



**XII INTERNATIONAL TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING CONFERENCE  
ENGAGING AT THE INTERSECTIONS  
PROCEEDINGS**



**October 20-October 23, 2016  
Tacoma, Washington**



**PACIFIC LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY**



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University of Georgia**

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# International Transformative Learning Conference



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## Front Page

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# ENGAGING AT THE INTERSECTIONS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE XII INTERNATIONAL TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING CONFERENCE

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# The Theatre of the Oppressed as an Imaginative Metaphor for Transformative Learning

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**Abstract:** The paper will explain the findings for the empirical research *Transformative Potential of the Theatre of the oppressed* (Romano, 2014; Romano, 2016), which aimed to demonstrate that the experience of the Theatre of the Oppressed with students and teachers promoted transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Marsick, 2015). The data were gathered through the adoption of qualitative (logbooks, narrative self-reports) and quantitative tools (Learning Activities Survey and the questionnaire on the Theatre of the Oppressed). The Theatre of the Oppressed is a learning experience that, starting from a reflection on the constructed meanings and inequality that are the background of the individual educational, social and professional life contexts, can promote complex thinking. The research, therefore, is itself an opportunity for transformative learning, seeking to promote the redefinition of people's meaning perspectives in the name of the shared construction of broader, differentiating and differentiated, more inclusive perspectives. Through the power of dialogue and problem-posing, learners develop awareness of structures within their society that may be contributing to inequality and oppression, and that is reflected in their dialogues. Our interest is to show how the Theatre of the Oppressed could be a transformative practice under the aegis of transformative learning: it offers a possibility of democratizing relationships and of re-inventing narrative and corporeal languages, preserving their educational and formative purposes.

## The Research Questions

The paper explains the findings for the empirical research *TOTP: Transformative Potential of the Theatre of the oppressed* (Romano, 2014; Romano, 2016), which aimed to demonstrate that the experience of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TdO) with students and teachers promoted transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Marsick, 2015). The research questions are the following:

1. Does the experience of the Theater of the Oppressed promote transformative learning?
2. If yes, what happens?
3. If yes, how does the process go?
4. If yes, what kind of elements, factors, perspectives, attitudes, beliefs, change?
5. If not, why?

The research hypothesis of the project *TOTP* is that the experiences of the workshops with students of the Bachelor's Degree in Psychological Sciences, students of the Master's Degree in Clinical and Community Psychology, the teachers involved in PAS certified courses during the academic year 2013/2014 promote transformative learning in the participants.

The project *TOTP: Transformative Potential of the Theater of the Oppressed* moves from practical experience. The workshops were scheduled in four meetings, each of them lasting two hours. The participants were divided into three groups:

- 145 students of the course in Pedagogy of Learning Processes of the Bachelor's Degree in Psychological Sciences of the Department of Humanities
- 87 students of the course in Social Pedagogy of the Master's Degree in Clinical and Community Psychology of the Department of Humanities
- 100 teachers being enabled with the Certified Special Course.

The sampling was an intentional rational sampling (Creswell, 2003; 2007). The theoretical/purposeful sampling attempts to select research participants according to the criteria adopted by research purposes: in our case, to belong to three distinct natural groups facilitated the data collection process according to the intentional stratified sampling, having three groups of subjects who fit the search criteria to have had an experience of Theatre of the Oppressed, and which belong to three different levels of education. The stratified purposive sampling is a theoretical non-probabilistic sampling, whose aim is not to select random units from a population, to create a probability sample suitable to put generalizations and statistical inferences. The data were gathered through the adoption of qualitative (logbooks, narrative self-reports) and quantitative tools (Learning Activities Survey, King, 2009; the questionnaire on the TdO, Vittoria, Strollo, Romano, Brock, 2014).

### **Overview of the Methods**

Phenomenological analysis was conducted of all journals preparing a panel of three independent judges who analyzed the categories emerging (see Chart 1), and first worked separately and then comparing their work. The analysis identified the core categories, measured the frequency and occurrences for each category. The author used the software NVivo, which allows coding in vivo for the text, the collection of the first codes in knots and the conjunction of conceptual issues in analytical categories. Besides selecting by analyzing phenomenological categories of logbooks, I have carried out a new analysis at the individual level for each participant, in order to investigate for each subject the presence of the four criteria for transformative learning. Later, I analyzed for each participant the questionnaire LAS in order to demonstrate quantitatively the change in perspectives of meaning, and the questionnaire on TdO, in order to understand the subjective experience of the process of the Theatre of the Oppressed, the subjective perception of what happened during all phases of the laboratory. Participants were thus divided into three groups of subjects, rated by the scoring of the PT-Index -Perspective Transformation Index- (King, 2009):

1. High Level of Transformation: people who submit all four criteria of the transformative learning
2. Low Level Transformation: people with only two of four criteria of transformative learning
3. No Transformation: people who do not show any transformation.

Thus, the PT-Index indicates whether the learners have experienced a transformative learning experience.

### **Research Findings**

#### **The Findings from the Phenomenological Analysis Among Group**

This phenomenological study focuses on the original phenomenon of the experiences lived by participants of the Theatre of the Oppressed Laboratories. Starting from the analysis within group for each group of participants (Bachelor's Degree Students, Master's Degree Students, Teachers), I found the core categories for their narratives based on those identified by

the panel of independent judges: labelling the categories, the description, the indicators, the absolute and percentage frequencies for each of them. Then, although the experience and the subjective perception of each participant is unique, they can be found some common themes embodied in their stories.

Comparison of categories between the three participant groups

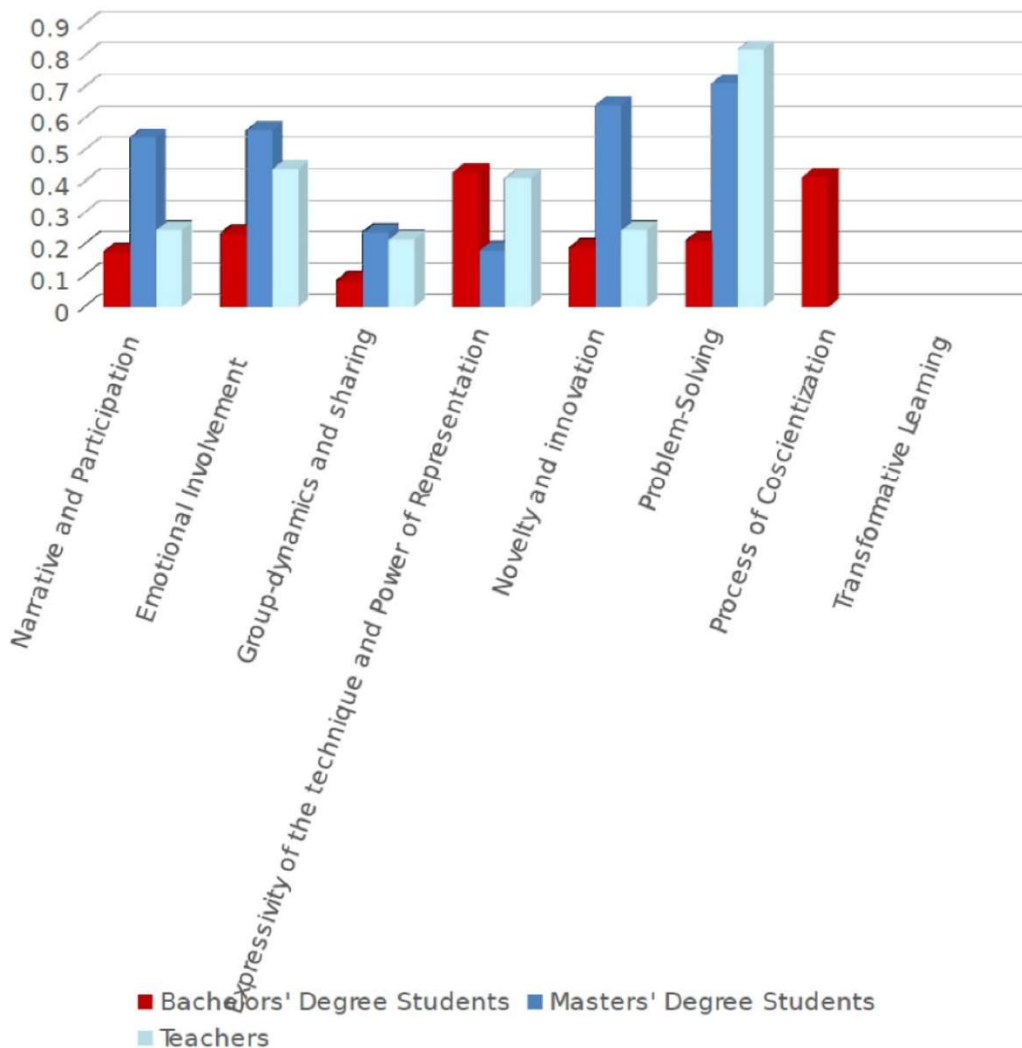


Chart 1. Comparison of the percentages for the frequency of categories for the three groups of participants in the among-group analysis.

The Process of Consciousness is the category that is missing in the journals of the teachers. The Process of Consciousness has to do with the imagination, where «Imagination lies at a kind of crux where perception, memory, idea generation, emotion, metaphor, and no doubt other labeled features of our lives, intersect and interact» (Lake, 2013, p. XIX). The imagination, in fact, permeates every aspect of life, and helps the development of political and personal awareness in students such as teachers in order to look over what we take for granted, to question the normal, customary, to develop different ways of know, hear, see, and create positive social change. The imagination itself becomes a metaphor of agency and the construction of meaning

for the subjects, because it is planning, time to come, projection into the future that transcends the present, the here-and-now, in the moment of consumption the same time of its recognition. Consciousness is in part defined by the way it always exceeds towards a completeness and a fullness that can not be obtained. If you could get a full consciousness, it would lose its very essence, there would be a cancellation of the internal voltage and no need to the research (Lake, 2013, p. 449). Why is this category missing in the journals of PAS teachers group?

The Process of Consciousness that is observed in the students' words of the Bachelor degree and the students of the Master's degree course, in the case of teachers becomes a process of reworking of the injustices and oppression experienced as humiliations in the everyday practice.

Below some sentences taken from the logbooks of the teacher group:

*10 PA<sup>1</sup>: It allowed me to empty myself of so many humiliations and to represent my idea of professor and director who is not founded on the power games but on dialogue with respect to roles. I lived a real catharsis.*

*19 PB: I felt as if I were experiencing a déjà vu. The experiences I have had, they did so to find myself both in staging history both in revisions, to correction of oppressions spelled with the staging. [...] The group in this experience has played the facilitating function of interpretative comfort, in comparison with the function on the slice represented and compared with the actual experience of each of us. [...] The actively assist in the staging has evoked memories about myself, not only as a teacher but also as a student. The resurgence of these memories allowed me to understand the state of mind of students and teachers when they suffer or exercise oppressive behavior [...] The Theatre of the Oppressed is a very interesting educational tool: allows you to work on the development of shared collective problems deepening them, looking for the critical points and proposing possible solutions.*

The identification element is very strong, because the scenic representation activates autobiographical experiences related to their professional identity and to their working world, encouraging their elaboration in an analytical way.

*22 PA: The theater of the oppressed allows us to transform the unease hidden in explicit conflict, allows us to make "visible" the daily oppression, raising immersion consciences and allowing removal from their discomfort; create a unifying symbolic object, a social ritual of community, to get used to react to discomfort with the change; give a solidarity and collective dimension; create links, being able to move in the places of people's lives; emotional and energetic activation, as well as the intellectual side, are roiling other resources to address the problems and activates a secure testing of possible changes; projection into the future through visions, can reveal and shake what is the individual and collective imagination, powerful means of prefiguration of the future.*

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<sup>1</sup> I adopted a system of nomenclature to guarantee participants' anonymity. The Bachelor's Degree students were indicated as T1, T2, T3, T4 [...]; the Master's Degree students were indicated as M1, M2, M3, M4 [...]; the Teachers were indicated as PA1, PA2, PA3, PA4 [...] and PB1, PB2, PB3, PB4 [...].

The process of Conscientization regards, therefore, in this case the personal history of each of the participants, who appreciate the cathartic function and transformative methodologies that have experienced.

*38 PA: We imagine, build and realize all about experiential reflection, then make autonomous educational action, conscious and critical in the management of plural and alternative practices aimed at awareness building on the experience of thought and socio-educational action.*

The most prominent category and in the three groups of participants remains Change in perspectives and disorienting dilemma, occurring category in 82% of journals of PAS teachers, in 70% of journals of Master's degree students and 35% the journals of Bachelor's Degree students: this is the strongest evidence in the narratives of the protagonists transformative learning occurred in these. Freire (1970) shows the cognitive interest to make explicit what is implicit, and to discover what is not yet discovered. Implemented in the distinction between action and free will such as integration and adaptation, Freire (1998) asserts that integration is the ability to adapt himself to reality as the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. Adaptation, however, is a dehumanizing response that mostly is constituted as a self-defense: if a human being is not able to change reality, it suits itself. Only through the perception of the gap, the difference between the existing and the possible can project a better social order and try to transform the real. This can happen anywhere, in school desks, in university classes, in the streets, in the squares, and the Theatre of the Oppressed is the instrument through which reality becomes fiction stage to be subject to critical reflection and can be simulated in the representative reality of the present. All of our cognitive abilities and imagination allow us to give credence to alternative realities: this allows us to break with what is taken for granted and go ahead in the tortuous path of endless signification.

*30 PB: During the various scenes I arrived with other consciousnesses, my point of view is totally changed. Thanks to the comparison with the other guys in the group I realized that I could do anything in my little to cope with that situation, I could transform the class and be the agent of change simply by changing myself.*

The Power of the scenic representation leads to a reflexive awareness that goes beyond the forms of instrumental and technical knowledge that is taught in school and university classrooms through the sequential and systematic use of other forms of knowledge presentational, such as the scenic art, the metaphor, the dramatic action, followed by the writing of metacognitive self-report and the discussion, the students and teachers challenge their perceptions, making them explicit and subject to review and processing through the critical and complex thought. This transformation is never just cognitive, it is also always affective and emotional, partly empathetic considering the specular inter- subjective connections with their colleagues. The provocative questions of Joker (facilitator of the workshop) follow existential questions which arose between the participants, some with fear, fear, partly with the courage to look inward and look at their own history.

From the outcomes, the Theatre of the Oppressed is recognized as disorienting moment just by PAS teachers, who are the most adult age group, more defined by professional and occupational identities. An interesting case is that of the category of the Power of representation, which is not apparent in the journals of PAS teachers, while it is a very frequent category in journals of students at bachelor's degree and master's degree. Among the hypotheses for this finding, the most plausible seems to do the difficulties and resistances that PAS teachers tell in their self-report, in relation to put yourself at stake and to let go in a participatory perspective to

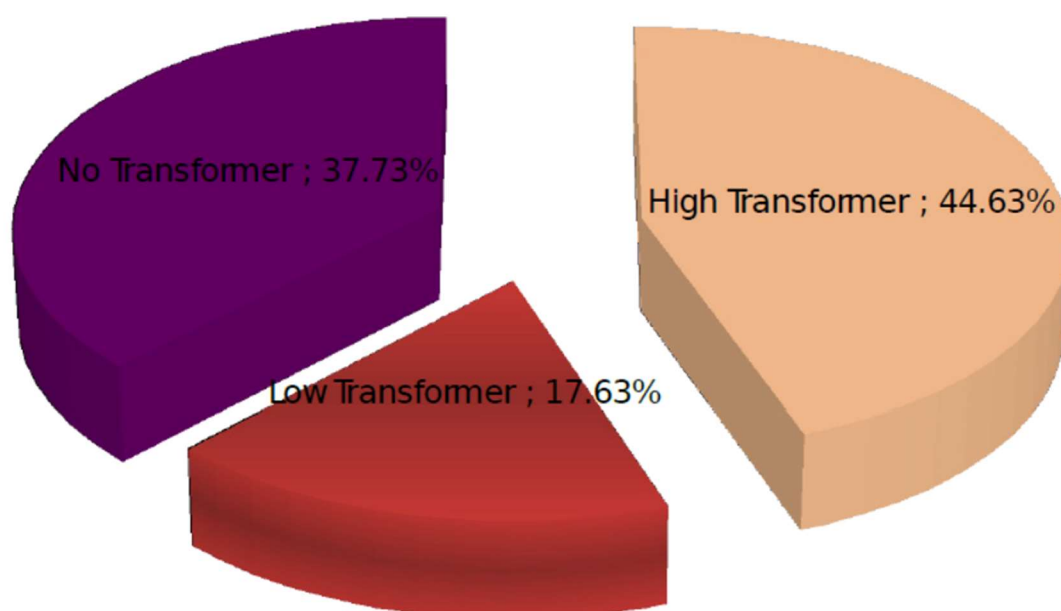
the play. It is, in fact, a group of individuals with very structured from the point of view of identity and professional development, preset on formal roles, unaccustomed to questioning in a dialogic and stage automation.

### **The Findings of the Phenomenological Analysis Cross-group**

The cross-group analysis is aimed at a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants:

332 participants are divided into three categories:

## **Cross-group analysis**



*Chart 2.* Percentage of the three High Level of Transformation, Low Level of transformation, and No Transformation compared to the size of the total sample

The High Level of Transformation (N= 151, 45, 48% of the total sample) are participants that present in their journals the indicators for all the four criteria for Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2000). The four criteria are:

- Presence of a process of questioning, and of critical reflection
- Presence of a change of meaning perspectives
- Showing renovate, more inclusive, more open and differentiating perspectives
- Showing new pattern of actions thanks to this transformation.

The participants rated with a high level of transformation have scoring 3 PT-Index Questionnaire to LAS (King, 2009) and describe the Theatre of the Oppressed in their questionnaires (Romano, 2014) as a analysis of the premises previously unquestioned, try of new strategies and approaches, access to a new understanding of values, beliefs, assumptions about themselves and their world. Through the Theatre of the Oppressed, these participants, the students and teachers, experiment with new ideas that may impact on their assumptions about society, relationships of

power and politics. Eventually it changes as a result of this bias between understanding and learners' perspective.

Using the Data Summary Table (King, 2009), a spreadsheet in which the variables for each Item, where are shown the relative frequencies and percentages for each type of learning and change, in order to observe the transformation that occurred in participants.

What, then, say the participants in the research whose experiences meet all the criteria of Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2000) and have been categorized in the subject band with High Level of Transformation:

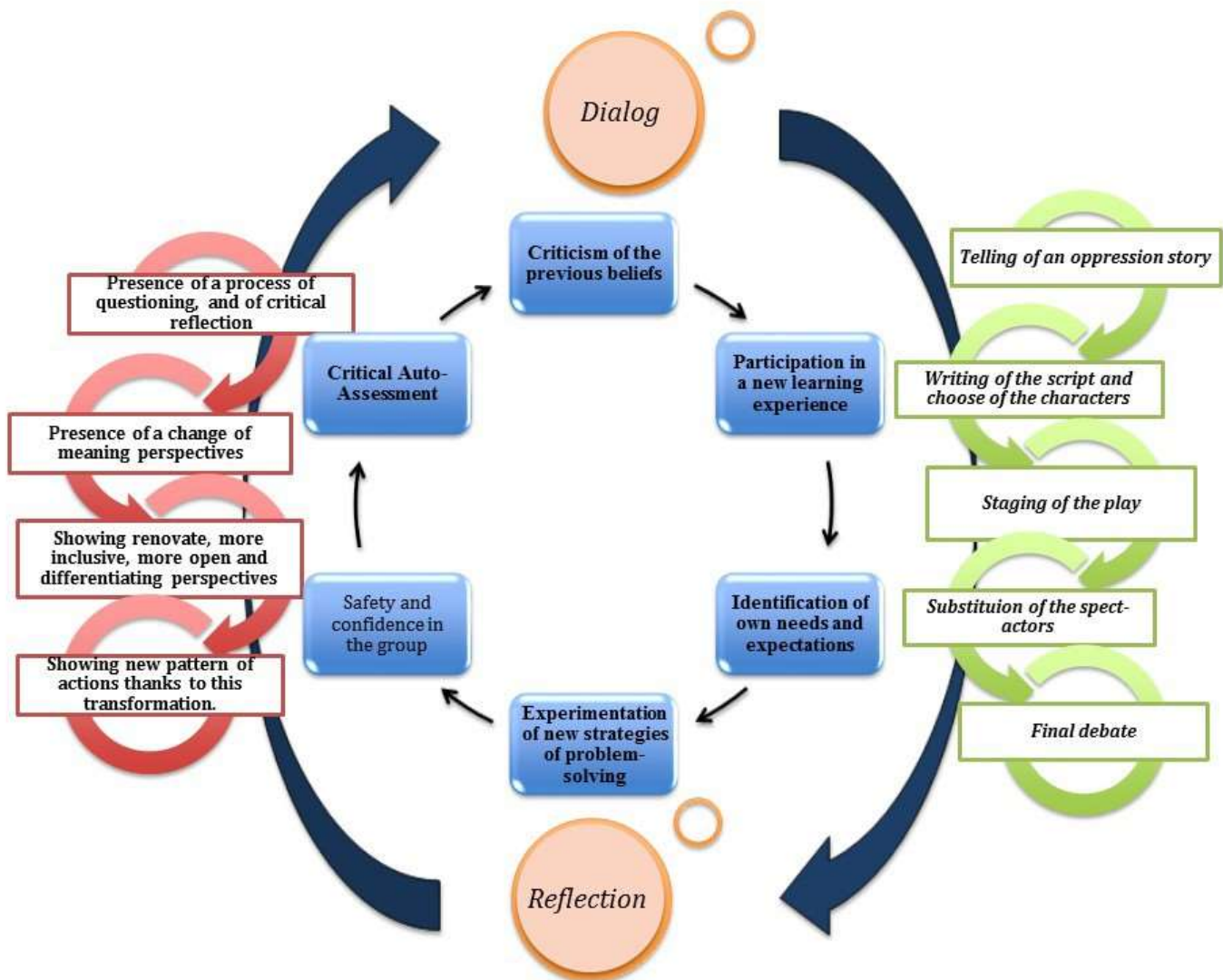
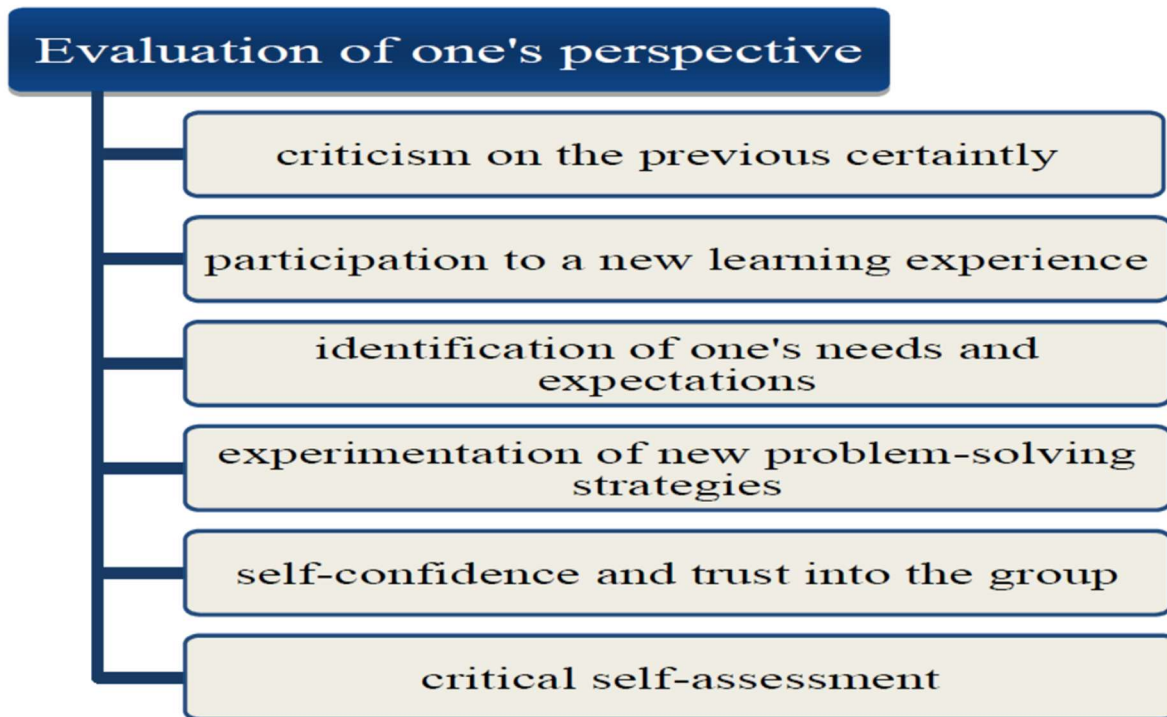


Figure 1. The process of change of the perspectives of meaning in the Theatre of the Oppressed



*Figure 2.* The features of the evolution of one's perspective in a transformative learning process

The group of Low-Level of Transformation, who gained a score of 2 PT-Index Questionnaire to LAS (King, 2009), is the smaller group (N = 53; 18% of the total sample). These are participants whose stories do not meet all the criteria in order to consider this a Transformative Learning, or who do not bear new patterns of actions. These subjects put into question their meaning schemes, their world views, but do not speak in the logbooks of new, more open, inclusive and permeable prospects of meaning. They also do not show attempts to create new social roles and new patterns of actions due to perception of the experience of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Also fall into this group the participants (N = 10; 3% of the total sample) describing in their journals the experienced process, but for which the LAS questionnaire does not confirm the presence of transformative learning.

The group of No Transformation, with a score of 1 to PT-Index Questionnaire LAS, is the second group by number (N = 128; 38.45% of the total sample). They are participants who do not describe a complete transformation process in their logbooks. These participants do not show anyone of the criteria for Transformative. It needs a second distinction between those participants who do not show any change (N = 101; 78.91% of the group No Transformation) and those subjects who do not show a change in meaning perspectives in their logbooks (N = 27; 21.09% of the group No Transformation). For the latter minority, Transformative learning Questionnaire (King, 2009) confirms that there is a learning experience that can be considered a transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), but it is not reported in their journals changes or challenges in their meaning perspectives.

## Conclusions

The results of empirical research conducted with qualitative and quantitative tools encourage an affirmative answer, pointing out that the entire workshop experience of the Theatre of the Oppressed is characterized as a disorienting dilemma. The workshop undermines people's certainties, and determines the development of new models of action in interaction with the world. The elements that facilitate the change of individuals' meaning frames are interconnecting with their personal autobiographical experiences, with the group dimension and with the sense of sharing and belonging that participants develop, and last but not least, with reflection in and on action stage. The impact, therefore, in terms of knowledge of the *TPTO research: Transformative Potential of the Theatre of the Oppressed* is to arrive at theoretical explication through an empirical procedure as adults learn by and in the experience, develop a workshop teaching model that helps teachers and educators in understanding how to promote transformative learning and use methods of TdO with different participants and different social and cultural environments as transformative learning device (Mezirow, 2000).

Referring to Boal's dramatic art of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985), the Theatre of the Oppressed is an imaginative metaphor for the journey of perspectives' transformation. Imagination permeates every aspect of life experience and helps to develop personal and political awareness in people who look beyond what they take for granted, questioning the normal. The imagination is the metaphor for making possible social and educational change. The free exercise of imagination can be suggestive of new ideas, while the raising of consciousness opens people to possibilities and to the unknown explicating the implicit constrictions they undergo. The theatre makes active the audience and serves to groups of spect-actors (Boal, 1985) to explore, to stage, to analyze and to transform reality that they themselves live. The methods of the Theatre of the Oppressed provide analysis tools, liberation and awareness through a dialogic relationship, which deconstructs the aspects of violence. According to a maieutic approach, without giving answers, the questions are asked for finding collective solutions.

The changes and transformations (Mezirow, 2000) are achieved through the development of self-criticism, awareness and reflection on oneself and on others as well as through the development of a capacity of ethical behaviour, and of reflective processes on the dynamics of oppression suffered by the participants, and the recognition of different and varied forms of oppression that act at all levels of the ecological metaphor. Understood within this context, the Theatre of the Oppressed can help groups and organizations engage in essential debate over strategy and process and to work for social change and collective perspective transformations.

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