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‘IT TAKES A LOT OF ENERGY TO DO[ING] NOTHING’: REFUSALS AND IDLENESS

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ABSTRACT

What is the role of ‘time’ in experimental applications of the educational commons? How do we navigate the condition of time that is constantly ‘running out’ and is ‘never enough’? Do we consider ‘time’ among the common resources that need to be collectively managed in the implementation of the commons? In the context of the European project *SMOOTH (H2020): Passing through Enclosures and Reversing Inequalities through Educational Commons*, we co-designed four Case Studies in four MOMus Museums in

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Thessaloniki. We undertook these case studies as instances of commoning education, that is, of configuring the museum and its resources, as well as the pedagogical practices therein, as common goods that are collectively governed by its community in alignment with the values of the commons. In this paper we look at aspects of our empirical data through the lens of theories of time related to education and educational commons. We explore the participants' experiences of time and the way teachers and museum educators grappled with issues of time in their attempts to develop commoning educational practices. It is suggested that time emerges as imperative with regard to the need to provide an open space for collaboration, creativity and reflection, collective decision-making, the sharing of authority, and the development of practices of unlearning.

Keywords: Momus Museum, commoning education, educational commons, collaboration, creativity, reflection, collective decision making

Time, temporality, and the Educational Commons

Most parts of the world today are ‘governed by the clock’ (Nanni 2020). Clock time is an international language, so common and unquestionable that, as Nanni indicates, ‘an alternative consciousness of time seems scarcely conceivable’ (2020). The social perception of time is a construction with a very short history that dates back to ‘1884 with the official deployment of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) - the corollary of Western, temporal imperialism’ (Nanni 2020).

Since then, the notion of time has developed to cover the needs of the growing capitalist societies and marketized labour. This has repercussions on the shaping of ‘working time’, and its decoupling from “leisure time”, and of course ‘educational time’.

The time of clocks and calendars, of minutes, hours, days, and years, is unquestionably the dominant time experience in contemporary Western education: so many minutes set aside for the next test, so many hours for a particular topic, so many years for each stage of the children’s educational career. Learning, teaching, and even the payment of teachers are established and calculated on the basis of calendars and clocks (Adam 1995: 61).

Educational time is then shaped by what Adam calls ‘artefactual devices’, to refer to the bells, buzzers, and timetables, functioning as parameters and frameworks within which the educational process, and its teacher/student roles therein, are defined, organized, and performed; the logic that underpins educational time is one that aims for ‘cost-efficient’ and ‘productive’ outcomes (1995: 61).

Educational time is ‘linear’ and ‘homogeneous’, conditions that promote and perpetuate colonial discourses and material relations of power (Glissant [1997] 2020: 64). This, according to Glissant, expresses itself in at least three ways:

1. *The progressive discourse of civilizing both the children and the profession of education*
2. *The production and promotion of universal, ordered, standardized hierarchies of knowledge and value systems*
3. *The interconnectedness of neoliberal educational policies (i.e. evidence-based curriculum), medicalization/remediation of child ‘deviation’, (i.e. cognitive, sexual, behavioral), and persistent ‘segrenomic’ (Rooks 2017) logic of the different modes of temporalities (school to prison pipeline)*

In our paper, we are interested in the entanglements of the social construction of time with commoning educational practices. There is literature that engages with educational practices (broadly defined) and time (Korsgaard 2019; Pechtelidis 2020), and also chunks of literature that discuss time in relation to the commons (Bollier & Helfrich 2015; Korsgaard 2019; Pechtelidis 2020), but we noticed a significant gap when it comes to time and commoning educational practices.

Through the prism of four case studies, which we studied as instances of commoning education, we bring the focus on snapshots from our experience in the field whereby educators, teachers, young participants but also ourselves in our complex positionality as researchers, grapple with elements of time and temporality in more or less obvious ways.

