

Prethodno priopćenje

ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION ON A MICRO-LEVEL. FOCUSING ON REAL LIVING CONDITIONS AND THEIR SOCIOPOLITICAL EFFECTS IN NEIGHBOURHOODS

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Abstract

This article addresses the neighbourhood as a learning space. People live and learn in their own neighbourhoods and acquire space through learning. These processes can be informative for adult education in the context of understanding the contextualities of learning and spatial analysis elements. Through the methodological triangulation of walking interviews, accompanying observations, image analyses and interpretations of photographed places as well as expert interviews, processes are made visible and significant places and spaces are made accessible. This makes visible, for example, how spaces of perception and action are influenced and reflect sociopolitical aspects. Space is used not only to obtain information, but also for political issues that affect people's immediate lives, to organise themselves accordingly and to articulate demands.

Keywords: *adult and continuing education; democracy building; informal learning; learning and space; living environment; neighbourhood; participation.*

Introduction

“People do not live and learn in a vacuum; then, they die. They move in the fragrant, sounding, shining, tasting and tangible spaces of the living world: on streets, squares, and markets, in homes and workplaces, in halls, stadiums and discos. Factory halls and supermarkets, football pitches, streets, underground stations, and railway stations are places of learning” [translated] (Faulstich, 2013, p. 17).

As already indicated in the quote by Faulstich, there are many places of learning in which we move in everyday life. One of these is the neighbourhood as a nearby living environment. Looking at everyday places and daily routines can be informative in terms of understanding the contextualities of learning in noninstitutional spaces. Finally, adults acquire a large part of their knowledge and skills in informal learning settings. We also learn informally and incidentally

in everyday life. In adult education studies, empirical analysis of the everyday lives of adults is exceedingly rare, although it can be very informative.

The region [the space / the district / the neighbourhood] is to be seen as an interface of learning and educational spaces between politics and organisation. This makes the thematization and analysis of noninstitutional places of learning particularly interesting from an adult education perspective. Notably, traditional “adult education/further education [...] is still finding it somewhat difficult, as it is more group-orientated and geared towards traditional course structures” [translated] (Stang, 2016, p. 185). However, the challenge for educational institutions lies in addressing the needs of individual, location- and time-independent learning and using the current possibilities of space utilisation (Rohs, 2010). As a reaction to the already perceived changes in the needs and demands of learners, the current debate on learning venues is increasingly focused on cooperation and networking between institutionalised learning venues, as there is currently perceived pressure for change and institutions want to remain ‘viable’ (Brünner 2019). I therefore assume that the spatial context is a decisive factor for learning success and is internalised together with the acquisition of knowledge. Spatial issues are considered highly relevant for the understanding of adult learning as a whole and I assume that spatial theories convey ideas of the relationship between ‘people and space’ (Bollnow, 2010), which also have consequences for the construction of the objects of learning, education and subject (Ebner von Eschenbach & Ludwig, 2015).

Methodological Discussion: Exemplified by the Survey in a Neighbourhood of the City of Graz in Austria

In terms of spatial and learning theory, neighbourhoods can be interesting because, as the smallest urban units, they usually only comprise several blocks of houses. Neighbourhoods are constructed as such by the residents themselves, without any official boundaries. Neighbourhoods as a perceived, sociospatial and everyday category have grown historically and may have previously been villages or communities that merged with the urban space over time. This close living environment and the neighbourhood as a familiar space for people can provide exciting insights into people’s everyday routines and meanings and thus depict meaningful, noninstitutional learning spaces.

The survey in the neighbourhood named Floß-Lend in the city of Graz in Austria (Klement, 2024) focused on a mixed method approach, which included walking interviews, accompanying observations, image analyses and interpretations of photographed places as well as expert interviews. This approach made it possible to reconstructively visualise everyday spatial productions as well as the dimensions and contextualities of learning in the neighbourhood. With the proposed empirical model of method triangulation, access can be created to dimensions of learning in the context of the neighbourhood and units of analysis of the spatial reference, in particular (intended) space-related and space-constructing individual action. This opens up the possibility of contextualising the identification of spatial factors and analysing their significance and relevance in learning.

