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## RENEWAL FROM THE MARGINS: CHANGE-ORIENTED ADULT EDUCATION IN DO-IT-YOURSELF LEARNING SPACES

### Abstract

Under the pressures of neoliberalism, adult education has been moving away from its socially engaged roots. Teachers are supposed to model learners as workers for the market. Increasing workloads keep educators from focusing on what is meaningful in their job. Within institutional frameworks, there seems to be little space for what could be seen as one of the most fundamental purposes of education: enabling people to become critical and creative co-shapers of society, capable of navigating a complex world that is facing unprecedented social and ecological crises.

Yet, when we shift our gaze from the centre to the margins, there are signs of hope. In the cracks of the formal education system and informally at grassroots level, people take the socially and ecologically engaged cause of education upon themselves. Often with little or no structural support from the educational establishment – but also out of the reach of its suffocating demands and policies. Two theoretical lenses can help to appreciate what it means to work from the edges of the learning system: Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias', counter-spaces that compensate for an imperfect reality by creating a new reality, and the Overton Window, a theory of change used in the political sciences to explain how ideas that seem radical at first get normalised over time.

In this paper, I investigate a number of change-oriented nonformal non-vocational adult learning spaces. Rooted in personal values and a sense of meaning and purpose, all are developed and facilitated by individuals with a Do-It-Yourself spirit. I draw on interviews with practitioners who, each in their own way, redefine what learning can look like, what desirable outcomes are, and what knowledge and capacities are needed in the world of today. What connects these people is their persistence and struggle 'to make it happen' against the odds. I will argue that however insignificant, makeshift, or curious these initiatives and projects may appear at present, they can set an example for the future and are well worth taking seriously when looking for signs of renewal in a field under pressure.

**Keywords:** change-oriented adult education, DIY learning spaces, heterotopias, Overton Window

## Introduction

As I begin writing this paper, it is the first day of school for many children in the area where I live. There is a sense of excitement in the air. Parents give their offspring giant cone-shaped bags filled with all you need to embark on the adventure called education. Will it live up to its promise, I wonder? Will the teachers manage to help these little people become capable citizens, equipped with the capacities needed to face a world in crisis? There is still some time until these kids will have grown up. Meanwhile, the landscape of learning is changing. Awareness is growing that in order to live well and sustainably on our shared planet, it is not only important to learn your reading, maths, and science, but also to develop creative capacities, communication skills, and ecological awareness. For many people who are adults today, there is a lot to catch up on. Is there anything we can do, given the scale of the social and ecological challenges we are facing today? That is the question the practitioners involved in Do-It-Yourself [DIY] Learning Spaces ask themselves.

In this paper, I will begin by positioning my research in the field of adult education – as I will argue, a field under pressure. Then, I will explore the locus of the margins in relation to the centre. I will introduce two theoretical lenses that may help to appreciate what it means to work from there: Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias', counter-spaces that compensate for an imperfect reality by creating a new reality, and the Overton Window, a theory of change used in the political sciences to explain how ideas that seem radical at first get normalised over time. Subsequently, I will describe the evolution of the research project and its attempt to give visibility to educational initiatives based at the grassroots and in the cracks of the system, by representing each of the cases on my blog [www.artistsofsociety.com](http://www.artistsofsociety.com). Finally, I will move on to mapping ten Do-It-Yourself Learning Spaces – examples of largely non-formal and non-vocational change-oriented sites of adult learning. Who are the people involved in these spaces? What are their aims, motivations, approaches, struggles, and achievements? What can we learn from the do-it-yourself spirit that drives their work? And what do these individual projects amount to in terms of shifting the priorities of adult education? What follows is a picture of renewal from the margins.

