
“La Piazza” - Convivial Spaces for Inter-generational Learning: What places for the digital age?

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EU sponsored “Piazza” team rethinks the nature of conviviality, community, and informal learning in the digital age, and identifies some of the human, environmental, and technological qualities that make for rich *event-spaces* in inter-generational learning. The paper stresses the importance of *third-places*—great good places between home and work—and focuses on their transformative power, or capacity to draw in people from different ages and walks of life to jointly *turn the habitual into the extraordinary*. Drawing from case studies (interviews) and interaction design methods (co-creation of concept cards), the authors provide a conceptual framework to help drive the design of experientially rich places for inter-generational learning.

Keywords. Inter-generational learning; third-places; living stages; play; imagination; dreams; identities.

1. Introduction

Third-places, as defined by Oldenburg, are “great good places between home and work” where people from different ages and walks of life come together to turn the habitual into the extraordinary [1] Examples of third places include cafes, theatres, public squares, museums, and concert halls. They also include dedicated locations for passing events or celebrations, such as carnivals, fairs, markets, or circus. Third places are important to intergenerational learning in that they bring together folks who wouldn’t otherwise meet, to do things they wouldn’t ordinarily do! Transitional zones in Winnicott’s sense [2], these spaces in-between afford a mental elbow-room (Spielraum in German) for social actors to safely explore, recast, play out, and ultimately work through otherwise unspoken aspects of their lives, thus inventing new potentials, or virtualities, together. Third places are both convivial “piazzas” and living stages.

This paper stresses the transformational power of third-places, and presents a conceptual framework to help identify some of the qualities, or attributes, that make for rich inter-generational encounters. Research questions include: Why re-unite old-timers and newcomers? What places for young and elders to meet, enjoy each other’s presence, and learn from one another, at a time when communities, as we know them, dissolve? What “displacements” are needed to unleash people’s imagination while, at the same time, bringing them closer, and back into place! The approach used is iterative, and draws insights from two complementary methods.

Based on case studies in four sites (Cosmo Caixa / MAMAC / Space Signpost, Bristol Harbourside Cultural Quarter, Computer Club House, Viborg – see Barajas, M., Magli, R., Owen, M., Safin S., Toccafondi, G. and Molari, G., “La Piazza” –Convivial Spaces for Inter-generational Learning: Which role can learning technologies play?, presented in this conference) a first series of themes emerged, mostly from interviews, which helped researchers narrow down some of the characteristics that make for great good third places, including safe havens; dream spaces; room for symbolic exchanges and play; room for

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personal expression, mutual respect and empathy. All these dimensions are drivers in informal learning and community building. They play a key-role in inter-generational learning.

Making use of interaction design, or co-creation methods (UniSiena), researchers and site participants joined forces to imagine new forms of integrated third-places (the piazzas, cafes, market-places of tomorrow). Based on first-hand experience, and drawing from diverse expertise, the team drafted a handful of innovative concepts cards. Participants were encouraged to merge digital, physical, and virtual to generate engaging and “futuristic” event-spaces.

Comparing and contrasting the outcomes of the two approaches (fragments of interviews and concept cards) has been instrumental in refining and articulating emerging dimensions.

The ultimate purpose of the “piazza” study is to help educators and practitioners tap into communities’ needs, aspirations, and collective intelligence, by imagining and designing special occasions and places, where elders can learn from the young, and the young from the elders. More generally, the purpose is to re-invent the “piazzas” of the future: places/events where not just young and old, but also insiders and outsiders, can feel at home, learn from each other, and grow-in-connection.

2. Learning from the sites—fragments of interviews

The fragments below have been extracted from interviews in Liège (MAMAC), and selected for their ability to encapsulate [the essence of] what many other practitioners in the site are thinking, and have expressed. The chosen quotes cannot possibly do justice to the richness of the ideas expressed. For a more exhaustive presentation of interviews, refer to report [3].

Time — As outlined by one interviewee (artist, practitioner in intergenerational work), a key to success is to take the time to reflect on the issue of time(s). “Individual times are different between generations. One needs to design collective times, and create rhythms. But one also should allow for intra- and inter-generational moments. If people are put together too quickly, one loses in the richness of the encounter (...) Intergenerational activities can’t be time-efficient or product-driven: They are inversely proportional to the demands of the current era! These projects must have disproportionate ambitions in time, history, and at the same time a very great humility in terms of result“.

Space — Enabling spaces for intergenerational learning are described by another practitioner (under the form of aperitif archives) as: “convivial spaces for encounters, discoveries, and questionings“ of community-related archives. They are informal settings, broad-minded, that call for dedicated areas, or agora, focusing on freedom of exploration and expression (...) They tap into a community’s living memory”.