Walking interviews and accompanying observations as a method for surveying everyday spatial productions can be used to visualise noninstitutional learning spaces and learning potential (in the neighbourhood) (Evans & Jones, 2011; Kühl, 2016; Ahlrichs & Ehrström, 2024). The methodological concept makes it possible to visualise exemplary places from the everyday routines of the interviewees, such as places where they play and spend time, favourite places or areas of

fear, which were also photographed as part of the study. In the subsequent image analysis and interpretation, two essential elements of image interpretation were used to establish a link to the questions of learning and space. On the one hand, this was the question of WHAT, which can be used to describe what can be seen in the picture (learning object). In the second step, the question of HOW was asked, with which spatial contextualisation and connections can be described and dimensions of learning can be made visible (e.g., learning fields and topics, learning potentials and motives). The combination of the walking interviews, image analysis and interpretation with the notes from the accompanying observations, supplemented by expert interviews, made it possible to capture a holistic, realistic picture of the social world of people from the neighbourhood.

Some Reflexions on Social Learning Processes in the Neighbourhood

With the theoretical and empirical approach described, it is possible, among other things, to visualise dimensions of learning in the neighbourhood. At this point, I would like to cite three examples from the walking interviews from the survey in the Floß-Lend neighbourhood of the City of Graz in Austria (2021–2024) (Klement, 2024). Although these represent only a small aspect of the empirical model described and the findings, they can provide insight into social learning fields as examples. The names of the interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Dorothea has lived in the Floß-Lend neighbourhood for approximately 50 years, is between 70 and 79 years old and has already retired. At the beginning of the interview, she shared a concern with me: “The newspaper says that a Prince William from the Netherlands has bought the Schloßberg. It is normally a listed building. Why? Does Graz have such high debt that it has to be sold? I do not think so. The debts are purely political. Schloßberg has always been a landmark for the city of Graz. Everyone who came from abroad, the tourists, went to the Schloßberg” (Dorothea, L. 9–14) [translated and paraphrased].

It was only during the follow-up and further analysis of the interviews that I was able to understand where the worries came from. The content in question is a satirical production by the satirists Maschek, who used their voices to cover the visit of the Dutch royal couple Wilhelm-Alexander and Máxima to the current mayor of the city of Graz, Elke Kahr, in the programme “*Willkommen Österreich*” [translated: “*Welcome Austria*”]. Dorothea could not place the information and is therefore worried that the Schlossberg, the landmark of the city of Graz, is being sold.

Another sequence emerges from the conversation with Anthea. Anthea has lived in the Floß-Lend neighbourhood for approximately 31 years. She is between 60 and 69 years old and told with a smile on her face that she took part in a demonstration for the first time: “(...) This year was also the first time I went to a demonstration. It was about health and the whole system. It was fun, I liked it so much. It was on May 1st. (...) It was about the health system, rents and electricity [energy prices]. I have a friend at the health department. He wrote to us, and we obtained the Protest Sign from the health department. Then we marched. It was fun” (Anthea, L. 367–371) [translated and paraphrased].

According to the example of Anthea, the importance of local networks for social movements becomes apparent. She stands up for her own rights, demands change in the healthcare system and joins a group to change things at other levels, starting from the micro level.

In the following interview passage, Berta talks about the exchange on the tennis court from the club's perspective, referring to an event during the COVID-19 pandemic: "Of course, the coronavirus topic was exciting because we have a number of doctors and pharmacists there, some of whom, for example, do not get vaccinated. There are always discussions about this. However, especially those with a practical focus, such as pharmacists or doctors, are repeatedly asked for information. You could say that they give informal lectures. They simply provide information" (Berta, L. 101–106) [translated and paraphrased].

