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NEW LEARNING SITES IN LEARNING CITIES – PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AND CIVIC EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

Although the concept of learning cities and the idea of learning being place-based and focused on a region, city, town or community have existed for a long time, it is UNESCO's work that gave the impetus to the practice, helping to create and spread the network of Learning Cities worldwide. One of the main characteristics of the current concept is the leading role of the local government and partnership with policy makers. The paper challenges this feature with the example of cities that are “rebellious” against the local or national government, but do have learning at the core of their activities. The example of Belgrade is described in detail, where various civic actions (protests, ‘guerrilla’ actions, active participation in public discussions) are analysed from the point of view of public pedagogy. The theory of Gert Biesta and his conception of the public sphere as a space for civic action as well as Elizabeth Ellsworth's ideas on the active creation of space are the framework in which civic actions are interpreted as important kinds of learning. Lefebvre's concept of the “right to the city” is also applied. In this way, the whole concept of learning cities might be broadened to include cities without a harmonious relationship with its policy makers, but with strong civic movements and civic actions as a kind of non-formal learning in public spaces.

Keywords: *learning city, public pedagogy, Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own, civic education, civic activism*

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NOVA PRIZORIŠČA UČENJA V UČEČIH SE MESTIH – JAVNA PEDAGOGIKA TER DRŽAVLJANSKA VZGOJA IN IZOBRAŽEVANJE – POVZETEK

Čeprav koncept učečih se mest in ideja o učenju, ki je osredinjena na prostor, torej regijo, mesto ali skupnost, obstajata že dolgo časa, je Unesco to prakso spodbudil ter pomagal ustvariti in razširiti mrežo učečih se mest po vsem svetu. Vodilna vloga lokalnih oblasti in partnerski odnos z oblikovalci politik je ena od poglobitih značilnosti obstoječega koncepta učečih se mest, vendar v članku prek primerov učečih se mest, ki se »upirajo« lokalni ali nacionalni vladi, ob tem pa imajo v središču svojih dejavnosti učenje, spodbijamo nujnost te značilnosti za nastanek učečega se mesta. Podrobno je opisan primer Beograda in različne oblike državljankega delovanja (protesti, »gverilsko« delovanje, aktivno sodelovanje v javnih razpravah) v tem mestu, ki so analizirane z vidika javne pedagogike. Okvir, v katerem je državljansko delovanje interpretirano kot pomemben način učenja, tvorita teorija Gerta Bieste z njegovim konceptom javne sfere kot prostora državljankega delovanja in ideja Elizabeth Ellsworth o aktivnem ustvarjanju prostora. Prav tako je uporabljen Lefebvrov koncept »pravice do mesta«. Na ta način je mogoče idejo učečih se mest razširiti tudi na mesta, v katerih odnosi z oblikovalci politik niso harmonični, obstajajo pa močna državljankega gibanja in državljansko delovanje kot oblika neformalnega učenja v javni sferi.

Ključne besede: učeče se mesto, javna pedagogika, Ne da(vi)mo Beograda, državljanska vzgoja in izobraževanje, državljanski aktivizem

LEARNING CITIES AND NEW GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Learning cities are one of the most captivating phenomena in the education landscape of the last decade. Retaining the best features of “community learning” (and similar “geographically defined learning concepts”; Longworth & Osborne, 2010, p. 369) and capturing some of the recent global trends and challenges of globalisation and urbanisation, learning cities offered a new educational response to both policy makers and practitioners. The practices of various kinds of learning at the community level are not new. They were known and popular even in the 60s, 70s and 80s, across the continents, often as a part of social movements (peace, feminist, political, environmental movements), but in the last two decades they got a new interpretation and a new frame, while the flexibility, inclusiveness, and adaptability to local circumstances added to the popularity of the concept.

One of the most important “drivers” of the concept of learning cities and learning regions from the 1970s to the 1990s was the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), whose economic agenda was the main framework for the new understanding of learning at the community level. Even later, in its publication *Cities and Regions in the New Learning Economy*, OECD (2001) clearly states that the goal is “to promote learning, innovation, productivity and economic performance at the local level”, analyses the “relationships between various forms of learning and economic performance at the regional level” and “provide[s] strong evidence of the importance of individual and firm-level organisational learning for regions’ economic performance” (p. 3). A clear neoliberal character influenced the concept of learning cities, which later echoed in the

concept of “smart cities”. UNESCO has broadened this narrow understanding and added other elements to the contemporary approach.

