There exists no “one size fits all” approach to planning education in Europe (Healey 2011; Kunzmann 2015; Kunzmann, Schretzenmayr 2015; Gilliard, Thierstein 2015; Alterman 2016). A European-wide planning education approach seems neither possible nor desirable. Not possible because “Europe has many quite different regional traditions when it comes to educating planners” and “there does not seem to be much willingness to agree on a best approach to planning education” (Kunzmann, Schretzenmayr 2015:89). Not desirable, because “it would endanger the diversity of planning cultures across Europe” (Kunzmann 2015:2).

Planning is a discipline, which seeks to achieve progress towards an environmentally-sensitive future of the built environment in response to socio-culturally embedded human needs. It is a social practice oriented towards enhancing livability and sustainability in the future and to serve the many rather than only the few (Healey 2014). Planners around the globe, shape, create and make places and cities (Landry 2006) and as a consequence influence the living conditions of the people residing in these places and cities (Jacobs 2011). Educators therefore should teach their students – the planners of tomorrow – how to plan for people in their specific geo-political, socio-cultural, economic, legal, administrative, local, regional and national contexts and environments.

Let us agree that there is no single planning approach that fits everyone. One of the emerging questions then is: what happens when planning educators travel from place to place, for example, as a Visiting Professor, to teach future planners in a different country (different context and environment, different planning culture, different language)? What kind of knowledge, values and beliefs do they transfer to these new settings? What are the opportunities and/or risks of this transnational flow of knowledge for students and educators? How far can educators from a different country prepare students to develop endogenously-shaped responses to their own particular situations? Are there any contingent universals in planning? If yes, how can they be translated into a specific context, planning culture and language?

The purpose of this essay is to briefly discuss some challenges that I – an Austrian planning academic – faced as part of a four-month Visiting Professorship at the University of Cagliari, Italy. The arguments made in this essay build on my own personal experiences and observations. They are offered here for the purpose of furthering the discussion about the future of planning education.

Setting the scene

It was a cold and cloudy November day in 2014. Sitting at the Vienna University of Technology, I was awaiting the results of my Visiting Professor application. The notification arrived, the University of Cagliari invited me to join their teaching staff at the Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile, Ambientale e Architettura for the period from March to June 2015. This, my first teaching assignment outside of Austria, committed me to teach the basics of planning theory and practice to a group of around 40 undergraduate students. An exciting adventure was about to begin.

What kind of planning knowledge can/should cross borders?

I had three months to design a planning course for 40 Italian – more precisely, Sardinian – undergraduate students, who were just starting their planning education. As I contemplated the assignment, I asked myself: What kind of planning knowledge can or should cross borders? How can I educate planners with a different socio-cultural background, living in a different political, administrative, legal and institutional system? We know from research and experience that the way planning is done in one country or situation “cannot just be extracted from its context of invention, uprooted and ‘planted’ somewhere else. It ‘arises’ from a particular ground and context, and might well not transplant easily somewhere else” (Healey 2011:190). Reflecting on this made me aware that I teach a form of planning at the Vienna University of
Technology that is deeply rooted in the Austrian socio-cultural, politico-economic and legal environment. I further realised that such knowledge of planning as I had would not allow for an easy transfer to a different context, such as Sardinia, since planning knowledge cannot claim universal validity. Considering that I was, at that time, not very familiar with the Sardinian planning system, I did not feel comfortable with (a) teaching the Austrian planning approach, leaving it to the students to relate what I taught to their own specific context, (b) carrying out meaningful lessons from Austrian-style planning applicable to the Sardinian situation, about which I knew little or nothing, (c) trying to dive into the Sardinian planning approach – in just three months – and presenting myself as an expert of this planning style, and (d) teaching Anglo-American planning theories, pretending that the principles and aims of planning are the same the world over.

Time was passing quickly, my departure to Cagliari was approaching, and I was still struggling with the question of what kind of planning knowledge can or should cross borders. In an article about how to educate planners from China in Europe, Klaus Kunzmann and Liu Yuan wrote that “teaching foreign students requires experience, sensibility and an understanding of cultural differences” (Kunzmann, Yuan 2014: 69). I had no experience in teaching foreign students, but due to my own research on “planning cultures” and “border issues” I had a certain sensibility and understanding of how to deal with cultural differences within a planning process (Haselsberger 2014). Cultural differences are always very visible in a cross-border situation. In the course of fieldwork carried out in a number of cross-border regions, I had learned that the success of making myself understood in cross-cultural conversations about planning depends on how mindful I am when dealing with the different planning cultures at play.