### Spaces of renewal in a field under pressure

As ecological and social crises intertwine, humanity is presented with complex global problems that defy easy solutions (Abram, 2012; Akomolafe, 2017; Wheatley & Frieze, 2011). Our survival and that of the planet depend on every person's creativity: on our ability to develop new ways of perceiving, reflecting, imagining, talking, listening, and shaping our life conditions together (Beuys & Harlan, 2007; Kirchgaesser, 2018; Sacks & Kurt, 2013). What humans of all ages need are spaces in which we can learn to become such 'artists of society'. Whilst in the

Western world, efforts are being made to increasingly focus on the development of creative and critical thinking in primary and secondary schools (OECD, 2019), institutionalised provisions on such a scale do not exist for adults. Instead, the field of adult education – especially state-supported adult education – has been moving away from its socially engaged roots, as once established by, for example, the Nordic *folkbildning* system (Korsgaard & Martin, 2002), popular education in Brasil (Freire (1996 [1968])), and workers movements in countries like England, France, and Austria (Federighi, 1999). Today in countries such the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands, neoliberal policies support forms of adult education that focus on skills that will help people function on the market –maintaining the problematic status quo rather than questioning and re-visioning the capitalistic system that has been the root of current social and ecological crises in the first place. Whilst in the cracks of the system and in the shadow spaces of the curricula individual educators expose their students to different sets of values (Sandlin, Burdick & Norris, 2012), many mainstream sites of learning are drenched in the logic of late capitalism – namely, that there are no real alternatives and that economic growth for its own sake is what we should all aspire to (Fisher, 2009).

A depressing picture? If you look at what is going on in the centre of the field, probably yes. But if you direct your gaze towards the periphery, there are signs of renewal. In the cracks of the formal education system and informally at grassroots level, people take the socially and ecologically engaged cause of education upon themselves. Often with little or no structural support from the state and its institutions – but also out of the reach of its suffocating demands and policies. Testimony to these forces of renewal from the margins are accounts of educators from around the world, as they have been gathered in single-case study collections in books (e.g. Fisher-Yoshida, Geller & Schapiro, 2009; O’Sullivan, Morrell & O’Connor, 2002; Sandlin & McLaren, 2010) and in specific issues of academic journals (e.g. Clover & Hill, 2003; Dentith & Griswold, 2017; Finnegan, 2019; Lange & O’Neil, 2018). However, since these largely non-formal and non-vocational change-oriented learning spaces (Manninen, 2017; Manninen, Jetsu & Sgier, 2019) take all kinds of different shapes, it is a challenge to map and compare them. Yet, diving into this somewhat chaotic universe at the margins to get a sense for the variety of initiatives and the people behind them can be rewarding. Because even if at present, their efforts might seem insignificant, makeshift, or curious, their experiments could be of inspiration to a field under pressure to respond to the social and ecological challenges we all face.

## Working from the margins of learning systems

In 2018, Lange & O’Neil highlighted the potential of educational alternatives conceived of in the margins of the system in their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Transformative Education* on Transformative Sustainability Education:

“The final report of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development indicates that entire education systems are straining at their edges to accommodate the needed transdisciplinary approaches and other transformations in education systems. The way forward often lays outside the strictures of formal, institutionalized contexts within non-formal and informal adult learning sites. In this polyarchy of learning edges, there are opportunities for the field of adult education and lifelong learning.” (p. 275)

How precisely can we conceive of the notion of the periphery in relation to the centre of a system? From biology we know that the edges of ecosystems are supposedly the most diverse and dynamic places, whilst the centre is more homogenous. Translated to learning systems, the centre is dominated by one particular paradigm or narrative, which is being multiplied through state-funded, hierarchically structured educational institutions. They hold authority, asserted through their power to set (epistemological) standards and award degrees and certificates. In order to maintain this authority, it is important that people adhere to these standards. The one valid reason for change is new knowledge produced by research carried out within this hegemonic framework. Supposedly. In practice, established educational institutions tend to be too big and bureaucratic as to be as efficient and adequate as they would maybe like to present themselves. Neoliberal austerity policies mean that employees are under constant pressure and that there is actually little space for experimentation, both in teaching and research. Managerialism causes staff to feel disempowered and ever bigger buildings turn educational spaces into anonymous learning factories. Even though Freire formulated his educational critique in the particular context of Brazil in the 1960s, his belief that “the efforts by individuals and groups within the system of oppression to implement education for liberation should be conceptualised as projects and distinguished from systemic education” (in Williams, 2009, p. 282) still holds its relevance today.