The process of the creation of Agenda 2030 gave further impetus to learning cities. The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (UCLG [United Cities and Local Governments], 2015) pointed out that

[c]ities and territories are where women and men, girls and boys, live, where they work to create their livelihoods and where dreams are made. They are where poverty and inequalities are tackled, where health and education services are provided, where ecosystems are protected and human rights must be guaranteed. (p. 21)

It seems that learning cities might be an approach for achieving many goals, not only Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (quality education and lifelong learning for all) and SDG 11 (inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements) – it could help tackle poverty, inequality, and environmental problems, and showcase how SDGs can work at the local level. The concept was embraced by the education sector for its idea that “cities can transform by placing lifelong learning at their heart” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 126) and for the fact that the learning cities practice can successfully integrate the whole scale of lifelong learning, including all ages, formal and non-formal education and informal learning, different levels of education and various sectors and areas.

Furthermore, learning cities seem to capture three dimensions of lifelong learning:

- as green and healthy learning cities (environmental sustainable development);
- as equitable and inclusive learning cities (individual empowerment, intercultural dialogue, and social cohesion);
- through decent employment and entrepreneurship in learning cities (economic development and cultural prosperity).

One aspect of the process of building learning cities deserves special attention if considered from the point of view of the new social reality in many countries marked by social movements, civic and student protests and new forms of organised citizenship. In spite of these movements, the mainstream understanding of learning cities is still through the strong leadership role of the municipality, whereby a learning city relies very much on the stakeholders’ involvement and the support which government at all levels should provide to education and learning processes.

One of the main recommendations of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) (2015) for becoming a learning city clearly states: “Create a coordinated structure involving all stakeholders” (p. 1). Further on, strong political leadership and steadfast commitment are recommended, as is the involvement of city leaders. Clearly, local government is in the driver’s seat. The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments is resolved on this issue:

All of the SDGs have targets that are directly or indirectly related to the daily work of local and regional governments. Local governments should not be seen as mere implementers of the agenda. Local governments are policy makers, catalysts of change and the level of government best-placed to link the global goals with local communities. (UCLG, 2015, p. 1)

Additionally, although other local actors play the most important roles, it is recommended that “strong contact with the ministry of education or any other related ministry” is maintained “to link the local with the national development” (UNESCO & UIL, 2015, p. 2).

Even more than UNESCO’s guidelines, the Global Network of Learning Cities, consisting of cities from all continents and coming from very diverse geo-political settings, presented broadly at UNESCO’s Learning Cities conferences, proves the importance of political support and the involvement of decision-makers and politicians. Although they usually involve various stakeholders and include representatives from civil society and different community groups, the heads of the delegations are almost always mayors, and the strong commitment of the city leaders and local government is never absent in success stories (UNESCO & UIL, 2019b). It starts with the national governments that are usually dedicated to the creation of the learning society, and peaks with the mayors that have the leading role in guiding, coordinating, and strategising towards the common goal of the learning city. The current global panic around climate change has increased the belief that learning cities might boost, through the engagement of citizens, more actions towards sustainable development. But what about an increasingly important challenge coming from the current political processes in Europe and the world, the wave of authoritarian and extremist regimes, the crises of democracy? Can learning cities and their existing stakeholder cooperation patterns meet these challenges?

The most recent, fourth International Conference on Learning Cities in Medellin, Columbia, showcased clearly the leading role of policy makers: The UNESCO Learning City Award 2019 was received mostly by Mayors, Deputy Mayors, Governors and one Secretary-General of the Municipal Government (UNESCO & UIL, 2019a). This guarantees, no doubt, the continuous commitment, the sustainability of the efforts, the broad range of the stakeholders involved (institutions and organisations that are motivated or supported by the municipality) and the systemic impact of education and learning activities.

But what happens in cities that lack this kind of governance, one supportive of learning? Longworth (2014) reminds us:

It is also why we believe that the process of becoming a learning city is a long one, taking many years of development, and therefore, unfortunately, often at the mercy of opportunist politicians or parties with limited vision or a personal agenda. (p. 3)

Most authors explore this issue through the lense of stakeholder interactions in urban partnerships (Le Feuvre, Medway, Warnaby, Ward, & Goatman, 2016), question the growing diversity of urban partnership forms (urban growth coalitions, new policy networks, and urban regimes), but a broader view might bring another dimension to the understanding of learning cities. Namely, some cities experience, for longer or shorter periods, autocratic governance that excludes the voices of citizens, ignores their needs, and perceives education either as a commodity or as the means of ideological control and pressure. Could such a city, whatever educational actions might be organised by its main actors, be called “a learning city”? What happens when there is a deep discrepancy between the way the citizens and the city’s governing bodies see the development of the city, the way of engaging, the role of education and learning? What happens if there is a gap, even a conflict between them? Who has the right to decide what learning is for, and whose vision of the city is valid? Great examples of a truly democratic approach to this question are experiences with participatory budgeting in many cities, the most famous example being Porto Alegre in Brazil, where citizens engaged in meetings and discussions held in public spaces, set the budget together and decided on the priorities in spending it. This experience was so inspiring that a few thousand cities worldwide developed similar practices (Beard, Mahendra, & Westphal, 2016).

