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Case Studies from the Student Groups Learning for Life? How Participants Evaluate LEDs Relevance and Applicability

Casi studio dai gruppi di studenti "Learning for Life?" Come i partecipanti considerano la rilevanza e l'applicabilità dei programmi LED

A widening economic gap and growing diversity in society, coupled with climate change and deteriorating habitats are pressing challenges which should be tackled in socially and politically-responsible manners by our society at large and planning and design professionals more specifically. Planning and design education however seldom considers its social responsibility and is therefore slow to prepare students to lead democratic, participatory planning, community design and landscape stewardship processes. To fill this gap, the LED sought to offer online courses and intensive workshops to planning and design students. The team wanted the educational experience to be improved and adapted upon through a feedback loop, which involved participants in evaluating its education, relevance and applicability from a student perspective. Analysis of the interviews showed that while the students valued the LED experience and found it transformative both on a personal and professional level, they expressed also doubts about the applicability of their newly acquired skills in future professional offices where participatory practices are often discredited as too time consuming and limiting of the designers' expertise and creativity.

Un crescente divario economico e una crescente diversità nella società, unitamente al cambiamento climatico e al deterioramento degli habitat, sono sfide pressanti che dovrebbero essere affrontate in modo socialmente e politicamente responsabile dalla nostra società in generale e dai professionisti della pianificazione e progettazione in modo più specifico. L'istruzione della pianificazione e della progettazione, tuttavia, raramente tiene in considerazione la sua responsabilità sociale ed è quindi lenta nel preparare gli studenti a condurre processi democratici, di pianificazione partecipata, di progettazione comunitaria e di gestione del paesaggio. Per colmare questa lacuna, il LED ha cercato di offrire corsi *online* e *workshop* intensivi per la pianificazione e la progettazione degli studenti. Il *team* ha voluto migliorare e adattare l'esperienza educativa attraverso un ciclo di *feedback*, che ha coinvolto i partecipanti nella valutazione dell'istruzione, della pertinenza e dell'applicabilità dal punto di vista degli studenti. L'analisi delle interviste ha dimostrato che gli studenti, pur apprezzando l'esperienza dei LED e ritenendola trasformativa sia a livello personale che professionale, hanno espresso dubbi anche sull'applicabilità delle loro nuove competenze nei futuri uffici professionali, dove le pratiche partecipative sono spesso screditate in quanto troppo lunghe e limitative delle competenze e della creatività dei progettisti.

1.   INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt, neither in academia nor among lay-people, that we are experiencing fundamental environmental, social and cultural challenges. There is, however, less certainty about how these challenges manifest in our lives, and how to tackle them. Our society is experiencing a widening gap between socio-economic groups, and our growingly diverse population is challenging the notion of what constitutes a good community. Global landscape challenges related to climate change and deteriorating habitats are further affecting both people and landscapes. While they show universal applicability, they manifest in specific local landscape democracy challenges revolving around accessibility and use of landscape by a diversity of groups.

"The landscape belongs to everyone. We should all have equal access to it and a voice in how it is used, valued and maintained" (LED, 2016). While this idea has been underscored by both the UN Sustainability Development Goals and the European Landscape Convention, it is does not necessarily reflect in everyday planning and design actions. Also for planning and design students across the world, this is not as obvious and self-explanatory, and one of the reasons is the way their education is currently framed:
"… spatial planning education rarely includes considerations of democratic processes, participatory planning, community design and landscape stewardship. Furthermore, it does not fully prepare young practitioners to become leaders in promoting democratic landscape change and work effectively in partnership with communities." – (LED, 2016)

Beginning in 2016, the LED project recognized this challenge, and sought to address this gap in the education of planners and designers by focusing on creating a program that would help build the "knowledge, skills, and sensitivities necessary to design and implement democratic decision making in landscape planning" (LED, 2016). Whether it succeeded, and how well students feel prepared for facing the pressing societal challenges mentioned above through the LED course, is the content of this paper.

