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Published in:
Environment and planning b-Planning & design

DOI:
[10.1177/0265813515617658](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265813515617658)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dijk, van, T., & Ubels, H. (2016). How Dutch professionals conduct interactive design sessions to foster 'shared understanding'. *Environment and planning b-Planning & design*, 43(3), 464-479.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0265813515617658>

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Environment and Planning B:

Planning and Design

2016, Vol. 43(3) 464–479

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DOI: 10.1177/0265813515617658

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Abstract

In the pursuit of the communicative, collaborative and participatory planning processes advocated by academic planning literature, a practice has evolved that translates abstract objectives into practical workforms. Planning literature proposes many objectives that can be met by less top-down methods of generating ideas and making decisions. Little is known about how such objectives are translated into practical methods applied. This paper presents an inventory of practices that is meant to validate and supplement available theories on communicative planning. It concentrates on a specific part of the planning process: the moment where optional solutions to a problem are being generated, not by each stakeholder in isolation, but specifically by groups of stakeholders in constructive designerly interaction with each other. We interviewed 11 experienced professionals from the Netherlands who use interactive design sessions on a regular basis. This paper reports on their responses to questions about skills needed by session leaders, what types of venues are best to use, how to behave during sessions, requirements for participants to contribute, roles of governments and what explains the eventual effects of session outcomes. Although every session still needs to be tailor-made, based on practical wisdom and sensitivity to context, this study reveals recurring hands-on principles for organizing an effective dialogue for exploring solution space.

Keywords

Design, communication, workforms, inventory

Introduction

The question of how communicative planning works in practice remains important. We studied what it takes in a practical sense to organize meetings where groups of people effectively come to a shared understanding of problems, options and sensible choices.

Proper communication is expected to simultaneously save time, knowledge and stress, while creating equality and shared understanding. Both the actual collected benefits and the

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methods to practically bring about communication in a divided community have been subject to a range of studies, both empirical and theoretical. One difficulty is that there are no general truths; every process is unique in its objective, its stakeholders and its cultural, economic and institutional contexts. The very intent of communication differs widely. It may be about conflict resolution, satisfying formal decision-making procedures or, more constructively in an early stage, about ‘making sense of things together’ (Forester, 1989).

A key distinction we use for making our argument is ‘design’ being set apart from the wider notion of ‘planning’. ‘Design’ refers to the activity where options for a certain area’s future are constructed, based on an evaluation of the area’s problems and possibilities (identical to Forester’s (1989), Chapter 8). Design is about imagination, about exploring trajectories of change, that every stakeholder can take part in. It is a divergent process, producing a cloud of ideas. ‘Planning’, on the other hand, is the larger setting that we assume here to be ultimately *convergent*, trying to achieve consensus on what future to pursue, formalizing choices made and organizing action to achieve that chosen future. The process of planning is the ‘trading zone’ (Mäntysalo et al., 2011) that needs to be fed by moments of joint exploration of the not entirely knowable world, for the discovery of solution spaces (the ‘strategy formation’ in Healey, 2007: 192). Every planning process (*convergence*) has pockets of design (*divergence*) but these pockets are not always equally explicit and extensive. It obviously is an artificial distinction as in reality divergence and convergence are interrelated and oscillate between various levels of scale. Our question was: what do practitioners consider to be important for organizing effective meetings to pursue divergence?

The empirical object of our study can be defined as face-to-face informal meetings, of half a day to several days, with relevant experts, an array of lay locals, non-governmental organization representatives and government officials sharing a spatial problem/challenge, meant to develop a shared understanding and generate a range of courses of action. Meetings like these have been organized, for example, in New Orleans just after hurricane Katrina to discuss tentative options to rebuild, in London to evaluate how to build Olympic facilities to benefit the city after the games, in Antwerp to imagine how best to complete the city’s ring road, in Hamburg how to equip the city to cope with floods, et cetera. This excludes regular, more formally embedded meetings, such as town hall hearings, where there generally is a polarized situation around a predefined option, or meetings confined to individual organizations or households. It also excludes analysis of the more diffuse long-term processes in extensive networks, where standpoints are formed and defended more gradually and in fragmented interaction between stakeholders. Our primary focus is on open, creative, hands-on meetings.

We contend that every spatial challenge is accompanied by a cloud of theoretically possible solutions. Expressed in mathematical terms, that could be labelled a ‘solution space’, as Forester (1989: 123) and Stempfle and Badke-Schaub (2002) do. The total solution space contains both options that have been taken in conscious consideration, no matter how individual and how momentary, and options that are yet to be discovered.

