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The pedagogical cocoon: Spatiotemporal dimensions of emancipatory learning in adult education

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Abstract

*Drawing on research into processes of individual emancipation in adult education, we examine how training may support transformative processes by establishing its own spatiotemporal dimension and bring into dialogue how French-speaking authors conceptualise emancipation, particularly within autoformation¹. Training can operate as a secured spatiotemporal cocoon, aiding in regaining life control through transformative learning and anthropoformation. The study focusing on adults resuming higher education suggests utilising Galvani's concept of *kairos*², Pineau's *schizo-chrony*, and Alhadeff-Jones's rhythmic approaches that emancipation addresses both spatial ('Where is my place?') and temporal ('What is my time?') questions. Within this secured spatiotemporal cocoon, learners reflect on experiences, addressing Mezirow's 'disorienting dilemma' and benefit from the gift of *epoché*. Engaging with training's rhythmic patterns, they redefine their present, constructing futures. We contend that educators' role involves supporting transformation and emancipation while creating, maintaining, and defending this spatiotemporal cocoon. How might educators safeguard this transformative space?*

Keywords: emancipation, transition, experience, spatiotemporal dimension, transformative learning

Introduction

Space, time, and rhythm structure adult learning processes in higher education, particularly in contexts marked by societal transformation and professional mobility.

Recent scholarship has examined how learning unfolds through negotiated temporalities and evolving rhythms. For instance, in her editorial introduction to a special issue dedicated to *Time and Temporalities in (Adult) Education and Learning*, Schmidt-Lauff (2023) positions time and temporality as central analytical categories for



understanding adult education and learning and highlights the diversification of time-related approaches currently shaping the research agenda. Similarly, Impola (2023) argues that conventional, linear temporal frameworks and their accelerative pressures significantly influence how pedagogical action unfolds in higher education, with important implications for how students and educators experience time and rhythm in learning processes. Taken together, these contributions suggest the relevance of examining how specific educational configurations may create particular spatiotemporal conditions for learning. However, most of these contributions are published in English, and key French authors addressing these dimensions remain less visible beyond francophone contexts (with the notable exception of Alhadeff-Jones (2017, 2019), who contributed to making French-speaking authors more visible). Beyond the language barrier, there is also the difficulty of faithfully rendering all the meanings and nuances of some concepts.

This article therefore pursues a dual objective: to contribute to research on the spatial and temporal dimensions of adult education and to introduce central concepts developed within the French tradition of *autoformation*. More specifically, it seeks to examine how formal adult education settings may constitute distinct spatiotemporal configurations that shape the conditions under which transformative and emancipatory processes can occur.

Within this framework, we ask: How might the spatiotemporal dimensions of training, understood as a secured cocoon, enable processes of emancipation among adults in higher education? This question builds on a tension between, on the one hand, the tendency to consider educational settings as given environments, and, on the other, the need to understand how their specific spatial, temporal, and rhythmic structuring may actively support or constrain emancipation. To address this question, the analysis focuses on the temporal and experiential dynamics through which such conditions are established and sustained.

Drawing primarily on Pineau (2000, 2003), Galvani (2005, 2011, 2020), Mezirow (1978), and Alhadeff-Jones (2017, 2019), we argue that training may establish a bounded spatiotemporal configuration that makes suspension, critical inquiry, and temporal re-articulation possible, thereby supporting processes of emancipation. In this perspective, the notion of a ‘cocoon’ does not refer simply to a protected space, but to a deliberately structured spatiotemporal environment whose rhythms and boundaries create the conditions for reflective and transformative engagement.

The article first situates adult education within contemporary debates on transition and temporality, then develops the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, and finally examines empirical material drawn from adults returning to higher education.

Adult education, adulthood, and transition

While the broader study sought to understand emancipation dynamics among adults returning to higher education (Balayn Lelong, 2024), the present article focuses specifically on the spatial and temporal dimensions of training within this emancipatory process, with particular attention to how these dimensions shape the conditions under which emancipation may occur. More specifically, it asks how the spatiotemporal configuration of training may support or hinder processes of emancipation in contexts of adult transition.

In this section, we argue that an adult in training may be understood as an adult in transition.

This perspective makes it possible to articulate the temporal tensions that characterise this condition and to examine how training may establish a distinct

spatiotemporal configuration that supports such transitions. This framing highlights a tension between, on the one hand, the instability and uncertainty inherent in transitional experiences and, on the other, the structuring role that training environments may play in supporting these processes.

Drawing on Boutinet's (2020) work on adult life as movement and transition and engaging with Anderson et al.'s (2006) presentation of Schlossberg's transition theory and Pesce's (2011) respective analyses of transition and crisis, we approach transition as a potential site of transformation.

In *Psychologie de la vie d'adulte*, Boutinet (2020) underscores the difficulty of defining adulthood as a stable state. The term 'adult' initially designated an intermediate state between childhood and old age, characterised by acquired maturity and adherence to social norms. With the generalisation of lifelong learning, adulthood gains what Boutinet describes as an 'unexpected diffusion'. The adult is now conceived as a subject to be trained 'according to an appropriate methodology' (Boutinet, 2020, p. 14, author's translation).