2.   CONTEXT

As the quintessential actors involved in shaping our environment, planners and designerss have great power and responsibility to promote the creation of socially, economically and environmentally sustainable landscapes, both in urban and rural contexts. This includes the use, allocation, and preservation of (community) resources, and thus engages issues of power, oppression, and privilege and can be understood as inherently political (Brown and Jennings, 2003). There is, however, ample literature that bemoans the lacking political and social awareness in planning and design education (and practice), stating that planners and designers are not yet educated to take an active role and address the aforementioned challenges in socio-politically responsible, comprehensive ways (Brown and Jennings, 2003; Beunen, Van Assche & Duineveld, 2013; Flyvberg, 2002; Howe and Langdon, 2002). Adiversity of researchers and authors concur about the need for more reflexivity or critical social consciousness in education. One of the core features of design and planning education, the studio setting, lends itself particularly well to raise awareness that "[…] domination and emancipation are embodied and enacted through social structure (institutional, economic, and ideological) that can find formal manifestation in the built and planned environment" (Brown and Jennings, 2003: 107). This would enable students to "identify societal power relationships of privilege and marginalization and believe[s] they can be understood through analysis and addressed, if not transformed, through design actions" (ibid.). Such an approach also serves the notion that the planning and design professions are part of "an unfinished social project whose task is to manage our coexistence in the shared spaces of the cities and neighbourhoods in such a way as to enrich human life and to work for social, cultural and environmental justice" (Sandercock, 2004, p. 134).

The above explanations entail the realisation that planning and design need to surrender the idea of creating 'perfect' solutions "in the sense of definitive and objective answers" (Rittel and Webber, 1973: 155). Even though the positivist believe that planners and designers base their action on value-free knowledge still prevails in many schools (Brown and Jennings, 2003) there is growing awareness of the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Allmendinger, 2001) and thus a growing appreciation of local knowledge and multiple ways of knowing, including local experiential and intuitive knowledge (Sandercock, 2004). This, of course, relates to increased use of deliberative and participatory practices in planning and design. Even though participation has become a standard procedure in many planning and design processes, it is frequently accused of being token or unable to shift power positions and "there are still too many cities in which urban planning is done by technocrats beholden to local elites with little involvement of citizens or stakeholders" (LeGates and Stout, 2016: 425). It is with this background that LED offers knowledge about democratic processes, participatory planning, community design and landscape stewardship to planning and design students.

3.   THE LED SEMINAR, ITS GOALS AND THEMES

The LED course consists of two modules that together aim at equipping students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills to take on landscape democracy challenges; an online module which is complemented by a studio-like intensive program (IP) that is held in one of the partnering cities.

The online modules revolve around themes such as landscape and democracy, participatory theories and practices, community and identity, the design process, and communication and representation. Course participants were divided into interdisciplinary and international working groups and in addition to participating in the online sessions, they were expected to collaborate on group work, individual assignments, concept mapping, and reading materials, which they documented on the group's pages on the LED-wiki page (accessible a https://ledwiki.hfwu.de).

After being exposed to the ideas and practices behind Landscape Democracy, Intensive summer Programmes would give some online seminar participants the opportunity to apply theory and methods to a real community, serving as a critical case study of democratic landscape change . In partnership with local stakeholders such as associations, schools, administrative boards and private developers, students tested various tools and methods to analyze complex physical and social landscapes and proposed places-specific strategies to improve livability, identity and long term resilience inspired by their partnership with local community members in the communities of Zingonia, Italy; Kassel, Germany and Torokbalint, Hungary, where the LED traveled to in the summers of 2016, 2017 and 2018(LED, 2016).

Part of the goal of the LED partnership was to operate within a Participatory Action Research framework, which implied the need to partner with communities, act with the rigor and inquisitiveness of a skilled researcher, and act to promote democratic transformation of their landscapes so that some of their most pressing challenges could be addressed. Central to PAR is the need for reflection and adaptation of one's actions. This required that moments of reflections be built into the project through both quantitative and qualitative, interview-based methods. This paper reports on the findings from the qualitative interviews.

THE EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

To evaluate students' learning experience, LED staff used both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions focusing on experiences and learning outcomes of respectively
1) the online course,
2) the intensive program, and
3) the international and interdisciplinary working groups the students were part of in the online course and intensive program.