Planning processes need to organize active joint inquiry into this solution space. The meetings we study can be the loci where trust is built, perspectives are adapted, solution spaces are explored, decision spaces constructed and acceptable courses of action are found. Knowing how to develop meetings in which creative capacity is mobilized is therefore important. So, we take the broad ontological perspective of what has been called ‘Design Thinking’ (De Lille et al., 2013), a ‘designerly approach’ (Luck, 2012) or ‘planning-as-design’ (Van Assche et al., 2012). It should be understood broadly here as a creative property of phases in a decision-making process, separate from its disciplinary connotation.

Some call it 'mundane designing' to distinct it from the highbrow design (Luck, 2012; McDonnell, 2009). It is a cluster of paradigms (Dorst, 1997; Stumpf and McDonnell, 2002), that have in common that they are ways of treating each problem-solving process as a mindset, a process of inventing alternatives (Boland and Collopy, 2004), empathize with multiple kinds of people using and owning the site (Battarbee and Koskinen, 2005), visually imagining problems and preliminary solutions (Evans, 2011) where words alone would not convince (Utterback et al., 2006). Designers employ their skills in a continuous creative dialogue (Gloppen, 2009).

'Interactive design sessions', as we shall call them throughout this paper, take willingness, time and effort. But jointly elaborating on a problem or starting situation increases the chance of finding satisfying and even synergetic ideas that will come to support formal plans. This elaboration expands the range and/or solutions that can be consciously taken into consideration, investigated, and often rejected, sometimes becoming a dominant concept. In many countries, it has become popular to make this exploration a team effort with a variety of perspectives in one session.

Although the literature has emphasized the need for communication in planning, as we will briefly review in Section Theories on 'planning together', an inventory of the hands-on repertoire of techniques to actually realize this communication had yet to be made. There are handbooks (Carpenter and Kennedy, 1988; Gastil and Levine, 2005; Moffitt and Bordone, 2005; Sarkissian et al., 2009; Susskind et al., 1999) with practical guidelines, and deep case analyses as well (Booher and Innes, 2010b) but we wanted to document the practices which are actually applied, thus encompassing many cases.

Our objective was to validate the ideas from the literature: are they considered to be effective? How are they practically applied? We also wanted to measure perceived importance: How do criteria rank? Another goal was to supplement the literature: What practical advice can be added to the existing knowledge? Experienced Dutch session leaders were interviewed about what they perceive to be effective. However, we did not empirically test the actual effectiveness of their recommendations.

Our methods for documenting the practice of interactive design sessions are explained in Section Method. We based our study on pre-structured interviews with 11 experienced design session leaders from the Netherlands. Sections 4 through 7, as well as 7b in the Supplementary Material available online, present our findings and then we conclude with a discussion.

Theories on 'planning together'

For a number of years, the quality and credibility of spatial plans were determined to a great extent by the expert knowledge represented in them. Experts would model traffic volumes, water flows, housing demands, wildlife migration and so on in order to produce rational and effective plans. However, the authority of experts decayed as their models appeared to be incapable of resolving the disputes inherent to making planning decisions.

The acknowledgement of limits to rationality, such as 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1991), 'communicative rationality' (Innes, 1998) and power-laden rationality (Flyvbjerg, 1998), led to changes in the way planning can be understood. A number of leading authors adopted a social constructivist perspective on planning: facts and logic do not exist independent of people, but are constructed in planning practices. Plans are therefore as much about process as about content.

The relevance of communication in planning has formed the focus of much literature on democracy and deliberation in decision making in general (see Abelson et al., 2003) and in

relation to spatial issues in particular (see for more information the Supplementary Material available online).

For our inventory of design session practices, we take the planning literature as our starting point, and a particularly influential author within that literature. Captivated by a fascination with decision making on spatial issues being ruled by the political process rather than content (Foreword of Innes, 1995), Innes has analysed dozens of cases to identify whether programs work and why they work (Booher and Innes, 2010b). Important case studies on how planners can be effective are presented throughout Innes' publications. These suggest that decisions should primarily be rooted in shared meanings, shared knowledge and shared understanding of problem and benefits (Booher and Innes, 1999b, 2002, 2004; Innes, 1996, 2004), culminating from a joint process of truly engaged participants.

Innes' work has been, and still is, greatly influential on thinking about planning and begs to be supplemented with insights on how to create the conditions in actual meetings for 'authentic dialogue' (a concept coined in Booher and Innes, 2002, 2004). Although Booher and Innes (1999a, 1999b) put forward interesting examples and opportunities, more systematic empirical observations are welcome on how meetings may be arranged and what methods to use to achieve better outcomes. In recent years, Innes has zoomed out instead of zooming in and has chosen to analyse metropolitan political processes of consensus related to larger issues such as resource management (Booher et al., 2007, 2011; Booher and Innes, 2010a; Gruber and Innes, 2005).

