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Public open spaces as arenas for learning: Informality, transformation, and the pedagogy of the unknowable

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Abstract

The paper examines public open spaces as sites of informal and transformative learning and engages with the frameworks of public pedagogy and the pedagogy of the unknowable. The study aims to understand how learning unfolds through unplanned, relational, affective and non-representational encounters with space, others and the self. Based on a qualitative case study conducted along the Path of Remembrance and Comradeship in Ljubljana (PATH), the paper analyses this urban memorial site as a multi-layered learning environment that evokes historical, symbolic and social dimensions. The findings suggest that such spaces not only harbour social interaction, but also actively shape reflective, critical and emotional learning processes that promote personal change and social awareness. By conceptualising the unknowable as a pedagogical condition, we foreground the unpredictability, openness and ambiguity inherent in learning in public open spaces and offer a conceptual rethinking of pedagogy beyond formal institutions.

Keywords: public open space, pedagogy of unknowable, informal learning, transformative learning, public pedagogy

Introduction

Learning is an integral part of everyday use of public open spaces, taking many forms, often unconsciously and unplanned. Users learn by observing, conversing, protesting, or simply moving through space. Because public open space is in principle open to all, it is a site of coexistence, action, and informal knowledge accumulation. Yet learning here is not only about positive experiences: public spaces can also be sites of exclusion, discomfort, and social tension, where inequalities of race, gender, age, and class are reproduced (Holland et al., 2007). Access to public space is never truly universal, and



marginalised groups frequently encounter hostility or invisibility within spaces ostensibly open to all (Madanipour, 2016). While this is not the central focus of this paper, it is an important part of the broader landscape within which informal learning unfolds.

Learning from everyday life is one of the most common types of learning in adulthood (Wright & Sandlin, 2017), and research has shown that this type of learning is complex and multifaceted, leading to similarly complex, diverse and multidimensional outcomes in different people's lives (Biesta et al., 2011; Thomas, 2017). Jarvis (2009a) states that learning takes place in a social context and through participation in everyday rituals and practices of being. Everyday interactions in public open space and interactions with various media and technologies can trigger learning that 'becomes the means by which we become ourselves, that encourages us to enrich our lives and makes us truly human' (Jarvis, 2009b, p. 14). According to Schugurensky (2000), informal learning includes three overlapping forms: self-directed learning (intentional and conscious), incidental learning (unintentional but conscious afterwards), and socialisation (neither intentional nor conscious), which differ mainly in their degree of intentionality and awareness. Informal learning can mediate between the cultural and civic spheres, between private and public life and between everyday learning and formal education (Grummell, 2010).

Public open space is a significant arena for public pedagogy (Charman & Dixon, 2021; Giroux, 2003), which explores how various factors influence the formation of individual identity, alter attitudes and values, and affect behaviour and learning. Public space, as a setting where public opinion is formed, exercised, changed, and developed (Habermas, 1996), and as a space marked by conflict and frustration where societal power and attitudes towards different social groups are expressed (Holland et al., 2007), serves as the site for various dimensions of public pedagogy, ranging from popular culture, art installations, and performances to dominant discourses and social activism.

In this paper, we address the topic of informal and transformative learning in public open spaces, where informal learning may serve as an entry point into transformative processes, although the latter is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Using the concept of the pedagogy of the unknowable (Ellsworth, 2005), a term Ellsworth coined to describe learning environments that resist fixed outcomes and instead open individuals to uncertainty, relational encounters, and the limits of what can be known, we explore learning and learning experiences in public open spaces and relate these to the concept of public pedagogy. One role of public pedagogy is to promote and enable spaces in which individuals develop their changing selves through various non-cognitive and non-representative events, processes and elements. We present the results of a qualitative study researching how informal or transformative learning takes place on the Path of Remembrance and Comradeship, a large public open space in Ljubljana, that also serves as a memorial to the occupation of Ljubljana during World War II, raising new dimensions, questions and perspectives on learning in public open spaces. In line with the thematic focus of this special issue on movement and transformation, we conceptualise the PATH as a transitional space in which physical movement enacts and mirrors inner processes of change. Walking the PATH is not merely locomotion but a form of spatial transit that opens possibilities for reflection, disorientation, and the gradual reconfiguration of meaning. In this sense, movement through space becomes both a metaphor and a mechanism for transformative processes.