A kind of “blindness” to alternative approaches and to a broader understanding of learning cities is quite common:

[T]he concept of learning cities has been implemented mainly in ‘developed’ countries, growing initially out of initiatives by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) from the 1970s onwards and the European Commission (EC) in the early part of this century. (Osborne, Kearns, & Young, 2013, p. 411)

The concepts of learning cities developed in the Global South have been less explored, maybe also because of their ‘non-traditional’ character and ways of practising democracy and pursuing democratic goals in a less democratic environment, or even in war zones, such as Rojava in northern Syria, where stateless democracy and democratic confederalism are practiced (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboğa, 2016).

Although more and more developing countries are cultivating new forms of learning communities, cities, and regions, the dominant discourse still frames the thinking behind learning cities. This might have been the reason for neglecting the political aspects of learning cities, the nature of city governance, and the relationship of power between citizens and city leaders. These are also being dramatically impacted by the various forms of civic protests which are happening around the globe (currently in Lebanon, Chile, Hong Kong, Haiti, Barcelona, Serbia, etc.). The current discourse focuses on the “western” type of the learning city, leaving behind many examples worldwide that do not “fit the mould”.

The special issue of the International Review for Education *Learning Cities: Developing Inclusive, Prosperous and Sustainable Urban Communities* explores and broadens the characteristics of learning cities beyond Europe; for example, Biao, Esaete, and Oonyu (2013) use the Freirian concept of conscientisation that should “awaken the consciousness of city-dwellers towards action to transform their physical, social and psychological environment”, while Messina and Valdés-Cotera

show that the notion of an educating city is related to the democratisation of social life and to the possibility of creating a community from or within an urban space. Hence it corresponds to political proposals that defend the notion of a community of individuals, whilst talking and negotiating as equals. The educating city first of all promotes an extension of the fundamental right of all people to education. (Osborne, Kearns, & Young, 2013, p. 413)

The focus is still very much on the increased role of civic participation, a kind of partnership, and the goal of the learning activities; authors very seldom examine cases with a conflicting paradigm and learning processes that are clearly oriented against the city governance.

A very strong line of development is currently oriented towards “smart cities”, but the difference is substantial:

unlike smart cities that start with digital technologies, big data, artificial intelligence and sustainable infrastructure, learning cities start with people, with their needs, families, such cities draw on their problem-solving capabilities, they are about caring for one another and working together for the common values. (Popović, 2019, p. 10)

The examples of smart cities are being pushed forward and presented as exemplary, but authors such as Nancy and Lefebvre provide “indispensable critical tools for conceptualizing the urban planet and its political possibilities [...] [contrasted] to the conservative imagery of the urban planet as techno utopia that was produced at Expo 2010 in Shanghai, China” (Madden, 2012, p. 1).

Instead of moving towards more technologies (although they shouldn't be excluded, but rather used as an important ally for civic movements), some cities are trying to find an answer to the democracy deficit, the rise of populism and nationalism; for that purpose, they are moving towards a new kind of togetherness, towards new ways of achieving solidarity and new concepts of community learning (Popović, Maksimović, & Jovanović, 2020).

LEARNING CITIES – THE NEED TO CHANGE A PARADIGM?

Several efforts have been made to help cities monitor and measure their progress and learning achievements, for example, *The Composite Learning Index CLI* developed by

the Canadian Council on Learning (2010), *The European Lifelong Learning Index – ELLI* (Saisana, 2010), and the *German Learning Atlas* (Baethge-Kinsky & Döbert, 2011; Das Bildungsportal-Lippe, 2011). Based on the criteria and indicators from these frameworks, most of the “rebellious cities” wouldn’t be categorised as learning cities. They might match the criteria related to formal education (such as the education level of the population) and educational infrastructure, and also other indicators whose value systems and contents are not contested by the stakeholders involved.

Most of the usual criteria seem to be based on the ‘silent’ assumption that all stakeholders share the idea of the importance of education, while the differences come from the level of commitment to the realisation of education goals, from different approaches and different priorities, as well as from the lack of resources. An example of a commonly used indicator illustrates this: access to education institutions, especially community institutions, is considered very important. While this indicator could be defined in various ways (the number and sufficiency of education institutions, geographical distance, physical accessibility, financial affordability, information and guidance provided etc.), it cannot include the possibility that existing educational institutions can be rejected by citizens for being politically exclusive, non-democratic and manipulated in terms of their content or methods, or simply going against the will of the citizens for various good reasons.

