

Voices of dwelling: education, urban art, and postdigital multimodal narratives in the peripheral lifeworlds of adolescents

Voci dell'abitare: educazione, arte urbana e narrative multimodali postdigitali nelle periferie adolescenziali

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents are facing complex social, cultural and technological changes that are reshaping how they develop and perceive society. In multicultural urban suburbs, narratives of deficit can obscure their constructive actions in creating their cities, minimizing their experiences and rendering their “voices of dwelling” invisible. This study examines the conditions that enable adolescents to narrate their experiences and imagine the future, and explores how urban art, narrative cartography and multimodal storytelling can function as pedagogical tools for place-making. Through postdigital configurations in which the body, media, and community are intertwined, murals, maps, and mobile assemblages render marginal experiences visible and shareable. A qualitative, interpretive analysis of a dialogue between a project carried out in Northern Italy and practices developed in the United States and Latin America shows how multimodal narratives can express disorientation whilst revealing potential resources and innovative relationships. These generate “third spaces” in which urban art fosters a sense of place, intercultural bonds, and future images.

Complessi cambiamenti sociali, culturali e tecnologici stanno rimodellando lo sviluppo degli adolescenti e il modo in cui percepiscono la società. Nelle periferie urbane multiculturali, narrazioni deficitarie spesso oscurano la partecipazione e il loro contributo civico, rendendo invisibili le “voci dell'abitare”. Il presente contributo esplora le condizioni che consentono agli adolescenti di narrare le proprie esperienze e immaginare il futuro, esaminando come l'arte urbana, la cartografia narrativa e lo storytelling multimodale possano funzionare come dispositivi pedagogici di costruzione del senso del luogo. Attraverso configurazioni postdigitali che intrecciano corpo, media e comunità, murales, mappe e assemblaggi mobili rendono visibili e condivisibili esperienze marginali. Un'analisi qualitativa interpretativa del dialogo tra un progetto realizzato nel Nord Italia e pratiche sviluppate negli Stati Uniti e in America Latina mostra come le narrazioni multimodali esprimano disorientamento, ma anche risorse immaginate e innovazioni relazionali. Queste generano “terzi spazi” in cui l'arte urbana promuove il senso del luogo, legami interculturali e immaginari futuri.

Keywords: education, urban art, multimodal narratives, postdigital pedagogies, peripheral adolescence

Parole chiave: educazione, arte urbana, narrazioni multimodali, pedagogie postdigitali, periferie adolescenziali

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Introduction

Current trends of precaritisation, segregation, and digital mediation are shaping how young people engage with work, learning, and citizenship. This is a common occurrence in urban spaces that feature high levels of economic disparity and cultural diversity. Adolescents are frequently represented in public discourse and the media through deficit narratives, which are associated with risk, vulnerability, and criminal behavior. Such representations fail to acknowledge how adolescents navigate, make sense of, and shape their environment daily (Farrugia, Wood, 2017; Farrugia, 2019; Kettunen, 2023). This approach fails to consider how adolescents' lived realities and epistemological contributions can help imagine more equitable futures and enable educators to understand the complexity of adolescence.

In the last two decades, global research has highlighted the significance of acknowledging youth as knowledge-laden subjects who need opportunities for their voices to become audible in the decision-making spaces that impact their lives (Wong *et alii*, 2010; Checkoway, 2011). It is vital that there be common ground: listening to youth is not merely a form of self-expression but a political and pedagogical process that involves redistribution of visibility, agency, and urban citizenship (Jacquez *et alii*, 2012; Rowland *et alii*, 2024).

From a hermeneutic-aesthetic perspective and in light of recent postdigital debates, we examine how urban art, social cartography, and multimodal narratives help young people reconfigure everyday spaces, imagine new forms of sociality, and reimagine their ways of inhabiting the world (Escaño, Mañero, 2025).