The role of planning cultures in the transnational flow of planning knowledge

As a planning educator I see my responsibility as preparing students for planning practice and, in particular, to always interrogate that practice critically. It is important here to underline that local, regional and national endogenous planning practices or approaches emerge from different planning cultures (Friedmann 2005, 2011; Healey, Upton 2010; Fürst 2009; Reimer, Blotevogel 2012). Friedmann (2005) defines planning culture “as the ways, both formal and informal, that spatial planning in a given multinational region, country or city is conceived, institutionalized, and enacted” (184). Planning cultures are complex, socially-constructed phenomena, which are difficult to decode. On the one hand, they are manifested in several symbolic and ideological layers, such as values, traditions, attitudes, mind sets and habits, which are shared by those taking part in the respective planning process (Fürst 2009). On the other hand, meaning is given to them by those who interpret, define and use them, sometimes shaped by personal interests, including power and money (Albrechts 2016; Reimer, Blotevogel 2012). In the course of their practice, planners also define the rules of the game regarding spatial quality, equity, accountability, sustainability and legitimacy. All this leads to the conclusion that planning cultures vary from place to place, from context to context and across time as well. They might, however, gradually converge over the next few decades, a result of the ever-expanding worldwide net of professional contacts and the Internet (Friedmann 2011), as well as the growing importance of English as the lingua franca of the scientific world (Kunzmann 2015).

This raises the question of whether planning educators and students are equipped to understand issues deriving from other planning cultures, contexts and environments. And if this is the case, how does it work in practice? I would argue that in this process it is, first of all, important to understand that knowledge in planning is contextual. It emerges from a particular planning culture and conveys certain material and cultural processes, including “the effort to shape urban and regional development pathways through deliberate, collective governance efforts” (Healey 2011: 194). This means, among other things, that what works in one place, context and time might, in another situation, have a very different result, or even be rejected altogether. In other words, one should never expect to be a local expert in another country. The objective therefore is not to copy planning concepts and ideas but to deconstruct and study them in order to learn which responses to local challenges can, in a careful and sensible way, be transferred to another setting in a different time, context and situation. This, however, implies at the same time that we have properly understood the way planning is practiced in our own country. The view from outside the window certainly helps in this process, as it provides a refreshing new perspective of seeing things we tend to take for granted in our own planning culture.
Contextual knowledge versus contingent universals in planning

Although it is true that all knowledge in planning is contextual, there are some general theoretical and methodological foundations professional planners everywhere should be able to understand. Alterman (2016) calls these foundational “beacons” of planning. Selected theoretical considerations, she argues, have the potential to provide planners with a normative-ethical guiding light or beacon from within planning thought. This guiding light concerns values such as sustainability, spatial quality, equity, inclusivity, social justice etc., all of which tend to remain the same even when planning systems and approaches change (Albrechts 2016). But to effectively communicate them to different audiences, such universals may have to be deconstructed before applying them in a specific context. A personal observation from Helen Kara, a UK academic who taught qualitative research methods to postgraduate medical doctors in Damascus, Syria, will illustrate this point. Though this example is not from the planning field, I think it demonstrates nicely why theory cannot and should not claim to be universally valid.

“In the UK I take it for granted that I can teach from a principle of equality for people of different gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc. Not so in Syria where, for example, homosexuality is illegal. A book chapter I often use to teach focus group methods happens to centre on the topic of lesbian sexual health, to illustrate how focus group methods happens to centre on the topic of lesbian sexual health, to illustrate how focus groups can be used when dealing with sensitive topics, but in Syria it would be completely inappropriate to use that kind of reference. My class divided themselves into women on one side of the room and men on the other, which was a new experience for me!” (Kara 2015, online)

Kris Gowen, a US academic, has made a similar comment about teaching qualitative research methods in Oman. She reports the following:

“I enjoyed good discussion with my students when I asked them whether the fundamental theories of Western teaching approaches are appropriate and transferable to the Omani classroom. We discussed why—why not and that offered me a way to teach them why it is important to conduct research in Oman. We also discussed which methods would be most welcome in their culture (e.g., qualitative or quantitative; focus group versus interview).” (Gowen 2015, online)

With these experiences in mind, I decided to design a course for my Sardinian undergraduate students with the focus on real world and real time planning challenges in the city of Cagliari, instead of asking them to follow a reading list. Peter Bleier, a colleague of mine at the Vienna University of Technology, called my attention to the “City Walk” method, which he had used successfully for many years. The basic idea of this method is to get students out of their protected classroom to explore real places from a planner’s perspective; thus to learn how to see places with a planner’s eye and not with an architect’s eye. Still in Vienna, I shadowed Peter and his students for a while to observe how that might be done.

