FEEDBACK ON OMNIBUS GROUP ASSIGNMENT

I have very much enjoyed reading the web pages that you created in your group assignments. It was good to see how well you had used the assignment to advance and apply ideas that had been introduced in the course.

I have read all of your postings and considered them in terms of the goals and assessment criteria laid out in the original assignment and the additional recommendations for improvements that I made in my email of November 18th following our discussion of the initial postings.

Below I provide some general feedback. It is based on reading at least twice the products created by each of the five groups. Drawing on this reading I indicate what would be the components and characteristics of stronger final products. While there were certain basics required, as specified in the assignment and elaborated during the course, I did not expect to necessarily find all of the elements of stronger creations in each group's posting. Rather the list of points indicates what I learned from being able to benefit from the varied approaches taken to the basics and your creative additions to them.

After the general feedback I provide comments specific to your group's final web pages along with the grade I assigned it. Comments on your class session and the grade for it are provided separately.

General Feedback

Although not divided into separate sections my comments below progress through three general topic areas: creating web pages; structuring an analytical report; and, content of the component sections of a strong analysis of sustainability planning.

Web Pages vs Hard Copy Papers
This is the first time that the products for Omnibus have been prepared as web pages. Given that most of you had not constructed web pages before or had had little experience in doing this, you are to be congratulated on all that you achieved. Writing for web pages and constructing web sites provide opportunities and challenges that are different from producing hard copy papers. However, in the case of the present analytical assignment they share similar basic requirements as discussed below. In varying degrees your sites demonstrate clear structure, ease in navigation, good use of hyperlinks and attractive presentation.

I was impressed at how quickly everyone was able to get started using Google Sites. It was my first time using this software; I usually use Dreamweaver. As we progressed in testing out Google Sites capabilities, its simple operation and capabilities were confirmed but also its limitations became evident. This led three groups to use different software for their final sites. My present inclination is to continue to use Google Sites as the start-up

software because of its gentle learning curve and the currently ongoing further development of it will likely reduce some of the limitations.

Using Hyperlinks and Structuring Pages
On a web page the ability to use hyperlinks to connect to other pages on and off the site is arguably its most powerful advantage over traditional papers that are presented and read in hard copy. Three aspects of this particularly struck me in reading your postings.

1. Layering Information
Being able to layer the information by placing it on different pages provides the potential to lead the reader's thinking steadily into more detail. It also gives the reader choices as to whether, when and to what depth to pursue further information. This also enables one to escape the strong linear progression that tends to be dominant in reading hard copy papers and creates potential options for deeper nesting.

At the same time these powers create the risk of losing the reader unless the navigation in the sidebar and on the page enables the reader to keep a clear sense of where they are in the hierarchy of the document and how to move around.

Most groups did a very good job in guiding me through their pages and the logic of their presentation. However, be conscious of how deeply nested and variously routed your links might be. I found I needed to use a numbering system in my notes in order to keep clear where I was in the main thread of your argument (e.g. on occasion I got down to 6.2.2.4.1).

2. Linking To Other Sites and Guidance
In addition to being able to connect to other pages on the site, links provide the opportunity to connect with other sites where there is additional information. This is a great way to provide the reader with the option of more detail. In the present assignment this was a potentially powerful way of capitalizing on the often extensive data and information that existed on the planning process that you were examining. Some groups could have made much more use of this.

When this linking was done for reasons more than just providing the reference, I found it particularly helpful when I was given guidance as to what I should be looking for when I followed the link. For example, if the link took me to a pdf of a report, directing me to what I should look at first or in particular, as opposed to puzzling as to what exactly I should find there, short of beginning to read the whole report.

3. Linking To References
Linking a reference to a list of sources and/or the actual document can be very powerful and is expected in this kind of analytical exercise. This is well exemplified in the approaches being taken in online journals. Most groups could have made more use of this approach including providing a consolidated bibliography or reference list that could be accessed from a link in the navigation bar (Below I say more about the use of referencing in general).