1. Adolescence: educational challenges within hyper-technological environments

The contemporary adolescent exists in an environment of uncertainty, fragmentation, and rapid change. They constantly seek out a sense of self, involvement in society, and community, especially in the case of adolescents in multicultural urban suburbs experiencing socio-economic disparities, cultural exclusion, and poor public image. Meanwhile, their experiences occur within hybrid environments where presence, communication, emotions, and meaning are spread across physical, spatial, and mediated aspects. Thus, adolescence takes place within inter-realities and *postdigital lifeworlds*, where digital technologies are deeply woven in relational, perceptual, and cultural life rather than simply being external tools (Riva, 2014). Therefore, educational reflection should consider not only how young people use technology but also how it shapes their self-perception and relationships with others (Lavanga, Mancaniello, 2022).

The pedagogical implications of this are hard to sidestep. If adolescence is shaped by layered, interconnected environments, then education cannot simply transmit content and hope it lands. It must create conditions through which young people can genuinely interpret their worlds, give form to their experiences, and come to see themselves as capable, expressive subjects. That requires something more than good curriculum design: it requires sustained attention to the symbolic, emotional, and spatial mediations through which meaning gets made, challenged, and shared. Narration, within this framework, is not just a linguistic act. It becomes a situated, relational practice – a way for adolescents to work out and articulate where they actually stand within the complex, often contradictory social worlds they move through (Biffi, 2010).

Multimodality matters here for a reason that is easy to overlook: young people's relationship with the world is already mediated by multiple languages, many of which regularly exceed what linear, text-based forms of expression can hold. To insist on textuality as the primary or most legitimate mode of learning is, in practice, to leave a great deal of adolescent experience unacknowledged. Multimodal approaches take a different position – they treat visual, sonic, gestural, and spatial languages as genuine forms of knowledge, expression, and communication, not as supplements to the real thing. In doing so, they open up room in the learning space for experiences that traditional discourse tends to ignore, fragment, or push to the margins (Zaidi, Sah, 2024). This shift carries particular weight in suburban and urban contexts, where the same spaces that produce marginalization and stigma can also, under the right conditions, become sites of recognition, critical understanding, and symbolic reinvention.

Urban art works precisely at this intersection. It gives adolescents a way to engage with how their local

environment is represented, to negotiate what those representations mean collectively, and to begin imagining other, perhaps more livable, ways of belonging to a place. Integrating urban art into pedagogical practice offers an opportunity to connect embodied experience, visual culture, public space, and civic imagination in ways that resonate strongly with the postdigital, multimodal condition of contemporary youth.

2. Postdigitality: towards a hybrid ontology of the real

The conceptual oppositions digital/analogue, image/body, virtual/in-person, or spectacle/life no longer function as analytical categories for describing contemporary social experience: from a postdigital perspective, these dichotomies no longer reveal themselves as stable ontological differences and instead operate as historical constructions whose usefulness has been diluted once they landed within the symbiotic context existing between technology and society (Jandri *et alii*, 2018).

The critical theoretical tradition of the twentieth century warned of the mediation of the then-emerging mass-mediated reality already dominated by technological reproduction mechanisms. Guy Debord (1967/2014) argued that the spectacle should not be understood as a set of images but as a social relation mediated by images, in which direct experience was progressively displaced towards representation. However, contemporaneity, in that progressive development now intensified more than ever, confirms that we no longer live before representations that replace the real, but rather inhabit a framework in which representation and reality mutually constitute one another. Within this framework, the previously announced lack of functionality gains meaning, whereby spectacle and life merge. As Martín Prada (2018) observed, the total visibility of experience does not imply its falsification but its ontological reconfiguration, since the visible does not conceal the real: it now forms part of its very structure. The digital is not the opposite of the physical; it is a material reorganisation of the physical world. From this angle, the online experience is viewed as a means of inhabiting the world rather than as a means of escaping it.