So, in the end, what did my planning course look like? I divided my introductory course into three parts. In the first, I taught my students some theoretical and methodological planning foundations, which in the second part were then contextualised in a real place, the neighbourhoods of Is Mirrionis and San Michele in Cagliari. Here I mainly relied on the “City Walk” method, where contingent planning universals were decoded into contextual knowledge. In the concluding part of the course, students would invent and develop their own imaginative futures for the situations previously explored in Is Mirrionis and San Michele.

In the frame of the City Walks with the students I learnt a lot about the different ways of seeing. For me, a foreign planning educator, the neighbourhoods of Is Mirrionis and San Michele were full of fascinating secrets, which I eagerly wanted to explore. My students, on the contrary, thought that they knew these neighbourhoods well. Some of them had even been living there for years. What I observed, however, was that it was their confidence in terms of knowing these places that made them blind to really understanding them. Let me offer an example here. The neighbourhoods we visited were full of rundown social housing complexes. Before entering the first of these “ghettos” (in Piazza Medaglia Mirculous) my students stopped me and asked if I was sure that I wanted to enter the complex. I was surprised by this question and asked why they thought we should not. They told me wicked stories about this particular place and the people living there. Interestingly, none of my students had ever been inside the complex. After some negotiations with the students they agreed to visit the place with me. As part of this endeavour, we also spoke to the local residents who were observing us during our visit. Afterwards, the students told me that they now had a completely different picture of this place in mind. All in all, for me it was a fascinating experience to observe how it is possible to ease prejudices through a close encounter with the reality.
The role of languages in the transnational flow of planning knowledge

English has become the lingua franca in the scientific world of planning. This has both advantages and disadvantages. As regards the global world of planning, the use of English as lingua franca appears to be helpful. It enables planners all around the globe to communicate, debate, as well as exchange ideas and experiences with each other. However, for the local world of planning, in Cagliari for instance, the use of English as the lingua franca has to be considered problematic. Popper (2015) explains that human beings use language as a means of communication and expression, both in a descriptive and argumentative way. I am arguing therefore that in countries where English is not used by the citizens as part of their daily face-to-face interaction, it does not make sense if planners rely exclusively on English in public participation processes or when conducting interviews. In these cases, planners are advised to use the local and regional languages in everyday use. And this is the case in planning education as well. As Kunzmann asserts, “planning has to be taught in the language of the people whom planning should serve and in the language of professionals in public and private institutions, who prepare political decisions” (Kunzmann 2015: 7). But this is not always easy. Planning educators are often confronted with the challenge that hardly any planning theories are available in languages other than English. Sergio Peña, a Mexican academic, who graduated and worked in the US for eight years, reported the following in this regard:

“After my return to Mexico, I have been teaching planning theory at Colef (Mexico). There I realized the lack of planning theory available in Spanish language. As a consequence I had to rely on Western planning theories, published in English language. The main challenge I was confronted with was how I can meaningfully translate Western planning concepts into other settings. After a few years of teaching, I decided to write a planning theory book in Spanish.” (Peña 2015, online)

I must admit that before my move to the University of Cagliari, I was not aware of the diversified meaning of languages as part of planning education. Over the years I had adopted English as my working language. English as the lingua franca was very convenient for me. It allowed me to contribute to international planning debates irrespective of any language barriers. And so, when I applied for the Visiting Professor position, I took it for granted that I would teach in English. But, three weeks before I left Austria, I received an e-mail from Corrado Zoppi from the University of Cagliari, asking if I could do my course in Italian. Somebody must have told him that I speak some Italian. Yes, it is true that I speak Italian, but it is also true that I have not spoken it for several years. Initially, I was very unhappy with this request, because it took me out of my comfort zone. And yet, I understood Corrado’s concern. He was worried that a lot would get lost if the course was taught in English. So, I agreed to teach it in Italian. Luckily, I came across a planning handbook written in Italian by Luca Gaeta, Umberto Janin Rivolin and Luigi Mazza (2013). This book opened a door for me to the world of Italian planning thought. I liked this book; it was written in a readable accessible language; there were many explanatory side-boxes; and last but not least, a list of suggested movies to show in the classroom. Looking back on my Cagliari experience today, I must admit that Corrado was absolutely right. Doing the course in Italian turned out to be an absolute win-win experience, for the students and for me. On the one hand, the students had the chance to follow my course without any language issues. On the other hand, I was forced, due to my limited Italian, to concentrate on the essential key messages.

Concluding reflections

I want to distil three key messages from my learning experience abroad. They are based on personal observations, and I do not seek to offer them as a generally valid piece of advice. All I can and want to do here is to provide some food for thought to enrich the discussion about the transnational flow of knowledge in planning and planning education.