The UNESCO guidelines do state that learning offers should respond to the learning needs and interests of citizens, and a learning city forum should be established where people can contribute and share experiences (UNESCO & UIL, 2015). But disrespect of the citizens’ needs, and the lack of common spaces for sharing and coordinating might happen not only because of the omission or lack of resources, but as an expression of deeper misunderstanding and conflicting interests of the citizens and the city’s governance. Does this mean that we cannot talk about learning cities anymore? Or that we should change or broaden the concept of learning cities? Many of the rebel communities and cities, especially in the Global South, do not implement the usual learning cities agenda, but they do democratize many aspects of their everyday life, using learning as a powerful instrument to do that. Cities using participatory budgeting are among them, but also Rojava in Syria, Zapatistas in Chiapas, Lenca communities in Honduras, etc. Some European cities also have an ‘alternative’ learning agenda, compensating for the gaps in the formal learning agenda of the municipality and practicing true grassroots democracy even if it is against the will or the agenda of the authorities.

The “rebellious cities” question two main premises of the current concept of learning cities: partnership and learning sites.

There is a strong feeling in these cities that the political establishment lets people down and that it is disconnected from the lived experiences of communities. Such an example is London’s Take Back the City movement (White, 2016), which fights the effects of neo-liberal urbanism on London’s neighbourhoods. They turn against the establishment and leaders, and create their own spaces and their own learning realm. In these “rebel cities”

(Harvey, 2012), there is a strong partnership, but it exists among other actors, mostly non-governmental organisations, associations, various civic groups, often also with cultural and artistic organisations. The official representatives of the municipalities are not included – even more, fighting their agenda is part of the civic discourse. When Longworth (2006) talks about a centralised model of the education curriculum and assessment, he allows for other models depending on the system that is in place in various countries and cities, “but the general trust of contribution by stakeholders remains valid and modifiable whatever the setup” (p. 106). The protesting cities challenge this paradigm of trust, and don’t assume that trust and cooperation with the municipality is only a matter of a lot of effort and a good strategy.

Longworth (2006) quotes the LILLIPUT learning materials for learning cities and regions: “Ever changing and developing learning cities and regions are no place for ideological dogma or single-issue politics” (p. 137)¹. But we are dealing with the crucial difference in perceiving democracy and civic and human rights as the main value in the context of learning cities. Therefore, the people and civic groups in these cities are making a turn: by being committed to the values defined in UNESCO’s guidelines and similar documents developed within the framework of human rights, they organise actions that include learning as an important instrument for achieving these goals, transcending simple participation in decision-making, but claiming the city in a new way, not only without the city government or leaders, but also outside of their political reality and through strong partnerships among the community actors. With this shift, “democracy” comes hand-in-hand with learning, as inseparable criteria for calling any geographical reality a “learning space”. Learning occurs as the “natural instrument” in the fight for democracy, and democratic, participatory actions become the best “content and way of learning”.

The second feature that is transformed by the “protesting cities” are learning sites. Since the municipality is not considered a partner in this case, most of the formal and governmentally run institutions are not seen as important learning sites. They may be included in educational interventions, and their importance is not denied, but the main spaces of learning intervention are found elsewhere: in public spaces, in the streets, squares, parks, abandoned buildings, alternative areas, etc. Occupying spaces selected for gentrification or investor-driven urbanism – these are expressions of the citizens’ will and the right and claim they have over the city. Obviously, the focus here has shifted to non-formal education and informal learning, as well as to adult learning, and is less focused on formal education and the learning of children. But even the ‘usual’ educational spaces might be contested if they deny the nature of public education as a common good:

It is in this context that the revival of a rhetoric and theory of the commons takes on an added significance. If state-supplied public goods either decline or become a mere vehicle for private accumulation (as is happening to education),

¹ The LILLIPUT Learning Materials are available in audio format at <http://eurolocal.info/resource/lilliput-learning-materials-overview>.

and if the state withdraws from their provision, then there is only one possible response, which is for populations to selforganize to provide their own commons. (Harvey, 2012, p. 87)

This is one of the reasons why education and learning may leave institutional rooms and formal education spaces, and move to new, alternative learning sites. In connection to Lefebvre's "the right to the city" concept, Harvey (2012) explains how new spaces are created, becoming the new reality of the citizens:

Lefebvre's concept of heterotopia (radically different from that of Foucault) delineates liminal social spaces of possibility where 'something different' is not only possible, but foundational for the defining of revolutionary trajectories. This 'something different' does not necessarily arise out of a conscious plan, but more simply out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives. Such practices create heterotopic spaces all over the place. (p. xvii)

New civic movements, rebelling cities, and their re-focus of the cities' philosophy of human rights, put "space" in the center. Public spaces are the frame for exercising and showcasing "the right to the city", being physically at the heart of civic activities. Therefore, public spaces are natural new learning sites, not only places to learn, but spaces where simply "being there" has a relevance in a political context and thus becomes a starting point for the learning process, often a collective one.