What differentiates the margins from the centre? In terms of adult learning, there is a much greater variety. People organise in different ways, from short-lived projects and meetings in living rooms of “friends educating each other” – in the spirit of Lindeman’s definition of adult education (1926, p. 5) – to social enterprises that offer an eclectic range of workshops and experiences, to fully fetched alternative schools providing a range of programmes. What characterises these alternative educational initiatives from the margins is that they have emerged from a do-it-yourself mentality, which is why I started using the umbrella term DIY learning spaces to describe them. Whilst taking many different forms, these learning spaces are connected by “the appreciation of small interventions and the desire to work outside of totalizing master plans” (Talen, 2015, p. 142). As Glowacki-Dudka and Helvie-Mason (2004) point out, not being regulated means more space to experiment, to be flexible, and to remain responsive. If you don’t buy into an existing framework, you can actually try something new. Something that you think is important and needed. But the landscape of learn-

ing at the edges is not only diverse, it is also dynamic and unpredictable. Whilst these can be circumstances in which creativity can flourish, there are downsides, too. Working in the margins doesn't simply mean one is free: a lot of time is spent navigating complex and competing interests (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 4) and simply keeping afloat, both personally and financially. Marginality can be a "prime source of insecurity" (Clark, 1968, p. 149).

Clearly, working in the margins can be productive, but it is not straightforward. To abandon the trodden paths involves a whole range of choices and challenges that not everyone would choose to grapple with. The complexity and precarity only increases if the context the margins of which one works in is politically charged. In European countries, where the DIY Learning Spaces I engaged with for this stage of my research are based, alternative educational narratives are tolerated and even applauded as long as they don't break the law – although this situation may not be as stable as it seems, as some of the interviewed practitioners did mention having encountered resistance to their work in the past. The situation is entirely different if you are based in countries like China or Brazil, where the educational paradigm is closely linked to a political narrative that leaves little space for alternatives, making practitioners have to fear repercussions. Whilst some principles and characteristics, such as diversity and adaptability versus a more established and static order may be inherent to many margin-centre dynamics, the actual context determines what being located in either means in practice.

## Two theoretical lenses: Heterotopias and the Overton Window

Despite the challenges involved, many DIY Learning Spaces deliberately position themselves in opposition to (aspects of) the dominant educational paradigm. Compensating for an imperfect reality by creating a new reality, they are counter-sites, like Foucault's 'heterotopias' (1986, p. 24):

"There are [...], probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. [...] Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias."

The role of heterotopias "is to create a space that is other, another real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled." (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). The extent to which any given situation allows this role to be fulfilled depends on many factors. If the paradigm one seeks to

subvert is neoliberalism, there are some special traps. Innovative initiatives are not only at risk of being co-opted by the very system once rejected by their originators, they can even come to fulfil a neoliberal dream:

“Indeed, what could be more welcome to neo-liberal policymakers than a series of alternative spaces, which have internalised the language of entrepreneurship to the extent that they bill themselves as conceptual enterprises?” (Hadchity, 2019, p. 27)

Whilst many an alternative educational practitioner might appreciate the human scale of their heterotopia, the question arises whether such individual initiatives can affect change on a larger scale. The Overton Window (Mackinnac Center for Public Policy, 2019), a theory of change developed by Joseph Overton in the mid-1990s used in the political sciences, offers an interesting perspective on how ideas from the margins can spread and influence the mainstream over time. It illustrates how what is radical today can become acceptable tomorrow and desirable eventually, as the window of normality slowly moves closer towards what were once fringe phenomena. This movement can be influenced.