1. Go abroad to better understand your own planning culture and system

Living and working in a different country takes you out of your comfort zone. It may create some personal difficulties, uneasy feelings and insecurity, but it may also be an enriching and rewarding experience. One needs, however, to be realistic about what can be learned from such an experience. During my four-month stay in Sardinia, I certainly gained a better understanding of the Sardinian planning system and how it works, but I did not become an
expert. On the contrary, while abroad I learnt above all to better understand my own – Austrian – planning culture. How did this happen? At home, I am used to the fact that problems and challenges are treated and solved in a particular way and, over the years, I have taken these approaches for granted. In Cagliari, however, I discovered that people handle the same or similar planning challenges in a very different way, more aligned to their own culture. This observation led me to critically scrutinise the cause and effect of the different planning approaches. As a matter of fact, this provided me with a clearer picture about why we, in Austria, practice planning the way we do. Today, I absolutely agree with Kunzmann (2016) that the visitor should aim exclusively to learn more about planning in his or her own country but explained why simply copying Austrian ways of solving planning challenges to Sardinia, it took me quite some time and effort to explain to my students why it does not make sense simply to copy another approach to planning. I learnt during this process that both physical and ideological proximity play a key role in the sharing of knowledge across borders. As I had no possibility to bring my students to Austria, I worked with concrete examples from my country but explained why simply copying them would not necessarily bring about the expected beneficial results. Austrian and Sardinian planning approaches are, respectively, neither better nor worse, but simply different in that they incorporate endogenously-shaped responses to specific local situations.

2. Be curious, learn from other planning cultures, but refrain from copying them

In times of globalisation, and with English as the lingua franca, fashionable and transient trends spread virus-like across the globe. This ambitious dynamic often lead to harmonisation effects, even where they are not appropriate. As I have argued in this essay, planners have to be careful when transferring concepts and ideas from one country to another. Strictly speaking, planning approaches are not internationally transferable to other contexts, times and situations, except in the most general sense. This applies even to countries that share the same language: Raumplanung, for instance, has different meanings in Austria and Germany (Haselsberger 2009). Thus, when exploring different planning cultures and perspectives, similarities are equally important, as are differences. Though I was aware that I could not apply Austrian ways of solving planning challenges to Sardinia, it took me quite some time and effort to explain to my students why it does not make sense simply to copy another approach to planning. I learnt during this process that both physical and ideological proximity play a key role in the sharing of knowledge across borders. As I had no possibility to bring my students to Austria, I worked with concrete examples from my country but explained why simply copying them would not necessarily bring about the expected beneficial results. Austrian and Sardinian planning approaches are, respectively, neither better nor worse, but simply different in that they incorporate endogenously-shaped responses to specific local situations.

3. Dedicate time to your teaching and learn from your students

Our performance as academics is increasingly evaluated, based on international university ranking indicators. As a consequence, academics around the globe seek to increase their number of publications, as well as win more and more research money from external sources. I tend to argue that this has major implications on the quality of our teaching activities, even to the point where some academics consider teaching as a burden because they do not consider it important for their own career. Although teaching quality is not and cannot be measured by international indicators, we should not forget that educating students is one of our core duties at the university. Moreover, I can say from my own experience that dedicating time to teaching and engaging with students in exercises and joint learning is not a one-way road. When I arrived in Cagliari I brought with me a fully completed planning course. What I did not know was that most of the students there seemed to belong to a privileged middle class. Equity and equality meant something completely different to them, so I decided to challenge their way of class-based thinking as often as I could. While I did not seek to impose my way of thinking on them, I was eager to get them to question things they took for granted with the help of critical questions and arguments. My classroom became a harsh testing ground of my own teaching expertise. Putting the students into the centre of discussion forced me to come forward with clear and comprehensible arguments. In the end, I think I learnt more from my students than they learnt from me.

I will end this essay with a quote from Karl Popper taken from his book Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt (In Search of a Better World). This quote summarises for me the key lesson I learnt during my Visiting Professorship at the University of Cagliari:

"Unser Ziel als Wissenschaftler ist die objektive Wahrheit, mehr Wahrheit, interessantere Wahrheit, besser verständliche Wahrheit. Ge- wisheit kann unser Ziel verunmöglicherweise nicht sein. Wenn wir einsehen, dass die menschliche Erkenntnis fehlerhaft ist, dann sehen wir auch ein, dass wir nie ganz sicher sein können, ob wir nicht einen Fehler gemacht haben." (Popper 2015: 13)

Our aim as scientists is objective truth; more truth, more interesting truth, more intelligible truth. We cannot reasonably aim at certainty. Once we realize that human knowledge...
is fallible, we realize also that we can never be completely certain that we have not made a mistake.

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