Pedagogy of unknowable in the context of public open spaces

We conceptualise public pedagogy in public open spaces within the framework of Ellsworth's (2005) pedagogy of the unknowable, which invites us to understand learning not as a fixed or planned trajectory, but as a relational, spatial and affective process that unfolds in unpredictable ways. In this perspective, public space is not only the framework for pedagogical interventions but becomes pedagogy itself. The physical, symbolic and social characteristics of space function as a pedagogical dispositive that shapes perception, stimulates reflection and enables new forms of being and becoming. The space, architecture and artistic interventions act as catalysts for learning encounters that resist closure, do not aim for predefined outcomes and open participants up to uncertainty, contradiction and potential transformation. Ellsworth emphasises that learning in such environments does not follow a linear path but rather takes place in the in-between: in transitional spaces where participants experience a temporal and spatial pause – a pause between experience and interpretation. These in-between spaces offer individuals the time and space to interrupt familiar ways of knowing and relating to the world and to themselves. They create the conditions for profound reflection and a reconfiguration of identity, memory and social connectedness (Ellsworth, 2005). Importantly, learning takes place not only within the individual, but in the dynamic interplay between the internal affective landscapes and the material, spatial and symbolic conditions of the external world. This perspective introduces a spatial dimension into pedagogy, in which the inside and the outside are not opposites, but co-determine the learning process. Artists, performers, architects and activists often work with this dynamic by creating public installations, performative actions or spatial interventions that invite passers-by to take moments of pause, friction and reconsideration. As Walter and Earl (2017) argue, arts-based public pedagogies – particularly those situated in environmental and social contexts – serve to engage adults in critical, embodied and emotional forms of learning. These practices do not aim to teach content, but to create conditions for experiential encounters that promote awareness of ecological interdependence, social injustice or collective memory.

The unpredictability and relational nature of such learning is consistent with the principles of the pedagogy of the unknowable. Ellsworth (2005) argues that the most powerful pedagogical moments are those that invite users of public space – whether regular visitors, occasional passers-by, or those engaged in purposeful activity – to become learners through encounter. In public open spaces, the role of the learner is not assigned in advance but emerges situationally; it is the space itself, with its material, symbolic, and social dimensions, that activates the pedagogical relation (Charman & Dixon, 2021). Such encounters invite engagement with what they do not (yet) know – where the aim is not to arrive at a fixed meaning, but to relate to otherness: to others, to history, to public culture and to unfamiliar aspects of the self. These pedagogical encounters are often characterised by ambiguity, contradictions and tensions, which are not an obstacle to learning but are essential features of democratic and transformative processes. In this sense, learning in public space becomes a constant negotiation between familiarity and rupture, interiority and exteriority, stability and movement. According to Wildemeersch (2012), a public pedagogy that addresses such tensions can serve as a basis for democratic engagement precisely because it legitimises difference, plurality and conflict as pedagogically valuable.

By viewing public open space through the lens of the unknowable, we move beyond instrumental notions of pedagogy and recognise the transformative potential of everyday, unstructured, and emotional experiences. In this framework, public pedagogy does not

seek to educate through planned curricula, defined objectives, or credentialled outcomes (Biesta et al., 2011; Schugurensky, 2000), but instead aims to disrupt, provoke, and open possibilities for new understandings of the self, society, and the world.

Public open spaces as places for socialising and learning

Public open spaces bring together diverse communities and provide opportunities for socialising, exchange, and mutual learning (Kohn, 2004; Worpole & Knox, 2007). They serve both as places for building personal and communal identity and as arenas where that identity is expressed, tested, and sometimes contested (Mean & Tims, 2005). Public spaces can promote tolerance and solidarity through direct social contact and shared presence (Madanipour, 2016; Shaftoe, 2008). However, this potential is neither automatic nor universal. As Holland et al. (2007) note, public spaces are also sites of exclusion and social tension, where encounters with difference do not always lead to openness and may equally reinforce prejudice or discomfort. It is precisely this ambivalence that makes public open spaces pedagogically significant: they are not ideally harmonious communities, but complex social environments in which learning, conflict, and identity formation are intertwined.

If public space is understood as a space of appearance (Arendt, 1958), where individuals encounter a multitude of identities, become visible to one another, and act together, then its pedagogical character is inseparable from its public character. Learning in public open spaces is inherently self-initiated, ad hoc, and unpredictable; it unfolds without predefined goals, content, or programmes, and often goes unrecognised by those experiencing it (Jelenc Krašovec, 2015). As Ellsworth (2005) argues, public spaces function as a kind of autonomous teacher: their materiality, architecture, and symbolic layers convey messages, raise questions, and stimulate reflection that can, under certain conditions, become transformative.

