The Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI) has at its core a wealth of energy and experience that reaches across the disciplines involved in educational facilities. Its membership spans across international borders and generations of practitioners. The MAYFIELD project builds on the opportunities this offers through project based research activities that encourage the sharing of ideas, the researching of theory and the collaboration of minds. It is the aim of this article to locate the MAYFIELD project within current thinking on research and practice as a means of professional development. In doing so it is hoped that future MAYFIELD activities can be developed that promote the learning of the participants and strengthen the meaning of research in architectural, educational and management practice.

In order to discuss the possibilities of learning in practice, and the possibilities afforded by the MAYFIELD project, what is meant by learning must first be considered.

- Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
- Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.
- Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.
- Learning is the process of creating knowledge. (Kolb 1984)

This supports the notion that learning can also occur through practice, and that experience is a valid form of research. For those who are familiar with research and educational theory, this can be seen as action research and experiential learning. It is an approach that is often discussed in curriculum development and design of education for primary and secondary students, yet is one that can easily be applied to a professional learning context. In the MAYFIELD project, the learners are CEFPI members involved in the design and use of learning environments, and the action research is used to inform the design of these spaces and enable designers and users alike to better understand the opportunities, benefits and innovations that are possible. In 1948, Lewin, one of the founders of this way of thinking about research, considered that “research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (Lewin 1946). He regarded the process of research and knowledge creation as identical to the process of learning and problem solving in everyday situations. For the MAYFIELD participants, research enables the problem solving we face on a day-to-day basis to become an intrinsic part of our continual development and learning as professionals and practitioners. Critical to this process are the four stages of actual (or concrete) experience, reflection and observation, formulation of concepts and theory and testing these concepts in new situations (Zuber-Skerritt 1992). This cyclical process in turn leads to new experiences which can be used to further develop practice, as shown in figure 1 on the next page, and the two research based projects that have been coordinated by CEFPI Australasia can be found within this model.

The Young Professional Project 2006 and the MAYFIELD Project 2010

John Mayfield’s original concept for the Young Professionals Program was to engage younger professionals in a project based program that reflected the diversity of membership, topics
and approaches within CEFPI. It also provided an opportunity to develop mentor/partnerships with experienced professionals internationally. This culminated in the projects presented at the CEFPI Australasia Conference in Adelaide, South Australia in May 2006. The second project built on this framework but in a broader and more dynamic way. The idea was to develop this concept and name it after John Mayfield as a tribute to his contribution to CEFPI and his desire to keep people, especially young people, engaged in a learning process. It was literally on the back of a napkin that the idea of the five themes came up and at the CEFPI Australasia Conference in Perth, Western Australia in May 2010, the MAYFIELD projects were presented. For both programs the project commenced at least one year prior to the conferences, and the participants involved were rarely based in the same cities, or states.

The Young Professionals Project (YPP) had a clearly defined project based design focus and aimed to raise awareness of new ways to plan, design, deliver and manage community services for a life of learning. The participants were asked to investigate the benefits of lifelong learning in a developed Greenfield community and to respond to a specific brief, site and user group. Three groups were formed and over around 12 months, each developed a distinct and innovative approach. These were an interconnected learning centre; an evolving learning community; and a framework with a political focus that support reform in educational delivery at a policy level. Despite their differences each of the projects had tangible outcomes that involved the formulation of theories and the testing of these theories in the given scenario.

The MAYFIELD Project was the cornerstone of the Designing for Difference Conference in 2010. Fifty young professionals, with the assistance of experienced mentors, all from the fields of architecture, education and administration, investigated whether design makes a difference to learning. Their research, undertaken in teams, focused on one of the following topics – the learner; the community; the landscape; the curriculum and the learning environment. The project began in 2009 as the groups found their position within the broader themes, and developed a focus for their research. The aim of the project was to enhance knowledge of educational facility design and allow discussion and debate into future directions. Once again each group developed a distinctly different approach to develop theories within the allocated themes. Most of the research activity focused on their own concrete experiences and reflection which led to the development of concepts and theories. The activities at the conference were framed around this research and demonstrated the application of the concepts and encouraged delegates to reflect upon their own experiences and practices. The diversity of the presentations, which ranged from model
making, round table discussions, virtual discussion that crossed the globe and a garden of grass and flowers, reflected the variety of approaches to research and the broad approach taken within each of the themes. While the outcomes of these projects were less tangible than in 2006, the focus of sharing of experiences served to encourage all participants to look for opportunities for development in practice.