Titles of Pages and Sections
The words you chose to use for titles are critically important in providing clear guidance to the reader. Ideally they should provide unambiguous signals as to the content of what follows in the section beneath them. Ill-chosen words can create erroneous expectations and divert the reader from the argument you are seeking to advance.

The careful choice of words likewise applies to the terms used in your navigation bars. There should be unambiguous relationship between the wording used for page titles and the wording used in the navigation bars.

Most of your web sites could be improved in this regard and some significantly as you will see from my comments on them.

Constitutent Pages
There is no one correct way in which to define and organize the subject material of the constituent pages of the web site. They should, however, respond clearly to the assignment. Specifically you were asked to create an analytical framework and then use it in analyzing your chosen process as an example of sustainability planning. Further it was indicated that the analytical framework should include at least four basic parts:
- Governance Context
- Planning Models Employed
- Sustainability Planning Tools Used
- Sustainability Planning Approaches

Also you were encouraged to elaborate the framework further by drawing on ideas considered in the course and in ways that would be particularly relevant to your chosen planning process and focus within it.

Each of the groups established and applied an analytical framework, although not always as clearly, explicitly or fully as would be desirable. The stronger responses went further than others in developing their framework by drawing ideas from the course and a few incorporated relevant ideas by taking from literatures beyond those considered in Omnibus.

Giving an explanation of why and how you would address the components of the analytical framework was much more effective than just stating them. In most cases groups went on to use these to structure their discussion; it would be very effective to explicitly express them as questions and to elaborate them in terms of a series of sub-questions if relevant.

In the following paragraphs I list a number of the characteristics of the stronger responses, beginning with general points and then turning to specific sections of your reports.

Ordering the Major Sections of the Web Site

There is, in general, a set of topics that is conventionally expected to be covered in any research report containing an analysis. One generic way the topics can be listed is as follows:
- Introduction
- Analytical framework
- Methods
- Analysis
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- References

These topics can be developed in all kinds of ways and levels of detail and can be divided into several parts each. They don't have to be labeled by these particular words (and are best worded in ways reflecting the specific subject) but the sections do need to clearly carry out their intent and function in the report.

The topics are often presented in the above order because it has been found to be a good way in which to develop a clear understanding of what is the goal, how it is being pursued and what results from it. Sometimes, when the component subjects and approaches to their analysis differ, it is advantageous to present information on the analytical framework, methods and analysis separately for each research sub-question being addressed.

Often there is also a Summary, which might be placed at the end or the beginning of the document. And a consolidated list of References, usually placed at the end.

Although this general approach is usually employed in hard copy reports, it is just as relevant to a web page report on an analysis.

Here is a broad summary of the approaches that were taken by the groups:
- Most of your web sites included discussion of most of these topics but in many cases they could have been strengthened by addressing them more explicitly.
- Sometimes the nature of the topics was evident from the words in the navigation bar but not always.
- Some advantageously addressed the development of the Analytical Framework separately and before getting into its application.
- A few mixed development of the analytical framework and its application together, which is not easy for the reader to follow and detracts from the apparent rigour of the analysis.
- Most summarized the methods they employed but did not always discuss their strengths and weaknesses.
- In some cases the Methods discussion was put into an appendix, which works fine as long as there is a summary discussion of the methods in the body before they are being applied.

I now realize it would have been useful for me to discuss these particular issues and ideas in the class so as to help you in deciding how to design the content of your web sites. Not all groups had people in them who were experienced in how to organize an analytical report. I plan on covering this topic in any future classes where students are producing such products.

Much of what I have presented above (and address further below although only briefly) will be covered in SCARP's two research methods courses. Most textbooks on research methods discuss these issues of structure, analysis and content and other points relating to style, practice etc. For an example of one available in Google Books and whose Chapter 6 is relevant to the above discussion, see Writing Essays and Research Reports in the Social Sciences by Betz, Farquharson and Seitz (2005)
http://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&id=rbuCGdYIdLIC&dq=Writing+social+science+research+reports&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=TbQRWcWVwT&sig=7U4x36HTjvgPQ97JkeU-jlhEuyI&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result#PPA83,M1

Referencing
Throughout the report there is a need to provide appropriate references to indicate the literature that supports your development of ideas and assertion of facts. The general approach and the standards expected in this analytical exercise should be no different than you would employ in a hard copy paper. Online journals demonstrate how very well hyperlinking can be used to do this effectively on web pages. In general, the groups could have done more in referencing their texts and in providing a list of sources and/or connections to them.