However, in the context of late modern societal transformations, adulthood is no longer approached as a model to be attained but as 'in perspective', that is, as an open-ended condition continually redefined. Boutinet distinguishes legal majority from the sociological understanding of adulthood and argues that individuals position themselves as 'more or less adult' depending on contexts of recognition, activity, and social belonging. This formulation suggests that adulthood is not a fixed age category but a relational and situational position, one that may shift across different temporal and social settings.

Expanding on this idea, Boutinet adds to the three traditional indicators of adulthood – chronological age, developmental tasks, and psychological maturity – the dimensions of social recognition and identity, emphasising that adulthood depends not only on age but on how one is recognised and positions oneself within institutional, professional, and generational contexts.

These contexts include workplace hierarchies, university settings, paths departing from normative age expectations, and the social norms that define what it means to be 'on time' in one's life course.

For Boutinet, adulthood, defined as 'a construct' and as 'a process marked by instability' (Boutinet, 2020, p. 55), is defined by existential questioning and by the search for coherence within one's life path, an ongoing effort to relate past, present, and future within a meaningful temporal narrative.

Because maturity, understood as a guarantee of autonomy and self-realisation through crises, remains provisional, continually exposed to reconfiguration through unforeseen events, this societal destabilisation, combined with increasing individualisation, 'confirms the adult state as one of perpetual change' (Boutinet, 2020, p. 23).

Nonetheless, this mobility is ambivalent, as the adult 'fears it as much as he desires it'.

Boutinet observes that contemporary environments 'push individuals to innovate, to change, to continually renew themselves' (Boutinet, 2020, p. 51).

At the same time, this need for change may give rise to experiences of disengagement or disorientation.

He thus distinguishes between subjective mobility, sought as a way of escaping stagnation, and objective mobility imposed or limited by external conditions.

Although employment stability may appear as a priority for adults in this framework, this discussion raises a more precise question: how can training be understood not merely as

a response to instability, but as a transitional context structured by specific spatial and temporal conditions?

Within his framework, ‘crisis’ designates an experience of existential uncertainty arising from external situations or internal tensions. It disrupts linear time and introduces temporal discontinuities that call for reconfiguration. When a crisis is worked through, he states that it may support a renewed form of autonomy; when it is not, forms of balance may nevertheless re-emerge, but in more precarious configurations. In this perspective, transition has a spatial dimension, as adults are required to construct a path composed of successive stages. Boutinet also emphasises its temporal extension, defining transition as a process of passage that organises an experience of rupture within a continuum and whose realisation depends on conditions (Boutinet, 2020). He argues that temporality is not reducible to measured time but refers to the ways individuals and groups organise and signify their relation to past, present, and future. He further emphasises that contemporary societies are structured by a plurality of temporalities whose rhythms intersect personal paths and institutional frameworks.

To clarify this transitional context, we now turn to Anderson et al. (2006)’s presentation of Schlossberg’s transition theory and to Pesce’s (2011) interpretation of crisis as *krisis*.

In this respect, crisis may be understood either as emerging from underlying tensions, as Pesce suggests, or as triggered by specific events or non-events, in line with Schlossberg’s framework of transitions. Reopened through its Greek origin, *krisis* designates a temporally bounded moment of discernment (Pesce, 2011), described as the time of decision. In this sense, crisis is not only disruption but also a decisive temporal juncture in which interpretation and action become inseparable. Transition therefore involves multiple intertwined temporalities.

In this perspective, our research examines what precedes entry into training, that cannot be reduced to a response to crisis understood as an imposed transition resulting from the painful loss of stability. Rather than functioning merely as a solution to transition, it may constitute a transitional context in which normative frameworks are questioned.

On this basis, the article addresses the following research questions: how do the spatial and temporal dimensions of training shape the conditions under which emancipation may occur among adults returning to higher education, and how does training function as a transitional context that supports or constrains processes of emancipation?

This section introduces the theoretical framework structuring the analysis of adult emancipation in higher education.

Autoformation as emancipatory education

Building on Boutinet’s (2020) understanding of adulthood as a non-linear and unstable process, individual emancipation is examined here through Pineau’s (2003) framework of *autoformation* and, within this same tradition, through its existential elaboration in the work of Galvani (2005, 2011, 2020). We approach training as an emancipatory process through two perspectives that are epistemologically close yet geographically distant: Mezirow’s (1978) work in the American context and Pineau’s (2000, 2003) contribution within the French field of adult education. Although these contributions emerge from different scholarly contexts, they converge around a common set of dynamics. We therefore organise the framework around these dynamics, suspension, inquiry, temporal

organisation, and identity tension, so that their articulations can be read across traditions. We begin with the dynamics of suspension that structure formative experience.

Within the French tradition of *autoformation* in adult education, Pineau (2003) conceptualises training as a formative process enacted by the subject within lived experience and temporality. He situates this process within a broader framework he calls *anthropoformation* through which human beings are continuously formed across their lives through their relations to self, others, and environment; training (*formation*) is therefore not confined to institutional learning but constitutes an ongoing anthropological and temporal process.