The transformative potential of public open spaces

Transformative learning is a significant form of adult learning that also occurs in public open spaces. The concept was first systematically developed by Mezirow (2000), who defined it as a process of critically examining and revising taken-for-granted frames of reference – the assumptions, beliefs, and expectations through which individuals interpret their experiences. According to Mezirow, this process is typically triggered by a disorienting dilemma, an unexpected experience that unsettles existing meaning structures and prompts critical reflection and dialogue. If transformative learning is understood as learning that brings about a change in the learner's personality (Illeris, 2014), then public open spaces, with their openness and opportunities for action, encounters, and learning, can be seen as fertile ground for transformative learning in adulthood. Building on this foundation, Hoggan (2016) developed a typology of transformative learning outcomes based on an analysis of 206 academic articles. He identified six categories: (1) changes in worldview, (2) self-concept, (3) epistemology, (4) ontology, (5) knowledge, and (6) skills. He also offered a more holistic definition: 'Transformative learning refers to processes that lead to significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, understands and interacts with the world' (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71). Transformative learning is not guaranteed; it cannot be provoked or forced, but it can be encouraged through installations, performances, art, and interventions.

To explore how transformative learning takes place in public open spaces, we draw on three approaches to understanding transformative learning that analyse change at (1) the micro, (2) the meso, and (3) the macro level (Lange, 2019), and relate them to learning in public open spaces.

Change at the micro level (1) is primarily individual and draws on Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation. Through dialogue and critical self-reflection, individuals recognise how their perspectives shape their perceptions and emotional responses, leading to more open and reflective ways of engaging with the world. This approach emphasises intrapersonal change in worldview, self-perception, epistemology and skills (Hoggan, 2016). Public open spaces, through architecture, art, and installations, can trigger a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) that initiates such transformative processes.

The second approach emphasises transpersonal and organisational change at the meso level (2), drawing on Jung's depth psychology as applied to transformative learning by Boyd & Myers (1988) and further elaborated by Lange (2019). Rather than changes in cognitive structures, the focus here is on holistic personality change towards greater self-wholeness, extending to emotions, symbols, aesthetics, and imagination. Practices in public open spaces involving imagination, rhythm, and movement promote multidimensional learning that goes beyond the rational, allowing individuals to re-experience themselves through encounters with monuments, architecture, nature, and the symbolic layers of space. Conversely, highly saturated spaces can inhibit transpersonal change, highlighting the role of spatial design in supporting non-cognitive forms of learning.

The third approach promotes social change at the macro level (3) through consciousness-raising: individuals become aware of the economic, political, cultural, and technological structures that contribute to inequality and work towards changes that enable liberation at both personal and societal levels (Lange, 2019). This approach encourages 'naming the world' through a practice that combines action and reflection, disrupting established meanings and allowing individuals to re-examine social reality, consistent with Giroux's (2003) concept of critical public pedagogy. Public open spaces, as arenas of power struggles and marginalisation, can serve as sites for this kind of transformative engagement.

The PATH case study

The research problem addressed in this study arises from the limited understanding of how public open spaces support informal and transformative learning. While informal learning in everyday environments is widely recognised in educational theory, little is known about how this learning specifically unfolds in public open spaces. Even less often are these spaces explored as potential sites for transformative learning – learning that challenges existing assumptions, encourages critical reflection and leads to a shift in perspective. Building on this, the study draws on the concepts of public pedagogy and the pedagogy of the unknowable to better understand how public spaces can serve not only as physical and social environments, but also as open, unpredictable contexts for learning. Despite the growing theoretical interest in these pedagogical concepts, few empirical studies have explored how they are realised through the lived experiences of users in public open spaces.

In order to close this gap, the research was conducted within the framework of a qualitative research paradigm. We chose this approach because we wanted to gain a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives and uncover the meanings they ascribe to

their experiences in their natural context. The qualitative methodology allowed us to develop a holistic view of the phenomenon under study and to explore the processes and contextual dynamics involved (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2009). We conducted a case study as a form of qualitative research that enables in-depth exploration of a phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Starman, 2013). We chose this approach to gain a thorough understanding of a real-life phenomenon, as such understanding requires consideration of important contextual conditions (Yin, 2009). A case study provides comprehensive insight into complex social phenomena and contributes to understanding individuals, groups, organisations, and related social phenomena (Yin, 2009). There were two main reasons for its use: (1) case studies enable intensive and detailed analysis of a selected phenomenon, group, or process, making them suitable for research in education and andragogy (Yin, 2009); (2) case studies are also established in landscape architecture as an effective form of analysis, criticism, knowledge transfer, and as a record of the development of new insights in the field (Francis, 2001). As the public open space we are researching extends beyond purely social science and andragogical aspects and falls within urban planning and spatial management, the case study is an appropriate research strategy for understanding the use of space, user experiences, and related learning processes.