Networks — [expanded time-space, connectedness] The same practitioner stresses the importance of being part of a network, while still anchored in the here-and-now: “To build such communities means using pre-existing networks (...) in every transmission the path has to be indicated (...) then the encounters can create new networks, facilitating intergenerational meetings“. In today’s world, the young are connected to many on-line networks, yet they don’t always feel grounded or in touch with others.

Journeys — [from actual to possible, from past to future] – Contemplating “how things could be” is further mentioned as playing key role in defining a person’s identity. The same practitioner continues: “the idea is to work with the young—or the elder—on observation of trivial reality and then convene their imagination (...) they have to know from where they start to express themselves and be conscious of that. Often people borrow their identity from pre-formatted discourses“.

Speaking beyond words — [“Cultural baths”]. We need “meeting places that encourage personal expression not only through discourse but through artistic means, Mingling in a cultural bath where things are shared through perfume, colours, sounds, music, people would understand each other beyond words”.

3. Inspirational materials - innovative concept cards

The cards below (Fig. 1) are the outcome of a co-design activity aimed at the production of personal stories based on participants’ experience, and a brainstorming session articulated around idea-generation

techniques: *attribute listing*, to create vignettes, *collection of elements*, to start concept production; and *exquisite corpse*, for the production of concepts. The emerging cards offer a visual and textual encapsulation of 8 concepts to be used as inspirational materials by researchers and actors in the sites. Cards in a readable size can be found at http://www.futurelearning.org/la_piazza/designcard.html

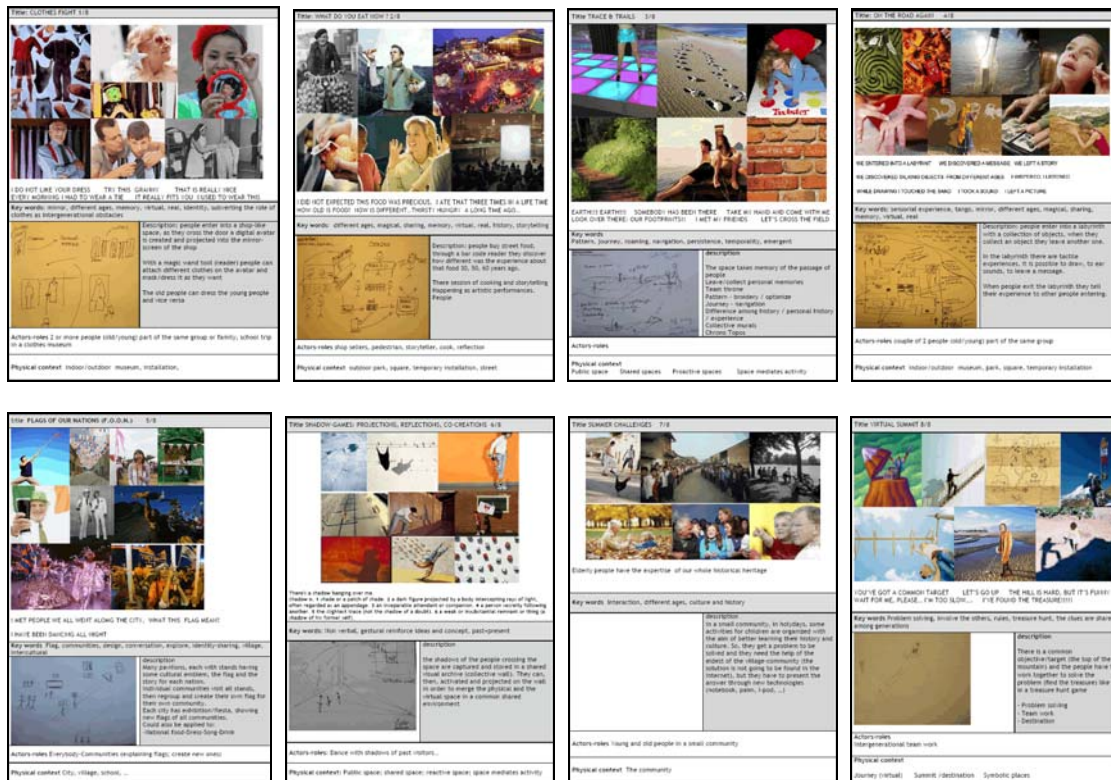


Fig. 1 Concept-cards [8]— clothes fight [1]; what do you eat now? [2]; traces and trails [3]; on the road again [4]; flag our nation [5]; shadow games [6]; summer challenges [7]; and virtual summit [8].