In this sense, a training course may be understood as a particular moment within this broader process: one that temporarily concentrates and makes perceptible formative dynamics that are usually dispersed within ordinary life. He describes autoformation as occurring in ‘two times and three movements’ (Pineau, 2003, p. 38, author’s translation), which he mobilises to structure the formative process. This dynamic is explained by Pineau (1986) and further detailed by Alhadeff-Jones (2017). The ‘three movements’ designate hetero-formation (formation received from others and institutions), eco-formation (formation shaped by the environment and context), and auto-formation, through which the subject appropriates and reorganises these formative influences. The ‘two times’ refer to an alternation within the formative process. A first time corresponds to formal and collective engagement: participation in organised training, interaction with others, and the practical enactment of learning. A second time corresponds to reflective withdrawal: a moment of digestion, distancing, and critical reworking of experience. Pineau metaphorically associates these two modalities with diurnal and nocturnal times – not as literal chronological periods, but as alternating modes within the learning process. Emancipation emerges through the alternation of these times and movements and designates the effort – often described by Pineau (2003) as a struggle – through which the subject reinterprets lived experience and progressively reclaims authorship over their own formative path.

Extending this analysis of formation as an alternation of times and movements, Pineau (2000) further examines the temporal conditions under which such processes unfold, leading him to conceptualise schizo-chrony as a way of accounting for the fragmentation of temporal experience.

He distinguishes three levels at which such temporal cleavages may occur. These correspond respectively to macro-time (metaphysical), micro-time (biological), and meso-time (personal). First, macro-time cleavage refers to the loss of synchronisation between institutional dating systems and broader existential temporalities, where chronological frameworks regulate schedules without aligning with lived experience. Second, micro-time cleavage concerns the disruption of organic and embodied rhythms, whereby internalised time pressure and rigid scheduling norms distance individuals from their own biological temporalities. Third, meso-time cleavage affects the construction of personal time, where standardised temporal measures destabilise the articulation of past, present, and future and may render lived time experienced as imposed (Pineau, 2000). Schizo-chrony thus designates a fragmentation of temporal coherence shaping contemporary adult paths.

Building on Pineau’s framework of *autoformation*, Galvani further develops this framework through the notion of existential *autoformation* (2005, 2011, 2020). While grounded in Pineau’s articulation of ‘two times and three movements’, his work places greater emphasis on the lived intensity of formative experience. Through this process, the subject engages in a suspension of egocentrism – that is, a shift in perspective through which habitual interpretations are temporarily suspended and experience can be perceived

differently. Galvani explicitly relates this suspension to the phenomenological concept of *epoché*. He writes that ‘awareness of experience depends on the capacity to suspend the egocentric utilitarian intentionality that dominates our relations to others, to things, and to ourselves’ (Galvani, 2011, p. 65, author’s translation). In this sense, suspension does not mean withdrawal from reality but a temporary bracketing of habitual judgements and utilitarian orientations. This understanding resonates with Husserl’s formulation of the phenomenological *epoché* as the methodological suspension of the ‘natural attitude’, that is, the bracketing of judgements concerning the spatiotemporal existence of the world, without denying it (Husserl, 1982).

Galvani defines existential *autoformation* as the process through which individuals become conscious of the formative forces shaping their existence and actively reinterpret their lived experience. It involves a reflexive reworking of one’s relation to self, others, and environment, made possible through moments in which experience becomes particularly intense and meaningful, what he names *kairos*. He describes this process as operating as ‘ternary dynamics’ (Galvani, 2020, p. 85) meaning that formation always unfolds through three interconnected relations: relation to oneself, relation to others, and relation to the natural environment. Existential *autoformation* therefore does not proceed in a linear manner but through a reflexive engagement with these three relational poles.

Galvani further clarifies that this dynamic unfolds across three levels of reality: practical, symbolic, and epistemic, referring respectively to action and interaction, meaning and representation, and understanding and reflection. Within this process, the self navigates between ‘two antagonistic logics’ (Galvani, 2020, pp. 66-67) based on Ricœur’s (1990) definition of *idem* and *ipse*. The first corresponds to permanence over time or identity as sameness. The second is related to selfhood, the capacity to remain oneself through change and to respond authentically to one’s situation. Existential *autoformation* unfolds within the tension between these two logics, where continuity and transformation must be held together rather than opposed. In this sense, suspension constitutes the formative condition that makes reflexive reworking of lived experience possible. This condition can also be approached through transformative learning theory, where disruption initiates a process of critical inquiry and perspective change, as also noted by Alhadeff-Jones (2017).