“There are two ways to do this: the long, hard way and the short, easy way. The long, hard way is to continue making your actual case persistently and persuasively until your position becomes more politically mainstream, whether it be due to the strength of your rhetoric or a long-term shift in societal values. By contrast, the short, easy way is to amplify and echo the voices of those who take a position a few notches more radical than what you really want.” (Bolotsky, 2019).

In other words: if you stay with your principles and refuse to compromise, sooner or later you will “stretch the boundaries of what the majority considers possible and redefine what counts as the “moderate” position” (Lee, 2011). Thus, heterotopian ideas and practices may flow into mainstream reality.

## The evolution of the research project

Following the DIY learning spirit myself, I started this research project in February 2019 during a period of suspension from a compromised PhD situation. Having worked closely with my then-supervisor on the development of the alternative ‘University of the Trees: Lab for New Knowledge and an Eco-Social Future’ (2018) for six years and doing my PhD on this work, I felt like my frame of reference was growing too narrow. Having had experience with diverse educational philosophies since I was a child and a sustained interest in alternative learning spaces since I was a teenager, I decided to contact friends and friends of friends in order to see what is currently living in the world of DIY Learning Spaces.

Soon, I started interviewing people engaged in such spaces about the nature of their work, their motivation, their idea of learning, the outcomes they anticipate, and the challenges they face. I spoke with project initiators and with people who joined existing initiatives as employee, facilitator, student, or participant. I also had some direct experiences of engaging with their work. According to my desire to bridge the gap between research and practice (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller & Schapiro, 2009, p. 2), I didn't just want to gather my data privately and produce a paper only to present it to a selected academic audience. I wanted the stories of the DIY Learning Spaces to be publicly accessible and engaging to read for the people who are actually involved in them. Therefore, I decided to write articles portraying each of the initiatives on my blog, [www.artistsofsociety.com](http://www.artistsofsociety.com), which I started in October 2018. Even though the interviewees were aware that what they told me wouldn't be confidential – unless they requested to have certain sections left out in the public articles, which only happened on three occasions all related to income – they were very open to sharing their questions, aspirations, and experiences, both positive and challenging. They appreciated the space the interview gave them to reflect on their practice and were keen to see their stories being brought together on a public platform.

More than previously expected, the research project is taking on something of a momentum, with ideas for a second phase showcasing DIY Learning Spaces from outside of Europe and turning it into a longitudinal study by revisiting the people, projects, and organisations in 2, 5, 10, and maybe even more years. This would be particularly interesting given that the current interviews only show a snapshot in the – mostly early – development of the work, and in order to see whether and how it evolves and contributes towards a larger change over time, it needs to be traced over a longer period. My hope is that this research project itself might contribute towards connecting practitioners who are often working on shared causes but in relative isolation and amplify these voices from the margins. In that sense, it could be seen as what De Sousa Santos calls a “sociology of emergences”, which is about actively “identifying [...] alternatives and seeking to “enlarge the signs of possible future experiences, under the guise of tendencies and latencies, that are actively ignored by hegemonic rationality and knowledge”” (De Sousa Santos, 2003, in Teamey & Mandel, 2016, p. 238).

## Mapping the DIY Learning Spaces

### *Overview of the featured initiatives*

The landscape of alternative learning spaces is both diverse and dynamic. Being located at the grassroots or in the cracks of the system, change-oriented non-formal and informal adult education initiatives pursue their socially- and/or ecologically-engaged, future-oriented aims in countless different ways. Still, each

of the practitioners interviewed for this research has their own distinguished view on what kind of knowledge and capacities are needed in the world of today, and they (co-)create settings in which such learning can manifest. The sample of DIY Learning Spaces represented in this research ranges from dialogue-based gatherings and games with a purpose to projects supplementing existing (educational) provisions and altogether independent alternatives:

- (1) *The Intuitive Story*, a time-travel roleplaying game involving the use of one's intuition;
- (2) *Earth Forum*, a social sculpture dialogue practice and multi-stakeholder process;
- (3) *Moving School*, a range of educational projects aimed at 'learning from the future';
- (4) *Mycelium*, a creative thinking game for learning to deal with wicked questions;
- (5) *Deconstruct Education*, an initiative to bring more awareness to issues of representation in the Danish curriculum;
- (6) *ThoughtBox*, holistic teaching materials for "learning how (not what) to think";
- (7) *FarmAbility*, a care farm for people with learning disabilities and autism;
- (8) *Vakrēšana*, spaces for learning from each other by engaging in respectful dialogue;
- (9) *Kaospilot*, a half private half state-funded design and business school with a curriculum co-created by students; and
- (10) *Utopia Working Group*, a gathering of sociallyengaged creatives for mutual inspiration.

In this paper, I can only provide a glimpse into each of the projects. The full stories are available on my blog.

### *Who is involved?*

Nearly all these DIY Learning Spaces provide not just one experience, but connect a range of activities for different audiences, including workshops, course programmes, talks, and blogs (1; 3; 4; 5; 6; 9). Whilst some offer one-off experiences (1; 2; 3; 4; 8), all aim for long term engagement. Among them are actual communities of learning, where people come together over an extended period of time (1; 2; 3; 7; 8; 9; 10). All work with adults, although in two cases, where practitioners provide both curriculum supplements and teacher training (5; 6), young people are involved too. In the words of the interviewees, target audiences include "friends" (1; 2; 4; 8; 10) and "strangers" (2; 8), "locals and refugees" (3;



8), “people with an interest in questions of social and ecological change” (2; 6; 10), “People of Colour” (5), “marginalised people” (3; 5; 7), “people with learning disabilities and autism” (7), “creatives” (2; 3; 9; 10), “teachers” (5; 6; 9), “students” (3; 4; 5; 7; 9), “the public” (2; 3; 4), and “policy makers” (2; 5).

Whilst most of the DIY Learning Spaces want to be inclusive and reach out to people from different backgrounds, this is not always easy. Diversifying who gets to be involved and hence increasing one’s impact is therefore in many cases an aim for the future.

### *Approaches to learning*

Altogether, a myriad approaches to learning manifest in these spaces. Many initiatives engage their participants in a consideration of specific social and/or ecological issues, such as climate change and mental health (2; 3; 5; 6; 8; 10). Others focus on inclusion and representation of marginalised peoples and perspectives (3; 5; 6; 7; 8). There are projects that explicitly focus on the development of creativity, imagination, and intuition (1; 2; 3; 4; 9; 10) or on social capacities, including empathy and respectful communication (1; 2; 6; 7; 8). Others, again, promote embodied learning and focus on enhancing sense perception (2; 3; 6; 7; 10). What follows is a taster of the philosophies informing the work of the DIY Learning Spaces as described by the practitioners involved.

- (1) “The Intuitive Story enables people to rediscover their capacity for intuitive knowing and to become more empathic.” (Noa Golan, Germany/Israel)
- (2) “Earth Forum builds a sense of community, which is based on the recognition that we live on a shared planet and are faced with the question of how we want to treat it.” (Heiko Nowak, Germany)
- (3) “Although the Moving School projects can be very different, what links them is a communal and hands-on approach that encourages participants from mixed backgrounds to explore the direct relevance of certain themes to their own life.” (Ludwig Möller, Germany)
- (4) “There are all sorts of social penalties for thinking creatively. I think that’s the most important thing to overcome. That’s why we need a safe space for learning together.” (Dan Holloway, UK)
- (5) “Deconstruction refers to the action of breaking something into separate parts with the purpose of understanding their deeper meaning and examining the reality they create.” (Mette Toft Nielsen, Denmark)
- (6) “ThoughtBox has been designed to address three levels of learning: 1) Thinking, as in learning to question, 2) Feeling, as in developing empathy, and 3) Connecting to self, society, and the natural world.” (Rachel Musson, UK)