In her search for the relationship between process and outcomes, Innes typically reviews the full challenge of achieving consensus. She does this as a critical theorist and in a qualitative way with a focus on actors who form networks for joint action. She makes claims about the requirements for consensus building, but clues about *how* to organize better for processes of deliberation are relatively broad brush and qualitative. Similarly, Patsy Healey qualitatively reviewed the main requirements for communicative action (Healey, 1996, 2007), underexposing the hands-on aspects of how to achieve it. Planners have yet to understand the concrete *loci*, the actual meetings where trust is built (or not), innovative solutions are explored (or not) and agreement is reached (or not).

Although the literature on communicative planning is much wider than Innes' work, we concentrated on her observations and recommendations for the purpose of our study. We wanted to validate and supplement her recommendations, acknowledging that most of them have been stated by other authors as well. We compared our inventory of practices to Innes' seminal work and took a different perspective that: (1) zooms in on the actual sessions instead of the wider collaboration process, (2) concentrates on the Dutch practice instead of the American one Innes bases her observations on and (3) includes the time that has passed since Innes' publications. In addition to core communicative planning literature, literature related to visioning was used in Section 8, where types of outcomes and their critical factors are discussed.

Method

Starting from Innes' recommendations on how to organize communicative planning processes, we sought to establish: (1) if practitioners recognize them, (2) how they rank their relative importance and (3) what additional, more detailed principles they consider worth applying.

Obviously, this study is epistemologically complicated. The best way to produce an accurate reflection of a practice was unviable, namely to observe hundreds of meetings and objectively measure what happened in them and their participants' minds.

Table 1. Qualities of the interviewees.

Formal training	Years of experience	Type of position
Geography, management consulting	10	Co-owner of a small consultancy firm
Spatial economics, business studies	22	Consultant in a large firm
Physical geography	>20	Researcher at a university of applied sciences
Environmental science	15	Advisor in a government agency
Business studies, management consulting	7	Owner of a consultancy firm without personnel
Landscape architecture	30	Owner of a consultancy firm without personnel
Urban design	10	Co-owner of a small consultancy firm
Landscape architecture	10	Advisor in a government agency
Landscape architecture	20	Co-owner of a small consultancy firm
Spatial planning	7	Consultant in a large firm
Geography, communication	15	Advisor in a government agency

The complexity of interpreting and analysing interdependent thoughts and actions would be too daunting. Instead, we relied on intensive pre-structured interviews with 11 experienced session leaders working in the Netherlands. Our interviewees (Table 1) all are specialized in being organizers themselves of interactive design sessions. They have been contracted on dozens of occasions to lead design sessions throughout the Netherlands. Based on their experiences, they have come to form a personal practical theory on how to best handle such sessions – we inquired into just that. The advantage of interviewing them is that they have a professional overview over a series of many meetings and can derive general patterns that are likely to be representative for the small Dutch territory they work in, and its relative cultural and institutional homogeneity. The disadvantage is that their account may be selective or distorted – as in all data collection relying on interviews. Experienced leaders also may have become less observant regarding parts of their practice because these parts have become routine to them.

In addition, we wanted to derive general statements on an intrinsically heterogeneous object of study. Every planning process is unique, and a set of processes can never fully be collapsed into a single truth. Nonetheless, a practice of meetings has evolved and must hold some general logic we can learn from. And indeed, despite each project's uniqueness, the data do show a number of consistently repeated replies, increasing their significance.

The phenomenon is very diverse indeed. Dutch interactive design sessions are sometimes about solving problems or finding preferred solutions. But they also may have a wider objective, such as finding a joint direction and formulating a future vision on a specific area or place. Sometimes they are about just interrogating the problem and/or the solutions in the hope that by doing so, the problem could become reframed and not to be a problem at all, but rather a specific situation or a starting point that invites participants to develop a joint vision and action.

Given these inherent uncertainties in relying on interviews, we stress that we measured *what these practitioners consider to be* conditions imperative to effective interactive design, instead of wanting to measure *what are* these conditions. The practitioners are the object of study, not the practice itself – although we interview practitioners about their daily practice. And although it cannot be prevented that each interview has its own dynamics, we kept all possible conditions constant for maximum comparability: the same interviewer, the same time of day, similar introductory explanation in the e-mails, similar short introduction at the

start of the interviews. The literally same prompts were used for the questions and are shown in the caption of each table.