Within the American context, Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning provides a complementary perspective on emancipation. Drawing on his study of women returning to higher education (1978), he identifies a process of perspective transformation initiated by a disorienting dilemma and unfolding through critical reflection on previously unexamined assumptions. This process involves a ‘critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions’ (Mezirow, 1978, p. 100) leading to the exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions. Emancipation, in this sense, corresponds to a reappropriation of one’s life through the revision of meaning perspectives. Training here corresponds to what Galvani described earlier as a time of suspension. This active suspension delays decisions (Pesce, 2011) and enables the problematisation of the disorienting dilemma, the first step of the transformative learning process.

Fabre (2006) explains that this shift moves a situation from merely ‘problematic’ (posing problems) to ‘problematised’ (raising critical questions) (Fabre, 2006, p. 29, author’s translation). Problematisation, he argues, requires more than awareness; it involves critical re-examination and sometimes the invention of new conditions.

However, while Mezirow describes the phases of transformation, less attention is given to the spatiotemporal conditions that allow such reflection to occur. It is precisely this dimension that the notion of the secured spatiotemporal cocoon seeks to illuminate.

If Mezirow describes the phases of perspective transformation, Alhadeff-Jones allows us to conceptualise the temporal dynamics through which such transformation becomes possible.

He conceptualises training from a processual perspective, defining process as ‘a complex set of occurrences having a temporal coherence that manifests itself through an organised sequence of events’ (Alhadeff-Jones, 2018, p. 22). This processual and rhythmological perspective foregrounds the dynamic organisation of experience, through which transformation unfolds via repetitions and discontinuities rather than linear progression. Grounded in rhythmanalysis, this perspective understands lived time through patterns, periodicities, and variations. Emancipation may be understood as emerging through the repetition and transformation of such patterns over time, as individuals progressively reconfigure their ways of acting, thinking, and feeling within and across situations. These patterns are not confined to formal educational settings but unfold within broader biographical movements, suggesting that the ‘cocoon’ of training may be sustained through its own rhythmicity. This rhythmological approach resonates with Pineau’s (2000) notion of schizo-chrony as explained above. Alhadeff-Jones thus provides a framework for analysing how such temporal fragmentations unfold and may be re-articulated in educational contexts.

From a rhythmological perspective, this spatiotemporal suspension intervenes within existing temporal arrangements, creating conditions in which personal temporalities may be re-examined and potentially re-synchronised.

These temporal dynamics ultimately affect the subject’s relation to identity and continuity. In this sense, the re-examination of personal temporality reactivates the tension between *idem* and *ipse*, requiring the subject to negotiate continuity and transformation. In this perspective, our research considers the training course as a secured spatiotemporal cocoon that enables the alternation of formative times and movements described by Pineau (2003) and the processes of suspension and reflexive reworking of lived experience articulated by Galvani (2005, 2011, 2020). The course creates conditions under which habitual roles and temporal pressures may be partially suspended, enabling participants to understand, question, and reinterpret their lived experience. In this article, emancipation is understood as a process of reflexive reconfiguration of lived experience made possible through a spatiotemporal suspension that enables *epoché*, perspective transformation, and a renewed situated capacity to act. This section addresses the question of how training, understood as a spatiotemporal configuration, creates the conditions under which processes of emancipation may occur.

Methodological approach: An inquiry based on *kairos*

This article draws on doctoral research examining emancipation and identity-building in adult learning (Balayn Lelong, 2024). The inquiry was conducted within higher education and centred on adults who resumed their studies during their professional paths. The methodological framework relies on the study of *autoformation kairos*, developed by Galvani (2005, 2011, 2020). Originally designed as a workshop, this methodological approach named the *atelier des kairos* was adapted into a one-on-one interview format in order to explore the emancipatory dynamics embedded in individual paths while maintaining its phenomenological foundations.

The objective was to examine the articulation between intensive lived moments and training, bringing to light dynamics that often remain implicit in adult transitions. The method was thus mobilised to unveil how meaning emerges through reflexive narration within the temporal and institutional frame of higher education. The present article

focuses specifically on the spatiotemporal dimension of these dynamics and asks how training, understood as a spatiotemporal configuration, creates the conditions under which processes of emancipation may occur.

The study involved seven adults (five women and two men, aged between 30 and 55) who entered a higher education programme during their professional path. Enrolment in the programme was grounded in their own professional and personal initiative. Participants had accumulated substantial professional experience prior to returning to education. They temporarily interrupted their professional activity, thereby engaging in a significant reconfiguration of their temporal and professional commitments. As explained in our broader study (Balayn Lelong, 2024), while the group presents some demographic variation, the main bias lies in the fact that participants volunteered to take part in a study on emancipation through training. As such, the study is based on individuals who completed the process and were able to reflect on it as an experience of emancipation.

Higher education here constitutes a specific institutional and temporal configuration. Entering such programmes as an adult entails engaging with academic rhythms, expectations, and symbolic structures shaping both experience and interpretation. It is within this institutional framework that participants articulated and reflected upon their intensive moments of experience. The limited number of participants reflects the in-depth orientation of the inquiry, which enables a detailed understanding of how emancipation processes are articulated within the spatiotemporal configuration of higher education.