- (7) “Spending time outside and engaging in meaningful activities as part of a community is not a given for everyone. Providing more than a safe space or entertainment, FarmAbility enables people with learning disabilities and autism to do just that.” (Olek Salmanowicz, UK/Poland)
- (8) “Learning to listen to each other is as important in Vakarēšana as becoming confident to express oneself.” (Laura Bužinska, Latvia)
- (9) “Kaospilot’s philosophy is based on embracing uncertainty and trying to navigate rather than to resist it.” (Edda Luisa Kruse Rosset, Denmark/Germany)
- (10) “By committing to regular meetings, sharing questions, ideas, and projects that really matter to us, and being open to what wants to emerge, we create a community of mutual inspiration and support.” (Daniel Weyand, Germany)

### *Dilemmas of growth*

What connects the learning spaces featured here is the DIY spirit driving their (co-)creators: the urge to contribute something new where a lack is being perceived. To better understand this spirit of renewal from the margins, I engaged with most of the initiatives in their early stages. Although often, a longer period of research and development preceded the actual founding of the initiative, five out of ten were established less than two years ago (1; 4; 5; 6; 10). Another four have been running for up to ten years (2; 3; 7; 8), and one has existed for 28 years (9). In terms of organisational structure, some of the learning spaces are completely informal and happen in people’s living rooms or out on the streets (2; 8; 10). Others have been incorporated as a social enterprise or comparable legal body (e.g. the German *Verein*) (1; 2; 3; 4; 6). The exceptions are one charity (7) and one half private half state-funded alternative school (9).

Moving to a new stage in a project’s evolution comes with its own dilemmas. For example, how can you pass on a method you developed to others? Laura Bužinska, founder of Vakarēšana:

“Now, other people are also starting to facilitate Vakarēšana. It is great to be able to share the responsibility, so it doesn’t start feeling like a burden on me. This new development also makes me realise, though, how much depends on the host and their character. That has been a real eye-opener. It poses a question about multiplying, because it’s not just about passing on a method. Although the basic process is simple, there are so many variables that influence the quality of the space! And everyone works with them in a different way.”

The concern of finding a form that will allow the initiative to grow and professionalise, whilst staying true to its original values, is echoed by Ludwig Möller, founder of Moving School, a charitable association (German: *Verein*):

“How will pinning down what our work is about impact on its ability to shape shift and develop as it happens? How does defining an entrepreneurial niche and establishing a brand to be better able to sell our expertise and experience go together with working for social and ecological causes?”

For some, adopting an entrepreneurial spirit is a challenge. Others take a more pragmatic approach. Edda Luisa Kruse Rosset:

“We all want to contribute to a paradigm shift, and yet we have to deal with the complexity of the world as it is. It means having to make necessary compromises and moving between different agendas, as we try to find ways of making our ideas work in practice. In the reality of a capitalist society, we have to learn how to make projects financially viable and communicate them appropriately. This applies both to our own work as well as to the school itself.”

In contrast, some people choose to bypass the money question by making their livelihood through other jobs. However, not earning your main income from doing what you love has its drawbacks. Dan Holloway, creator of Mycelium:

“It is great that I can make use of the university’s infrastructure – we have events at museums and libraries, so I get to meet and talk to the public. But whereas academics get to do that as part of their job, I have to go along in my spare time and sometimes hoodwink myself onto the guest list [laughs]. But it’s definitely worth the time and it’s an interesting experience as well, because you have to find a creative way of doing it. Now, it is a question of growing outwards from here.”