1. Clothes fight describes a role-playing game where people can “put themselves in other people’s shoes”. They dress up to stretch their identities; 2. What do you eat now builds on the power of food to draw people! Gastronomic habits activate a narrative flow when a food is encountered in a public space like a market; 3. Traces and trails lets players drop memories in a public space and share them with passers-by, marking a territory with their traces; 4. On the road again describes a labyrinth where players find tokens left by previous explorers (sounds, pictures) and drop their own, to be found by others; 5. Flag our nations lets players explore the social meanings of cultural symbols, such as flags, and engage in building their own special flag or totem to represent their communities; 6. Shadow games merge physical and virtual to capture people’s shadows as they cross or mingle in a shared area; 7. Summer challenges offer engaging ways for players to solve a problem of interest to all, and where the contribution of each is fundamental to reach a shared goal; 8. Virtual summit is similar to 7 in the form of a treasure hunt. Players are set to reach a goal (mountain top). They join forces to succeed in their adventure.

4. Dimensions

Recurring themes from interviews and concept cards have been grouped into 5 categories, or dimensions, to be taken into account when designing or facilitating events and spaces for intergenerational learning.

4.1 Space-time

Take your time and find your place. In their everyday lives, people don't usually separate time and space the way scientists do. The word "chronotope" (Greek for time/space) captures the notion that, in human experience, place is tied to events, i.e., evocative of what happened in it over time. Conversely, timely events are associated with, and evocative of, place. Intergenerational learning calls for dedicated space/times that enable shifts between private and public, comfort and challenge, "connivance" and inclusiveness (like-minded and extraneous). Time and place are experienced differently at different ages, and so are levels of tolerance for "filled" versus, "empty" time/space (noisy/silent, crowded/void, fast/slow).

4.2 Traces and trails / routines and rituals

Keep track and come back. In Casey's words, "Who we are is where we are and when we are" [4]. Finding one's way around (navigating) and keeping a bearing (having a direction or destination) are needed for people to exist, physically and mentally, in time and space. Traces and trails are *self-orienting device* to help people in transit—or minds in motion—be grounded and able of return. So are routines and rituals. They also convey an identity to place itself (genius loci), and stimulate a sense of belonging by the people who contributed to the construction of its identity.

4.3 ME ++ (self-expansion, personal growth)

Tell your tale and find your voice. Identity formation is about staying in touch with what one feels, perceives, understands and likes. It also involves an ability to speak one's mind, and be heard. To Bruner, stories happen to those who know how to tell them [5]. Early on, children learn to tell their tales to those willing listen, and they soon become silent if their gift is not heard. People, young and old, speak in a hundred languages to express themselves (words, gestures, humour, music) [6]

4.4 Togetherness (relating to other, us / them)

Belong and be loved – Mingle and share. As a member of a socio-cultural community, a person's identity has much to do with becoming an active and respected member of a group. It also has to do with being able to negotiate differences. Intergenerational encounters are a means for old-timers and newcomers to reshape their roles in society, define a new identity for themselves, and regain a voice as a group.

4.5 Dream space: Imagine, Create!

Dream it up and make it happen! The future belongs to those who invent it! Making dreams come true is a key to both personal and societal growth. Envisioning possibilities, or gauging *what is* in terms of *what could be*, opens new horizons and sheds different light into one's reality. Imagination naturally occurs in make-believe activities, such as storytelling, or play. Creativity reigns in the mind of the artist.

4.6 From experiential qualities to design guidelines (cf. table 1)

Table 1 summary of dimensions, examples, and lessons for design

Dimensions	As experienced	Example	Lessons for design
Space-time	Chronotope.	Sun-dials	Time-aware spaces, spatially grounded moments
self (expanded)	ME++ There's more to	Me as I was (past) Me as I will be (future)	Design stages / events to boost personal expression,

	me than my individual self, here and now	Me as I 'd like to be Me when I go there. Me when I am here	self-expansion, and identity formation. Ex: story telling; performance
US (relations)	Connectedness Empathy Dance/dialogue	Me seen through other Other seen through me Many kinds of others	Design stages / events for Sharing, trading, dancing Ex. Become other/carnival
Dream-space	Envision new horizon. Open possibilities. Invent future	How I wish things were How things could be Fictionalize. Dramatize Think out of the box	Design stages / events for Co-creation, co-invention, Building fictions together Theatre. Poetry. Story-telling

5. Conclusions

The ultimate goal of the “piazza” study is to help educators, practitioners, and policy-makers tap into communities’ untapped potential and distributed intelligence. The paper discussed on the role of third-places in allowing folks who don’t normally meet invent new possibilities for themselves. It fleshed out conditions for old-timers and newcomers to feel at home, learn from each other, and grow-in-connection. While this paper has not directly addressed how digital technologies can be used to augment existing or imagined third-places, it lays the ground to pursue research in this direction. This specific question is at the core of a research project that is about to start under the auspices of the Minerva Programme. Indeed, the dimensions emerging from the study are meant as guiding principles in the design of digital places.

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