Data was collected through seven individual interviews, following a precise and stable protocol, based on our adaptation of Galvani's (2020) *atelier des kairos*. The first stage consisted of a reflexive return to experience. Participants were invited to enter a contemplative posture, described as 'entering and staying in one's own bubble', and to trust their associative memory. We introduced the opening of 'doors of memory' redesigned in accordance with the research focus on training and orientated toward moments occurring before, during, and after the return to higher education.

As decisive or intensive moments emerged, participants wrote a few words to anchor each moment in awareness and establish a list of potential *kairos* and then selected the most significant moment to explore. The narration followed a phenomenological orientation: each sentence began with 'I remember', prioritising the description of lived experience over abstract representation.

Throughout the narration, we facilitated phenomenological revival using the clarifying interview technique developed by Vermersch (2006). Our interventions focused on action, gesture, perception, bodily sensation, and the unfolding of the situation. The emphasis remained on the progression of the experience itself. While the protocol provided a clear structure, follow-up and probing interventions were adjusted *in situ* according to the dynamics of each interview, requiring a disciplined and experienced interview posture.

On average, three *kairos* were shared per interview. Following the descriptive phase, a reflexive moment was introduced during which participants articulated their emerging understanding of these key moments and their perceived impact on their personal and professional path.

The same procedural pattern was applied across all interviews. Each of them lasted approximately one hour, was audio-recorded, and was fully transcribed prior to analysis.

The analytical procedure combined a transversal and an individual approach. Following transcription, all interviews were first subjected to a transversal analysis in order to identify recurrent patterns, discursive regularities, and shared configurations in the articulation of participants' return to higher education. This initial stage involved

thematic coding inspired by Bardin's (2013) content analysis, enabling the identification of common motifs, temporal markers, and recurring narrative structures across the corpus.

Beyond this first level of organisation, the material was examined through discourse analysis informed by Maingueneau's (2024) perspective. Attention was paid to enunciative positioning, narrative construction, and the way participants configured their experience within specific temporal and spatial frames. This analysis sought to remain as close as possible to the internal coherence of each discourse, taking seriously the reality constructed through language.

Each interview was analysed individually through a hermeneutic reading inspired by the comprehensive interview approach of Kaufmann (2011), consistent with a broader hermeneutic epistemological orientation. This level of analysis aimed to interpret how processes of emancipation emerged within the articulated experience and how meaning was progressively constructed in relation to training.

Even if our purpose is not to entirely describe the interviews or the *atelier des kairos*, we would like to highlight several points. The first is the pleasure of adopting a hermeneutic approach as a method of inquiry while accompanying the subject and attending their understanding of their path. It is the researcher's privilege to witness these moments arise, sometimes unexpectedly even for the main actor. Similarly, we support and facilitate critical reflection in order to allow the subject to give birth to the sense and meaning of their own life: the maieutic approach offers the researcher a vicarious satisfaction akin to that of a midwife. This means that participants do not leave empty-handed, as they articulate their own experience. As Kaufmann (2011) has explored motivations for responding to a scientific interview, our findings suggest that within this specific methodological configuration, the interview itself may participate in processes of emancipation (Balayn Lelong, 2021). This positioning clarifies the epistemological horizon of the inquiry. The interview is conceived as a structured, rigorous space in which experience is made explicit, narrated, and interpreted. The methodological discipline described above ensures that this reflexive process remains anchored in lived experience while allowing the emergence of meaning within the spatiotemporal configuration of higher education.

Analysis: The spatiotemporal configuration of training

Our analysis examines how, from a spatiotemporal perspective, training as a transitional experience becomes an emancipatory process when understood as a cocoon with its own space and time.

The analysis draws on all interviews, which consistently highlight the spatiotemporal specificity of training, described as a protected environment and a temporal experience set apart from ordinary rhythms. In several accounts, training is experienced as a period that 'does not count' (not subtracted from ordinary time). These descriptions are anchored in concrete situations and spaces, suggesting that the spatiotemporal configuration of training is experienced materially and subjectively. We choose to foreground Bianca's account, as it is particularly developed and explicit and provides a salient illustration of these dynamics.

Experiencing the spatiotemporal specificity of training

Her narrative especially illustrates how these dynamics unfold. She chose to return to study at a business school while holding her first position as a lawyer. While training could respond to existential questions, it also addresses issues of temporality. Initially,

alienation raised a spatial question: ‘What is my place?’ But Bianca introduced a temporal one: ‘What is my time? Where is my time?’ She referred to the feeling of being ‘out of time’ particularly before training. She lamented being a young person ‘stuck with old people’ at work and traced this gap back to her initial training: ‘At 25, I was already a lawyer, younger than my classmates.’ She expressed temporal concerns: ‘Very young, I found myself stuck in a job’, ‘decades older colleagues’, ‘more than 4 years older than me’.

These tensions resonate with Pineau’s concept of schizo-chrony, understood as a fragmentation of temporal rhythms affecting the construction of personal time, as illustrated by Bianca being ‘out of time’. Such fragmentation may generate an ‘unhappy consciousness’ (Pineau, 2000, p. 32), when past, present, and future cannot be lived coherently.