As a case study within a qualitative research paradigm, we researched and presented the Path of Remembrance and Comradeship, a public open space in Ljubljana. PATH is a monument to the city of Ljubljana, which was surrounded by a wire fence for 1,170 days during World War II. The PATH follows the route of this wire fence, is 34 km long, and encircles Ljubljana. Today, due to the expansion of the city, it winds through its neighbourhoods. This case was chosen because the PATH embodies all three key dimensions of public space as defined by Lehrer (2007): (a) physical public space – the PATH is a green public open space that connects Ljubljana as a green ring and is an important source of recreation and walks for the city's inhabitants; (b) social public space – on the PATH different people, friends, acquaintances and strangers meet, talk, socialise and integrate into the community; (c) symbolic public space – the PATH was created as a memorial to the occupation of Ljubljana during the Second World War and as such is inscribed in the collective memory of the citizens of Ljubljana and in the history of Slovenia. The strong interplay of all three dimensions makes the PATH an interesting example of a public space that was conceived with the clear intention of commemorating the occupation and promoting the spirit of brotherhood, comradeship and solidarity among the inhabitants, but which is subject to different attitudes, interpretations and interests towards this message, that change over time, and which is also subject to different uses. By focusing on this case, we wanted to explore how a single public open space can simultaneously fulfil multiple roles – functional, social and symbolic – within the urban and cultural fabric of a city.

In line with the qualitative case study approach, we formulated the following research questions: (1) How does the PATH influence informal and transformative learning? (2) How do users reflect on the learning experiences they have in the PATH? and (3) How do public pedagogy and the pedagogy of the unknowable manifest themselves on the PATH? These questions served as the basis for the design of the data collection and analysis procedures, which aimed to capture the lived experiences, narratives and reflections of the PATH users in their natural environment.

Selection of the research units and data collection

For the qualitative research, 24 people, 15 women and 9 men, aged between 15 and 90 were interviewed. We divided them into three age groups: 15-30 years (group 1), 31-60 years (group 2) and 61-90 years (group 3). We selected people who use the PATH either daily or a few times a month. We conducted a semi-structured interview with each respondent separately. The interviews took place in May and June 2021 and in March and April 2023 and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each. The interview protocol addressed four interrelated thematic areas: everyday use of the PATH (including forms, frequency, and purposes of engagement), experiences of social connectedness and community participation, identity-related meanings and reflections on heritage, and perceptions of learning and change. Attention was paid to participants' narratives about how their relationship with the PATH had developed over time, how they interpreted its historical and symbolic dimensions, and whether they noticed any changes in their understandings, attitudes, or practices. The questions were designed to progress from descriptive accounts of use to reflective articulation of meaning, allowing the identification of both informal learning practices and potential transformative processes. This structure allowed the exploration of learning not only as the acquisition of information, but also as relational, interpretative, and identity-related change.¹ Semi-structured interviews allowed us to ask additional questions and sub-questions, as well as to connect with the interviewee, their beliefs, and views, allowing us to obtain comprehensive answers and explore the problem in greater depth.

Participants in the youngest age group (15-30 years) were recruited through Zavod BOB, a youth organisation with a community space at the PATH, and through students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. The middle age group (31-60 years) was reached through public and non-governmental organisations. Older participants (61-90 years) were recruited via the Third Age University in Ljubljana and the Green Ring Ljubljana Association. In all cases, coordinators informed potential participants personally or by email.

Research methods and analysis

The text analysis method was used to process the collected material. The interviews were transcribed and edited for further processing. They were coded into different categories and codes. We used a combination of deductive and inductive coding. In the deductive approach, which we used to analyse transformative learning in a public open space, we prepared codes in advance, which we checked when analysing the data. We determined the codes in the transformative learning domain based on a typology of transformative learning outcomes (Hoggan, 2016). In analysing the informal learning, we used an inductive approach, characterised by the researcher determining the codes during the analysis of the text and therefore not preparing them in advance (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative analysis was conducted using MAXQDA, a computer programme for the systematic analysis and interpretation of qualitative texts.