This interweaving of dimensions is highlighted by the postdigital paradigm. The prefix “post” highlights a cultural state where digital technology is no longer seen as a novelty and has become woven into the fabric of daily life, rather than referring to an “after” digital era (Negroponte, 1998). In this way, a digital technology ceases to be seen as a medium and as technology itself when it becomes widespread, persistent, and localized; rather, it becomes a part of our organic and natural surroundings. Both offline and online dimensions take part in a single media interaction between layers. In a context of constant media interaction between layers, both dimensions – offline and online – participate in a single experiential system. Peters, Jandri and Hayes (2021) describe this condition as a postdigital convergence in which biological, cultural and technological processes intertwine in dynamic configurations. This entanglement also transforms the notion of space. The screen can no longer be understood as a surface of representation, but rather as a relational space in which social, affective and political interactions take place. Screens function as interfaces that articulate subjectivities, generate communities and structure forms of knowledge. Everyday life unfolds within a superposition of perceptual layers in which the in-person and the mediated continuously affect one another. Contemporary culture is characterised by the permanent co-production among subjects, devices and symbolic systems.

Such a postdigital transformation compels us to reconsider the foundations of educational, artistic and cultural discourses. Consequently, a postdigital education requires conceptual frameworks capable of interpreting the complexity of environments in which the symbolic, the material and the technological mutually constitute one another.

3. Social cartography as a pedagogical tool: narrating, mapping and producing the world in postdigital contexts

If the postdigital condition is characterised by structural hybridisation between technological, social and bodily dimensions, then the central pedagogical question would no longer consist solely in teaching con-

tent, but in generating frameworks of understanding that enable subjects to position themselves critically within that complexity. In this regard, social cartography stands out as a particularly fitting methodology, since it manages to translate something as abstract as sociotechnical systems into concrete practices: representing, narrating, and situating oneself in the world. A map is not simply a descriptive tool: it is, above all, an epistemological device. As Paulston and Liebman (1994) point out, maps allow those who create them to make social relations visible, along with their symbolic positions and those power structures that would otherwise stay buried in the semantic layers of the territory we inhabit.

From contemporary critical perspectives, this productive dimension of the map is central. Herrera (2022) argues that social cartography focuses on the representation of contexts, understood as a process of expansion that happens in the very act of understanding. The map becomes a dialogical space, a place where the social can be grasped, and continually re-grasped, as something inherently dynamic and plural.

In the postdigital era, this idea carries more weight than ever. Cartography is no longer confined to static graphic media: cartographic works are now built within multimodal environments where very different languages come together – visual, auditory, textual, geospatial – and digital platforms make it possible to layer, interweave, and merge information across multiple narrative paths and sensory registers. Physical and symbolic experience becomes dynamically integrated with multimedia through technological mediation. Cartographic action thus becomes a paradigmatic practice of postdigital epistemology – hybrid, relational, and processual in both its meaning and its way of operating.

This orientation also has recognizable historical roots in twentieth-century artistic and critical practices. The Situationist *dérive*, proposed by Debord (1956), involved moving through urban space while attending to its psychogeographical effects. In contemporary art education, this idea has been taken up to explore the relationships between subjectivity, space, and creation. Alonso-Sanz (2019) notes that cartographic practices make it possible to teach not only content, but also ways of perceiving and thinking about the environment. When students produce maps, they are not simply learning about a territory – they are learning to position themselves within it. That distinction matters more than it might first appear, because it is precisely what transforms cartography from a representational technique into a practice of situated self-knowledge. Social cartography can be understood as a critical technology of visualisation. It makes visible social structures, power relations and subjective positionings that often remain implicit. To map is to problematise: to ask who defines territories, who is included or excluded from them, and which narratives are legitimised as official.

4. Maptelling: postqualitative artistic methodology for social knowledge

The practice of *maptelling* (Escaño, Mañero, 2025) involves a multimodal artistic methodological approach that incorporates a situated narrative. It is an exercise that promotes research, creation and reflection in a single process. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it generates knowledge with and about reality through multimedia storytelling and interaction between subjects, territories, languages and technological mediations. It is a postdigital perspective that cuts across media and social planes.