Bianca’s narrative renders this temporal tension visible in lived experience. Her references to age (‘I can’t take being treated like someone in second grade!’) show that she did not seek to live as young or old but to define her own pace. In her account, emancipation appears as the possibility of choosing the moment for change and creating distance from imposed rhythms.

Training functions as a cocoon with its own temporality, allowing her to recalibrate to her own rhythm, as described as ‘a sort of bubble of additional time’. This ‘year offered’ suggests that the period of training was experienced as time set apart from ordinary temporal pressures.

The effects of this recalibration become visible afterwards. In her final *kairos*, she describes a suspended time of ‘both freedom and security’, stating: ‘I could either return to my old job or choose something new’ as she is not ‘in the urge to take the decision now’.

Alhadeff-Jones’ processual perspective clarifies what is at stake in this experience by conceptualising training as an unfolding process structured by rhythms, repetitions, and discontinuities.

While participants do not explicitly refer to ‘rhythms’, their *kairos* can be understood as emerging within different temporal organisations structuring their experience of training. On one hand, training is organised through institutional temporal frameworks, such as modules, scheduled evaluations, or defined durations, which structure progression over time. For instance, one participant describes that the training ‘was arranged through successive modules,’ while several *kairos* occurred at key institutional moments, such as thesis defences (for two participants) or assessments (for two others). On the other hand, participants describe a lived temporality characterised by hesitation, exploration, and progressive emergence. As noted above, Bianca refers to the training period as a ‘bubble’, while another participant explains that she entered the programme unconvinced of its relevance and remained hesitant for a long time. Similarly, another describes her experience as a form of ‘trial and error’, progressively exploring possible directions. Some accounts emphasise moments of slowing down while others highlight interruptions, uncertainty, or the need to test and explore before reaching clarity. Here, one participant explicitly states that she ‘decided to take the time’. These experiences point to tensions between institutional temporal structures and personal temporalities, as individuals navigate between imposed schedules and their own rhythms of engagement. For instance, one participant explained how difficult it was to find a time and space at home, outside the formal training setting, where she could concentrate. In this sense, the temporality of training may be understood as a dynamic organisation of experience, in which repetition, interruption, and transformation coexist.

In this study, the temporality of training was initially approached in simple terms: ‘before, during, and after.’ From a processual perspective, movement takes precedence over sequence, and training takes place within a temporality distinct from ordinary rhythms. Through this lens, meso-time schizo-chrony, as described by Pineau (2000), can be understood as being reconfigured. In training, individuals re-tune their personal temporality through an ongoing process of recalibration, as Bianca’s experience illustrates.

Through her narration, she makes visible how training and emancipation become intertwined. In her account, lived time appears as a fabric of interwoven dimensions – professional position, age, institutional expectations, and personal aspiration – each carrying its own rhythm, coordinated differently, as training enables a redefinition of her present and the opening of future choices. It is perceived as a space where ordinary rhythms are set at a distance, allowing participants to reconnect with their own rhythms and reorient their paths.

Spatially, it becomes like a refuge: a place to pause, rest, and reassemble oneself, to remember and transform, and sometimes even to redirect one’s life. This refuge is not only metaphorical but takes shape in concrete configurations. For instance, one participant describes a training session organised in a circle, where ‘everyone sees each other’, creating a space that facilitates openness and engagement. Another evokes working in her basement, deliberately withdrawing from the rest of the household in order to concentrate. These configurations illustrate how the ‘cocoon’ of training supports reflection, withdrawal, or confrontation, made possible by the material existence of a specific and dedicated space.

These spatial settings are closely intertwined with the temporal experience of training, shaping how participants experience time, suspension, and transformation.

This transformation is so internalised that it appears implicitly and in specific moments that function as turning points within the training process: one participant mentioned an event that occurred ‘before the change’, understood as ‘before training’; another said she was ready for ‘change’ before enrolling; a third explained the impact of training while discussing her diploma defence: ‘It’s the return to my life, which either stays the same if I fail or changes if I pass’.

Other moments occur during the process itself: Bianca explains that during an accounting exam she found ‘difficult’ and ‘pointless’. she realised that she did not need to master accounting because she was ‘really a jurist’, while another describes a moment of realisation when the trainer portrayed ‘the professional (she) wanted to become’.

Thus, in these narratives, training appears as a period of suspended decision regarding one’s path, structured by moments that function as temporal condensations in which reflection, decision, and transformation converge. One interviewee explained, ‘It’s one year, so afterwards we’ll see. It gave me a one-year objective.’ Training is experienced as a temporal bracket within which the future remains open and undecided. This period is also described as protected. One participant insisted on testifying at the very end of the interview: ‘There’s an aspect that is very personal. By resuming my studies, I regained a student life I no longer had. I was with people much younger than me, and this kind of bohemian, student-like lifestyle, this fun between students, was enriching and refreshing in the context I was in.’ The weight of professional and personal responsibilities is temporarily set aside for light and joyful concerns (‘Tomorrow I go to school; I have to prepare my school bag and pencil case.’) Furthermore, participants expressed how training offers a chance to reconnect with meaning.