Research ethics

The research was conducted in accordance with five principles of research ethics (Oliver, 2010): reflexivity, participant information and consent, harm prevention, respect for autonomy, and privacy and anonymity. Two key ethical challenges arose. First, many interviewees perceived the PATH primarily as a recreational area and were unaware of

its historical and symbolic dimensions. We addressed this with additional sub-questions, while avoiding excessive guidance that might have influenced their responses. Second, we remained attentive to researcher reflexivity, continually monitoring how our own values and expectations could influence data interpretation, to ensure rigour and trustworthiness in the research process.

Limitations of the research

One limitation is that the research was conducted in a largely recreational public open space with little organised content, making it difficult to identify informal and transformative learning, as most respondents were not aware of such learning. The findings are also limited to a single qualitative case study and cannot be generalised to all public open spaces or users. Further research could comparatively analyse spaces with different symbolic and historical layers, examine how spatial design and governance influence learning processes, and use longitudinal designs to assess the duration and stability of transformative effects.

Results and discussion

The findings are presented in two interrelated sections. The first addresses informal learning on the PATH, focusing on the forms and dynamics of learning that emerge through everyday use. The second examines transformative learning, tracing how these everyday experiences may, under certain conditions, develop into deeper shifts in meaning, identity, and social understanding.

Informal learning

Informal learning in public open spaces takes various forms, which in our study we examine through three analytically distinct but interrelated types: instrumental learning, mutual learning, and transformative learning (Duguid et al., 2013; Hoggan, 2016; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008). These three types constitute forms of informal learning as conceptualised by Schugurensky (2000), embedded in the everyday practices of PATH users. Although analytically distinct, they often overlap and reinforce each other in practice (Biesta et al., 2011; Jarvis, 2009a). We found that instrumental learning is most prominent on the PATH, consistent with research on informal learning in everyday and public open spaces (Biesta et al., 2011; Duguid et al., 2013; Jarvis, 2009a; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008), where opportunity-based, unplanned acquisition of knowledge and skills tends to predominate. Instrumental learning involves acquiring new knowledge, skills, and competences for immediate use in everyday life (Duguid et al., 2013). PATH users acquire new knowledge by listening to podcasts on social, political, musical, and cinematic topics, as well as learning the language. This type of learning was more frequently expressed by respondents aged 15 to 47. Instrumental learning on the PATH also occurs through conversations with others, which can provide new information – respondents reported gaining knowledge about raising, training, and caring for dogs, as well as cycling equipment, brands, and descending techniques. Instrumental learning on the PATH should therefore be understood primarily as a form of informal, opportunity-based learning focused on immediate use and everyday problem-solving, rather than being transformative in itself. However, such learning can serve as an entry point into transformative processes when newly acquired information is later integrated into broader

reflection and begins to alter how participants interpret the PATH, public space, or their own position within the urban and social environment. In these cases, what begins as the acquisition of content may develop into epistemological or worldview shifts in Hoggan's (2016) sense, as participants re-evaluate taken-for-granted assumptions and reconfigure meanings through experience and reflection.

Learning about your surroundings and Ljubljana itself is most evident when using the PATH. This learning and observation manifest in various ways:

1. **Perception of changes in Ljubljana.** While using the PATH, respondents observe the changes in the city itself, which they often express. They pay attention to new construction sites, new residential buildings and new neighbourhoods:

Often of course you get to know the place, you see the changes, you realise that there is construction going on, because there are new paths, new streets, new shops, that's also, the city is growing, there are also residential buildings, then you see the gardens that have been created, for a change from before. (Klara, 74)

Perceiving changes in Ljubljana involves more than empirically observing urban transformations; it represents a shift in the interpretation of space. Interviewees do not describe changes as neutral facts but situate them within the broader context of the city's development, neighbourhood expansion, and the transformation of the living environment. This interpretative dimension goes beyond instrumental learning and can be understood as a change in worldview, according to Hoggan's (2016) typology. The change is evident not only in increased attention to space but also in its resemantisation – the city is seen as a dynamic, historically and politically conditioned process, rather than merely the backdrop to everyday practices. The transformative moment is thus established in the transition from a self-evident perception of space to its reflexive interpretation.

2. **Getting to know other neighbourhoods of Ljubljana and finding their way around the city.** As the PATH runs through the whole of Ljubljana, the interviewees can orient themselves and see the entire city:

Yes, it's very cool, because the first time I went round the whole circle, I felt a bit of that connectedness. How the different parts of Ljubljana are connected, where they are, because I have a very poor geographical idea. On the one hand, to see, oh, okay, it's next to this, this part of Ljubljana, and on the other hand, to know how small it is, that it's not big if you can walk around it in a hike like this. (Ema, 35)

The interviewees began to understand the city as a whole and no longer perceived Ljubljana as a confined space, but as a dynamic and connected environment, indicating changes in epistemology (Hoggan, 2016) related to how individuals transform their understanding of space and geography.