Reflections

It is important to note that both the Young Professional Project and the MAYFIELD project can only be considered as part of this process of experiential learning, and while the role of the research, reflective and conceptual activities is critical, success of the projects depend also on the mode of practices of the participants and their capacity to follow up through everyday situations. As Boud and Pascoe note, experience does not necessarily lead to meaningful learning (Boud and Pascoe 1978). Experience without reflection, generalisation, hypothesis formation and testing does not result in learning (Zuber-Skerritt 1992). This was echoed by participants of the 2010 MAYFIELD project, when asked to comment on their experiences leading up to and at the conference.

Many saw the opportunities for personal and professional development within the experience. As many of the participants were younger members of the professions, the MAYFIELD project offered an opportunity to question and challenge in a context that supports risk talking. This was seen as a critical element of the development of new and innovative theories. In addition, those who were part of the presentations and activities at the conference observed the potential for learning and even change in those who attended.

Lessons Learned

The MAYFIELD project, as an experience, achieved many of the aims and in some cases exceeded expectations. However, the response to the MAYFIELD project was at times mixed, and the format challenged delegates. Additionally, the logistics of a 12-18 month long project, which in many cases really took place in the 3-6 months immediately preceding the conference, was difficult. The challenges came mainly from engendering consistent commitment and participation from all members of the groups and providing sufficient guidance while encouraging exploration within the broad themes.

Following up after the conference, encouraging the testing of concepts in practice and continuing the share experiences was also a challenge, more so for the MAYFIELD project than the
YPP in 2006. When considering the model for experiential learning, this is not surprising, as the less tangible outcomes of the MAYFIELD project may have made it difficult for delegates and participants alike to test their theories.

However, some people involved had the opportunity to develop the theories further. Earlier this year, an activity similar to that of the Curriculum group was conducted in Singapore, this time involving students as well. The sharing of experiences enriched the discussion and many left with new ideas for current or planned building projects, in which it is hoped they can test their newly developed theories.

**Ideas for next time**

Plans are currently underway to include the MAYFIELD project in the 2012 CEFPI AUSTRALASIA Conference on the Gold Coast in 2012. Suggestions have been made on how to develop the MAYFIELD project and these are offered here as prompts or opportunities for the future. These reflect the experiential learning cycle, and could serve to continue the development of MAYFIELD in the long term.

“it would be good to not ‘reinvent’ the MAYFIELD project, but to continue where the previous year left off so delegates can be brought back into the buzz of excitement, see what has progressed, what has changed and furthermore, contribute to what they have done over the course of the year.” (PE)

“The challenge is to ensure that [we] don’t focus on the ‘too hards’ but embrace the ‘we can do it/give it a go’ mentality. After all, taking a risk is what we are all striving to do in our professional lives in developing new ways of doing things and learning from our mistakes and the Mayfield Project was a testament to this mentality.” (PI)

Given individual groups have had the opportunity to work and get to know each other … it would make sense to take things further …” (KB)

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**References**


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**Lara Mackintosh** has over 15 years experience as an architect working in the residential, retail and educational sectors. Her focus on educational facilities began as project architect at Taylor Robinson Architects when working on Harmony Primary School, a pilot ESD (Environmentally Sustainable Design) school for the West Australian Department of Education. This prompted her to return to full time study to complete a M.S. in Environmental Architecture at Murdoch University and a teaching position in the Department of Architecture and Interior Architecture at Curtin University in Perth. Now an academic, Lara has been able to develop a keen interest in teaching sustainability in architecture, bridging across the science and the design of architecture. Through her current research activities, in which the relationship between the built and natural environments is examined, the role of education and education environments has come to the fore. Her practice, viridis architecture, provides the opportunity to extend her role as sustainability and education consultant.