As three of the participants said, this rupture of space and time is ‘lived and received as a gift’. They adapt to what training makes available. The existential goal shifts: rather

than building a future as in initial training, it becomes a matter of reshaping it; rather than searching for oneself, it involves finding oneself again. Because this project is often difficult to formulate and legitimise, once accepted, its implementation appears less overwhelming, as one participant noted: 'It's just a bit of organisation, nothing major.'

In this perspective, *epoché* redirects thought by temporarily setting aside habitual assumptions. This active suspension, described by participants as a suspended or protected time, delays decisions and allows the destabilising situation to be progressively problematised. As Fabre (2006) suggests, such a shift transforms a situation from merely problematic into one that can be critically examined and reconfigured. In the interviews, the existential question underlying the destabilising situation becomes progressively articulated and assumed.

One explained that she realised that 'At the end of the day, the barriers that prevent us from doing what we want, we are the ones who put them there.' She described what happened during the training: 'Here I am! I am in my place now!' Similarly, another participant, who had struggled to find a professional direction, said that while observing the trainer at work she had 'a revelation': 'Now I know exactly the professional I want to become.'

In such moments, the destabilising situation is reinterpreted. The suspension created by training allows participants to reframe constraints, reposition themselves, and articulate a renewed sense of direction.

The spatial and temporal paradox of adult learning

These phenomena are reinforced by the specificity of adult learning in higher education, which we describe as a spatial and temporal paradox of continuing education. As adult students, individuals experience two temporal dimensions simultaneously. Continuing education allows them to return to spaces and rhythms associated with initial training – same places, similar institutional settings, comparable academic rhythms. Yet the pedagogical orientation differs. In this sense, adult learning constitutes a reflective time grounded in prior experience.

On one hand, age-based hierarchies are temporarily suspended: adults sit again in student classrooms and eat in university cafeterias, rediscovering a sense of beginning. On the other hand, the entire learning process relies on their maturity and prior experience, without which access to training would not be possible (particularly in contexts of recognition of prior experiential learning).

This duality produces a temporal overlap. Participants described feeling both 'back in initial training' and grounded in a professional past that did not exist at that earlier stage of life. Physically present in spaces often associated with youth, they remain psychologically anchored in adulthood, or maturity. Several spoke of losing temporal markers, such as feeling 'out of time', being out of sync with others, or no longer knowing how to situate themselves in relation to their age or professional stage, or experiencing the coexistence of different life periods at once.

This sensation reflects a shift from linear, measured time toward a lived temporality reclaimed as one's own. In such moments of *kairos*, the present is experienced as decisive and integrated as a transformative phase within one's process of *autoformation*. In this way, training can create a space for reflection and understanding of experience. It may open the possibility of inventing a new rhythm, a personal temporality. Continuing education inherently acknowledges past experience. Entering such a programme always entails bringing one's professional background, whether fulfilling or not, into a context where it becomes material for reflection: to reject, process, make sense of, or rework.

To benefit from the transformations and re-evaluations made possible within the spatiotemporal cocoon of training, participants describe having to accept a loosening of established spatial and temporal reference points. This involves inhabiting a transitional state marked by temporal uncertainty, as participants describe a loosening of established temporal reference points, in which usual markers of time and progression become less stable: one noticed that she was ‘out of sync with others (outside training)’. Another participant noticed the uncertainty of the future (‘we will see after (the training)’), but as a future where everything would be possible, she also noticed when she was losing track of time when ‘entering into some text’ and described those moments as ‘pure bliss’. Bianca perfectly illustrates this, as she states that ‘the French degree will allow (her), on her CV, to justify (her) strong emotional attachment to France’. The emancipatory potential described here arises within specific spatial and temporal configurations that may be enabled by the training, which combine spatial arrangements, temporal structuring, and institutional constraints, such as ‘being in a circle where we could all see each other’, ‘being with younger people’, and thus experiencing a ‘lightness, a bohemian student life’ that contrasts with one’s ‘adult life’, but also ‘having to be present every day’ as Bianca explains, as well as aligning with the rhythm of ‘meetings with the thesis supervisor’.

In this study, participants voluntarily re-entered higher education in France within a stable institutional framework and a full-time programme that offered a protected temporal horizon. The inquiry itself formed part of this protected environment, extending a space in which experience could be articulated and reinterpreted. Under such conditions, training functioned as a holding space in the sense described by Cornu (2016), a space capable of containing the vulnerability generated by critical reflection while sustaining the continuity required for its elaboration. These findings illuminate the conditions under which a spatiotemporal cocoon may emerge: a sufficiently structured institutional setting, a shared and delimited time for inquiry, and an environment able to maintain reflective work. The contribution of this study therefore concerns programmes that provide comparable stability and protected time, while inviting further examination of how such configurations may be cultivated across diverse educational settings.

Spatiotemporal conditions of training and emancipatory learning

Training, understood here as a ‘spatiotemporal cocoon’, should not be considered as a simple metaphor but as a structured configuration. This bounded environment, described several times as a ‘bubble’, allows participants to revisit their experience through two mechanisms.