3. **Getting to know the PATH.** The interviewees not only got to know the city, but also the specific PATH, which they mentioned to a lesser extent. Primož explored the PATH by discovering bunkers and pillars. He found old maps of the PATH in the archives of the National University Library and used them to search for and inventory the bunkers and pillars that remained on the PATH.

We found that the PATH, located within the city, encourages reflection on the space (planning, layout, placement) and on Ljubljana, as well as on the perception of the space.

4. **Learning and observing nature.** The respondents most frequently stated that the PATH offers them opportunities to learn about plants and animals, observe nature and the changing seasons, and experience how agriculture changes along the PATH: ‘Well, my partner told me about ragweed last time and how it’s invasive, and I found out about it by accident because it grows right next to the PATH.’ (Tinkara, 29)

Here again, we can draw a connection with Hoggan’s typology, specifically changes in epistemology, as users began to understand their relationship with nature and the environment differently. This shift is key to changes in behaviour and the recognition of natural elements.

The diversity of informal learning practices on the PATH can be further clarified using Biesta et al.’s (2011) four metaphors of learning: acquisition (gaining knowledge through observation, conversation, or media use), participation (involvement in collective activities connected to the PATH), construction (interpreting experiences and integrating them into personal meaning-making), and becoming (the gradual formation of identity through long-term engagement). While these metaphors clarify the layered nature of users’ practices, analysis of whether and how such processes develop into deeper shifts remains grounded in Hoggan’s (2016) typology.

In analysing mutual learning on the PATH, we found that it extends beyond simple information exchange and emerges as a relational process in which ways of understanding oneself and others are reconfigured. Mutual learning, as defined by Mündel and Schugurensky (2008), was evident through conversations with acquaintances, friends, family members, intergenerational exchanges, and spontaneous interactions with passers-by. It was particularly noticeable among members of the second and third age groups, who reported conversations that led to a deeper understanding of others and the formation of new social bonds. Dialogues on everyday topics, upbringing, life experiences, and social issues fostered openness to diverse perspectives and reduced stereotypes. Conversations with parents and grandchildren, as well as reflections prompted by photographs used as narrative stimuli, further deepened intergenerational understanding and facilitated a transition from individual reflection to shared meaning-making.

Such processes can be interpreted through the lens of Hoggan’s (2016) typology of transformative learning. Within mutual interactions, not only is content exchanged, but epistemological assumptions about what counts as relevant knowledge and how such knowledge is legitimised in relation to others are also reconfigured. In some cases, changes in behaviour occur, as greater openness and acceptance of plurality lead to different forms of communication and collaboration. Mutual learning thus serves as a bridge between micro-level reflection and potential macro-level effects, with social interaction acting as a catalyst for transformative shifts.

Transformative learning

Transformative learning was also observed on the PATH. We examined the latter based on Hoggan’s (2016) typology of transformative learning and linked the identified four categories of transformative learning with three approaches to transformative learning that analyse change at the micro (1), meso (2), and macro (3) levels (Lange, 2019). While Hoggan’s (2016) typology identifies six categories of transformative learning outcomes, the empirical analysis revealed changes in four of these: changes in worldview, changes in self-concept, changes in epistemology, and changes in behaviour. Changes in ontology

and knowledge/skills were not empirically substantiated in the data and are therefore not discussed further.

1. **Change at the micro level.** Transformative learning occurs at the micro level for most respondents. The PATH serves as a space for self-reflection, where users evaluate their feelings, engage in internal dialogue, and process personal challenges. Changes in self-understanding are particularly evident – respondents reflect on and revise their own perspectives, which influence their perceptions, actions, and emotions:

Sometimes, when I feel I'm not doing well and that something needs to change, I push myself to go to the PATH. I don't think so much about the nature around me, but about what is bothering me at that moment – whether it's a relationship or something I need to do. (Jaka, 33)

Changes in epistemology are reflected in the critical evaluation of prior knowledge regarding PATH and public spaces more broadly:

Ever since I started attending the programme about the city at the Third Age University, I have learned a great deal and become aware of how important public space is in every such place; that a certain public space is needed for people, that it improves the quality of life and opportunities for socialising. (Neja, 70)