Before continuing with our findings, we'd like to give you a brief overview of the context of our CS.

The MOMus case studies

In the context of SMOOTH we conducted research on CSs implemented in the four MOMus Museums in Thessaloniki based on the philosophy of the educational commons (Bollier & Helfrich 2015; Korsgaard 2019; Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis 2020; Pechtelidis 2020). Each CS was designed and implemented by a different group of museum professionals, artists and educators and aimed at different groups of young interlocutors. Therefore, the MOMus Museum of Modern Art-Costakis Collection collaborated with a group of teenagers from a vocational high school, the MOMus- Experimental Center for the Arts with a theatre group that consists of both abled and disabled artists, the MOMus-Museum of Contemporary Art with deaf and hard hearing young people and the MOMus Museum of Photography with teenage pupils with multicultural migratory background. In all four CS, which were understood/designed as instances of commoning education, we looked at how educational commons can inform the development of experimental artistic practices in museums and art centres.

Our research design remained open and flexible, allowing us to dynamically (re)shape through our research encounters in the field, directing our observations accordingly. In that vein, we considered a number of key elements that, in accordance with the theories of the commons, we considered to be important to observe and record how they played out in the context of attempting the educational commons in practice. Those elements included 'time', alongside participation, the shaping of hierarchies and distribution of decision-making power, to name a few. In regards to 'time', in particular, our intention was initially to observe if -and if yes, under which conditions- time could be framed and/or managed as a collective resource by the educators and the young

participants in each case study. Prompted by our data about time, in what follows, we share some first analytical insights that approach time as: i) a collective resource and, ii) a practice of refusal. Through these prisms, we lay out some first thoughts that speak to the imperative of reconsidering our understanding of -and by extension relationship with- time if we desire to put into practice the commoning of education in informal, cultural educational settings.

Insights and reflections from the field

Approaching time as a collective resource

In a call for sociology to do more to advance our understanding of time as a ‘social differential’ and a ‘power relation’, Pantazidou asks:

If we were to see time as a collective resource, how would we live (in) it differently? This is more than a question of a fairer distribution of time but of time recast as a shared project (Pantazidou 2022: Time as a collective resource, para 4)

Pantazidou’s question is one that resonates with our observations about the attempts to negotiate time as a common resource in the context of the four MOMus CS. What we observed is that a fairer distribution of time, which in the educational context might signify equal amounts of time for learning, playing and/or ‘doing nothing’, is not necessarily a sufficient condition for it to become collectively managed by the educators and pupils involved in the educational praxis. The educators’ attempt to recast time as a shared project, was an attempt that often felt as a leap of faith from their part as it involved letting go of their leading role as educators and their power over time. However, their well-intended attempts would not always find fertile ground as the efforts to collectively manage time did not always resonate with the youth’s own perception of the issue at hand; we were often left with the impression that it was hard for them to believe that the power of time-management could actually be handed over to them - the absence of experiences in institutional environments where children are entrusted with managing (their) time certainly plays a role here.

A young person asks the educator about the time we have available but she replies that this does not concern us as much at the moment. Educator2 and Educator1 open up the question of the management of our shared time together as a topic of discussion to the group. The educators propose a mutual agreement around the management of time, initiated by the youth. [...] The goal for our future sessions is set to the youth making decisions about when we take breaks, and how long these will last, as well as the transitions from one activity to the next one. (MOMus Modern, fieldnotes excerpts)

In other cases, we felt that ‘having more time’ was not necessarily enough, if not underpinned by the educator’s intention to ‘let go’ of their authority over time: ‘*If only we had more time, we would entrust the process with the children*’, repeated an educator from the Museum of Contemporary Art, but our observations show us that *how we think about time* is maybe equally if not more important than the time we have objectively available to us.