First, the suspension of ordinary temporal pressures enables a specific experiential condition in which participants become available to their own experience. This suspension, *epoché*, is not a passive withdrawal but an active process through which decision-making is temporarily delayed and experience is held open to interpretation and critical reflection. Participants describe a form of distance from urgency, allowing them to explore, hesitate, and progressively re-articulate their situation.

Second, this cocoon is structured by a specific organisation of rhythms, through which experience unfolds as a dynamic interplay of repetition, interruption, and transformation. These rhythms articulate institutional temporal frameworks, such as modules, evaluations, and defences, with personal temporalities characterised by hesitation, exploration, and gradual clarification. Participants do not describe a linear progression but a temporality marked by pauses, returns, and moments of intensification, in which meaning progressively emerges. The cocoon does not suspend time entirely but

reconfigures it, as participants recalibrate to their own temporality within and against these multiple temporal structures.

Taken together, these elements allow us to conceptualise the pedagogical cocoon as a spatiotemporal configuration that actively shapes the conditions under which emancipation may occur, as participants examine their assumptions, clarify their position, and progressively reorient their actions and regain control over their lives. This mediated environment enables experience to be actively interpreted, transformed, and oriented toward new possibilities.

In the present study, the conditions described by participants were grounded in a pre-COVID-19 pandemic training context in which the unity of place was preserved and training was not mediated online. Under these conditions, educators contributed to holding together a bounded spatial framework within which learners could temporarily distance themselves from the ordinary demands of their professional and personal lives. What appears now, with the possibility of virtual presence, is that the challenge lies less in creating temporal than spatial conditions for this configuration. Participants have clearly demonstrated the importance, in the emancipatory process, of sharing a common physical space, including the possibility of being together in the same room and, at times, arranged in a circle, which supports openness, attention, and reflexive engagement. These findings highlight that the pedagogical cocoon operates as a spatiotemporal configuration, whose effectiveness depends on both the structuring of time and the material conditions of space.

Conclusion: spatiotemporal conditions for emancipation

This article set out to examine how training, understood as a spatiotemporal cocoon, creates the conditions for processes of emancipation among adults in higher education. Drawing on empirical material and engaging with the French tradition of *autoformation* in dialogue with transformative learning theory, we argue that emancipation unfolds within a structured spatiotemporal frame that holds together suspension, inquiry, and temporal elaboration.

The analysis suggests that training establishes a bounded temporal environment within which ordinary rhythms are set at a distance and personal temporality becomes available for examination. Through moments of *kairos*, participants articulate experiences that had previously remained implicit, clarify their position, and reshape their relation to time and action. The spatiotemporal cocoon supports this elaboration by organising conditions in which lived experience can be narrated, interpreted, and integrated within an ongoing process of *autoformation*.

The articulation of Pineau's (2000, 2003) framework of *anthropoformation* and schizo-chrony, Galvani's (2005, 2011, 2020) concepts of existential autoformation and *kairos*, Alhadeff-Jones's (2017, 2019) rhythmological perspective, and Mezirow's (1978) theory of transformative learning allows us to specify the temporal dynamics through which such processes take shape. While transformative learning describes the phases of perspective change, the notion of the pedagogical cocoon highlights the spatial and temporal conditions that sustain suspension and inquiry. In doing so, the article contributes to adult education research by foregrounding the structuring role of temporality in emancipatory processes.

Our analysis has shown that the structuring effects of training rely not only on temporal but also on the material and spatial dynamics. This raises the question of how such conditions, particularly spatial ones, can be maintained in evolving training environments. How can a bounded and protected cocoon be sustained when it is dispersed

across multiple individual locations? How can the effects of collective spatial arrangements, such as ‘being in a circle’, be re-created in contexts where participants are no longer physically co-present? How can the necessary degree of enclosure be ensured, so as to protect the learning space from external intrusions? Central to this configuration is the decentring effect of inhabiting an unfamiliar and dedicated space, which supports a shift in perspective and contributes to the suspension of ordinary constraints, necessary for reflexive engagement. It also raises the question of whether processes of transformation and the appropriation of one’s own temporality and rhythm may be hindered when external rhythms become more difficult to hold at a distance.

How can such spatial conditions be recreated or sustained in increasingly virtual or distributed learning environments? To what extent can educators preserve the protective and decentring effects of the cocoon, and maintain them without shared physical space?

Notes

- ¹ This study relies primarily on French sources. Official English translations are used where available; otherwise, translations are the author’s. Certain key terms are retained in French, italicised and defined upon first use, as translation would entail conceptual loss: *autoformation* or *anthropoformation* are maintained, as ‘self-formation’ or ‘self-education’ would reduce their meaning. These choices aim to preserve conceptual precision and the reflexive dimension of these notions.
- ² When referring to Galvani’s utilisation of *Kaïros*, we follow his terminology and write ‘*kaïros*’ as a noun for both singular and plural form.

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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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