According to Berta in the previous interview sequence, informal talks by people at the tennis court, who are considered to have expertise in a particular area due to their professional affiliation, make it possible to obtain information, orientate themselves and acquire knowledge. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, it was possible to be close to healthcare professionals and obtain information while socialising on the tennis court. The experience that people have had with others on the tennis court creates trust, which means that people listen to each other's opinions and enter into dialogue. In the next interview excerpt, Berta describes the extent to which she learns through the social interaction process: "I have never been much of a social type. Not in the sense of antisocial but perhaps in terms of communication. However, I have certainly learned a lot. How to talk to people I barely know. In the past, when I met them, I would have exchanged maybe one sentence and no more. It works very well now. I am positive I have become more tolerant" (Berta, L. 118–123) [translated and paraphrased].

With respect to the tennis court, Berta talks about how she learns, develops, and changes through the process of social interaction on the one hand and through encounters with strangers and foreigners on the other hand. Berta's experience changes something. Berta learns in a social context and addresses the tolerance developed, the community, the acceptance of different opinions and approaches and the basic possibility of interaction.

Other examples from the survey include experiences with migration flows, understanding and tolerance towards other people and the opposite, accessibility of politicians and their proximity to the population, fears and concerns, and mobility and opportunities to acquire space.

Adult Learning and Education on a Micro Level: the Neighbourhood as a Space of Living and Learning

"The neighbourhood as a person's immediate living and learning environment can be informative regarding the contextualities of adult learning. Nevertheless, such a consideration is rare in the context of adult and continuing education" [translated] (Faulstich, 2013a, p. 19).

The question of space is highly relevant to understanding adult learning. The space in which people learn is far more than just a physical place. It influences learning processes, motivation, and the ability to absorb and apply knowledge sustainably. This is relevant, for example, in terms of ecological and social challenges accompanied by socioecological degeneration, which cannot be solely blamed on the climate crisis but also on existing inequalities and social injustices (see Vandenabeele et al., 2014; Lange, 2024; Stimm & Dinkelaker, 2024; Ahlrichs & Ehrström, 2024). Nevertheless, an empirically orientated consideration of living and learning spaces is not widespread in adult education.

However, dealing with space and the connection to learning is relevant for adult education because learning always takes place in space and time; i.e., in the sense of human learning, it cannot be considered independent of these factors. "Learning [is understood] as an independent

action of the learner, which also takes place relatively independently [of] classical teaching and specially designed places” [translated] (Ebner von Eschenbach & Ludwig, 2015, pp. 71–72). To grasp this, learning must be considered from the subject’s point of view.

On the basis of the relational understanding of space, “space [is understood] as a relational arrangement and/or order of living beings and social goods in places” (Lów 2019, p. 271). This means that, on the one hand, spaces define a social order, but on the other hand, spaces are also constituted by human actions. Space is thus conceived as a relationship between structure and action and includes both material conditions and subjective achievements (Kraus et al., 2015).

The following figure shows a possible approach to the relational (learning) space. Learning space is to be understood as a dynamic set of conditions, as I worked out in my dissertation and would like to illustrate and describe in more detail below (Klement, 2024):

