?
- Have they consulted all the stakeholders, are all the realities taken into consideration?
- Is there a political undercurrents at play?

3. A Critique of the CHICA[S] Application in terms of Pragmatism

The practical example that will be critiqued in terms of pragmatism has been taken from the C@R (Collaboration at Rural) project. The project has demonstrated advances in Geo-ICT and other communication technologies in order to promote sustainable (SMME) development in rural areas. Andries Naude and Johan Maritz are the two main South African authors that have contributed to the International work on the C@R (2007) initiative.

At the centre of the C@R project is the CHICA[S] logical framework. The CHICA[S] model was developed by the South African team and the diagrammatic model provides an ideal platform to identify its pragmatic features. CHICA[S] as an acronym stands for the following:

- Enhanced **C**onnectivity (digital and physical/ transport connectivity, with the latter depending on enhanced road connectivity and/or mobility).
- Enhanced **H**uman interfaces, capacities and e-entrepreneurship.
- Enhanced **I**nteroperability and local **I**ntelligence (including intelligence-enhancing decision support or modeling);
- Enhanced **C**ollaboration (including initiatives such as SMME cluster and network

development, or the establishment of local innovation networks);

- Enhanced **A**ccessibility
- E-enabled **S**patial re-organization (such the opening of accessible village agencies or multi-purpose centers) and/or **S**tructural changes (such as the re-allocation of service delivery responsibilities among hub-, satellite-, and mobile/route-based service providers); (Naude and Maritz, 2007).

The diagram below depicts the CHICA[S] logical framework. The cycle represents the anticipated logical course that a practitioner would have to go through. Pragmatic planning is located within this logical progression.

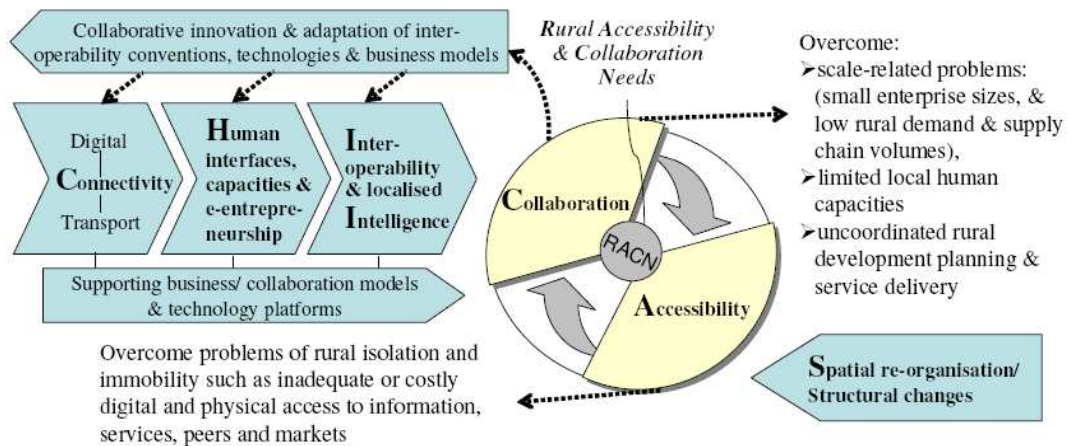


Figure 1: Logical framework for the planning of e-enabled rural accessibility and collaboration interventions (Naude & Maritz, 2007)

There are many areas in the diagram where pragmatism, or more precisely pragmatic decisions can take place at any stage of the flow diagram. The bulk of pragmatic decisions though should take place during the ‘accessibility’ stage when the consultation with the community begins as indicated in Figure 1. This is important as the planner at this point has decisions to make on the type of approaches that would best deal the problems of rural isolation for example. The second most important time that the planner is called on to be pragmatic is in the ‘collaboration’ phase of the project, when implementation is expected to occur.