Some interviewees expressed difficulty in answering the interview questions because they acknowledged the different type of interventions and/or processes and felt that their answers would differ according to the type in question. The tables in the paper then indicate the number of interviewees that did answer by 'n=10', for instance. Nonetheless, we invited them to point out general patterns in the sessions they facilitated. By aggregating these interviews, recurring observations can be taken to be legitimate outcomes.

The interviews were conducted in a structured way in order to allow a systematic comparison of the answers across interviews. The comparison of 11 answers to 1 question can establish whether there is much differentiation or similarity within practice. Part of the questions was open-ended. For the other part of the questions, the literature puts forward certain criteria or recommendations. We deliberately asked about those topics in two ways. First, the interviewee was asked an open-ended question to actually produce those criteria and recommendations: for instance, 'what would you define as the most important skill for a session leader?' After that answer was recorded, they were confronted with randomly sorted a list of what the literature says about that question, and invited to rank a top 5 or top 3 of importance. The ranking was converted in a figure, by inverting the scores (number '1' means most important and is assigned five points when it is a top 5 ranking) and the points are added up to one figure.

The next sections will present and discuss the outcomes of the interviews. The space available in a journal paper does not allow to present more details about the interviews. We therefore can only discuss the overall results summarized in the tables.

Main competences for session leaders

Professional backgrounds of interviewees

Although our set of interviewees was not intended to be representative of Dutch practice in a statistical sense, it is interesting to look at their backgrounds. We asked them two related questions: 'What was your own formal training' and 'Content-wise, what types of sessions did you lead?'

Their formal training varies, but it stays in the range of studies that have a spatial perspective. The interviewees are quite evenly distributed across bigger consultancy firms, small firms and government agencies. One works at a university of applied sciences but operates in an entrepreneurial way. The types or processes they have worked in vary widely, both between interviewees and within the experience of individual professionals. They range from village square designs with locals to regional visions with dozens of stakeholders.

Key skills

The necessity for proper facilitation and management of communicative processes has been widely acknowledged (Booher and Innes, 1999a: 11, 2002: 232, 2010: 4; Gruber et al., 1994: 25; Innes, 1996: 461, 1998: 59, 2004: 5), but what does that mean? After years of experience and leading dozens of processes, what have the interviewees learned about the key skills for successfully managing sessions? This is important because the outcome of a session is strongly influenced by the facilitator's process. Ideally, the facilitator only helps to facilitate a constructive exchange of ideas. We wanted to find out what is important to make that possible.

We first asked them what they would consider to be key skills. Then we gave them a list of the skills explicitly mentioned in the literature (on a sheet of paper, identical at every interview) and asked them to pick the five most important ones and arrange them in order from most important (number 1) to least important (number 5). The results are shown in Table 2.

Leadership and control over the process were proactively mentioned most often. Second most often mentioned were analytical qualities and the ability to listen. So both control and empathy were mentioned, with the first clearly more often mentioned than the latter. When ranking from a predefined list, the skills related to empathy were selected as most valuable. Interviewees gave the highest scores to the ability to listen, the ability to create a safe and trusting atmosphere and the ability to connect people. The aspect of leadership that was often proactively mentioned was ranked less highly but was still important.

These outcomes reveal an interesting tension between connecting to the group, following their thoughts and wishes, and at the same time staying in control. Obviously, the first concerns the substance of the discussion and the second the structure of the process. The interviewees are hired to structure a session and they often mentioned that they rarely altered the structure of a process. Participants actually accept and feel comfortable being guided through a predefined structure, as long it is a clear structure with clear rules (based on respectful interaction) in which people are free to express their thoughts and wishes.

Practical organization of sessions

A series of practical aspects was brought to the attention of the interviewees (indicated in italics in the left column of Table 3) and they were asked how a session should ideally be organized. These aspects included the need to brief a group before a session, the nature of the meeting location, how to choose time slots and how to create a communicative atmosphere. The commonalities are strong in most of the points (see Table 3, left column). Remember, we spoke to each interviewee independently, which adds to the value of these commonalities.

Interviewees almost all stated that they consider the choice of location and the arrangement of furniture to be vital for a constructive session. The setting was unanimously agreed to have a large effect on the outcomes. It is most important to stimulate an open attitude in the participants. For example, this can be facilitated by taking the participants out of their daily contexts and routines. Square tables encourage people to keep their distance and adopt a formal attitude. In a process with formal representatives, it might be desirable to start the first sessions in this way to foster trust in the process. However, it appeared that an arrangement in a circle with chairs and no tables at all works best for creating mutual contact (the specifics depend on the context). Ironically, Innes repetitively writes about 'getting people at the table' as a way to achieve communicative planning, while the professionals we interviewed would rather say 'getting people in a ring of chairs'. When tables cannot be avoided, only round tables should be used.