Transformative learning is also evident in how users reinterpret their earlier experiences of the PATH considering new knowledge and personal maturation. Childhood memories of the PATH often serve as a lens through which adults now view it, and it is this tension between past and present understanding that, following Mezirow (2000), forms the basis for transformative shifts in meaning:

When I was young, I thought: pfft, some old people fixing up a path. Pointless, why would you want to remember those things. But as the years go by, you mature, and the more you mature, the more you see that history matters, that historical monuments – that monuments are not just there for nothing, that they have a character, a kind of narrative power. And in the end, you also understand why some people tear monuments down; because they want to deny a history that actually happened. Over the years, my relationship with the PATH has become increasingly positive, more and more meaningful [...]. (Luka, 71)

These shifts in meaning, from unreflective familiarity to critical historical awareness, exemplify what Ellsworth (2005) describes as the pedagogy of the unknowable in action: an encounter with space that opens rather than resolves, leaving the user in productive tension with what they thought they knew.

2. **Changes at the meso-level.** These changes reveal a more holistic experience of the self. We found that the specificity (sand, tranquillity, promenade, simplicity) and predictability of the PATH enabled participants to move beyond the physical and connect with both the living and non-living world. Some participants connect with nature – with the sounds, colours and smells around them – and enter the spiritual dimension of space and self. The path allows them to be still, to experience the interconnectedness of space, body, and feeling, and to find a space for contemplation. Participants said they do not need to focus on the PATH because it is well maintained and predictable, allowing them to detach from external factors and immerse themselves in their inner world. The PATH thus facilitates that dimension of public education which Ellsworth (2005) calls the

education of the unknowable: it allows users to reflect on and question their feelings, emotions and thoughts. It also enables people to reach inside themselves, connect with the non-physical world, experience themselves through nature, sounds, and smells, and enter in-between spaces.

The PATH is an opportunity, especially when you go alone, to get to know yourself. An opportunity to reflect a little, to look at whether you have done something wrong, to think about yourself and your own experience of yourself, your family, and ultimately society. You do a kind of personal inventory. (Neja, 70)

- 3. Change at the macro level.** This concerns the willingness to work for social change and awareness of other social structures. It is most evident in the case of Neja (70), who combined the knowledge acquired in the programme Places, Streets and Buildings Around Us at the Third Age University with her own experiences and activities in public open spaces and joined the residents' campaign. Together, they worked to stop the planned development of public green spaces in the Murgle neighbourhood.

We all received a protest letter that we as residents had written – the Municipality of Ljubljana wanted to sell off a small parking area in the Murgle neighbourhood for development, and people are against it. I personally notice this in Murgle, that every available space is earmarked for construction. Space that was previously public is being privatised, and people are not happy about it. (Neja, 70)

Transformative learning is evident here in behavioural changes reflected in social action and in changes to existing practices based on critical evaluation. Furthermore, we found that the interviewees are aware of the struggle between two ideological currents in the Slovenian context, which is also reflected in the PATH. They recognise that the PATH is a space of social, political, and cultural conflict due to its historical background. This evaluation of different social structures is discussed in relation to changes in their worldview. By reflecting on the political conflict that is central to the PATH, interviewees became aware of these societal tensions, defined themselves in relation to them, and considered what we should take as a society to overcome them.

The fact remains that Ljubljana was occupied, surrounded by wire, and that this path was established in memory of that wire. [...] I see it as part of the real history of Ljubljana, which for me has no direct connection to left-leaning or right-leaning people, or whether it was communist, anti-religious, or anti-right-wing. (Luka, 71)

Such moments of political disorientation, in which users encounter competing historical narratives without resolution, correspond precisely to Ellsworth's (2005) concept of pedagogical encounters that resist closure and invite ongoing negotiation of meaning.

If the transformative effects identified on the PATH are situated within the interrelation of micro, meso, and macro levels, their uneven intensity becomes apparent. The most frequent shifts occur at the micro level, where changes manifest in processes of self-reflection, revision of meanings, and reconfiguration of personal interpretations of space. PATH users often describe altered perceptions of the city, nature, and their own position within the environment, corresponding to Hoggan's (2016) categories of changes in worldview and self-understanding. At the meso level, these shifts extend into the relational dimension, encompassing a heightened sense of connectedness, experiences of community, and transformation of epistemological assumptions regarding the significance of public space, heritage, and nature. The macro level, which involves explicit social action or political engagement, appears less frequently; however, it is

empirically substantiated in cases of participation in civic initiatives and voluntary activities. Such a distribution supports Hoggan's (2016) assertion that transformative processes are neither linear nor uniformly distributed, but are contingent upon contextual conditions, biographical trajectories, and individuals' readiness to act.