One way to approach the recasting of time as a shared project is through the prism of the question of who decides when we ‘start’ and when we ‘stop’. This decision most of the time reflects the educators’ anxiety and mixed feelings about controlling time and/ or stepping back along with the intention of openness:

Example 1: As the activity keeps on going, Educator3 says ‘Good, we will now do the same standing still (...)’. A few moments later Educator3 realizes that the group is not interested in the activity and says ‘Let’s try something different now (...)’. The group tries the new activity but with as poor interest as before. A young participant asks ‘Can we quit?’ and Educator3 answers ‘No, let’s try to reverse the roles (...). Can we try this for three minutes?’. Some voices answer positively. A minute after Educator3 says ‘Not reversing roles- let’s try moving from the center to the edges of the room (..)’. Three minutes later Educator3 announces the end of the activity. “You now have twenty minutes to experiment moving (...)’. (MOMus Experimental, fieldnotes excerpts)

Perhaps then, aside from the objective time constraints imposed by a program’s design, what is equally needed is to question the ideas we hold about time in the first place, the narratives we have embodied about whom time belongs to in the context of education. The question that arises is how do we shift our thinking about time as quantity through the prism of productivity, to time as quality and the practice of taking time?

‘Taking time’ as a practice of refusal

Educator3 says ‘we have very little time to produce something’ and Educator2 answers ‘the important thing is not to produce something but how we produce it’ (MOMus Photography, fieldnotes excerpts)

This notion of ‘creating time’ is something that caught our attention as we were going through our ethnographic data; there were those instances where, for example, the educators created a feeling of ‘stretching’ time, in an otherwise constrained time schedule; we felt these instances as resistances, or in Honig’s (2021) terms, ‘refusals’, whereby the objective limitations and time shortages imposed by external conditions (research/museum/school) were put aside, even so

momentarily: they mattered less, and the process of the here and now, the relational, absorbed us in its unpredictability and serendipity. We understood these instances whereby the educators ‘created’ time as practices of refusal.

Another expression of this refusal can be found in the phenomenon of ‘idle time’, the time of seemingly doing nothing, feeling bored, and lost.

During an open improvisation the group moves in a slow and sensuous rhythm/ pace. They dedicate time to explore and experience the exhibits. Observing them from afar, one could say that they are moving in a state between wakefulness and sleep, reality and dream. This ‘reverie’ state is slow and gentle. Nobody feels the need to be performative. (MOMus Experimental, fieldnotes excerpts)

Time is closely related to the idea of productivity. As Adam puts it ‘the requirement in Western-style societies to produce good work fast, at the correct rate, to deadlines determined by timetable and calendars, is thus underpinned by quantitative time’ and ‘every task has its own optimal time’. As such, Adam continues, ‘Time-wasting is considered acceptable only during specially created periods of time (...)’ (Adam 1995: 64). This idea of ‘time-wasting’ lies in the core of the refusals we observed during our research- the notion of ‘doing nothing productive’ while prioritizing the process over the product. As Räber puts it, time-wasting ‘represents a temporal opening for a collective emancipatory politics from the purported naturalness and normativity of productivism’ (Räber 2023: 4), a break of ‘unproductive time in the horizontal time of productivism’, which on the other hand is the norm in western societies regarding education, work and everyday life (Räber 2023: 2).

As every refusal, however, this practice has an affective dimension which, we observed, is experienced differently through the prism of different educational roles. The youth would often experience idle time as boredom and fatigue from not being able to coordinate and make decisions. At the same time, the educators would experience idle time more often as discomfort and bewilderment when they didn’t fill the shoes of their expected roles.

Educator1- ‘I feel strained with the time that passes at the beginning of each meeting in the museum without doing anything [..]’.

The school teachers, on the other hand, perceived idle time and time refusals to be an inherent quality of the social category of childhood: one school teacher of the MOMus Modern CS said:

‘When this program is over, I will certainly need to remind them that sloppiness may be ok in this context [of the project in the museum], but is not something that can be tolerated at school. Oh, God, these kids have been born idle.’