Questions revolved about the quality of the online setting as a learning environment, the potentials and challenges of the interdisciplinary and international composition of students and staff, and the primary lessons people took away from the course. The interviews concluded with an assessment of how applicable and transferable students found the knowledge gained.
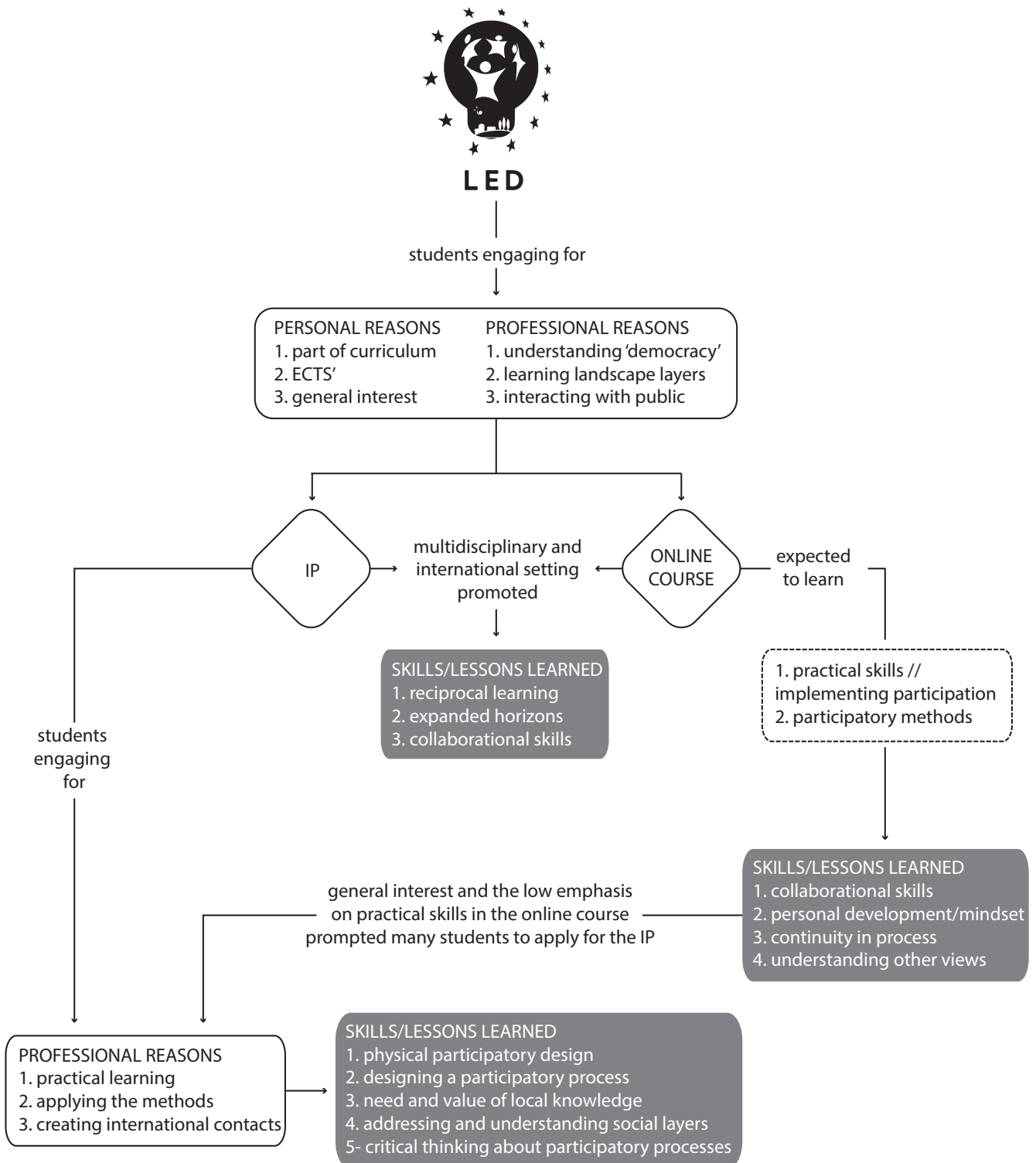
The goal of the interviews was to gather a second layer of evaluation and enrich the results from the questionnaires with more qualitative and experiential information.

Participation in our interviews was voluntary; however, invited individuals had to have participated in both the LED online course and the intensive program in Zingonia 2016 or Kassel in 2017. The study was conducted in spring/summer 2017 and used two different ways of sampling. in April 2017, students who had taken part in the 2016 LED course received an email invitations followed by a reminder three weeks later. Of the 7 people who accepted the invitation, only, four were actually able to be interviewed within the tight time frame available. Students interested in sharing their experiences contacted were asked to contact the authors to propose time and place for that suit them and be conducted in comfortable surroundings.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In addition to the four people mentioned above, 7 interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting during the Summer Intensive Program taking place July 24-31, 2017, roughly involving one out of three participants. The interviewees came from the backgrounds of architecture, landscape architecture and engineering from different countries such as India, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, and NorwayBoth authors conducted interviews. The interviewer asked opening questions to direct the focus of the conversation, but the interviewee led the conversation and was able to bring up themes or topics that he or she considered were of specific importance. The interviewer followed up with questions where the interviewee was unclear in his or her description of a situation or there was need for further clarification. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription and analysis. efore comparing them to each other, the authors conducted a thematically analysis of all interviews (figure X).