### *Doing things differently*

For many DIY learning practitioners, their motivation is linked to a critique of mainstream education. Several of the interviewees felt limited at university. They experienced a lack of space to engage in meaningful conversations, struggled with scientific conventions, or resisted the idea of linear progression as enforced by the Bologna system. Noticing how educational institutions were failing young people, Ludwig Möller even had a burnout from working as a school and university chaplain:

“Even in one of the richest countries of the world, educational institutions are having difficulties to make already disadvantaged young people flourish. Too many enter society without unfolding their full potential, with low self-esteem and few aspirations. The question how this could be different, and how education could be more empowering and inclusive, has been driving me ever since.”

Having worked as a teacher for 13 years, Rachel Musson describes the stunting effect education can have:

“It seems as though when we start to grow in the world, we are almost shackled or suppressed by our education environment (particularly at Secondary level), or perhaps something systemic happens that shuts down our sense of innate,

natural openness, connection, and empathy that we hold as young children. I've described it before as the butterfly-to-caterpillar effect of education. That's why ThoughtBox focuses on processes of unlearning and remembering."

Referring to a higher education context, Dan Holloway has a somewhat different perspective:

"It's become this dogmatic position that creativity and education can't go together, and that in order to be creative you have to work outside of education altogether – whereas I think that if you teach people to teach themselves, it can be education but not in the sense of educating. [...] If you are teaching someone how to do things in a prescriptive way, you will reinforce the problematic situation. However, if you help people to develop the mental tools to find a way of asking or approaching their question differently, you have the hope of finding a way out."

### *Making an impact*

Being involved in a DIY Learning Space creates impact on different levels – some very concrete, some hard to gauge. Witnessing how people are affected by what you do, especially if it is rooted in a sense of meaning and purpose, gives great satisfaction. It can be a reason to carry on despite the challenges involved. Olek Salmanowicz from FarmAbility:

"It is the sense of progression. When people first come in, they are often quite hesitant and anxious. This can be due to their previous education, which has given them a sense of not being able to do things. Here, there are many activities to choose from, and we involve the co-farmers in finding what type of work suits them. The more opportunities you give people, the more they can discover and show their capacities. We create an environment of encouragement and trust, and that way, their confidence grows. Being able to see the impact over time makes the work rewarding, even though it is demanding and the pay isn't great."

Sometimes, one's personal experience can be so fulfilling that it provides enough reason to carry on sharing the work with others. Heiko Nowak:

"Earth Forum always allows me to discover the world anew, to encounter it with fresh eyes and to hear it with fresh ears. I see a value for myself, but I also see the social value. People who enter an Earth Forum as strangers might depart as friends, because they have gone through a valuable experience together. This is where I see a wider relevance to society."

Often, however, the effects of what one does are not so clear. Mette Toft Nielsen, initiator of Deconstruct Education:

"I realise that it is difficult, because as soon as people leave the learning processes I try to engage them in, they walk into the world as it has always been. But I do hope that they get to reflect and that I manage to challenge the way

they think about the world – and I think I do – so that when they go out, they can begin to recognise the issues we talked about.”

Laura Bužinska’s final comment provides a good summary of the underlying intention and the combination of ephemeral and concrete forms of impact described by many of the interviewees:

“To give people a sense of agency, the feeling that they affect things and situations around them and that their choices make a difference, is what I hope to achieve with this work. What we do is an example of that: if it wouldn’t have been for us creating these initiatives, these precious and unique spaces simply wouldn’t exist! What we do is creating reality.”

## Discussion

In the beginning of this paper, I stated that humanity’s survival and that of the planet depends on every person’s ability to become a creative co-shaper of society, and that learning spaces for people of all ages are needed to support this process. Conceived out of need to compensate for an unsatisfactory educational reality shaped by neoliberal interests, the DIY Learning Spaces presented here – like Foucaultian heterotopias – provide a range of such alternative learning opportunities. They are counter-sites, working independently from educational institutions, through more and less formalised types of organisation, or by finding ways of inserting alternative narratives and practices into the system.