From an epistemological standpoint, maptelling is situated within the postqualitative turn in educational and social research. Postqualitative methodologies challenge the positivist assumptions of logical empiricism – in particular, the idea that knowledge can be captured through stable categories and objective representations – and instead propose open, intentionally interrelational, and experiential approaches linked to posthuman perspectives (Lather, St. Pierre, 2013; Pacheco-Costa, Guzmán-Simón, 2022). Within this framework, data are not conceived as pre-existing entities collected by the researcher, but as emergent productions generated through processes of interaction.

All of this sits within a longer tradition – one built around artistic languages, where aesthetic, affective, and embodied experience has rarely needed defending as a form of knowledge, because those working within it have simply always treated it as such. Barone and Eisner (2012) speak to this directly: artistic processes reach dimensions of reality that even careful, rigorous propositional language tends to fall short of. For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), this is not incidental – artistic creation thinks differently, through percepts and affects as much as concepts, and in doing so it reaches what other forms of inquiry tend to leave alone. Maptelling works in this register. To mistake it for a presentational technique, or a way of

“dressing up findings that exist independently of it, is to misunderstand what it actually does – which is to produce knowledge: situated, multisensory, and irreducible to any single mode of expression.”

Within this framework, maptelling can be understood as a heuristic practice that brings together cartography, narration, and territorial exploration (Fig. 1). Its aim is not to describe a space in any supposedly objective way. Quite the opposite – it sets out to activate subjective processes, encourage critical interpretation, and foster symbolic creation in relation to the territory one inhabits. The resulting map does not merely represent a context: it represents relationships, experiences and meanings constructed collectively, in community. This processual dimension situates it in alignment with the notion of the third educational space, understood as a hybrid and constantly evolving environment where formal, informal and experiential knowledges converge (Anderson *et alii*, 2023; Escaño, Dewhurst, 2024).



Fig. 1: Screenshot from Maptelling web. Note: taken from the website <https://institucional.us.es/maptelling/>

From a postdigital perspective, maptelling articulates analogue and digital dimensions in a symbiotic manner: the practice begins with physical traversals of a specific territory – urban spaces, university campuses, neighbourhoods, natural landscapes – and continues with the production of narrative materials in diverse formats (photographs, sound recordings, texts, drawings, videos or performative records). These materials are then brought together in digital geolocation or cartographic visualisation platforms, producing interactive maps that weave embodied experience together with technological mediation.

The experiences carried out so far across a range of international educational contexts have helped identify common features and pedagogical possibilities of the method. Implementations in academic seminars, international research meetings and training events have drawn together participants from different disciplines, nationalities and professional backgrounds, giving rise to collective narrative maps that connect personal stories with shared territories. These experiences demonstrate that the principal value of maptelling lies not solely in the final product, but in the collaborative process of construction that makes it possible.

The maptellings cited as examples constitute complementary experiences that demonstrate the pedagogical, critical and relational potential of this methodology in international and multicultural contexts. The first case to highlight, *Construir lo (in)visible* (Fig. 2), developed in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in 2023, took place within the framework of a university seminar focused on arts, inclusion and border pedagogies. Its conceptual axis was to explore the dialectic between subject and context through the question: “What in you belongs to your context, and what in your context belongs to you?”, promoting situated reflection on identities, community bonds and invisibilised dimensions of experience.