These new tendencies bring one important aspect to the forefront, and that is the political framework of learning cities. It is taken for granted that a certain level of democracy is provided, and the goal and content of education are rooted in the human rights approach. But the question of ownership and decision-making is more prominent than ever: who has the right to set the city's agenda and make decisions about education and learning?

In the contemporary learning cities network there is a kind of 'harmony' among the stakeholders, at least when it comes to their common goal. But what about cities where the relationship among various interest groups is marked by conflict, and learning is based on completely different discourses? Can they be called learning cities, and what kind of learning are they carrying out?

To answer this question, we will give an overview of the recent activities of the civic movement called Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own and inquire into learning that emerges through collective action. This process is also captured by the concept of public pedagogy which has been widely construed over time, and its meaning might have become elusive. But public pedagogy nevertheless gives us the best theoretical framework for learning cities. In learning cities the city as a public space is only a site for public pedagogy, "in which public refers not to a physical site of educational phenomena but rather to an idealized outcome of educational activity: the production of a public aligned in terms of

values and collective identity” (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011, p. 342); understood like this, public pedagogy is simply education for the public good. Public space is also a place important for civic or democratic education beyond the traditional humanistic understanding, a place for subjectification, as Rancier and Biesta call it, in the interpretation of Reimers and Martinsson (2016):

democratisation is not a process of identification, that is, of taking up an existing identity, but is rather a process of disidentification or [...] a process of *subjectification*, a process of being a subject of politics or political subject. (p. 22)

This kind of political subjectivity is achievable in education, but outside of the neoliberal institutional normative framework.

In arguing for sustainable development, Robèrt, Daly, Hawken, and Holmberg (1997) present public pedagogy as educating the public on “how the world works”, so that the voting public could understand the scientific principles that are related to the subject. They also state that the distribution of knowledge is at least as critical for democracy as the distribution of income, with the idea that the public that has appropriate knowledge will be able to adopt a certain public policy (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011). If we understand that public space is the result of purposeful actions (Garau, 2016), which are the result of policies, which are in turn the result of ideology, we can go one step further from just mapping the world and argue that social intervention in public space is simultaneously the criticism of dominant ideology, and the very active and concrete deliberation on ideal life and society. Moir and Crowther (2017) confirm that education can’t be neutral in this role:

Citizenship education without a critical view of democracy and society is more about social control rather than social change whereas the real challenge for citizenship education is to be relevant to the inculcation of an open, participatory democratic culture that contributes to individual and collective agency. (p. 18)

“DO NOT LET LEARNING CITIES D(R)OWN!”

This title is a reference to the civic movement born in Belgrade called Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own. The movement was established during 2016, when it was provoked by increased investor-driven urbanism and large-scale illegal actions in which private properties were demolished overnight due to new “urban investments”. Shocked by the lack of reaction from responsible official bodies, and in disagreement with an urban policy driven by neoliberal and capitalist interest that completely excluded the citizens’ voices as well as their interests, people started gathering and protesting. Out of these protests a movement was created, and would later participate in the local elections in Belgrade in 2018. Even without reaching census it remained a significant counterweight to current policies. Between 2016 and today this movement has remained the main opposition to the

dominant neoliberal political streams in managing the city of Belgrade and to its current urban policy. The movement's agenda and actions tackle the urbanisation of Belgrade funded by private investors, which jeopardises the environment and public goods under the mantra of "modernisation", and it also protests against restraining the possibilities of citizen participation and their right to the city of Belgrade.

All the efforts of the Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own activists aim at motivating, empowering, and educating citizens to take an active role in the life of the city. In this paper we use this micro case study to analyse how this movement, its structure, and its actions reflect the idea of learning cities and how it re-thinks public spaces and uses them as learning spaces. The initiative is a part of the global municipal movement standing up to defend human rights, democracy, and public good (En Comú, Bookchin, & Colau, 2019; Harvey, 2012; White, 2016). The movement includes new approaches to fighting for democracy, strong feminist features in its politics, a focus on solidarity, neighbourhood movements and various actions trying to build bottom-up changes and networks of solidarity and support.

Belgrade as a learning city?