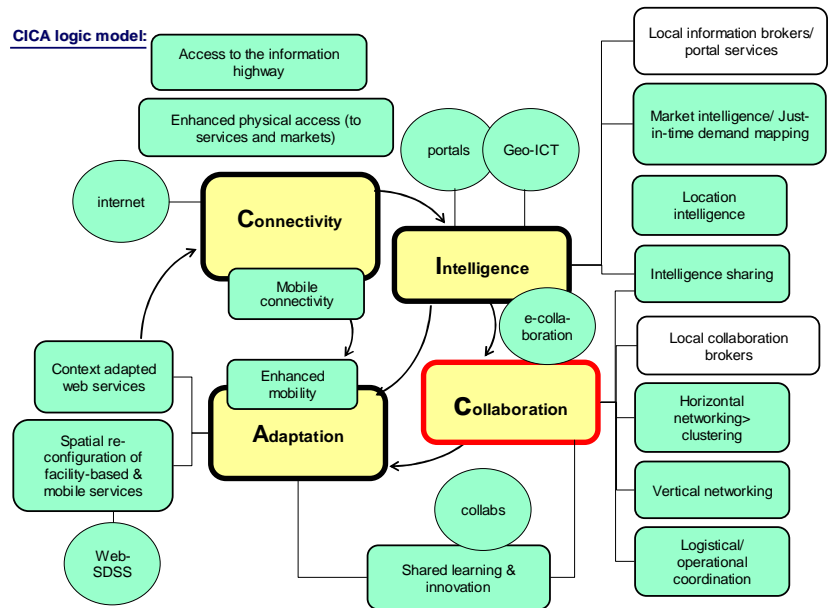


Figure 2: Another Representation of the CHICA[S] model

Figure 2 above shows in more detail what the different compartments of the CHICA[S] model entail. It is intriguingly interesting to note that the innovation aspects all fall under the ‘connectivity’ and ‘intelligence’ sections. Collaboration or collaborative planning is also a crucial component of planning including pragmatic planning. Pragmatism occurs when the practitioner employs ‘expert’ intelligence and collaborative learning and then fuses them together to create a solution that is best suited to the specific context. The planner then uses ‘self-control’ or discernment to calculate the solution that will determine the best consequences.

4. Emerging New Approaches and Opportunities for Pragmatic Practice

Pragmatism also involves a feature of being impulsive (Fraser, 1998) as it is community orientated and goal directed. These impulses, have allowed the planner to use new ways of reaching out to the community. The use of new materials to interact with communities includes the use of communication technologies, Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and any other, moments of inspiration by the planner, in order to more effectively explain and integrate community based data with the more technically determined expert data of planners.

These new technologically orientated approaches have been captured through what could be described as ‘pragmatic’ impulses in the planning profession. There have been great examples of this in the Geo- ICT and Geomatic fields. The pursuit for pragmatic solutions leads to innovation in the planning process. In terms of the C@R initiative, two examples of such innovations in terms of the pragmatic planning process are briefly demonstrated:

- The first was that of forming that Rural Living Labs (RLL). In terms of the C@R project these are labs where the intake of expert information and data that is gained from public participation is integrated to develop practical solutions. As such, this ensures that information can flow from the bottom-up more efficiently through empowering people to capture the information.
- The second involves promoting an emerging idea - that of using MXit technology¹. The MXit technology is envisaged to enhance through cheaper means communication between the core members of the communities, and the Pretoria based planning team. Thereby it would create and support a greater and more effective opportunity for real time collaborations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, pragmatic planning could be crucial for the future of planning in South Africa, for it will serve as a balancing agent for the planner when making a decision. The pragmatic planner is one that is using all the planning experiences to create a more concrete practical solution. This concrete solution will be able to take into consideration all the role players and resources. But not only does pragmatic practice look for concrete solutions, it also permits the planner to be ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ balanced when making decisions; thereby taking cognisance of the pragmatic necessity to consider the “entire concept”

¹ MXit Technology: MXit is a mobile instant messaging application developed in South Africa that runs on GPRS/3G mobile phones with java support.

One of the main ideas of pragmatic planning is that it will have continuing relevance to planners because the planner will constantly be striving for better practical solutions. These practical solutions will enhance the everyday quality of life of people. This process is a combination of mutual learning and the planner's ability to innovatively introduce new ideas to allow for more effective pragmatic solutions.

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