In an attempt to enact and embody a do-it-yourself version of utopia, the people involved explore new and more connective ways of relating to themselves, others, and the world around them, creating and spreading practices that foster the development of the perceptive, reflective, imaginative, and communicative capacities required to navigate the challenges we all face in the world of today. They bring awareness to topics of ecological concern and social justice, elevate marginalised peoples and perspectives, and emphasize the importance of learning in community. The new knowledge acquired through these processes takes different forms and cannot always be readily evaluated, as their work involves experiential, relational, intuitive, imaginal, critical, and embodied ways of learning – the effects of which tend to be incremental and can often only be fully appreciated over time. A longitudinal study could shed more light on the potential of DIY Learning Spaces to contribute to a shift in the current educational paradigm at large.

DIY learning practitioners stand out by paying attention to detail in maintaining the quality of the learning space, which is as much a space of encounter, and emphasise the role of trust and time for people to flourish. Valuing a human scale, they are wary of unconsidered growth. Therefore, they are unlikely to start a revolution through numbers. Instead, they may move the Overton Window by familiarising new audiences with their work, steadily contributing to a normalisa-

tion of what are as of yet ‘alternative’ or ‘fringe’ educational practices by “scaling across” rather than “scaling up” (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011) – sharing new knowledge and cultural practices trans-locally whilst maintaining the connection to concrete situations and struggles. These concrete situations will in turn shape the becoming of this work and determinewhat the implications are of promoting alternative educational narratives. In order to appreciate the cultural and geographical diversity within the overarching frame of DIY Learning Spaces, a second phase of this research will seek to also portray initiatives outside of Europe.

Becoming a catalyst for change is not the most comfortable choice, as it requires courage and stamina to advocate new ideas and practices – even if they are already finding resonance among a growing number of people. Yet, for DIY learning practitioners, the satisfaction of acting in accordance with their personal values and from a sense of purpose outweighs the price of being something of an outsider. Whether their work will actually contribute to the shifting of the mainstream educational paradigm, however, doesn’t only depend on their individual will to carry on, but also on their ability to connect with each other, insert themselves in local contexts, and reach out to people who are not already like-minded. This remains a challenge, since creating and running a DIY learning space as well as finding the right ‘construction’ without following an established blueprint can be a messy process. Moreover, the Overton Window is being pulled from multiple sides, as various groups promote their respective and sometimes conflicting narratives. Therefore, being able to communicate one’s ideas, creating spaces for dialogue with others who might not think like oneself, and inviting them into experiencing what alternative realities might feel like will be essential to a successful integration of the socially – and ecologically engaged values advocated by these practitioners into mainstream reality. The DIY Learning Spaces project is an attempt to support this movement of renewal from the margins.

## Conclusion

Reading through this paper you may have wondered: isn’t what these people are doing a bit naïve and idealistic? Aren’t these projects just a drop in the ocean? Is this the way to respond to the crises we are facing today? Clearly, it is not the only way. Nor should it be. Wicked problems such as climate change and global inequality ask for responses on many levels, from direct action, lobbying, and policy making to individual changes in behaviour, community organising, and new forms of education that help change the mindset that caused these issues in the first place. More important than waiting for the perfect idea, the right way of doing things, or others to act on your behalf, I would argue, is taking it upon yourself, daring to take the first step, and start with something in your capacity. Naturally, it is important to keep reflecting critically as you go along, as there is always scope for improvement. I would call for some respect for the courage and

stamina involved in sincerely trying to be a creative co-shaper of society, which often involves making long hours, working in several jobs to make a living or struggling to secure funding, not really being able to plan for the future, and having to explain over and over again what you are trying to do. It is not my aim to glorify a marginal existence, but for many DIY learning practitioners it simply is reality. And it doesn't have to be like that. States could fund alternative educational projects and actively support the renewal of their systems straining at the edges. A Universal Basic Income could distribute wealth such that more people would be able to act upon what is important to them. Because that is exactly what we need to turn the course of our ship steaming towards self-destruction: the creativity of *every* human being to shape society as a work of art.

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