Implying that children need a clearly defined and pre-determined time-framework so they can operate and ‘do some work’; otherwise, they will always return to being ‘sloppy’, an essentialist ‘state of childhood’ that counters productivity as defined by linear time.

‘Time wasting’ is a necessary practice in the context of the educational commons for a newly-formed group to identify its group dynamics and establish sustainable commoning practices, such as collective decision making:

The one school teacher steps in, interrupting an ongoing discussion that lasts longer than anticipated amongst the youth sitting across the room: ‘We’re losing time discussing the same stuff over and over again [...] Let’s do a project! I don’t think we have so much time to [talk about it that much]’. ‘I’m very confused...’, comments loudly one of the students. One of the museum educators picks up on her comment: ‘What can this tell us about our team, the fact that we feel confused?’. [...] The small ball we circulate in the room to take turns as we speak, lands on another museum educator’s hands: ‘I think the time we are devoting now is useful; it will help us know better the dynamics of our group next time. If we had appointed someone to moderate [the discussion], we wouldn’t be turning in circles, always returning to the same issues’. Later that day, another museum educator would comment during the reflection session: ‘I think it’s great that there was frustration -[it will help us] coordinate!’. (MOMus Modern, fieldnotes excerpts)

Time as a refusal or as ‘time of doing nothing of productive value’ (Räber 2023: 4) has created several ‘cracks’ throughout our CSs, exactly by creating time for the emergence of new forms or relations and possibly new perspectives regarding the character of museum-based educational encounters. We regard these moments as instances of ‘openings to a different activity, the threshold of a counter-world with a different logic and a different language’ as Holloway (2010: 19) puts it.

Discussion

What (educational) possibilities are torn open when we think of -and treat- time as a collective resource that is not linear and is liberated from the logics of productivism? As researchers and practitioners, we have often been asked whether the educational commons can actually be ‘real’, a ‘tangible alternative[s]’ (Gielen

2018: 84) in educational contexts in Greece today. We like to think of the answer to this question through John Holloway's notion of 'cracks', meaning 'explorations-creations of a world that does not yet exist' (Holloway 2010: 38) which 'often possess an extraordinary energy and creativity, taking us into new dimensions of understanding and perception' (2010: 79). This is where we can imagine and practice 'cracks' through time. As Holloway puts it '[t]he cracks are always questions, not answers' (2010: 20); and they 'begin with a No', a refusal, 'from which there grows a dignity, a negation-and-creation' (2010: 17).

Our fieldwork pointed us to two scenarios whereby the order of the educational time can be disrupted, opening up cracks towards 'otherwise educational imaginaries' (Dernikos et al. 2020). The first one is by approaching time as a collective resource; this includes the practices, tools, methods, but also importantly the mindsets, through which the managing of educational time is no longer monopolized by the expert-educator but is collectively managed and shaped by students and educators alike; we observed that in the making of collective decisions about break time, the start and ending of an activity, and whom time belongs to in the educational context. The question then arising from this scenario is how do we shift our thinking from the quantity of time to the quality of time, and how we 'recast it as a shared project' (Pantazidou 2022: Time as a collective resource, para 4). The second one refers to refusals through the practice of 'taking time'; here we noted the prioritizing of the process over the outcome, actively valuing 'idle time' and countering dominant discourses of productivity by shifting our attention to the value of 'doing nothing'; here, it is also important to further explore the affective dimensions of this practice of refusal, as we observed them through feelings of discomfort, boredom, but also essentialist views of childhood and youth such as that children are 'born idle'.

These two scenarios/ notions, then, constitute, in our opinion, a first step towards 'imagining alternative epistemologies, axiologies, and ontologies of time' as well as a revolutionary act, not only because it undermines the idea of productivity and linear time but also because it would potentially contribute to a wider process of decolonization of educational practices, policies, research and organization (Mikulan & Sinclair 2023).

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