Equally important in the responses was a welcoming atmosphere, humour and food. These factors all stimulate participants to leave their normal routines and paradigms and truly connect to the rest of the group and be open to new ideas. Other effective methods for moving people away from their fixed routines include a lunch walk, an excursion or drawing as a way to communicate. Time and location depend on the content of the process and the availability of participants. Residents will need evening sessions, while government staff are more easily involved in the afternoon and in their own offices. This dovetails with advice from Innes' work, in which she advocates informal ways of communicating (Booher and

Table 2. What key skills would you consider indispensable for leading a design session?

Proactively mentioned by interviewees in response to an open-ended question	Times mentioned	Qualities found in the literature – the ability of the session leader to	Score after ranking a top 5 from a fixed list by the interviewees (n = 9)
be analytical, find the core	3		
be flexible and creative	2		
listen	3	listen ^{a,e}	29
be a good host, give trust, be modest, show empathy, be sensitive	2 2	create a safe atmosphere of trust ^h	27
be welcoming, be constructive, connect individual interests in a collective interest	1 1	connect people	21
		give all input equal attention ^a	16
		lead a respectful discussion ^{c,h}	12
leadership, keep control, structure the process	5 4	be a leader ^{h,k,m}	9
convey enthusiasm	1	keep participants motivated ^h	9
		guarantee transparency ^k	6
		establish shared facts ^a	3
		put emerging ideas to the test ^e	2
		be comprehensive, complete ^a	1
		negotiate ^{c,e}	1
		use dramaturgical means ^c	0
		stimulate adaptive learning ^{c,k}	0
		mediate ^{c,e}	0
		neutralize conflicting ideas	0

^aInnes (1996),

^bInnes (1998),

^cBooher and Innes (1999a),

^dBooher and Innes (1999b),

^eBooher and Innes (2002),

^fBooher and Innes (2004),

^gInnes (2004),

^hGruber et al. (1994),

ⁱGruber and Innes (2005),

^jBooher et al. (2007),

^kBooher and Innes (2010),

^lBooher et al. (2011),

^mBooher and Innes (2010).

Innes, 1999a: 19, 2004: 429; Innes, 1996: 467), humour and conviviality (Booher and Innes, 1999a: 19) and the importance of joy in the process (idem).

Half the interviewees found it crucial to use drawings to communicate and the other half found it optional. These conflicting statements about the value of drawing can be explained by the interviewees’ formal training and the type of processes they have worked in.

There seems to be a wide variety of ways to structure the deliberation process in a session. When asked which philosophies they used to structure the process, interviewees answered either that they do it intuitively, without a predefined model, or that at some point in their

Table 3. How do you practically organize effective sessions?

Golden rules expressed by most interviewees	Minority view
Proper <i>briefing</i> before the session is essential to get the group on the same page. Don't start from scratch.	Don't put too much text on paper, just give a compact oral explanation. Little or no pre-knowledge can be effective as well.
<i>Physical setting</i> is vital: chairs should be in a circle and ideally there should be no tables (if they are necessary, only use round ones).	Choose an extraordinary room or location for a disruptive effect. A change of setting during the day gives new energy. Provide no chairs at all in short meetings.
<i>Physical setting</i> : All activities should happen in one single spacious room with a lot of daylight.	Going outside or taking a walk together, can be ways to make people connect. It is important to be able to project a slideshow of pictures of the area.
You need space to convene <i>located</i> in the area at stake. Go to the people involved, preferably an informal space with authenticity, not a luxury hotel.	In processes dominated by governmental organizations, one of their buildings could be a good option.
What <i>part of the day</i> to use depends on the group: civil servants want to leave early, while residents may only be available after work hours.	Never start before noon, and never stop without dinner or evening drinks. Mornings are better for listening, afternoons are better for group work.
The ideal <i>timespan</i> is half a day to three days.	Plan long breaks in the program to allow informal networking. Break the program up into 25-minute units.
An <i>atmosphere</i> of hospitality, food, humour, a nice location and fresh air make participants feel welcome and away from the office.	Humour should not downplay the value and importance of the meeting.
Drawing is truly an essential <i>tool</i> for retrieving more information.	Visualizing in drawings can help, but is not always applied. Theater and film can serve the same purpose so can music and clay models. A danger of images can be that they suggest a definite choice.
Wide variation between interviewees and stated context dependence with respect to: <i>Process philosophies</i> applied <i>Tools</i> used: flip-overs, bulletin boards, discussion software on laptops, maps, etc. Rarely deliberately used: <i>Mirror stories, metaphors, role playing</i>	

The *italic* words in the left column were given to the interviewee as a prompt to formulate his or her golden rule.

careers they found models that inspired them. When they did find a model, no two interviewees used the same one. Models varied from neuro-linguistic programming to ones found in management books.