When talking about learning cities one question can be put as central: whose knowledge counts in the everyday life of the city? Is it the knowledge of us as citizens as diverse as we are; the knowledge of professionals that analyse, conduct research and have a professional responsibility for the city's development; the knowledge of the politicians who make the final decisions and contracts about the development of the city; the knowledge of investors as power holders? To use Lefebvre's famous question: "Who has the right to the city?" (Lefebvre, 1996) Let us ask ourselves whose knowledge dominantly forms our everyday city experiences: on public transport when going to work, in the park where we take our dog for a walk, in the main square while we wait for a date, or in the very privacy of our flats? In each of these situations one can have positive feelings and attachments to the materialisations and meanings of these spaces, or one can experience frustration. The main discourse of the Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own initiative builds upon very common frustrations regarding these spaces among the citizens of Belgrade. The main arguments against the current and previous mayor have concerned poor city management that is negligent of its citizens and professionals. The issue of democracy is independent for the urban policy of the government: "Let us be contented with the notion that the democratic character of a regime is identifiable by its attitude towards the city, urban 'liberties' and urban reality, and therefore towards *segregation*" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 141).

So, having some fundamental principles of democracy and civic participation as the foundation, but engaging with the everyday problems of people living in the city, the Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own initiative acts through several channels. Their actions can be grouped into three categories:

- protests,
- "guerrilla" actions, and
- participation in public discussions.

Reflecting on these practices theoretically and analysing these three categories in the light of learning cities and the pedagogy of the public space will improve the theoretical framing and conceptualising of these phenomena, and put the local struggle into the broader context of global tendencies.

Public spaces as mass classrooms

Since its beginning Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own has organised several dozen protests with diverse ranges of participants; the biggest gathering encompassed tens of thousands of protestors. The way in which these protests has changed the public life of the city has been researched and described in several papers (Delibašić, Nikolić, & Vasiljević, 2019; Popović, Maksimović, & Jovanović, 2018). What these authors emphasise is the potential for mobilisation and a new discourse of provocation, humor, and personal engagement. The current government's opposition describes the political situation in Serbia with terms such as "media darkness", "arrogant and autistic governing", etc. This civic initiative raised the question of the visibility of citizens, their voice and their epistemological right when it comes to decision-making in the city. What does it mean to protest in such an environment? Whose interests do the protests bring out to the streets, whose right to the city do they exercise? Even though Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own included several thousand people, some people heard about it for the first time when it took to the streets, when it literally became visible and loud. In the era of the internet, social networks and a huge media presence, one wouldn't expect the streets, the very space of action, to become the most visible and prominent point of learning.

Protest walks and actions in public spaces are good illustrations of how safety, organisation, and planning have changed through time. With each new protest, people who previously had no experience in organising such events, learned more and more – how to engage, react, manage, talk, etc. For example, there were always some provocations or counter-protests organised during the Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own actions, but they were always pacified through some minor efforts of the organisers and mostly by the nonviolent reactions of the protestors. The protests are visually identified as colourful, loud, incorporating music and positive, humorous slogans; some examples of the symbols used are fake diplomas, fake monuments or similar objects pointing out and symbolically commenting on the current burning issues in society.

One of the layers of public space is formed by personal and interpersonal experiences, embracing the sensorial and haptic, interactions, memories, constructed meanings, but also imaginary ideas about possible lives. So by marching and protesting citizens are re-claiming their right to the city, they are physically sending the message about the spaces that belong to them. In Lefebvre's (1996) words:

It is on the one hand a relationship of the human being with his own body, with his tongue and speech, with his gestures, in a certain place and with a gestural whole, and on the other hand, a relationship with the largest public space, with the entire society and beyond it, the universe. (p. 235)

Occupying and re-designing public space thus transcends the one-day event and becomes a universal claim for human and civic rights. There is an undeniable subversive element to it: it is an interruption of the existing order which manifests as a reconfiguration of space and positions, occurring in those moments when the 'logic' of the existing social order is confronted with the 'logic' of equality (Biesta, 2013).

From the perception of the city as the best possible classroom for civic education, public spaces offer a multitude of meanings, ambiguous happenings, actions, interactions, all in the constant state of becoming through the engagement of its citizens. Public space is an unfinished entanglement of materiality, encounters, and relationships, "a meaningful witness of social and societal changes in history and the present. It creates the material basis for people's social (inter)actions within their community but in the same time results from these social (inter)actions" (De Visscher, 2014, p. 78).

Solidarity and joint action are the main core of this type of activity; in protests one learns how to become more aware of the community that he/she belongs to, and how to reach a level of organisation where the group impact is in the interest of individuals. Bridging the individual and the communal is the main issue not only in Belgrade but everywhere where neoliberal logic is prevailing and suppressing other interests and approaches.