Pictures, Figures and Tables
Most of the reports made good use of pictures, figures and tables to enhance and supplement the text. Insertion of appropriate pictures, maps and figures helped greatly in elaborating the discussion. The creation of diagrams to illustrate concepts and frameworks was particularly effective (e.g. variations on Campbell's triangle etc.). Some groups went to considerable trouble to obtain appropriate and high quality photographs.

Writing and Typos
In general the standard of writing was high with ideas being clearly communicated and concisely worded. In some sections of some sites ideas could have usefully been more fully developed (as mentioned further in the comments on analysis below).

Substantial efforts had clearly gone into most sites to ensure that there was consistency in styles and content when it had been generated individually by members of the group.

In a few places some of the pages contained a variety of typos and glitches. Very occasionally there was a rash of errors. Do proof read with care it is a great pity to detract with such apparent carelessness from otherwise excellent work.

Home Page (Introduction)
A strong home page would provide the following:

- A clear introduction to the subject of the site (i.e. the chosen planning process and your particular focus on it).
- Rationale for choice of focus and its benefits (could be elaborated in Analytical Framework).
- List goals and objectives of the analysis being undertaken on the web site.
- Be relatively concise and provide for further detail to be accessed by following links to additional pages in the text and in the adjacent navigation.
- Link to a summary is provided for ready access to overview of content and conclusions.
- Link to background information about the planning process you are studying. In most cases this was most appropriately one or more pages immediately following the Introduction and including information on its origins, history, timeline, contexts, governance, focus within it etc.
- Information available on who produced the site (i.e. identify group members).

Analytical Framework
A strong analytical framework appropriate to this assignment would include:
- A brief introduction to sustainability planning.
- Defining key terms
- Establishing your perspective on (i) sustainability and (ii) planning.
- Introduce ideas of what constitutes weak versus strong sustainability planning or some equivalent assessment measures.
- Developing a conceptual framework within which to analyse the sustainability planning process (i.e. in terms of governance context, planning models employed, sustainability planning tools used, sustainability planning approaches applied and other key components you add, such as stakeholder participation).
- Establishing a focal research question and breaking it down into component sub-questions.
- Referencing key literature sources for the ideas developed so as to put the research in context.

Methods
A strong outline of methods would include:
- A listing of methods used for addressing each of the research questions. In this instance this would likely include: information from web sites, reports, articles and books; and data from fieldwork and possibly some interviews.
- A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each method as employed.
- A statement about the strengths and weaknesses in your analysis and conclusions as a result.
- An identification of any ethical issues and how to handle them.

Analysis
A strong analysis would include:
- Clarity as to the sub-question being addressed in each sub-section.
- A clear distinction between presentation of data and drawing conclusions from it.
- Transparency about where the data or views or quotes come from.

- Maintaining clarity about what is someone else's views versus what are your own.
- Explicit declarations about any uncertainties relating to your conclusions and where they come from.
- Ending with a clear statement as to the conclusion you have reached with regard to the specific sub-question being addressed.
- Referencing sources throughout.

Conclusion

A strong conclusion would include:
- Response to sub questions and hence the overall research question.
- Wording conclusions as specifically as possible but being explicit as to how they have to be qualified because of weaknesses in your analysis.
- If you feel you are able, a set of recommendations relating to both the focus of your planning analysis and future research on the questions you have addressed.

Other Pages

Other pages that would make for a stronger web site in the context of the present assignment:
- A Summary of the Report.
- A Consolidated List of References.
- A Copy of the Groups Working Agreement.
- Copies of the Agenda and Notes from the Group's Working Meetings.
- Reflections by the Group on Its Experience in carrying Out the Assignment.