Most interviewees expressed an almost spiritual perspective on managing the energy between people in a group. They attempt to use the session room and structure to play to

the participants' senses. The interviewees want participants to open their minds and to welcome new connections. They raise consciousness through a deliberate group process.

Interestingly, the use of metaphors and role playing, advocated so elaborately by Booher and Innes (1999a), was specifically suggested to the interviewees, but they rarely use it as a work form (only one does). It does happen spontaneously: stories and metaphors emerge from discussions but not deliberately. One interviewee emphasized that if these forms are applied, they have to be very well thought out because they have to convincingly connect to the 'real' issue. Stories can help bring an area and an issue to life.

With respect to the group process, one interviewee added that it is vital that the group going through the process should stay the same. Follow-up meetings, if any, must be held with the exact same people, accepting no replacements. Participants should also refrain from bilateral talks apart from the group; the session should be a group process at all times.

Composing a group of participants

In general, the literature urges facilitators to make sure processes are 'inclusive': they should include every possible stakeholder in order to get everybody around the table. In Innes' work, the inclusion of 'all' is advised many times (Booher et al., 2007: 199; Innes, 1996: 461 and 465, 1998: 59, 2004: 7). Our professionals were quite outspoken that the composition of a group is more complicated. The main principles that they have come to honour are listed in Table 4.

According to the interviewees, it is often impossible and undesirable to have every stakeholder around the table. A group could become too large or interests might be represented twice. Most interviewees make a judgment on who to select as participants in order to get a balanced group. As one interviewee said: 'The group must have the feeling that if *they* don't solve the problem, then who will?' In stakeholder management processes, however, communication with all stakeholders should take place in advance, even if their participation appears to be unnecessary or undesired.

Interestingly, some interviewees stated that they not only select based on what interests a person represents but also on their style of communicating and cooperating. The group has to be able to function as a team and that takes the right mix of personal styles. Remember, the design sessions we study here are not primarily meant to generate consensus, but rather to make a creative leap to an innovative solution space that might get the consent of most stakeholders, even the non-participants. It is a different objective to explore solution space rather than reaching formal agreement.

Interviewees noted that the process is best served by a group that has a stable composition during the session and in any subsequent sessions. Participants might conclude, though, that their time is better spent elsewhere, and then it may be better that they leave. Interviewees said that it can be difficult for new participants to enter the process later on because they would have missed the connection with the group, the process and emerging ideas.

Including people from the relevant government in the session may decrease creativity or lead to confusion. Governments should be positioned as just one of the stakeholders, and not one that is placed above all parties.

On the last point in Table 4, the position of governments as session participants, we asked the interviewees to describe the government's ideal role. We asked it as an open-ended question and as ranking from a fixed list. The replies on the open-ended question fit well with the predefined list shown in Table S1 (Supplementary Material, available online), both in content and stated importance. According to the interviewees, ideally governments should set the playing field for the session: they should take the lead in organizing the process,

Table 4. What is essential with respect to the composition of the group of participants?

Principle expressed by most interviewees	Minority views
It is impossible to <i>invite everyone</i> ; many groups should be invited and representation should be properly balanced.	Those left out should be told why. Group composition could be left to coincidence. Too many participants can reduce the energy. Everyone should at least be offered the possibility to join in. All stakeholders who have an interest in the issue should be part of the process.
Look for variety in competences and styles of thinking. Group composition can be <i>modified</i> during the larger process.	This can happen provided that groups placed outside the process stay informed. It is okay and sometimes necessary for participants to leave, but it is complicated for new people to enter. Continuity is better, do not accept replacements. Depending on the process, new people might need to be added.
All groups that bear part of the <i>responsibility</i> should be included, also governments.	This is not necessarily true, depending on the issue and purpose. Politicians should be included for ceremonial purposes, but should not join in the session. People may feel less free to talk with politicians around.
<i>Governments</i> , even when they are the commissioning party, should be 'one of the stakeholders'. They should not take the lead in managing the session or stress policy-related impossibilities.	Governments may be placed in a separate parallel group, whose outcomes will be integrated later. It is important to include government because they are usually the starting point, but their involvement can be realized in different ways.

clarify what is at stake, enumerate the present policies to consider and explain what type of outcome is expected. After that, governments should be supportive to the process, but they should be stakeholders equal to all others. Their role should not be placed above that of other parties. Facilitators should be aware that the position of people from the government in the session has to be properly explained. The interviewees did stress that the government's role is very context-dependent: in particular cases, other choices may have to be made, giving governments a more prominent role or leaving them out.