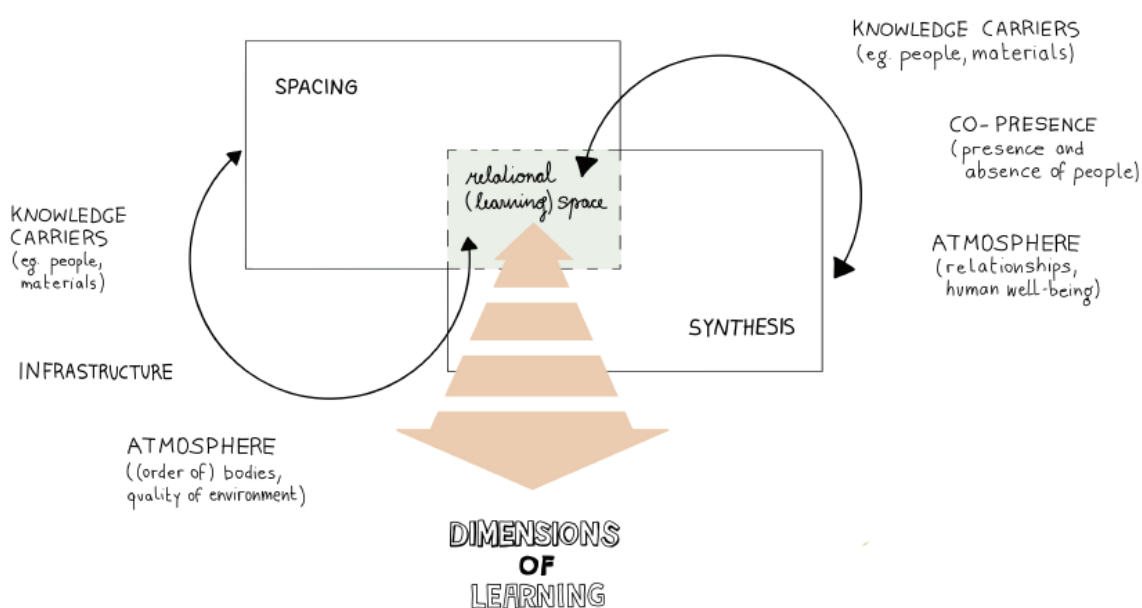


Figure 1. Dynamic conditional structure of a relational (learning) space (Klement, 2024 according to Kraus 2015; Lów 2019).

On the basis of a relational understanding of space (see Figure 1), I understand space as a pre-determined order in the sense of social structures on the one hand and as a consequence of human actions on the other hand (see Lów, 2019). Accordingly, space arises, on the one hand, from spacing, i.e., the placement of social goods and people (living beings) and the positioning of symbolic markers, and, on the other hand, from synthesis, i.e., the active linking of individual elements (Lów, 2019). If learning always takes place in space, then these two components are closely linked. Following Kraus (2010), I assume that learning space refers to a place and is created through the learning appropriation of space. Accordingly, I assume that we are always in places with our bodies, which is why place is seen as a specific, meaningful location shaped by human experiences and interactions. This approach shows that places are not just physical locations but also hold relational and epistemic value (see Creswell, 2014). Spaces can emerge from the combination of these components and thus refer to a rather abstract, universal concept. A space (e.g., in the sense of the space of the neighbourhood) can also contain several

places. Everyday places and ways in which these can be made visible in the neighbourhood can be understood as spatial constitutions, in which dimensions and contextualities of learning are made visible. From an educational perspective, a place becomes a place of learning when there is a suitable constellation of knowledge carriers (e.g., people, materials), co-presence (e.g., presence and absence of people), the atmosphere (e.g., (order of) bodies, quality of environment, relationships, and human well-being) and infrastructure (Kraus, 2015) that enable or disable human learning and influence the constitution of learning and learning processes. The complex construct of the learning space must be determined individually for each person in terms of its (learning) quality. If one person learns better in the presence of certain people, the opposite may be the case with another person. The question of (learning) space is highly relevant for learning success overall, and (learning) space is always social, processual, never finished and must be considered in its embedding as well as in its relationships of power and dependencies, historicity, structural principles (e.g., class and gender) and social structures (e.g., temporal, financial, political, spatial, etc.).

In terms of the spatial-theoretical approach described above, the neighbourhood can give rise to exciting aspects of adult learning. The close living environment and the neighbourhood as a familiar space for people can provide exciting insights into people's everyday routines and meanings and thus depict meaningful, noninstitutional learning spaces for them. It is therefore assumed that the neighbourhood harbours learning potential and learning opportunities. Different neighbourhoods can be characterised by different structures, spatial features and local conditions as well as rules and symbols. This microcosm, as I would like to call it, seems accordingly informative in a spatial and learning-theoretical examination of people's social realities. It is about the real-life realities of real people.