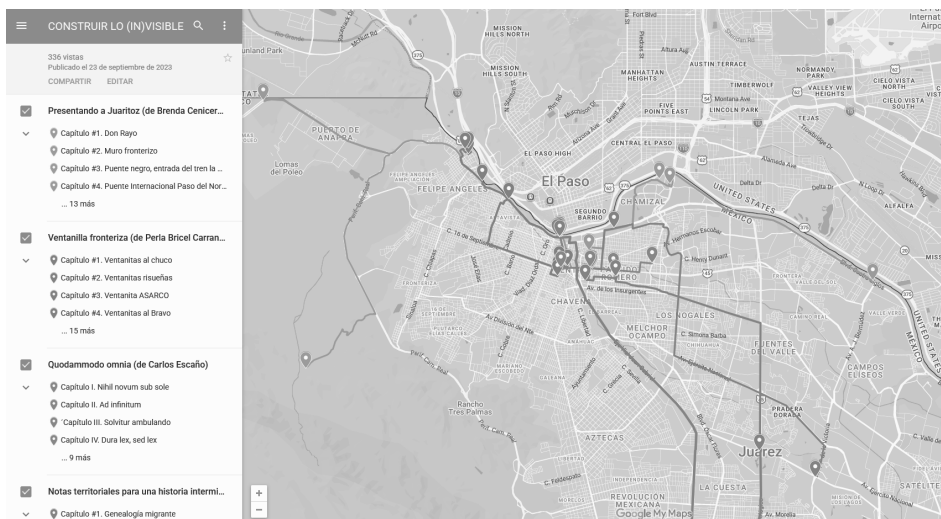


Fig. 2: Screenshot from maptelling *Construir lo (in)visible*. Note: taken from the website <https://institucional.us.es/maptelling/>

The second, *What can we do in common?* (Fig. 3), developed in New York, United States, in 2023, emerged from an international meeting at the City University of New York and was oriented towards investigating possibilities for collective action. Maptelling functioned as a dispositif for reimagining the environment and collaboratively constructing knowledge, articulating educational, creative and social practices from an intercultural perspective.

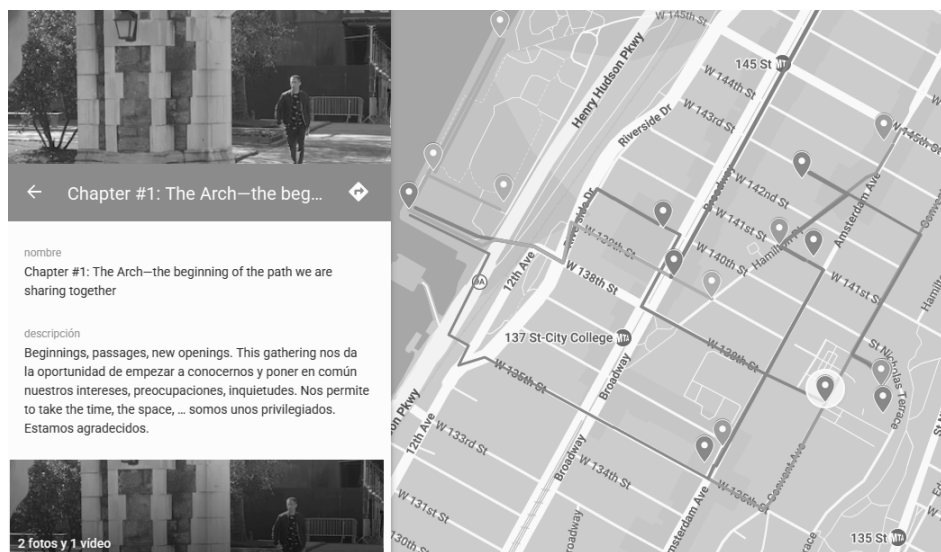


Fig. 3: Screenshot from maptelling *What can we do in common?* Note: taken from the website <https://institucional.us.es/maptelling/>

The third and final case referenced, *Art, Education and Networked Community* (Fig. 4) (Brazil-Spain-Argentina, 2023), originated from the international meeting of the Arte/Educação Research Groups enREDE (São Paulo, Brazil). It expanded the territorial scale by integrating international participants and projecting action into other countries, generating a distributed cartography reflecting on the links among territory, community and educational experience. This transnational dimension demonstrated maptelling's capacity to connect diverse contexts within a shared narrative.

