

Plan Newtown

A flexible learning strategy

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1. Plan Newtown

Plan Newtown is a flexible teaching and learning strategy which can be used with a wide variety of learners in different situations. It has been used effectively with second-level students and with adult groups following such varied courses as

- personal development
- communications
- community development
- civic, social and political studies
- geography

Plan Newtown was devised by Gerry Jeffers. Teachers and group facilitators are welcome to make copies of the various worksheets etc. Feedback on your experience of using Plan Newtown is always welcome and can be e-mailed to gerard.jeffers@nuim.ie . Revised 2011.

2. Rationale and background for the teacher/facilitator

The built environments in which we live are concrete examples of the results of decisions made by people. The layouts of our cities, towns and suburbs reveal particular values about people, their needs and how those needs should be met. Planning a new town involves making numerous decisions that reflect definite values about people's needs.

Plan Newtown encourages a creative approach to problem solving. The strategy aims to encourage people to move away from thinking solely in terms of 'right' or 'wrong' answers to complex questions.

Central to **Plan Newtown's** strategy is the idea that when a group of people engage in a common task, the communication dynamics within the group are multi-layered: group members adopt various roles; alignments and tensions develop; the internal processes profoundly shape the outcome of the group's work. **Plan Newtown** engages everyone in the group and encourages them to reflect on communication processes.

We tend to accept the layout and structures of the places in which we live, without much questioning, as if those layouts and structures were inevitable. **Plan Newtown** draws attention to the decision-making process; it prompts participants to ask questions and to examine the consequences of planning-related decisions.

Finally, **Plan Newtown** is based on the principle that people learn best when they are actively involved and that reflecting on personal experience and engaging in dialogue and open discussion can contribute greatly to individual learning, growth and development.

3. The Task

Groups of not more than six people plan an imaginary town for about 3,000 people. Thus, in a typical class group there might be five different sub-groups planning their own Newtown. Each participant has a handout that describes the task to be completed by the group. Each sub-group has a large sheet of paper and pens/pencils in order to record an outline of how Newtown will look. Each sub-group has an individual observer who does not initiate any discussion with other members of the group.

The teacher/facilitator circulates among the group(s), observing behaviour, listening to the emerging issues, and trying to identify communication patterns within the group.

When the task is completed (rarely in less than 30 minutes), a member from each sub-group is invited to display the outline plan in a prominent place, briefly explaining the main features of the plan. When all plans are on display, discussion about the exercise takes place. From a learning point of view, this is a critically important stage of the activity. Finally, students may be asked to complete a 'self-assessment' worksheet.

4. Resources required

Each sub-group of up to six participants should be supplied with

- A large (A1 or A2) *blank sheet of paper*. Using a marker the teacher/facilitator draws a freehand, diagonal line from one corner to the opposite one. This represents the river.

The facilitator should also distribute

- A copy of the **Plan Newtown worksheet** for each participant.
- *Pencils and /or markers*- preferably coloured - at least one for each participant.

Following the de-briefing discussion, participants may be invited to complete a *self-assessment sheet*

5. Procedure

The teacher/facilitator introduces **Plan Newtown** as a learning activity in decision-making - finding out more about how decisions are made in practice.

Materials are distributed. The teacher/facilitator reads, out loud, the top and bottom parts of the worksheet, checking that everyone is clear on the task. A time limit is suggested e.g. *'The group should have agreed on an outline plan of Newtown in about 20/30/40 minutes. You can start now'*.

The teacher/facilitator circulates among the groups, observing, taking notes if preferred. Words of encouragement and clarification should be non-directional, such as

- *I see that you are making progress...;*
- *That's an interesting start....;*
- *It's possible that you yourself could be living in Newtown in a few years time...*
- *While we are not considering costs at this stage, be reasonable about the amount of roadway you put in.*
- *It's a decision-making exercise, not an art competition. Rough plans will do.*
- *You may wish to personalise Newtown; put your own names on specific locations e.g. Murphy Road.*

The concluding time should be negotiated along the lines 'OK, five more minutes'.

When completed, each group is asked to display its outline plan in a prominent place. A member of the group is asked to tell the whole group, briefly, the main features of that particular plan.

When all plans are on display, discussion about the activity begins. This discussion/de-briefing is a vital part of the learning cycle with this type of learning activity.

6. Observation, Feedback and Discussion

Having observed the process, the teacher/facilitator will have a good idea of the questions to explore. Essentially, the discussion should generate reflection of the processes. Some effective questions to start include:

- *What do you think was the point of that exercise?*
- *What did you learn, if anything, from that activity?*
- *What would attract new residents to your Newtown?*

Depending on the group it may be appropriate to invite each sub-group to display its 'production', with one of the participants highlighting its main distinguishing features. All participants may be then invited to view the various plans, posing questions about particular decisions. The facilitator needs to maintain his/her focus on what the students are learning through the process.