What are the prerequisites participants need before agreeing to participate and contribute in a session? We asked this as an open-ended question and asked the interviewees to rank a fixed list of requirements found in the literature. The outcomes are shown in Table S2 (Supplementary Material, available online). In response to the open-ended question, we received answers about what it takes for a participant to engage well in a session. Almost every interviewee mentioned a respectful open attitude, and one-third of them mentioned

flexibility and creativity. The ranking strongly proves the importance of role definition, influence and autonomy. The first and the last of those three were also mentioned spontaneously in reply to the open-ended question but not very often.

Managing interaction during the session

The actual process commences after a balanced group of participants has been identified and successfully invited (Section 6) and the proper conditions have been met for constructive interaction (Section 5), among which a skilled facilitator has been added to the process (Section 4). Gruber et al. (1994: 27) emphasized how vital facilitation of the process is to its outcomes. Although in Section 5 we already showed that no single process model appears to be used, there are components to the process that appear to be generally regarded as vital.

Responses to the open-ended questions on management of group dynamics (Table S3, Supplementary Material, available online) identified steps that were basically about bridging. Most interviewees considered the search for complementarity to be the most important step; this shows that although participants are different, they may have compatible needs, even without realizing it. The intended results of this quest are mutual understanding between the participants and synergetic outcomes by connecting their needs. The other frequently mentioned step was the deconstruction of people's frames of thought (in line with the practical setting discussed in Section 5). This is the act of 'unfreezing' thought patterns, which is why the session is held in the first place. It also scored high on the fixed list.

The separation of positions and interests was most highly ranked on the fixed list. What people want is not important because that implies a chosen solution already and blocks discussion. Instead, what people need is important because it opens a discussion on how to satisfy those needs for several stakeholders at the same time.

Steps pertaining to sharing information that are considered important in the literature (Gruber et al., 1994: x; Innes, 1996: 461, 1998: 59, 2004: 12) scored low in our interviewees' rankings. The word 'information' seems to be understood here in the neutral sense of models and statistics. In an open-ended question we asked: 'Would it be possible to merely work with objective, scientifically based information in a session'; with one exception, they all answered no. Sessions should be about subjective experiences because these determine the varying social realities people construct and by what principle the participation processes are about. The reality of perceptions, emotions and feelings should be the core of the discussion; although these might change over time, in the process they should be dealt with as factual personal information for learning from each other, reaching mutual understanding and stimulating mutual knowledge construction. This is what Innes (1998: 58) called socially meaningful information.

The literature and the interviewees agreed that being persistent about the need to have an authentic dialogue with equality is an important value (Booher and Innes, 1999a: 13, 2002: 230, 2004: 419; Innes, 1996: 461, 1998: 59, 2004: 5). In an open-ended question, we asked the interviewees how they ensure that in a practical sense (Table 5). Most of them dismissed the need and the possibility of treating participants as equals. Intrinsically people are considered to be equal, but each participant has different experiences, interests, needs, responsibilities and roles. It would be harmful to deny that. Not every idea and interest is equally important, according to our interviewees. Differences in values and the importance of what participants represent must be accepted.

Nonetheless, a respectful discussion must and can be achieved. This goal can be helped by setting some rules of conduct (Gruber et al., 1994: 28 also mentions this) and having a session leader set the right example. There should be room for self-organization in this

Table 5. How does a session leader achieve 'respectful discussion' and 'authentic dialogue'?

Principle stated by most interviewees	Minority view
Although <i>individuals</i> may be equal, <i>organizations</i> have different levels of power and responsibilities. It would be unreal and even harmful to deny that.	People can and should discuss as equals during the session because of the way they are approached and the way their ideas are treated. Participants who are not open to revising their ideas should be removed or asked to adjust. The group's diversity in capacities and roles is an asset to creativity.
Make participants equal by giving people the opportunity to say what they want without judging their ideas as a session leader.	An informal atmosphere can prevent people from formal parties adopting their traditional roles. Making people visualize what is on their minds helps them feel safe and seen.
Use 'codes of respectful conduct' (either implicitly or explicitly) and enforce them if necessary.	Respect is more easily achieved than authenticity because authenticity may be less civilized.
When the session leader is genuinely respectful to all and polices undesirable behavior, the group will tend to be respectful as well.	
Although the structure of the session needs to be secure, session leaders should not interfere with the content of the discussion because it should be borne by the group alone. That propagates a sense of responsibility.	Even when the structure is open for discussion, most people are obedient. When the larger process has a strict schedule, the facilitator needs to be stricter.

discussion process when participants exhibit the need for it. Bearing responsibility for parts of the session is part of the process of appropriation that leads to participants taking responsibility and ownership toward the outcomes.