Guerrilla learning

"It is noon, people are gathering, everyone is silently anxious and no one is talking about the location of our action" (quote from one of the activists²). One hour later the entrance to the main landfill in Vinča, Belgrade is blocked. Activists with banners, barrels, and flags stand at the entrance, demanding that the city authorities give up on building an incinerator with a foreign private investor. The technology of burning waste is very outdated and bad for the already troubled environment, especially the highly polluted air in Belgrade. Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own has a detailed analysis of this project. The blockade isn't announced, lasts for one hour, and provokes one smaller incident involving unidentified persons whose efforts to stop the action were unsuccessful. Many truck drivers whose entry or exit from the landfill is interrupted talk to the activists. Many of them hear about the plans of the city officials for the first time, although they will directly impact their main source of income. The anger towards "someone who is preventing me from doing my job today" transforms into anger towards "someone who is taking my job forever"³. The same process takes place with people who live nearby in the neighbourhood of the Vinča landfill.

This type of "guerrilla learning", one can say, happens when policies are implemented without any public discussion or acknowledgment, in the deep silence of oppression, which restrains even the possibility of hearing the voice of the citizens. People learn about issues and problems that will change their lives dramatically and for the worse, that will

2 Source: the private archives of the authors.

3 Source: the private archives of the authors.

take away their space, their resources and their rights, but they also learn about how to fight these policies, how to join others, how to get a say in what will directly affect their quality of life and well-being, their cultural spaces, even their job opportunities. Is there any more important learning in a learning city than that?

Paradoxically, it is exactly through the activities of “guerrilla learning” that the process of becoming a citizen is occurring, since under the current political circumstances, it is a truly democratic practice. Biesta argues that “citizen” is not an existing identity but is in constant emergence through democratic practices, that “[c]itizenship is not so much a status, something which can be achieved and maintained, but that it should primarily be understood as something that people continuously do: citizenship as practice” (Lawy & Biesta, 2006, p. 72), which is rooted in Biesta’s idea of subjectification, where it’s important what a subject can do, and not what the subject is (Biesta, 2017).

As such, it cannot be reduced to an education goal and a curriculum or understood in a traditional way, because a goal-oriented curriculum is organised around specific linear learning outcomes that need to be transmitted and accomplished. It is a complicated and even impossible task because an answer is not predictable and given, but is a constant quest for equality, meaning that emancipatory education begins with the principles of equality and emancipation.

This is exactly where civic engagement in the rebelling cities is on track – not with educational goals and the usual set of learning indicators but through emancipatory action, the process of occupying spaces and at the same time liberating and/or constructing citizenship. In their research, a group of authors analysing civic actions in two Slovenian cities came to a similar conclusion:

Learning interaction in public spaces, as compared to traditional (structured, regulated) learning environments, is changeable, open and formed by citizens through discussion; learning is unpredictable, multi-layered, and in a way more demanding, because its course and results are dependent on a participant’s skills to perform it. Hence, such learning is natural, experiential and based on the problems of the citizens. (Jelenc Krašovec et al., 2017, p. 58)

The sector where the process is very dynamic is not unexpected: The problems of urban environments (but sustainable development in general) are among the most prominent in the actions of urban civic movements.

Learning in public discussions

A local government is legally obliged to organise public discussions in the form of a hearing or consultation with all stakeholders about each decision of public interest. This, however, does not mean that public discussions become open or free spaces where knowledge can be exchanged. They are usually organised at a time that is unsuitable for the majority of citizens, poorly advertised and without the necessary information and documentation,

or arranged in a way that is difficult to understand and navigate. It is clear that what was developed as democratic practice has turned into a space of exclusion. Do Not Let Belgrade D(r)own tries to translate these topics for citizens, to call and announce each hearing, and finally to engage in proposing and creating better solutions for the city. The interplay of power and knowledge in these discussions is always very intense. Marked by conflict, communication with the local authorities in public discussions in Belgrade remains an exciting battlefield of learning. Contesting knowledge reflects the social struggle and builds the identity of the learning city.

“The urbanization of society is more than just a spatial process – it also involves forms of knowledge and frames for action” (Madden, 2012, p. 780). Public discussions are exactly that – learning processes as preparation, gathering information and knowledge, taking part in the public discussions and navigating through verbal attacks and insults, engaging and empowering people to join in and take part.

However, it is important to differentiate between a common understanding of civic education and this kind of “learning in action”. For example, Biesta (2013) suggests a distinction between civic learning as a mode of socialisation – a person involved in a process of becoming a part of an existing social order, meaning adopting a social identity of an active citizen, and learning that happens through engagement in an experiment of democracy.