L E D

students engaging for

PERSONAL REASONS
1. part of curriculum
2. ECTS'
3. general interest

PROFESSIONAL REASONS
1. understanding 'democracy'
2. learning landscape layers
3. interacting with public

IP

multidisciplinary and
international setting
promoted

ONLINE
COURSE

expected
to learn

SKILLS/LESSONS LEARNED
1. reciprocal learning
2. expanded horizons
3. collaborational skills

1. practical skills //
implementing participation
2. participatory methods

students
engaging
for

SKILLS/LESSONS LEARNED
1. collaborational skills
2. personal development/mindset
3. continuity in process
4. understanding other views

general interest and the low emphasis
on practical skills in the online course
prompted many students to apply for the IP

PROFESSIONAL REASONS
1. practical learning
2. applying the methods
3. creating international contacts

SKILLS/LESSONS LEARNED
1. physical participatory design
2. designing a participatory process
3. need and value of local knowledge
4. addressing and understanding social layers
5- critical thinking about participatory processes

4.   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

As a way to represent the findings in an abstracted manner, this chapter uses a mind-map that categorizes the student's responses and links the different layers in them to the overall issues of expectations for engaging in the LED course and acquired skills after completing it (figure x) .It illustrates the students' eagerness to acquire practical skills as a main motivation for joining the LED course. Thus, the applicability of the skills imparted through the course must be a main concern for the educators. The mind-map clearly shows that through the experience with an actual participatory process during the IP critical thinking is fostered, i.e. that the online course alone does not lead to the intense and applicable learning experience the students were looking for.

A closer look at the results from the students' interviews and explanations reveals the importance of "knowledge, skills, and sensitivities necessary to design and implement democratic decision making in landscape planning" (LED, 2016). Overall, students expressed satisfaction with the course content, while also mentioning critical assessments of the structure of the online course, the workload, and the clarity of some of the online assignments. Some of the interviewees expressed scepticism towards the online platform as working space and learning environment because "one gets easily distracted" (need a citation). Other weaknesses mentioned by the students included the lack of a clear and easily understandable structure and technical problems related to weak internet connections disrupting the online sessions. All of the interviewees, however, perceived the course to be overall successful and expressed satisfaction with their experience of it. everal of the students uttered that the course had played a significant role in opening up their eyes to democracy and participation in general. "I knew so little beforehand. I mean I've known about participation earlier but now I understand the importance of it. I learned much more

and other things than I thought I would prior to the course (need a citation)."

Generally, they claimed that they would have graded the LED-course as less successful had it not been for the IP where they tested the interdisciplinary and international working groups in person and acquired practical skills. Even though the IP was highly valued, it was not beyond critique: Some students shared that they had found that language barriers, cultural differences, and disciplinary biases in their working group stood in the way of creating good participatory processes and design solutions with and for the local community. One student said "... perhaps it is just my prejudices or maybe it's my ignorance, but I think it might be easier to carry out participatory processes in my own country where there is a general agreement about design solutions, processes, and end results (need a citation)." These comments point at the challenges of working in and with diversity (Sandercock, 2004), and the difficulty to accept that there is more than one solution to a problem and that values inform any planning and design decision (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

From the array of different topics brought forth by the students, two (contradictory) issues emerged as central from a perspective of social awareness-raising education. Namely, how on the one hand, the course and IP influenced the interviewees and their understanding of participation and, on the other hand, their own interpretations of the role of planning and design professionals in promoting/engaging with it. Rather emotionally, they used expressions like "it (the course, comment by the authors) totally changed my view" or shared that through the course they "discovered another world, another universe"! (need a citation). Another student mentioned "I learned to think again...it moved me a lot...it's like growing up" (need a citation) For others, the course corrected their impression of participation and "made

me more critical, because I can see how difficult it is to include people", and that "participation consist of many more levels than I initially thought or knew". This confirms the effectiveness of the studio setting as a place of condensed immersion and a learning experience that helps the identification of societal power relationships (Brown and Jennings, 2003).

Some of the interviewees concur with the academics who bemoan the lacking political and social awareness in planning and design education (Brown and Jennings, 2003; Beunen, Van Assche & Duineveld, 2013; Flyvberg, 2002; Howe and Langdon, 2002). LED students mentioned that the course and IP provided them with learning that filled a gap in their home Universities' curricula. One student framed it like this: "In my studies, I was always thinking: What is the missing link? Now I know what is the missing link!" or "I felt what was lacking in my university is direct contact with… let's say…reality…where we are going to work"(need a citation). A third student expressed that "I feel I have finally learned theories and methods that bring validity to, and guide, my professional work." Another said: "The value of talking to and engaging with people is much clearer and I tend to want to do participation now. Even though a project is not just about participation, I think it is much easier to engage with it now and establish a closer relationship to residents because I want to, not because I have to" (need a citation). At the same time, knowledge about the limitations, difficulties, and the costs of performing participatory processes also became clear to the students: "I think one of the most important things I've learned is that participation is unpredictable and time consuming.