On the last point from Table 5, space for participants to determine themselves how the process should develop, Innes pleads strongly throughout her work to allow for self-management (Booher et al., 2007: 199; Booher and Innes, 1999a: 11, 2004: 428; Innes, 2004: 7). An interactive design session differs from the cases Innes refers to, but interviewees still said that responsibility for sessions' content needs to be borne by the participants. The facilitator should refrain from having too much influence on the content, otherwise the effects on the outcomes will be weaker. The structure of the session must be predefined, but the content should emerge primarily from the group process.

Conclusions

Interactive design sessions are a particular way of achieving the communicative planning ideal. They are especially geared toward achieving shared understanding in early stages of a planning process, unaffected by formal procedures. They are the *loci* that enable construction of a shared basis for collective action, in terms of substance but also socially in the form of trust and mutual respect. When confronting spatial challenges under

circumstances with many uncertainties and diffuse power, interactive design sessions may help parties find a direction.

We interviewed experienced design session leaders in the Netherlands to learn more about their ways of working. As in any research on planning practices, our material is therefore rooted in a specific cultural, political and institutional context that inevitably differs from other places. However, the basic circumstance in design sessions and Innes' texts on communicative planning is that there is relative equality and interdependence within groups of actors. Through shared understanding only they can orchestrate action. Our study shows what it takes concretely to manage the process of finding that shared understanding. This means that the practice studied here applies more widely to projects without one single dominant player that has the power to dictate what will happen. Outcomes thus would apply mainly to the planning cultures of Europe and North America but may be applicable in particular projects in other countries as well.

The interviews were designed to be juxtaposed with recommendations from Innes' work on collaborative planning, as well as the visioning literature, in order to validate, rank and further specify it. Despite the fact that every session is unique and every interviewee has a personal style, our systematic set of interviews did reveal a number of important lessons.

According to the interviewees, session leaders foremost are expected to bring leadership skills to the process, and to be analytical, creative listeners during session interactions (Section 4, Table 2). The analytical and creative skills are less prominently mentioned in Innes' texts. From the skills that Innes mentions and the interviewees recognize, interviewees say the three most important are: the ability to listen, ability to assure a safe and pleasant climate for discussion and being able to connect the people present in the session. Clearly, getting stakeholders to participate is not a solution, but just a prerequisite for an exchange of ideas that needs a skilled facilitator to effectively occur.

Dovetailing with Innes, but specifying it more concretely, is the outcome that session leaders should create a safe and relaxed atmosphere (Section 5, Table 3). They should properly brief the group and arrange a spacious and well-lit informal venue, preferably without any tables, in the area at stake. They can create the proper atmosphere and enable a genuine dialogue by being a welcoming host and providing food, drinks and breaks. In that dialogue, the session leader should be non-judgmental, genuinely give everybody equal attention, summarize and structure any input and enforce a basic code of conduct for respectful interaction.

Session participants should reflect the variety of interests in the area at stake, without necessarily having to include *every* stakeholder (Section 6, Table 4) – this principle honoured by the interviewees deviates from what Innes writes. Instead, interviewees choose to hand-pick the group members, balancing size, representation of interests and a diversity in personal styles. Governments (Table S1) should be included, but just as one of the participants, not placed above the others. Governments should stimulate the dialogue and be honest about legal and financial boundaries but refrain from dominating the substantial discussion. In order to persuade them to become involved (Table S2) interviewees emphasize personal features from the participants, such as attitude, flexibility, time availability and feeling safe to engage. Of the recommendations found in the literature, most highly ranked were that there should be clarity on their relation to the issue, the possibility of influencing decisions and autonomy during the session.

On the management of the interaction, interviewees emphasized connecting people and including all present in the discussion (Section 7, Table S3), which are additions to the present literature. They acknowledged the literature's mentioning of several principles, and ranked most highly the principle to detach people from problems, to create a

constructive attitude and reinventing the frames people bring to the process. Interestingly, interviewees did not think the availability of information to be as vital as the literature claims it to be. The interviewees also deviated from the literature in their ideas on authentic dialogue (Table 5). Equality is impossible because group members represent different organizations and interests – this should not be ignored but embedded constructively in a respectful atmosphere.

Our inventory sheds light on the Dutch practice of interactive design sessions and its logic. Although every session still needs to be tailor-made and based on practical wisdom and sensitivity to context, this study reveals recurring hands-on principles for organizing an effective dialogue and exploring solution space that expand and nuances current insights in the scholarly literature.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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