This “experiment” definitely needs the common action of citizens, and working for a common goal. So it is necessary to challenge and overcome the individualistic conception of civic education that came to the fore with neoliberal ideology, and focus on collective social and political engagement in democratic processes and a city as a learning context and an educator. This is why learning cities require a new understanding of what is “common” and new ways of belonging to the group, away from the traditional, conservative approach, but also away from neoliberal, alienating individualism. Public spaces as learning spaces in the city offer a framework for that.

LEARNING CITIES FOR/THROUGH CITIZENSHIP

What could be learned from these examples and how do we examine the topic of learning cities, civic movements, and civic education? First of all, the dominant question remains: is it possible to teach a person to be active in a community, and are active citizenship, activism, and human rights “teachable”, especially to adults?

It is public pedagogy, which asks for the link between city, space, learning, and education to be reconsidered, that might extend the existing concept of learning cities. Public pedagogy offers the discourse which sees activism in the context of learning, but also as an educational goal in itself. But one cannot learn the methods and theories of civic education without engaging in it; it is only through action that a person begins to notice the positions, discourses, interactions occurring in one’s environment, and starts to feel free to act, and feels in charge of his/her actions, is optimistic about collaboration and change, and familiar with the existing mechanisms of participation. Thus, not only are

there learning processes that are needed to engage in action, but the action becomes learning per se.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) uses Winnicott's view on transitional space as a point of departure when conceptualising public pedagogy. She claims that people transform only when they dare to connect with the outside worlds of things which provokes rearrangements of the "inside". However, this process does not happen consequently, but rather simultaneously as the world and person are recalibrating in the action of making. This "recalibration" is the act of "becoming a citizen" through action.

What is educational in this process? Educators encounter space, time, experience, people, and objects with an educational intent of seeking new ways of knowledge and relating that transform memory, space, and the future (Ellsworth, 2005). The city and its architecture become pedagogical and pedagogy becomes architectural when "together they create a fluid, moving pivot place that puts inside and outside, self and other, personal and social into relation" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 38).

This "imagining" in the case of the movements in Belgrade refers to the common democratic future, true participation, and increased agency for the common goal. By being involved in an experiment of democracy, a person is becoming/transforming simultaneously as a world and social order are being interrupted and transformed, having in mind that transformation is not a state but a field of emergence, a process of constant forming and re-forming. Perhaps, trans-forming is not even possible in this context, as a person is never *outside* of the world that is in the making. It is an entanglement of collective memory, imagination, and action that shapes new onto-epistemological realities. As Barad (2007) said:

Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. (p. 185)

This is exactly why public actions and activities in public spaces manage to transcend the gap between 'inside' and 'outside', learning goal and learning process, between those who teach and those who learn; they take learning to new sites and into a new education realm, thus enabling a true transformation of the person and community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The movements and initiatives of free municipalities, rebelling cities, and civic protest in urban areas reveal a potential to rethink and re-conceptualise the existing concept of learning cities. A new kind of governance is the most outstanding feature of these movements,

since they put citizens in the focus – not as the main ‘beneficiary’ but as the active creator of the learning content, spaces, and approach. Even more than that – the educational goals come from the citizens so the learning is not reduced to a limited instrumental role but goes beyond that and becomes a way of transforming people, community, and society.

Even in a traditional perspective, these movements change the view of educational institutions and learning sites:

Organizing the neighborhoods has been just as important in prosecuting labor struggles, as has organizing the workplace. One of the strengths of the factory occupations in Argentina that followed on the collapse of 2001 is that the cooperatively managed factories also turned themselves into neighborhood cultural and educational centers. (Harvey, 2012, p. 132)

Improving the educational offer is only one of the aspects of the new paradigm; what brings the substantial change is a new perspective of learning, removed from the usual paternalistic approach and instrumental treatment. The strong political character of these civic movements reshapes the municipalities’ lives and practices in various ways. Not all of them are successful and functioning, but it is difficult to deny that the answer to the challenges of extremist, populist, and authoritarian regimes lies in civic engagement at the local level. It incorporates “the simple view that we all have an equal ‘right to the city’, to co-create our urban spaces. It proposes a shift from participative tokenism to delegated power and citizen control; a creative, transparent, open style of democracy” (White, 2016, p. 1).

It would be hard to find such vibrant, learners-centred, dynamic, close-to-life forms of education and learning as those that can be found in the “rebellious cities”. This is the reality – the fact that such learning doesn’t fit into traditional learning paradigms and their rigid “compartments” doesn’t make it less important. Instead of ignoring that reality as it develops further, opening new possibilities for theoretical considerations and innovative practices, we should transform and broaden our concept of learning communities and learning cities so that we can improve the ways in which they try to meet the challenges of our time.

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