You have to be willing to put in time, efforts and resources to get to the core of challenges and problems and not just end up at something superficial. I learned the importance of the will to invest." For many of the students, the work of setting methods into practice was challenging,

and in particular deciding what methods to use when and where. "I expected to learn methods and how to perform participation, but I was unaware that I had to design the process myself. At first I thought that was weird (because of the lack of knowledge, comment by authors), but in retrospect I am glad it turned out that way because I learned much more" (need a citation).

While through the LED course the interviewees came to believe that "interaction with people is of great value", that "talking is always good" and that they "learned methods to address groups and motivate people" or "have enough information to stand up for what is right", they disheartened shared their doubts about the applicability of participatory planning and design.

Despite their enthusiasm for the course, those with work experience concur with the view that the planning and design profession is practiced in an a-political way (Brown and Jennings, 2003; Flyvberg, 2002, Howe and Langdon, 2002) and that "urban planning is done by technocrats beholden to local elites with little involvement of citizens or stakeholders" (LeGates and Stout, 2016: 425). They felt that even though courses like LED are needed to fulfil planning and design's societal responsibility, the applicability of the knowledge they gathered through the course was difficult to apply "…I would be quite pessimistic about using it in an office …no…we don't do this…it's just too time consuming for an office environment…if you work for the government maybe…but across places, I am quite sure there is this top-down design process" (need a citation).

Another student added: "cefore participating in this course I was thinking a lot about how one can involve people who live in the area, and at the same time get people with money, power, and ability to influence to agree on the ideas. I still don't see how this could work in my country!… It's as if the two are always opposing each other…". Even those that believe in the applicability of participatory

practices in planning and design implicitly talk about a work environment that is different: "I find it really applicable when working with communities…all the times the designers think they are the professionals who know best… but they are not…sometimes experience knows best!" (need a citation) Another said, "I have never really thought how people can be engaged…I have always thought that it (i.e. planning and design, comment by the authors) is a top-bottom thing and that people themselves can't do anything…it (the course, comment by the authors) really changed my whole idea about how to engage the community…I am definitely thinking about planning in a different way".

While some interviewees are skeptical about the application of the methods into their future practice, others are more optimistic: "I feel much more prepared than prior to the course and the thought of taking on such challenges is both exciting and scary. Such projects will never be the same because the context changes, so in that case it is not directly transferable. However, I feel I have a larger toolbox and some experiences that make me more capable of taking on such challenges,"

One of the students with no work experience sees this issue in a different light. While being pragmatic about how the field works, he thinks that knowledge in participatory planning and design gives him an edge over competitors in the field "…it is gonna be great for my future career in architecture".

5.   CONCLUSION

The value of Landscape Democratic
education is seen in the long haul
This chapter has provided insight into
how students e in the LED Programme
evaluate their learning experiences and
how much usefulness they attribute to
the acquired knowledge. The interviews
provide invaluable insight into what
participation in this kind of education
can a student's perspective and therefor
give important pointers on the changes
necessary to the LED course to improve
students' learning experience.
By providing students with more
knowledge, skills, and sensitivity to
design, the course aimed at enabling
them to implement democratic decision-
making in their professional practice.
Based on the interviews, the LED course-
especially through the IP -largely fulfilled
its intention and reach its goals. Students
expressed that their knowledge, skills, and
general understanding of participation
and democracy was improved through
the course. Students also expressed
that their expectations were largely met
and even exceeded and that the course
filled a gap in their current professional
education. Moreover, several implicitly or
explicitly said that their participation in
the course prompted them to evolve as
both professionals and individuals.
It is this combination of professional
and personal involvement that ideally
transforms into political and social
awareness in planning and design
practice. Only time will reveal whether
students will or will not utilize their new
acquired knowledge and skills in order to
promote sustainable landscape planning
processes in the future. This points at
the need for longitudinal evaluation and
a close monitoring of not only landscape
education but also planning and design
practice to equip students for the
responsibility they have as practitioners
to   meet   society's   most   pressing
challenges.

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DOI : 10.1080/01944360408976368