Transformative learning on the PATH is best understood as a situated process in which individual meaning-making is shaped through encounters with others and the symbolic-material layers of space. Users' reflections are articulated and negotiated in relational settings that enable mutual learning and the gradual reconfiguration of social understandings. Hoggan's (2016) typology provides an analytically coherent lens for tracing these transitions across changes in worldview, self-understanding, epistemology, and behaviour.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that the PATH functions as a multilayered public open space for learning, where informal and transformative forms of learning intertwine. Learning on the PATH may manifest as the instrumental acquisition of knowledge, while also opening possibilities for deeper shifts in understanding of the self, space, and social relations. Transformative effects are neither automatic nor universal; rather, they are situationally and relationally conditioned. They depend on individuals' biographical experiences, current life circumstances, moods, interests, encounters with others, material elements of the space, and the symbolic meanings mediated by the PATH. Learning is therefore unpredictable, uncertain, and both personally and socially conditioned; it is not necessarily positive, pleasant, or oriented towards immediate and visible change. The findings were interpreted through Hoggan's typology of transformative learning, which enabled an analytical differentiation between changes in worldview, self-understanding, epistemology, and behaviour. The results suggest that transformative effects on the PATH most frequently emerge at the micro and meso levels, while shifts at the macro level are less common, yet empirically discernible in instances of social engagement.

Analysis of users' reflections confirms that the PATH is not merely recreational infrastructure, but a space of meaning-making where individual memories intertwine with collective narratives, historical significations, and ideological tensions. Learning is constituted both as inner dialogue and as an intersubjective process in relation to others. The PATH creates possibilities for dialogue, shared coexistence, and engagement with a plurality of identities. In this sense, it fosters disruption of taken-for-granted identity positions and enables acceptance of diverse opinions, beliefs, and life practices as a condition of communal living.

The findings support the understanding of the PATH as a site of public pedagogy, where learning emerges in public and through publicness: in embodied experience of movement, in observation, in encounters with others, and in engagement with the symbolic and material layers of space. At the same time, elements of the pedagogy of the unknowable are confirmed, as the PATH opens transitional spaces in which educational encounters remain open and their outcomes uncertain. Within these transitional spaces, users encounter their own emotions, memories, values, and social structures – not necessarily with the aim of transforming their identities, but with the possibility of illuminating, problematising, and situating them relationally with others. In this way, the study contributes to understanding how public open spaces may influence informal and transformative learning, and how users reflect on their learning experiences within everyday practices. It further confirms that public pedagogy and the pedagogy of the

unknowable manifest on the PATH through unpredictable, relational, and multilayered processes of making sense of space and self.

Based on the research findings, several orientations for the planning, governance, and pedagogical use of public open spaces can be identified. For urban planners and spatial designers, the results show that the quality of public space is not solely a matter of aesthetic or functional design, but also of its pedagogical and social dimensions. Spaces that provide safety, accessibility, and predictability, while also offering symbolic depth and opportunities for encounter, create conditions conducive to reflection, mutual learning, and potentially transformative experiences. However, the findings caution that the transformative potential of space depends on modes of governance, the degree of openness to diverse groups, and the possibility for multiple meanings and uses to coexist within it.

For educators, the results confirm that public open spaces can serve as extended learning environments where informal, mutual, and transformative learning intersect. Integrating such spaces into formal and non-formal educational programmes may strengthen reflection, intergenerational learning, and the connection between individual experiences and broader social issues. The pedagogical use of public spaces requires sensitivity to their symbolic dimension and to the plurality of users' experiences, as it is within this plurality that conditions for transformation and critical reflection emerge.

For policymakers, the study highlights the significance of public open spaces as infrastructural supports for social cohesion, democratic culture, and lifelong learning. Investment in high-quality, accessible, and symbolically rich public spaces is not merely an urbanistic decision, but a strategic investment in social capital and active citizenship. Policies that support the preservation of the public character of space and the inclusion of communities in decision-making can help ensure that public spaces become genuine arenas of learning and social reflection, protected from excessive commercialisation or enclosure.

Notes

- ¹ In the broader research project, we also examined how public open spaces contribute to social cohesion within the community, how users engage with the PATH in their daily activities, and how they assess its social and symbolic value. This article focuses exclusively on the findings related to learning processes on the PATH.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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