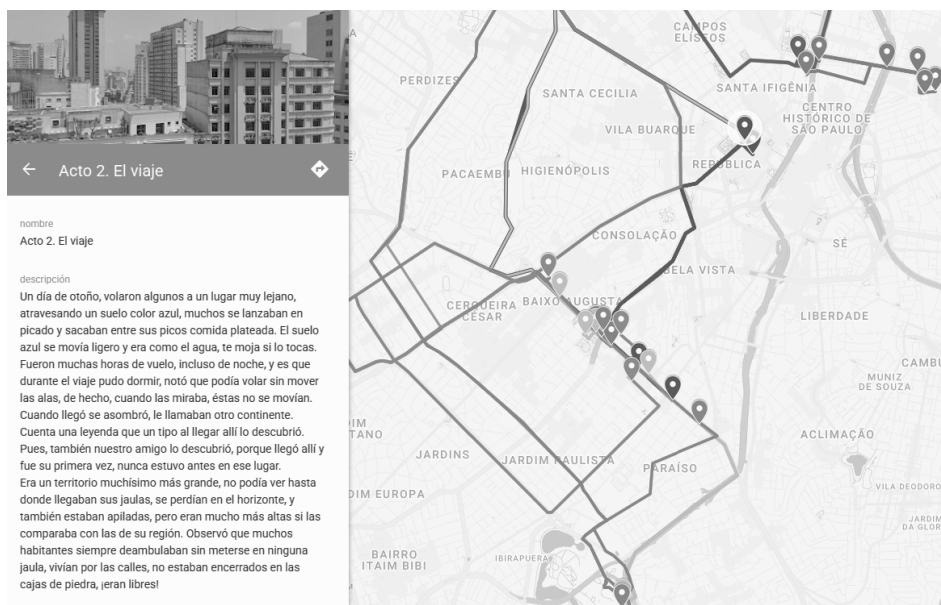


Fig. 4: Screenshot from *maptelling Art, Education and Networked Community*. Note: taken from the website <https://institucional.us.es/maptelling/>

Taken together, the three cases show that *maptelling* operates as a research-creation methodology capable of activating processes of critical reflection, narrative production and collective meaning-making in contemporary educational contexts.

5. Performing: urban art for inclusive citizenship in the Lunetta district

The *PERFORMING – Art and Storytelling for Inclusion* project is a community-based research study that examined the educational, social, and cultural potential of performative languages in contexts marked by fragility and inequality. The project was developed in Mantua's Lunetta district, a multicultural public housing neighborhood characterized by significant socio-educational vulnerabilities. The broader context of the intervention is shaped by the Lunetta District's long-term transformation through the "Without Frontiers – Lunetta a Colori" street art festival. Launched in 2016 during Mantua's year as the Italian Capital of Culture, the initiative will reach its eleventh edition in 2026. To date, around 90 murals have been produced by over 100 international artists. In this context, the *PERFORMING* project aimed to transform the neighborhood into a multidisciplinary social laboratory for the performing arts. Rather than viewing urban art as mere decoration, the project has considered murals and street art as pedagogical tools that can stimulate reflection, dialogue, and place-based learning.

Within this framework, WP1.4 set out to explore what urban art can actually do educationally – how it might work as a lever for participation, narrative agency, and civic responsibility.

Around 60 teenagers from the neighborhood CAG¹, together with their educators, university students from the Professional Education degree program, and researchers from the University of Brescia, took part in the process. The methodological design was built around participation and lived experience (Sabino, 2025). After an initial phase of exploratory reading, a working group of adolescents and students came together, and a formative pact was drawn up through a process of shared pedagogical design – establishing, from the outset, a collaborative rather than extractive relationship between researchers and participants.

The heart of the fieldwork was the itinerant focus group, organized around the theme "Urban Art in My Neighborhood". Rather than convening in a room, participants walked through Lunetta together, stopping at the places they knew, the murals they passed without always noticing, and the meanings – obvious or contested – that had accumulated around them. Moving through the space while talking about

1 Centro di Aggregazione Giovanile (Youth Community Center).

it made a difference: perceptions, emotions, conflicts, memories, and aspirations surfaced in ways that a conventional discussion setting rarely allows, each one anchored to the place that had produced it.

Alongside this, a range of expressive and participatory techniques gave adolescents further ways in: photography, short written texts, art workshops, musical activities, and video scriptwriting. The aim was not to collect data so much as to help participants turn what they already knew – often implicitly, sometimes in fragments – into something that could be shared. A simple prompt asking participants to write one or more words for Lunetta, or to name what they valued most about the neighborhood, produced a striking range of responses. References to violence, drug dealing, and insecurity sat alongside words like friendship, unity, the CAG, the park, murals, meaningful bonds. Neither register cancelled the other out. Together, they traced the ambivalent symbolic geography through which these young people made sense of where they lived – a geography that deficit-driven accounts of the neighborhood rarely manage to capture.

The final phase asked participants to do something with what they had produced: to turn it outward, toward the community. Working collaboratively, they designed and created two outcomes intended as a form of civic contribution – a video documenting neighborhood life in relation to its existing urban art, and an artistic artifact shaped by the group’s shared experiences. The underlying logic was deliberate: to move the educational process from expression toward restitution, from interpretation toward public responsibility, from individual voice toward collective authorship.

Taken together, *PERFORMING* made a case for urban art as an educational framework for inclusive citizenship. The neighborhood was not a backdrop; it became a site of inquiry, critical reading, and shared care. And the program’s lasting value lay less in any single outcome than in what it set in motion – listening, co-design, symbolic mediation, and the kind of public restitution that asks young people not just to inhabit a place, but to take some responsibility for it. Through these processes, adolescents transitioned from merely inhabiting Lunetta to critically narrating it and potentially caring for it. The project showed how participatory pedagogy, community-based research, and aesthetic experiences come together to create new connections among young people, institutions, and the local area.

Conclusion

The experiences described in this article highlight the potential of urban art when combined with social mapping and multimodal storytelling to become “third spaces of learning” (Anderson *et alii*, 2023) that are able to foster the development of multisensory social environments where learning becomes engaging through the involvement of multiple senses including cognition, affective, emotions, desires, socialization, dialogue, artistry, rituals, performance, intersectionality, and spirituality. Such *third spaces of learning* enable us to envision novel forms of collaboration, interaction, and learning with one another. They may prove highly promising not only in creating democratic social institutions but also in offering citizenship education of a much richer nature and fostering radical imagination (Anderson *et alii*, 2023).

As Dewey (2023) states, art can be regarded as a “field of experience” in which sensitivity, intelligence, and activity work together. Aesthetics transforms into a mode of knowing and being; it becomes an experience that, when shared, promotes learning, accountability, and integration. That is why, according to Dewey, merging the goals of art and education makes it possible to develop a “field of interactive experience” in which the pleasures of aesthetics and education integrate into a functional and sensitive environment. Thus, art provides a distinctive perspective on the development of individuals and communities.

In both cases, the *PERFORMING* project in Mantua and the maptelling practices discussed here, the premise stands that art could function as a pedagogical means, a way of voicing out daily experiences – the *voices of dwelling* –, turning the urban spaces into site of mutual recognition and collective imaginary. In the first case, through the murals painted in the Lunetta district, art no longer functions as a wall but becomes part of the lives of the youth, thus cultivating an empathic relationship with physicality that would create unity within the community. In the second case, the maptelling experiences have generated a process of self-localisation that has led to the production of narrative maps as *transnational third spaces*. Finally, narrative practices grounded in urban art help adolescents shift from “passive users” of urban spaces to “designers” of their own environment. As such, urban art can become a pedagogical tool for teaching

community awareness: grounded in the local yet open to the global, it can become a site for transforming suburban areas into laboratories of intercultural citizenship, where inhabitants of the world do not cease to be inhabitants of their own neighborhood.

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