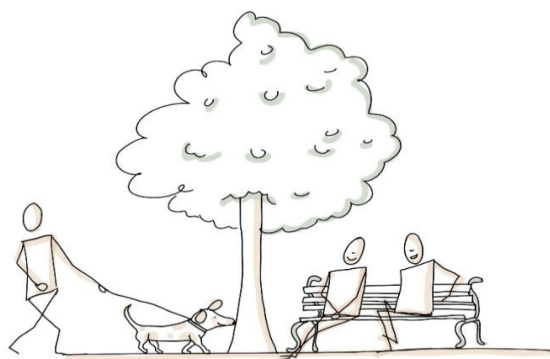


Figure 2. Learning in space - a dynamic set of conditions (Klement, 2024).

Figure 2 shows a situation that could take place in the neighbourhood as a nearby residential environment. It shows a person walking a dog on a lead, a tree and two people sitting on a park bench. Depending on what happens in the situation depicted, learning processes can be triggered. A person could be interested in dog breeds and ask about them, which could lead to a conversation about species-appropriate behaviour, the origin and special features of the dog. However, the dog could also relieve itself on the grass, after which the people sitting on the bench intervene and point out the rules in the city about leaving places clean and thus refer to the appropriate or desired behaviour. The three people could also get to know each other and exchange news and knowledge from their jobs or discuss travel destinations and expand their

geographical knowledge in the process. One of the people could be a botanist and give an informal talk about the tree, the structure, and its occurrence. The description of the possibilities can be used to illustrate theoretical derivations and elaborations in the context of learning and space, as I have attempted to do in Figure 1.

Conclusion

Focusing on real living conditions in the neighbourhood makes it possible to make real learning processes visible. Learning always takes place in space and time. The observation of learning potential in the microcosm of the neighbourhood and findings from this can be informative for fields of action in organisational, political, social, and other structures. According to a relational understanding, space is a given structure on the one hand and is influenced by human behaviour on the other hand. It is therefore about the relationships among several components, which can ultimately promote or inhibit learning in one's own neighbourhood. This means that spaces are not simply accepted as given but rather (re)produced as such through processes of imagination, perception, and memory. This linking performance is socially influenced and preconstructed by a range of factors, such as concepts of space, institutionalised spatial constructions, class-, gender- and culture-specific habitus and/or the historicity of the processes.

People's immediate living environment can be highly informative to capture and understand the contextualities of learning. The multimethod approach described in this paper (walking interviews, accompanying observations, photos and image analyses of places as well as expert interviews) helped create an image of people's social world as realistically as possible.

Excerpts from the interviews clearly demonstrate that the position of people in a space and their scope for action and learning opportunities are by no means the same. Spaces are accessible to people differently and they influence each other in many ways. Personal resources make it possible or impossible to process information adequately, as shown by the example of recognising satire as such and classifying it correctly. Considerations from a microperspective should also not be neglected in the context of political learning, as relationships at this level can also contribute to engagement and community building. Furthermore, the example of embedding in association structures highlights the extent to which resources can be opened and networks can be formed. The latter bears the potential to influence opinion-forming and the development of tolerance.

The provided examples suggest that adequate structures are needed to enable adults to actively participate in social processes. Initiatives in this direction must, for example, promote democratic legitimacy and justice and focus on the reproduction of power structures, political decision-making qualities, social movements, cultural dynamics and sociopolitical effects. Examining the contextualities of learning at a micro level can thus be informative for understanding the dynamics and dimensions of learning in a given context, capturing individual and social interactions as well as contextualisations of macro trends and connections between theory and practice.

Practices are needed to reintegrate people into the world in which they are living and further enable them to find orientation in a complex world. Adult education must enable political action and consider inequalities and distribution issues in the sense of democracy education.

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