Then the questioning can explore specific features of the design e.g

- *Why did you locate the dump /Garda Station/Bank etc. there?*
- *Which housing would best suit an eighty year-old living alone?*
- *How well does Newtown cater for car-drivers?*
- *How well does the town cater for people confined to wheelchairs?*
- *How much is Newtown's structure likely to lead to people feeling included and/or excluded?*

By this stage the teacher should be able to suggest that:

Built environments impact on people's lives. Decisions about built environments should, ideally, be informed by people's needs. Policy decisions about towns and cities have long-term and serious consequences.

Next, the teacher/facilitator can focus on the communication processes which have been taking place. The Observer Sheet 7 provides some of the key questions. The observers can be invited to report on their observations, initially highlighting what they saw as positive.

Issues that regularly emerge include:

- * listening and non-listening;
- * how decisions get made;
- * working to deadlines, under pressure;
- * learning from experience.
- * leaders and followers;
- * conflict and its resolution;
- * male-female perspectives;

All the time the facilitator/teacher should attempt to draw attention to learning, helping people make sense of their own behaviour. Finally, if some artistically inclined student wishes to follow up with a detailed drawing, encourage her/him!

Student worksheet

Newtown is being planned at present. Thirty-three miles from a major city, adjacent to a national highway, the new town will accommodate about 3,000 people when completed. Currently the land on which Newtown will be built is used for agriculture. A small river, the Owenbeg, flows diagonally across the site.

You are part of the group that is to plan Newtown.

To assist in the initial planning your group is to produce an outline sketch marking in the proposed locations of the features listed below. Essential roads should be included. Your group may also agree to nominate six additional features, not listed here, which might be included in Newtown.

Newtown must include:

1. Two bridges.
2. 200 local authority three-bedroomed housing units.
3. 100 local authority two-bedroomed housing units.
4. 100 private purchase two-bedroomed housing units.
5. 300 private purchase three-bedroomed housing units.
6. 150 private purchase four-bedroomed houses.
7. 50 private detached 'luxury' houses.
8. A residential centre for up to 50 intellectually disabled adults.
9. A shopping centre.
10. A refuse dump.
11. A bus terminus (Bus service is from Newtown to the city)
12. A youth club.
13. Public parkland to include at least three sports pitches.
14. A primary school.
15. A post-primary school.
16. A public health centre.
17. A branch of a commercial bank.
18. A Post Office.
19. A factory manufacturing pharmaceutical products.
20. A Church.
21. A licensed premises.
22. An Office of the Department of Social Protection.
23. A public car-park for at least 400 vehicles
24. A filling station and garage.
25. A serviced halting site for travelling people
26. Two bus-stop shelters.
27. A Garda Station
28. A factory manufacturing electronic components..
29. An Arts centre

Using the large sheet of paper provided, your group should agree on the overall design of Newtown. Work initially in pencil. Be prepared to explain and defend the decisions made on behalf of the group.

Observer Sheet

Plan Newtown is a flexible learning strategy with a variety of applications. Today's exercise aims to focus on DECISION-MAKING, in particular *communication styles*. Each group is given the task of planning Newtown according to a set of guidelines. Your task is to observe how the group goes about the task, paying special attention to the communication dynamics among the participants and how decisions are actually made.

During the activity you should not take part in the task. You may wish to record some of your observations in writing. If invited to participate, decline, politely stating that you are an observer!

At the end of the exercise you may be asked for your observations. In giving these please focus more on the positive aspects of what you observed (constructive suggestions, support, affirmation, active listening, clarification etc.) even if your observations are primarily negative.

The richness and complexity of communication within a small group is such that it is not possible to draw up an exhaustive list of what to look out for.

In particular, keep asking yourself '*What messages are being sent?*' and '*What messages are being received?*'.

Among the particular observations which might be worth noting are:

- Who sets the process in motion?
- Who writes on the page first?
- How are suggestions made - tentatively, aggressively, confidently, etc.?
- Who appears to listen well?
- Who dismisses other people's suggestions?
- Who offers support for other people's proposals?
- Who appears very task-centred?
- Is there 'opposition' between any two members within the group?
- Who attempts to play the role of reconciler between different viewpoints?
- Who withdraws to the margins of the group?
- Who makes constructive suggestions?
- Who makes destructive suggestions?
- Who assumes a leadership role?
- Who assumes a facilitation role?
- What other roles do you observe?
- How is offence caused within the group?
- Whose contributions appear to energise the group?
- In this activity how important is 'tone of voice'?
- How well do members establish eye contact?
- What observations can be made about body language?
- Overall what conclusions can you draw about the effectiveness of communication within the group in the light of the completed task?

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Self- assessment sheet

0=negative; 100=positive

This self-assessment form is for your own use. You will not be asked to share your ratings with anyone else. Keep this sheet as it may prove useful to consult again at a later stage.

1. How satisfied am I that the group completed the task satisfactorily?
(0-100).....
2. How was leadership shown within the group?

3. How well did I communicate my points of view to the rest of the group?
(0-100).....
4. How constructive was my contribution to the group? (0-100).....
5. How well did I listen to the other group members? (0-100).....
6. How did I react when someone disagreed with my suggestions?

7. What percentage of the completed plan do I feel is mine?
(0-100).....
8. How were decisions actually made within the group?

9. Briefly I would describe my style of communication during this particular task as follows:

10. What I learned most from taking part in **Plan Newtown** was:

