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## **The Theatre of The Oppressed to promote Transformative Learning in a social-situated dialogue**

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### **Abstract:**

We would like to present an experiential workshop based on the methodologies of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) for promoting a transformation of meaning perspectives and create the conditions for the establishment of an authentic dialogue between people. This will be achieved through an action, which is a practice of transformation and change because it requires the audience to get personally involved.

### **Introduction**

We would like to present an experiential workshop based on the methodologies of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) for promoting a transformation of meaning perspectives. This will be achieved through an action, which is a practice of transformation and change because it requires the audience to get personally involved. In the Theatre of the Oppressed, indeed, participants report episodes of oppression that may relate to all levels of society. They have to represent acting their stories of oppression. Taking the stage represents a moment of crisis for one's own certainties. For these reasons the TO expands awareness and reflexivity, which contribute to redefining the set of knowledge, beliefs, evaluative judgments and feelings that guide our actions. It can activate a critical examination of the common way of thinking, starting from a "disorienting dilemma," a problematic and doubtful situation which undermines established patterns of meaning. That gives rise to processes of exploration, analysis, and the assumption of new roles to try and to evaluate: critical reflection leads to transform and integrate meaning perspectives with new critical interpretations. In Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), education should allow the oppressed to regain their sense of humanity, in turn overcoming their condition. The oppressed individual must play a role in his or her own liberation. Likewise, the oppressors must rethink their way of life and to examine their own role in the oppression: "those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly" (Freire, 1970, p. 60). Specifically, the Theatre of the Oppressed is understood as a practice consistent with Freire's approach to liberatory education — namely, aesthetic education that promotes a transformative model of learning based on dialogue.

### **The Conceptual Framework**

The Theatre of the Oppressed is a formative praxis which leads participants to consciousness-raising, and our interest is to show how it could be a transformative practice under the aegis of transformative learning. The Theatre of the Oppressed offers the possibility of democratizing relationships between educator and learner, oppressor and oppressed, for future conscious global citizens. The Workshops of Theatre of the Oppressed (Vittoria, Strollo, Romano, Brock, 2014; Striano, Strollo, Romano, 2014) are developed in four meetings, and follow the methodologies and techniques set forth by Boal (2005; 2011).



For more than forty years, the Theatre of the Oppressed, founded by the Brazilian cultural revolutionary and popular educator Augusto Boal, has been serving oppressed communities all over the world as a powerful tool for building sense of community and organizing for direct democracy (Picher, 2007). The TO embodies the concept of theatre as a political act — both a transfer of cultural power to the oppressed and a rehearsal for revolution (Boal, 2005). The aesthetic function of theatre is here dialectically connected to its pedagogical function. The TO highlights theatre as a learning process that fosters critical thinking. Specifically, the Theatre of the Oppressed is understood as a practice consistent with Paulo Freire’s approach to liberatory education—namely aesthetic education that promotes a transformative model of learning based on dialogue. In the TO, this dialogue is brought about through the creation of a playful environment in which people express, analyze, and collectively change images of their reality according to their desires (Boal, 2011). Play structures are accordingly designed to activate a problem-posing learning process where participants examine and analyze their reality. First, they create acts based on their own direct experiences; then, they analyze the power relations and the etiological causes of the oppression expressed within those images; and finally, they act to transform the situation according to their vision of possible alternatives.

Throughout the history of humanity, from Aristotle to Boal, theatre was discussed as art for contemplation and art for transformation. Popular theatre is not an isolated performance or a cathartic experience, but part of an ongoing process of education, aimed at overcoming oppression and dependence, and at guaranteeing basic rights. «All the truly revolutionary theatrical groups», says Boal (2005), «should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilize them» (2005, p. 122). An innovative approach to community dialogue, the Forum Theatre (FT) is rooted in the Brazilian social justice movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The FT analyzes situations of conflict involving objective, external (as opposed to internalized) oppression, in which the appropriate action to be taken is not immediately clear. Themes for development are suggested by workshop participants, who then tell their actual personal stories of unresolved conflicts stemming from political or social problems of no solution. Skits depicting these conflicts are improvised and presented to an audience. Each story represents the perspective of an oppressed protagonist actively engaged in implementing a strategy for the resolution of a conflict; the protagonist’s original strategy to resolve the conflict, however, fails. When the skit is over, the audience discusses the strategy that has been presented, and then the scene is performed once more. However, this time, the audience members are invited to intervene by stopping the action, coming onstage to replace the actors, and enacting their own strategies to resolve the conflict. Thus, instead of remaining passive spectators the audience becomes a group of active “spect-actors” involved in creating alternative solutions and thus controlling the dramatic action. The aim of the Forum Theatre is not to find an ideal solution but to invent new ways of confronting oppression. A story of oppression is improvised, and the audience is invited to stop the action, replace the character that is being oppressed, and improvise a new ending. The Forum Theatre can be used to look at past or present situations, or it can be a rehearsal for the future.

The Theatre of the Oppressed has been exported to several Western countries, including Italy (Romano, 2016). In the Indian region of Calcutta, it was developed a broad movement of farmers and peasants, more than a dozen working groups, who organized stage performances on anger problems, unemployment and collaboration (Picher, 2007, p. 86). In Paris there is a center of Theatre of the Oppressed working

with immigrant communities on the rights of migrants and homeless. The Laboratory of Theatre of the Oppressed (TOPLAB), in New York, has maintained a strong working relationship with the Rio de Janeiro CTO group founded by Boal in 1990, and offers a spectrum of activity that arises to face social problems and oppression, such as housing, health care, abuses, spread of HIV, racism, sexism and gender stereotypes, and discrimination based on ethnicity. Those are forms of real oppression related to external forces and policies, even people internalized and reified oppression. Schutzman (1990, p. 80) recognizes that it is not possible to translate easily the semantic field of the words ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor’ from the system of cultural meanings of South-American culture, for example into the multicultural melting pot of Western, North American specifically, societies: this does not imply the impossibility to use the Theatre of the Oppressed, but its «pedagogical transitivity and usefulness» can be read according to simultaneously located perspectives, rooted in historical and political analysis for *that* experience and for *that* group of participants (Schutzman, 1990, p. 80).

In research conducted with Brazilian immigrants in a class of learning English as a second language in Everett, Massachusetts (Schaedler, 2010, p. 143), for a period of two months it was applied in class the educational curriculum of the Theatre Forum. The topic of the representations was the mistreatment of the local police against immigrant. The results showed that the adoption of the Theatre of the Oppressed allowed participants to acquire self-confidence and self-esteem in the process of integration with host communities (Schaedler, 2010, p. 145). Moreover the use of language in situations close to their contextual reality provided participants the possibility to develop situational and communicative skills, soft-skills (*Ibidem*). In another research conducted with a group of Swedish medical students (Nordström, Fjellman-Wiklund, Grysell, 2011, p. 1), the Forum Theatre was used for the development of professional skills, such as communication and health: the experience of the Forum Theatre with groups of 8-10 participants was called «Marathon of death» (*Ibidem*), and focused on the theme of death of patients and of the death notification to family members. Students spect-actors were interviewed and the results of the qualitative study showed that the educational course was perceived as an experience to practice before facing difficult tasks in future professional lives in a safe and controlled environment (Nordström, Fjellman-Wiklund, Grysell, 2011, p. 5) and to achieve a form of «simulation and contextual learning» (Nordström, Fjellman-Wiklund, Grysell, 2011, p. 6).

In South-Africa, was developed a movement of «Theatre for Development», a self-directed civic movement aimed at the pursuit of social change: it proposed the integration of experiential routes within curricula stemmed from the assessment of these activities on awareness processes and from the analysis of the form of political power in those communities.

### **The methodologies and the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed**

Boal states that the TO has two fundamental principles: (1) to help the spectator become a protagonist in the dramatic action so that s/he can (2) apply those actions s/he has theatrically practiced in real life situations. The spectator must become the spect-actor. The theory of Theatre of the Oppressed rests on six basic tenets:

1. First, we as human beings are by definition creators; we are inherently artists and actors who organize and transform our surroundings (Boal, 2006).
2. For the second tenet, we are also inherently “theatre,” in terms of social consciousness and social interaction. As conscious beings we play the roles of actor and spectator, or observer, of ourselves; we are also engaged in developing our innate

capacity for dialogue with ourselves and with others. We thus engage in a dialectic of action and reflection, acting on and transforming our environment and simultaneously transforming ourselves, because we are part of that environment. Boal refers to this dimension of our humanity as “essential theatre” (Boal, 2002).

3. The third tenet introduces the responsibility of society to help all people to develop their innate capacity for creativity, consciousness, and dialogue. The use of direct participatory democracy is the most effective means to achieve this (Boal, 2006).

4. The fourth is concerned with the ethical poverty of capitalist society. The global market economy, which transforms natural resources and landbases into private property to generate monetary profit, destroys people and the environment.

5. The fifth tenet considers the hegemony of bourgeois ideology as a system of political positions, educational theories, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.

6. The sixth tenet proposes that transforming images of reality according to our desires and dreams is in itself a transformative act. Boal conceives of Theatre of the Oppressed as a cognitive martial art, whose primary function is to serve simultaneously as a weapon of resistance against oppression and a tool for creating a transformative culture. Participants not only dramatize the world as it exists, but also test out their ideas for its transformation. The FT is particularly suitable to promote reflection upon issues of communication and asymmetric relations of power within a formal pedagogical framework. It also allows the development of cognitive and meta-cognitive processes that are, by their very nature, collective and shared, never individual. He changes the spectator-actor relationship, as Paulo Freire as educator has done with the professor-student relationship, practicing a dialogic relationship, which is open, circular, and, therefore, with critical potentialities (Romano, 2016).

In recent decades, the transformative potential of popular theatre, and the Theatre of the Oppressed in particular, has made it possible to use this as an educational tool in difficult and fragile contexts, since it can support the creation of instruments of dialogue and solidarity. It allows one to imagine and simulate several action options and build a shared desire for social change. On this basis over the years we developed a series of empirical research projects (Vittoria, Stollo, Brock, Romano, 2014; Romano, 2014; Romano, 2016) involving university students from different part of the world (some groups were attending the course of Social Pedagogy at the University of Naples Federico II, few groups were taking part to the Certified Training Course for teachers at University of Naples Federico II, other groups were attending the doctoral program in Organization & Leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University) in order to foster the development of skills useful for the interpretation of the social environment through the narration and subsequent dramatization of significant events. We would like to show empirically, through an experiential workshop, how we may use the Theatre of the Oppressed within formal academic contexts and we will adopt two questionnaires by the end of the workshop, to investigate participants' perceptions.

#### **The courage for Coming on stage**

Everybody participates in the Forum Theatre sessions. The joker, who is the conductor, interrupts the scene during the performance and asks the audience to recognize the situation of oppression, and to try to identify an oppressed and an oppressor. He/she is conceptualized as a connector between the stage action, actors and spect-actors. His/her action allows a contemporaneous analysis of the stage representation. Through questions, the participants speculate about the real situation represented and begin to encode and decode that reality represented in the stage action. It is not easy to say who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed; in a metaphor for the oppressor-oppressed dialectics it is known that the oppressed, as being oppressed, can oppress and,

viceversa, the oppressor may be so because of his/her suffered oppression (Romano, 2016). The FT includes a discussion of possible solutions to the conditions of oppression. The audience is questioned: if you were the oppressed, what would you do? How would you react? What would you think of doing to resolve the conflict?

The aim is not to look for a “happy ending”, but for a critical reflection on the relations of power and of the tools for dialogue (of which also conflict is part) that could alter it. Taking the stage, however, represents a moment of an abrupt transition from words to action. For this reason the TO is a technique that, according to the perception of the majority of participants, produces change and transformation in the meaning perspectives of the subjects; that is why it has been conceived as an educational tool that can potentially promote a form of transformative learning in the participants, both in the role of the actors and in the role of the spect-actors. The changes and transformations (Mezirow, 1991) 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 behavior, 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. The change and transformation processes are promoted primarily by experience in all its complexity, and in all its phases.

In the facilitation of TO processes, the joker plays a crucial educational role regulating and shaping the discussions that take place as a response to the images and scenarios that the participants create. The joker should use these discussions and representations as stimuli for deeper discussions about how the dynamics of power and oppression operate in people’s everyday lives, and to open a dialogue on why oppressive conditions exist and how they can be changed. Thus consciousness-raising is not an end but a means towards taking sustainable action that nurtures reflection.

The fictional action of the theatrical mode forms a bridge between the critical consciousness of the participants and their taking action in the ‘real’ world. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a preparation for the implementation of cultural change to address injustice, inequality, and oppression. According to Mezirow, «Fostering these liberating conditions for making more autonomous and informed choices and developing a sense of self-empowerment is the cardinal goal of adult education» (2000, p. 26). The TO could be an emancipatory instrument to promote transformative learning and change, not only for students of all ages, but, above all, for everyone.

The guiding ethical imperatives expressed by Boal in his *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (2006) consist of

- rejection of the ideology of political “neutrality” that dominates education and the arts;
- affirmation of the inherent political function of art;
- action, the creation of an oppositional and emancipatory model of theatre based on democratic principles — theatre of, by, and for the oppressed who are fighting back and creating a new society.

Also in the work by John Dewey there’s an openness to some use of art and aesthetic experience, namely theatre, music, writing, as means of liberation, as practices of individuation in educational practice. The theatre facilitates experiential learning. So, the Theatre of the Oppressed can be considered a vehicle of active learning (Dewey, 1938). Knowledge is the first type of investigation that arises from practical needs and from the transactions between people. The way in which we relate to reality is always a process of inquiry, aimed to problem-solving and derived from a deliberate search.

Participants not only dramatize the world as it exists, but also test out their ideas for

transforming it. Improvisation also brings out, often unconsciously, contradictions or constraints which had not been unearthed through a process of straight analysis. In effect it becomes a process of analysis - questioning, challenging and probing reality for deeper meaning. It is this malleable quality of theatre, its transformability, which makes it a potent tool to promote reflection. The real challenge is to use this powerful educational tool not only in social non-formal contexts, but also in university classrooms.

Forum theatre is designed to maximize participation of the audience in a performance by shifting the central focus of the dramatic event from the stage to the audience. This shift occurs through the spect-actor principle. The concept refers both to a social relation and to a protagonist function; rather than being installed into fixed roles, as in conventional theatre, the spectators and actors have dual functions, mobile and reciprocal, and the theatrical action becomes one that all participants — actors and audience — can exercise.

By taking on the role of protagonists of the dramatic action, audience members prepare to be protagonists of their own lives in the much broader social sphere. In forum theatre, the spect-actor role play is a vehicle for analyzing power and stimulating public debate. Participants explore the complexity of the individual-group relation at a variety of levels. They are invited to map out the dynamics of power within and between groups, and the experience and the fear of powerlessness within the individual. They explore rigid patterns of perception that generate miscommunication and conflict, as well as ways of transforming them. Forum theatre is useful as a means of helping participants prepare for effective social action intended to transform the objective social and political realities of their community.

In Theatre of the Oppressed, democracy is not only a vision but also a practice rooted in the daily life of oppressed people. This practice, however, takes different forms according to the social and political context of referring. The cultural practice and politics of Theatre of the Oppressed consists of promoting not only social, economic, and political democracy but also democracy as a way of life — a way of understanding and creating everyday human relations based on values and attitudes that foster direct democracy— and as a way to think and to reflect upon choices.

Inside school and formal educational contexts, the Theatre of the Oppressed and the Theatre Forum are group and collective pedagogical tools, which exercise and strengthen ability of self-regulation. According to the social cognition theory (Zimmermann, Bandura, 1994), self-regulation operates through a set of psychological subfunctions: these include self-monitoring of one's activities, applying personal standards for judging and directing one's performances, enlisting self-reactive influences to guide and motivate one's efforts, and employing appropriate strategies to achieve success. Thus, the aspect of self-regulated learning plays a central role in the Theatre of the Oppressed, also because this method mobilizes ability of self-directedness. Forum Theatre incorporates audience participation into a performance such that audience members make suggestions to actors in order to alter the outcome of a scene. Engaging in a performance can incite questions, experiences and issues that may otherwise be overlooked. In a broad meaning forum play is a simulation education because it is a simulation of a specific event with a specific goal. Forum play may be a useful exercise in teaching course for future educators, teachers and psychologists in university contexts. Through games, exercises, improvisations, group works, using the body, voice and movement, the selected situation of conflict, discussed during the narrative phase, is reconstructed and acted. These stories might represent the oppression in human relationship, such as that between a young male and a young

female through different levels of the ecological social metaphor.

**Mirror neurons: Theatre of the Oppressed, Dialogue, Empathy through neuroscientific approach**

Common sense suggests educators that the theater generally, and the Theatre of the Oppressed specifically, can be a tool to help people to overcome selfishness and to be more empathetic or simply more in contact each other. The mirror neurons are the neurobiological basis for human capacity to understand others as intentional agents, and this ability is highly dependent on the inherently relational nature of the action, which is expressed in two ways, as a relationship between agent and object of an intentional act and in the relationship between the agent and the observer of the action. The mirror neurons are an important element for creating empathic relationships between different individuals (Gallese, 2008). Functional architecture of Embodied Simulation seems to be the basic characteristic of human brain, which makes possible the inter-subjective experience. The embodied simulation proved in the neuroscientific research was also studied in relation to the understanding of literary language. For example, listening or reading metaphors active sensory simulations in human people. Although several studies on the comprehension of idiomatic phrases (Gallese, 2008; 2013) show that all human knowledge is deeply rooted in our physicality: the body is the basis for the development of abstract concepts. Wojciehowski and Gallese (2011) suggest that the phenomenon of mental imagery and simulation of feelings and emotions are both processes involved in the use of literary texts. The intentional mechanisms of resonance would allow the stories to live in us from carnal perspective. fMRI studies (Wojciehowski, Gallese, 2011) revealed the activation of a simulation process even when there are listening stimuli. Listening to a sound that identifies an action, is sufficient to activate a motor simulation of that action, even in the absence of visual stimulus. Thanks to the imaginary and intentional simulation mechanism our body is able to access instantly, pre-reflectively and pre-conceptually to others' actions. The simulation is highly dependent on intention and recognition of motor intentionality. In other words, the simulation is carried out exclusively in the case in which the end of the entire motor chain is already part of the motor knowledge baggage of the viewer or listener; and, especially, in the case where the motor chain is moved by an intention. The results of studies on mirror neuron systems (Rizzolatti, Senigaglia, 2008; Gallese, 2008; 2013) were linked by neuroscientists with one of the themes dear to the phenomenology: empathy. The term *Einfühlung*, translated with the word empathy realizes the experience mimetic sharing, which is achieved and materialized in various forms of artistic expression. The art in general and in particular the performing arts, including the theater, are example of how man put his bodily and spiritual dimension in function of interpersonal communication.

In the art, in fact, the object loses its instrumental connotation to become symbolic. This is also what happens in theatrical performance, where actors' body is released from the everyday utilitarian purpose, making himself able to evoke the magic of the performance that the artist and the public in some ways share. So, for several years, neuroscience studies look with interest at the theater as a place of interpersonal relationships - between actor and spectator in the audience - based on empathy. As pointed out by Gallese (2008), «in the theatrical acting is configured, in fact, a duality of relationships that, on one hand, bring into connection creator and audience and, on the other hand, transform the individual viewer in a member of a social group, the public. In both types of interpersonal relationship occurs identification mechanisms of mimetic phenomena, we assume based on resonance mechanisms - motor and not - not dissimilar to those exemplified by the mirror neurons» (Gallese, 2008, p. 13).

A crucial element of the aesthetic experience consists of the establishment of incarnate (*embodied*) mechanisms which include the simulation of gestures, emotions and bodily sensations contained in the artwork. Gallese and Freedberg (2007) conducted a series of experimental studies aimed at investigating the specific effect on the artistic image viewer, showing that when the image becomes artistic image, its aesthetic nature multiplies its power of attraction. One aspect related to the specific observation of artistic works is the unwitting embodied simulation in the viewer of the artistic gestures used to create the work of art. In the course of an experiment (Gallese, Freedberg, 2007) to a group of persons were shown high-resolution reproductions of famous slashed paintings by Lucio Fontana, alternating with control stimuli (edited images, where the cut was replaced by a line). Except for the dynamic aspect, control images were substantially identical to the reproduction of the artistic works, perfectly reproducing color, contrast, color effects. Observing the reproduction of the artistic works, all the subjects showed the same motor resonance, which instead has not occurred in front of the control stimuli. The reaction of the mirror neuron system is independent on the degree of cultural and cognitive mediation (half of the participants knew the artist). Since the motor response was observed only during the observation of original artistic works and was independent on familiarity that the subject has with the stimuli, considering that the cuts on the canvas are the signs of the motor acts, the team of researchers suggested that the artistic work is able to mediate the emotional motor resonance arisen between the artist and the viewer through embodied simulation. In this sense, the inter-subjectivity is constituted primarily as intercorporeity. The activation and the specialization of the mirror neuron circuits would require functional stresses which result in exposure of the individual to others' actions.

The mirroring mechanisms offers another perspective on the sociological concept of alienation: alienation is often represented in the scene of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Participants reflect on it thanks to the staging and the acting the alienated condition of individual in capitalistic society, oppressed by inequality of means and by the consumistic logic of the capitalism. The concept of alienation which emerges from the introduction of the mirror neurons mechanism to the theatre of the oppressed is quite different: thanks to the mirroring function, people can feel empathy towards the others and the oppressed, the same fact of acting constitutes the experimental field of assuming the perspective of the oppressed and of challenging the prior schemes, behaviors and beliefs about social justice. Alienation can become the road for the identification process that allows to overcome the narcissistic and selfish viewpoint, can become the way of bringing our mind out of ourselves to embrace and encounter others' and other perspectives, cultures and feelings. Those aspects impact not only on the theatre of the oppressed, but also on the opportunities of building an authentic dialogue between cultures and between nations for facing and managing the new social emergencies.

The endless possibilities of implicit sharing of moods through action, typical of the performing arts, could therefore be the principal instrument to promote the activation of neural networks underlying the mirroring processes in complex phenomena such as identification, projection, empathy.

The art of theater is therefore the art of relating with the audience through the scene and via the body, the voice, the poetic words. A theatrical act in the strict sense is an act that meets the characteristics of authentic intersubjectivity, this quality of human presence in the scene. The methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Picher, 2007, p. 81) is an aesthetic education: its basic steps are to see (and hear and feel), analyze and act. Each step embodies in its fulfillment the three propositions about the nature of

the real world, diametrically opposed to the ideology of the dominant fragmentation:

1. in the real world, each person is an indivisible whole whose sensations, movements, ideas, emotions and «beliefs do not merely interact with each other but are intertwined with each other» (*Ibidem*). All the ideas and mental images are physically revealed, the mental and physical domains are connected and overlapped each other, and all five senses are connected, because the whole person enters the scene.

2. The amazing power of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2005) resides in the most peculiar way this aesthetic phenomenon takes place: who bring the theatrical experience is a human being. In the Theatre of the Oppressed, the actor does not present a character to the public, but represents himself, his story and in some way someone else.

3. The Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2005), as eminently relational experience, based on a generative relationship, is a journey that culminates in the encounter between the public and creative actors: it is the story of an encounter.

The theatrical event, in its authentic manifestations, has the uncanny ability to transport those who take part in another world: the world of the scene. The actor can bring to life the world of the scene and at the same time be the protagonist of the reality acted. Actor and spect-actor then choose to dwell together a different world, with different and converging roles at the same time. The Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2005), like education, is a pact of generosity between the spect-actor and the audience, an act of faith in humanity than men, experiencing the beauty, getting in touch with what that transcends the sensible reality precisely starting from the sensitive reality. The Theatre of the Oppressed is therefore seeking the truth in the beauty; acceptance of one's humanity and need for transcendence; ability to marvel toward life and get away from oppression.

### **Conclusion**

Very often people are convinced that we can do very little to change situations in life settings and in society in general. But taking an active role in building the dramatization that examines alternative social structures, they can be encouraged to adopt a more optimistic prospective on their potential participation in social change.

As Freire argued (Schaedler, 2010, p. 147), there is no way for the transformation, transformation is the way, and to seek transformation, we must begin to transform the world around us. The experience as a place of expression and actualization of a complex thought emerges, in fact, as a strategic response to the problems posed by the unpredictable experiential and problematic dimension (Knowles, 1980; 1996).

The Theatre of the Oppressed is a learning environment in which each actor, in his or her role, has a chance to learn how to consciously reflect on his actions and to seek alternative solutions to the problem (Romano, 2014; Striano, Strollo, Romano, 2014). The Theatre of the Oppressed in the formative moment encourages the sense-making activities and the ability to build visions and always multiple meanings, breaking the perceptual set and the meanings attributed to the events, promoting the construction and the combination of other perspectives, more functional but always temporary. If we assume that every human action, whatever its nature, as a result of intentionality, implies a choice, the problem is to exercise our right to individual choice, to know explain and justify the reasons, take responsibility in first person, turning it into prior and preconceived structure. When we act must remember that what we see and understand is just a «small circuit arc» and that our action is just one of the infinite ways of operating in that context. We can then broaden our vision to other possibilities, to make the relational context as a learning opportunity. Working on the implicit and oppression implies a reflection on the conditioning exercised by formal knowledge,



acquired in the course of institutional education, on cultural suggestions received from the context in which we are located, to understand how these elements have constituted the patterns by which to read the relational experience and current information. To unveil these influences means opening up the possibility of building meanings independently and plan new directions for action.

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## Mindfulness Practices as discover of Inner Transformative Dialogue

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### **Abstract**

The experiential workshop we would like to carry out is based on the ACT Protocol (Baer, 2012), which aims to promote change and to increase the ability of listening to our inner world and consciousness flow. The workshops will incorporate the central elements of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow et. al, 2000), including: (1) Guided mindfulness practice as disorienting dilemma; (2) Critical reflection; and (3) Dialogue with the others in a non-judgemental openness.

### **Introduction**

We would like to present an experiential workshop on Mindfulness practices for exploring their potential effectiveness on people. Mindfulness exercises cultivate the attention and favor experiences of sensorimotor integration, in a wholistic approach. These methodologies could lead to a transformation of meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 2000) thanks to the work on the ability to stay in the present time and to be aware of our own cognitive processes. If dialogue can be considered at the heart of transformative learning processes, mindfulness practices can promote inner dialogue to develop critical reflection and emotional regulation. We call mindfulness a set of actions that affect many aspects of mental functioning. The competition continues to play a key role in individual success among people, it can easily impede efforts to enter authentic dialogue across cultures, disciplines, values; the kind that simultaneously allows for ‘changing’ and ‘being changed’ collectively. To do so would be challenging precisely because achieving individual recognition is such an alluring motivation in society. Balancing individual recognition with our desire to be one with something greater, rather than casually a part of, requires attitudes such as: beginner’s mind, being non-judgmental, maintaining patience, and letting go. A time for the process of understanding, formally cultivating, and living-out these attitudes is the practice of mindfulness, defined as paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment, moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Research shows that regular mindfulness practice is associated with a substantial increase in brain matter associated directly with learning processes, emotional regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking (Holzel et al., 2011). Mindfulness practice is also shown to substantially reduce anxiety (Roemer et. al, 2008) and rewire our individual perceptions so that we might better remain open to new ideas (Carmody, 2009).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework looks at constructive-development theory (Kegan, 1982) within the context of mindfulness meditation while paying particular attention to the importance of emotions. Kegan’s six stage theory of development starts at infancy and

includes three stages of adult development (Kegan, 1982) beyond adolescence: the social mind (interpersonal), the self-authoring mind (institutional), and the self-transforming mind (interindividual). The stages are important because although they rely upon the concept of social development of consciousness, they also focus more heavily upon individual emotional development. The stages, or meaning perspectives, are stage 0 or incorporative (an infant), stage 1 or impulsive (a toddler), stage 2 or imperial (an adolescent), stage 3 or interpersonal (a completely socialized adult), stage 4 or institutional (a self-authoring adult), and stage 5 or inter-individual (a self-transforming adult). The stages show how individuals have the potential to progress from one stage to the next, and Kegan describes that type of change as transformational (Kegan, 1982). For example, a shift from being a socialized person to being a self-authored person is a «shift away from being “made up by” the values and expectations of one’s “surround” (family, friends, community, culture) that get uncritically internalized and with which one becomes identified, toward developing an internal authority that makes choices about these external values and expectations according to one’s own self-authored belief system» (Kegan, 2000, p. 59-60). The three stages of adulthood are interpersonal, institutional, and inter-individual and are likely to be the stages most commonly identified in the group of adult participants who practice mindfulness meditation. Clearly mindfulness practice is acted by adult people, even if some recent approaches try to experiment mindfulness protocol with children. This study is going to examine the process of moving from one stage, or sub-stage, to the other through the practice of mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness practice has been defined as «an awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment» (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness practice is a sustained form of awareness that can be accessed through formal meditation and utilized as a helpful way of being in relationship with the fetters of everyday life.

One of the most critical attitudes that may be developed through mindfulness practice includes beginner’s mind. Dr. Kabat-Zinn, a trained scientist who is chiefly responsible for the recent popularity of mindfulness practice in the North-American countries, has cautioned professionals about the isolating nature of the expert mind, which we should take into account as we strive to be part of something greater than ourselves: «Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we ‘know’ prevent us from seeing things as they really are... An open, ‘beginner’s’ mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in a rut of our expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does» (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 35). The connection of body and mind through the meditative act of breathing creates an «integral consciousness» (Wilber et al., 2008, p. 185), brings us into the present moment (O’Reilly, 1998), and enables deep listening (Rao, 2009).

However, we are not always able to commit to this seemingly simple task. We may be distracted by our own thoughts, anxieties, physical discomforts, insecurities, pride, egocentrism, the past, or the future, all of which, sometimes simultaneously, might be happening in our minds during the spontaneously creative, intimate, yet collaborative act of improvisation.

The notions of listening and becoming more inclusive are related to the transformative learning theory by Mezirow (1997). However, the acceptance and nurture of our self with love as a prerequisite for a potentially transformative process, may add a new perspective to the part of the theory that encompasses listening. The transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) is a process in which people’s frameworks are transformed to

be more inclusive, differentiating permeable (open to other viewpoints), critically reflexive on assumptions, emotionally able to change, and including experience (Taylor, Cranton, 2012, p. 84). The transformative learning literature emphasizes the importance of critical reflection (Taylor, Cranton, 2012) in the learning process. Reflection can cover three different patterns: the content, the process and the premises of the perspectives of meaning. Most people experience a ‘reflection on the content’, during which simply questioning what were their values. As a result, they are able to reaffirm their values and/or increase the level of awareness. The second type of thought is about ‘process’, which some people develop by reflecting on their values. This process of reflection helps people to reaffirm their values through a deeper understanding of the etiology from which they derive. Reflection ‘on the premises’, or critical, comes from asking certain questions, such as the importance of certain values, experience, or how to manage the experience, socially constructed on the assumptions, beliefs, or challenges. When you start a process of questioning of your ‘habits of mind’ (Mezirow, 2000), gradually increasing the awareness of your own values. Regarding our taken-for-granted assumptions, or our mental models, Senge (1990) questions if we are prisoners of the system or prisoners of our own thinking. In his book *The Fifth Discipline* he describes mental models as deeply engrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. This information can help in appreciating the forces that are shaping reality and how we are part of those forces and therefore, can affect them. In this way, participants to the workshop can make that connection in order to change their paradigm through identifying their mental models. As we reflect, we better understand our “agentic” behavior (self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating). Bandura (1986) describes “agentic” behavior in his social cognition theory perspective that views people as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating, not just as reactive organisms shaped by environmental forces or driven by inner impulses, which is in opposition to the conception of humans as governed by external forces.

### **The ACT Protocol**

The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Baer, 2012), known as ACT, is one of the most known protocols of mindfulness of the cognitive-behavioral therapy. The ACT Protocol aims to promote change and to increase the perception of well being thanks to the ability of listening to our inner world and consciousness flow. It impacts on dysfunctional processes, which are responsible for psychological inflexibility, promoting the opposite “virtuous” processes. To be in touch with the here-and-now experience is a way of connection with our strengths and weaknesses, with our viewpoints from which it is possible to observe thoughts and feelings. Specifically, the goal of the ACT intervention is to increase the psychological “flexibility”, allowing people to make conscious actions, which could be valuable and effective. Moreover, people can become more resilient in dealing with unpleasant emotions and thoughts. ACT is based on Relational Frame Theory (RFT), a comprehensive theory of language and cognition that is an offshoot of behavior analysis. ACT tries to teach people to better control their thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and other private events, ACT teaches them to just notice, accept, and embrace their private events, especially previously unwanted ones.

The core conception of ACT is that psychological suffering is usually caused by experiential avoidance, cognitive entanglement, and resulting psychological rigidity that leads to a failure to take needed behavioral steps in accord with core values. ACT

views the core of many problems to be due to the concepts represented in the acronym, FEAR:

- **F**usion with your thoughts
- **E**valuation of experience
- **A**voidance of your experience
- **R**eason-giving for your behavior

And the healthy alternative is to **ACT**:

- **A**cept your reactions and be present
- **C**hoose a valued direction
- **T**ake action

The mindfulness-based approaches are gaining significant popularity in the training of psychologists, psychotherapists, and counselors and in the training for all the so-called helping professions. Mindfulness practices can promote self- and others-care. If people are not aware of them and are not able to listen to their inner speech, they would never be able to move from the monologue to the authentic dialogue with the others.

The workshop is inspired by the ACT structured protocol (Baer, 2012), which perceives some interesting psychological processes that can reduce noise and increase the feeling of well being:

- Decentralization, ACT helps the individual get in contact with a transcendent sense of self known as self-as-context-the you that is always there observing and experiencing and yet distinct from one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories. Act protocol exercises promote cognitive defusion (learning methods to reduce the tendency to reify thoughts, images, emotions, and memories).
- Psychological flexibility: ACT commonly employs core principles to help people develop psychological flexibility, which are contact with the present moment (awareness of the here and now, experienced with openness, interest, and receptiveness) and committed action (setting goals according to values and carrying them out responsibly).
- Values, discovering what is most important to one's true self: ACT aims to help the individual in order to clarify their personal values and to take action on them, bringing more vitality and meaning to their life in the process, increasing their psychological flexibility.
- Emotional regulation, ACT promotes ability of observing the self (accessing a transcendent sense of self, a continuity of consciousness which is unchanging).
- Self-compassion, with acceptance, allowing thoughts to come and go without struggling with them.
- Spirituality, cultivating self-transcendence and acceptance.

### **Transformative Potential of the Mindfulness Experience**

Since the nature of the mind is largely habit forming, our way of being at work and home are bound with our Habits of Mind, described as “a set of assumptions-broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 17). Therefore it is not enough to recognize how our assumptions beget specific behavior, but also patterns in behavior. The result of examining these patterns can be a perspective transformation. Perspective

Transformation is described as: «... a deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable, and better-justified meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978) – but the ways of getting there can differ depending on the person or people and the context or situation (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 3). Mezirow (1998) states that one of the important ways of developing critical perspective is through changing the habits of the mind. Many of the respondents in this study reported that they had knowledge (and often) of some sort of mindfulness practice, but mostly did not use it; they hadn't developed the necessary habits of mind and body to use it as a tool. Offering a combination of yoga, silent meditation, noticing one's breath, walking meditation, and shared learning opens up the definition of what mindfulness is and what its purpose.

Transformation like this however, only reveals itself in observable fashion when a person's transformed habit of mind prompts in concrete action, thus genuinely reflecting a change of heart. Sometimes the disorientation can be prompted by a simple question. You might ask a person 'why' they work for instance: Why are you here? Why are you really here? Why are you really, really here? Do they respond with a narrative that suggests they work to live, live to work, or perhaps live through a greater sense of meaning in the work? These questions are inherently personal, cannot be approached scientifically, and require a form of attention that creates some level of existential yearning.

Through critical reflection, individuals develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of what they are bringing out of their innate qualities. By encouraging a critical appraisal of the culturally determined stereotypes that people have internalized and defended, they open up new vistas for self-realization. Mindfulness program promotes consciousness rising, as its central educational mission. Mindfulness practices can offer new models for the dialogue with the oppressor, the abuser, and the racist, without violence and prejudices, suspending each reaction and cultivating openness to the others in a non-judgmental way (De Simone, Romano, Strollo, 2014).

### **The Mindfulness workshop**

Mindfulness is a simple way of relating to our experience, which can have profound impact on painful, negative experiences we encounter. Mindfulness exercises involve 'Stopping', Paying attention, Becoming aware of present moment realities and assuming a Not judging way of being whatever is happening as 'good' or 'bad'. Critical reflection, reflective discourse, and testing-out (i.e. trying on) new ways of being mindful are competencies that require an advanced ability to practice awareness and be vulnerable in a society where performance is so highly valued.

Critical mindfulness practice can impact on sparking, supporting, and maintaining transformative learning. As a whole, the process utilized in this workshops can also deeply impact on the existential side because it focuses on the 'now' and experience of 'being' rather than solely 'doing.'

Mindfulness exercises we would like to propose create a "holding environment", give participants a safe "platform" from which to observe and to reflect about the spread of monologue instead of dialogue, creating new transformational possibilities in self as well as in the wider world for being present at the moment and real open to the others and to ask themselves the question as to why dialogue is often so difficult, and human connections get broken.

Mindfulness exercises we would like to conduct in the experiential workshop are not a relaxation exercise, nor a way to avoid difficulty, nor a way to by-pass personality problems or about achieving a different state of mind.

Mindfulness exercises are about being present to our experience however distressing or upsetting it may be, bring people closer to difficulties but without becoming caught up in our reactions to difficulties. They are a slow, gentle coming to grips with who we are that and they can settle participants in to their current experience in a relaxed, alert, open-hearted way. If one of the aims of the Conference is to explore the difficulties of dialogue, and why we may not listen or accept another's point of view, Mindfulness exercises are helpful to invite gently participants to reflect about themselves and the others. These techniques are useful for bring mindfulness into the activities of everyday life. Mindfulness in action techniques include focusing awareness of an aspect of a physical habit that previously has largely been outside of conscious awareness, being aware of what happens to your breathing or voice tone in an argument, focusing awareness on the breath when a specified environmental cue occurs and on your thoughts when you are in a supposed dialogue with another person. The cues we might use include waiting for phone to be answered, being in a group conversation, walking. The Mindfulness exercises we would like to carry out are *Reflection on Your Morning Routine*, *It's your 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, *The Wind Blows*, *The Falls Exercises*, *The Mindfulness Exercise of Domestic Chores*.

The mindfulness practice can be based very closely on Transformative Learning Theory, particularly the three central components of critical reflection, reflective discourse, and change (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The disorientation that sparked this process is the meditation practice itself, as participants are quickly shocked by how quickly they are carried away by their thoughts and their ordinary talking.

Each meditation session is followed by quiet reflection time and then shared dialogue regarding the experience, connections to the inner values and thoughts, and the development of a 'real world' strategy to apply actionable mindfulness practice to teaching, research, and daily life.

The specific objectives of the workshop are to become familiar with the mindfulness practices and their application to creativity, innovation, and efficacy in managing anxiety and in be present in the actual moment; to develop a personal and individual system for recognizing symptoms of absentmindedness and implementing immediate mindfulness practice to re-center the mind in order to be more 'present' with students, colleagues and generally with the world. Another important aim of the workshop is to understand the role of mindfulness in dialogue with others as they will engage in mindful-listening activities, and to enjoy some of the many benefits associated with intensive mediation practice – such as reduced stress, increased clarity of mind, improved decision making, and overall sense of well-being.

Our experience is based on the workshops on mindfulness practices in the Laboratory of Educational Epistemology and Practices at University of Naples Federico II, during the last three years. The workshops on mindfulness adopts the ACT Protocol and lasts for six meetings. The participants of the Laboratory are students of the Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and students of the Master's Degree in Psychology. Through the use of all the exercises, students self-organize into the following areas with relatively even distribution: Grading and Assessment; Awareness of Students in the Classroom; Learning Mindfulness in and out of the Classroom; and Self-Awareness in Learning. Mindfulness into action facilitates in participants the identification of taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes that allows for a neutral ground where varied perspectives can meet to explore and move beyond the initial positions. New positions allow new solution to make new possibilities for the diversity issues at hand (De Simone, Romano, Strollo, 2014).

The workshop cannot be ordinary. It must be transformative in nature. It must also be



penetrating in its effect, particularly during a time when too many people crouch in bunkers of expertise, shielding themselves from doomsday scenarios: pink-slips, slander, demotion, scapegoating, exclusion, and anything else the fearful mind can conjure. Perhaps the greatest protection of all is the work or the appearance itself. They start to notice the techniques of mindfulness and reflection translating subconsciously into other areas of their life. Instead of seeing mindfulness into action as separate mindful activities where they need to consciously remind themselves, they notice themselves being more mindful individuals in all areas of their life: relationships, work, school, and how they treat themselves.

We can qualify transformative dimensions of mindfulness practice by drawing from a notion suggested by Yorks and Kasl (2002), wherein those who facilitate adult learning initiatives might conceptualize experience as a phenomenological process that necessitates more of an affective ‘experiencing’ of a shared moment: «Casting experience as a verb instead of a noun - that is, conceptualizing experience phenomenologically instead of pragmatically – leads educators to examine how they can assist learners in sharing a felt sense of the other’s experience instead of reflecting on its meaning» (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p. 186).

We will explore the use of mindfulness practices according to the ACT Protocol through exploring the embodiment of social, emotional, and communicative learning as meaning making and facilitating intuition and insight. We posit that Transformative Learning relies on the learner being emancipated from fragmented thoughts and distractions, while accessing an inquisitive, attentive, and reflective mind.

ACT mindfulness practice, which is essentially the type of ‘being with experience’ that Yorks and Kasl (2000) point to, is said to help participants re-enter life with something resembling a Beginner’s Mind, where they can practice seeing the world for the first time, moment by moment. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2009) has written much on the importance of developing a beginner’s mind: «Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we “know” prevent us from seeing things as they really are...An open, “beginner’s” mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in a rut of our expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does» (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 35). Beginner’s mind is just one of the many attitudinal dimensions cultivated through mindfulness practice. Others include being more flexible, patient, less judgmental, trusting, non- striving, and accepting (Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

The workshop may create the conditions for understanding the essence of self-transforming experiences with particular emphasis upon the emotional aspects of the change and investigation into possible epistemological and ontological changes identified as «the transformation in transformational learning theory» (Kegan, 2000, p. 53). The study will promote participants’ thoughts and feelings as they describe the self-transforming experiences within the context of mindfulness meditation. Key is what that kind of change feels like to the participant, and factors that influence it, which will hopefully be illuminated through the discussion after the workshop. In addition, it may show that one of the practical effects of mindfulness meditation is not only greater control of thoughts and emotions (Kabat-Zinn, 2009) but also greater complexity in the participant’s personality through a change in their level of adult development (Kegan, 1982). Furthermore, the context that will be used for the workshop, mindfulness meditation, is also more likely to change the emotions of the participants since it is designed to aid in observing and directing unruly thoughts (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). The ability to exist/be in the present moment with openness and

curiosity is essential to create an inner space for awareness which impacts the outer expression. How do we create mindfulness for transformative learning?

The purpose of this workshop is to describe the essence of the self-transformational change process with a special focus upon the emotion experienced by the participants. In this process, the context or space will be mindfulness meditation. Self-transformational change comes about because a person deliberately seeks to change some element of their life. They perceive a need in themselves and perform some actions that they feel that they will meet that need. What is a participant's experience of self-transformational change? What are the emotional aspects of the change?, and 2) What is the role of mindfulness meditation in this process?

What does it mean to make space for learning and expression of our intuition and embodiment? This presentation will examine the mind and body relationship, as well as the impact that mindfulness, and space/context plays on this phenomenon. The aims for the workshop of mindfulness are to address with participants their "taken for granted assumptions" around the definition of "dialogue and listening" and what it means to each of the individuals and group as a whole and to provide space for participants that takes them on a journey within to transform their underlying assumptions. Thus, participants are able to transform individually, in order to work as a collective.

The process of transformational change in the workshop acts in emotion (A), behavior (B), and cognition (C) in a nurturing and safe environment; i.e. the holding environment. The mindfulness meditation element is primarily concerned with emotion (A) and how it changes and matures. The transformative learning element is the behavioral (B) change as a result of learning through experience (Croswell, 1996). The transformational change element is about a change in cognition (C) as in a change in understanding how the world works (epistemology) and the nature of reality (ontology). The holding environment is the safe environment (meditation class) where one is supported and encouraged as one makes a transformational change. Altogether, they form a model which is an attempt at extending Kegan's constructive-development theory into emotional science within the context of mindfulness meditation. The workshop based on ACT Protocol may facilitate in participants the identification of taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes that allows for a neutral ground where varied perspectives can meet to explore and move beyond the initial positions. Immediately after the workshop, we will administrate a questionnaire in order to understand empirically participants' mind perspectives transformations.

### **Some instructions for facilitator**

«Say something about what brings you here and what you hope to get out of the group. Paying attention to the purpose and to the present moment and nonjudgmentally. Bringing your awareness to the breath, to the inbreath and the outbreath – no need to control breathing in any way – simply letting the breath breathes itself. As best you can simply allowing your experience to be your experience without trying to change it. And as your awareness settles on the breath, bringing attention to the lower abdomen, noticing physical sensations there as the breath moves in and out of the body.

Sooner or later, the mind will wander away from focus on the breath to thoughts, planning, daydreaming, whatever. This is ok. It is simply what minds do. It is not a mistake or failure. When you notice your awareness is no longer on the breath, gently acknowledge where it has gone, and gently escort your awareness back to the lower

abdomen. Now shifting your awareness to the nostrils. Paying attention to the breath as it enters the body through the nostrils and as it leaves the body through the nostrils. Just noticing any sensations, perhaps feelings of warmth or coolness or itching, or no sensations at all.

And when the mind wanders, as best you can, gently acknowledging where it has gone, bringing the attention back to the breath. Now letting go of attention to the breath, and bringing your awareness to hearing, to noticing sounds as they arise, wherever they arise. As best you can, being aware of sounds as pure sensations, noticing patterns of pitch, tone, volume and duration, letting go of the urge to label what you are hearing.

No need to go searching for sounds or listening for particular sounds, simply opening to sounds as they arise – sounds that are close, sounds that are far away, inside the room, outside the room, outside the building, noticing spaces between sounds or perhaps no sound at all. First taking a few moments to get in touch with the movement of your breath and the sensations in the body, perhaps bringing awareness to the sensations of touch or pressure, where your body makes contact with the chair or floor.

*Into the Present Moment* . Coming into the present moment and anchoring attention to the breath, following each inbreath and each outbreath. And as you (*mention the activity*), shifting your focus to what really matters; revisiting your anchor as needed when your focus drifts from the present moment.

*Take notice.* Taking notice of your inner experience from your observer perspective (perhaps embodying your inner mountain or another observer image). Noticing physical sensations (e.g., sweating, blushing, rapid heartbeat). Noticing emotions (e.g., fear, anger). Noticing thoughts (provide examples relevant to the specific activity). Noticing urges to protect yourself with safety behaviours (provide examples relevant to the specific activity).

The Pain is gone now what? (Hayes, Smith, 2005, p. 14-15). Imagine that you woke up one morning and suddenly, for no reason, the social anxiety you've suffered all these years is gone. What would you do? And not just what you would do on that particular day but more broadly how your life course would change if your constant struggle with social anxiety was no longer an issue. Just go with your gut instinct. You don't have to hand this in or share your answers unless you want to. Group members are given 5 minutes to write down their responses and are then asked to share them with the rest of the group if they are willing. Typically, it is clear from the responses that for most people social anxiety has gotten in the way of living a full and vital life.

*Coping Strategies exercise* (Hayes, Smith, 2005, p. 27-28) Group members are instructed to write down any control strategies they have used over the years to manage their anxiety and to rate each strategy on its short-term and long-term effectiveness. Typically, short-term effectiveness is rated much higher than long-term effectiveness.

Allowing your experience to be exactly as it is. Bringing a gentle curiosity, openness, and compassion to your internal experiences. Deep down inside, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for? What sort of qualities do you want to cultivate as a person? How do you want to be in your relationships with others? Values are our heart's deepest desires for the way we want to interact with and relate to the world, other people, and ourselves. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through life.

## **Conclusion**

In a parallel vein, Mezirow talks about integration as important for perspective transformation in Transformative Learning (2000, p. 50). It is the combination of the shared embodied experience, shared silences, shared conversations and emotions, and shared learning that make the “mashup” of mindfulness modalities so powerful and successful. The encouragement of and training by combining the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual domains allows participants to truly make the changes they need in their life. All the modalities simultaneously lead to developing habits of the mind and body. In TL literature, this is referred to as holistic orientation, which encourages and believes in the engagement with other ways of knowing—the affective and relational, and even the embodied. While TL’s roots are in rational discourse, lately there is recognition that other ways of learning and knowing are important as well. Thus the relational, intuitive and physical aspects of learning have become recognized as an important piece of the endeavor (Taylor, 1998). As Brown (2006) concludes, learners rarely change through a rational process (analyze-think-change). Instead they «are more likely to change in a see-feel-change sequence» (p. 732). Affective knowing developing an awareness of feelings and emotions in the reflective process is inherent in critical reflection.

The expected outcome in participants of this experiential session may be Mindfulness. Langer, often describes mindfulness as a state of constant awareness (1992). This state of neutrality is a moment-to moment consciousness that prevents individuals from engaging in automatic responses (Capel, 2012). Participants will be able to observe the behavioral patterns that are unintentionally sabotaging their lives. Once participants will be able to observe this behavior, they will be able to move into action to correct it. When an individual operates in a state of mindfulness they are able to identify underlining meanings and relevant information to solve current issues, resulting in an increase in productivity and peace of mind.

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## Promoting transformative learning at the intersections between formal and informal learning: the case of the virtual Communities of Practices

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### Abstract

This paper describes the pilot and descriptive study on the processes of learning and of knowledge construction occurring within the virtual community of practices. The aim of the research is to discuss the idea of the potential transformative impact of virtual community of practices on university programs.

### Introduction

All cognitive processes should be understood as contextually situated, deeply determined by time constraints, distributed because they are co-determined by factors, environmental resources and tools. Their products in terms of (tangible and intangible) support resources are deposited in external environments, in order to use them to support further cognitive processes.

This paper describes a research on learning processes and knowledge construction occurring in on-line groups within the university contexts. The aim of the research is to discuss the idea of the potential transformative impact of virtual community of practices on university students. The study explores strengths and weaknesses linked to educational practice that support the situated, constructed, relationally tacit, and distributed knowledge that constitute the on-line groups. Theories that support this research focus on *community of practice* (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and *transformative learning* (TL) as articulated by Cranton (2006), Marsick and Watkins (1999), and Mezirow (1991, 2000). In this framework, the construct of CoP represents: (1) an interpretative scheme to describe the situated nature of the learning that the on-line interactions are able to produce and, at the same time, (2) a methodological device which outlines the possibility to promote, develop and cultivate VCoPs. The focus on the situativity emphasizes a markedly social dimension of the learning and opens the opportunity to promote educational interventions interested in supporting the local dynamics of learning, wherever they happen. The on-line devices are virtual intersections between formal and informal learning. According to Wenger (1998), «We all belong to CoPs. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies –we belong to several CoPs at any given time. And the CoPs to which we belong change over the course of our lives. In fact, the CoPs are everywhere» (1998, p. 6).

### 1. Conceptual Framework

As revealed in advance, the theoretical underpinnings that legitimate this research refer to the constructs of community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and of transformative learning (TL) as articulated by Cranton (2006), Marsick and Watkins (1999), and Mezirow (1991, 2000, 2003).

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder define the CoPs as «groups of people who share a

concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis» (2002, p. 4). So far, learning has been characterized in terms of the uptake of information or the development of mental structures through interaction in the environment and the development of ideas through interaction with more knowledgeable others or developing ideas conjointly with others. More recently the notion of learning has been taken to include participation in and becoming part of a community. A community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) occurs when people jointly engage socially in a common enterprise or activity, and through this learn together.

Communities of practice can arise in a variety of ways, including taking part in everyday life. However, in the above respect ‘community’ is more than working proximity, or an organised group for a given purpose; its social fabric develops over time around things that matter so that it is possible to gain a sense of trust and belonging. Through this, a community of practice develops a ‘shared repertoire’ of resources, such as vocabulary, routines, understandings and artefacts, over an extended period. Rather than being an individual pursuit or academic exercise largely confined to the classroom, learning is ‘situated’ within the framework provided by the community of practice through which participation can take place. Through this learning can be acquired incidentally rather than intentionally.

The virtual community of practice is thematized as a system characterized by an inherent capability of learning and its members as epistemic subjects who develop knowledge and activity systems functional to deal with the open-endedness of the situations in which they move. In the age of Web 2.0, users not only receive knowledge online but also create and transmit contents. A VCoP is such an online community for like-minded individuals in geographically dispersed areas. A VCoP is an emergent online community where students in academia share and seek knowledge related to their practice. In accordance with the characteristics of a conventional community of practice, it is a place where a rich shared repertoire community identity (i.e., common interest, theme, organization) and individual member identity (i.e., moderators, experts) are developed through social interactions. Different from online commonplaces, a VCoP is as much a space for knowledge creation as for knowledge sharing. VCoPs are particularly celebrated for the generation and dissemination of tacit knowledge.

Virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) are defined as «online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions» (Chiu, Hsu & Wang, 2006, p. 1873). Traditional VCoPs organize knowledge into themes. Topics are grouped together into a theme hierarchy. Posts and their threads on similar topics are organized in chronological order. Members typically browse the theme hierarchy, identify the theme of interest, find an interesting topic, and follow its threads. Alternatively, a member may search with keywords to find interesting posts or directly delve into a topic that is promoted to the front page because of its quality or recency. Internet forum technology is the typical underlying technology that provides all these functionalities for VCoPs. Because members of a common interest are drawn together by topics, such a community can be regarded as a theme-oriented community.

A further hermeneutical key that allows the enrichment of the educational perspective learning and knowledge processes in the virtual communities of practices is traceable in transformative learning theory as articulated by Cranton (2006), Marsick & Watkins



(1999), and Mezirow (1991, 2000, 2003). This theory describes how adult learners, struggling with critical passages of existence, may help themselves to overcome the constraints on learning that occurred during childhood through a transformative experience. In other words, the authors investigate how adults construct meaning systems through elaboration processes of their own experiences. The transformative theory is a constructivist theory of adult learning: it outlines a perspective that emphasizes the centrality of a critical-reflective thinking able to validate the ways in which individuals interpret and symbolize the experiences that characterize them. The focus is on what happens in the apical events of the existence and on the possible connections between adult life and disorienting dilemmas that may mark this course. «Perspective transformation can occur either through accretion of transformed meaning schemes resulting from a series of dilemmas or in response to an external imposed epochal dilemma such as a death, illness, separation or divorce, children leaving home, being passed over for promotion or gaining a promotion, failing an important examination, or retirement. A disorienting dilemma that begins the process of transformation also can result from an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or from efforts to understand a different culture with customs that contradict our own previously accepted presuppositions» (Mezirow, 1991, p.168).

The need to connect the human issues around online, text-based communication, the teaching issues associated, was a significant part of the impetus to create a new research framework to investigate educationally important issues around all educational media. Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2010) described the experience of conducting higher education using online communications media. The Community of Inquiry framework they adopted was characterized by Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, and Teaching Presence. It is important to emphasize that this framework emerged in the specific context of computer conferencing in higher education—i.e., asynchronous, text-based group discussions—rather than from a traditional distance education theoretical perspective assumed that students worked independently from each other. The CoI framework is generic in that it is conceptually grounded in theories of teaching and learning in higher education: «it has been stated that the two constituting notions of community and inquiry form a pragmatic organizing framework of sustainable principles and processes for the purpose of guiding online educational practice» (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, 2010, p. 6).

## **2. Collaborative and Cooperative Learning in virtual community of practices**

An environment that allows interactive dynamics between the group members, which contribute to increase knowledge for everyone, promotes a collaborative learning process in the sense that it is based on shared experiences, identifying traded practices and mutual help. Collaboration and learning interactions can occur, at or around or in relation to the computer. However, these can also occur through computers (Crook, 1994).

Collaborative learning is substantially teamwork to reach a common goal and can be seen as overcoming the behaviorist view according to which learning is an individual activity. Collaborative learning moves from the traditional model of the information transmission, to that learning means to be able to gain knowledge and objectively measurable skills, to a communicative-dialogical model of learning, for which social and cultural learning is focused more on the subjective will to follow a customized knowledge route and to engage oneself in paths of creation and joint development of meanings. The conversation, confrontation, debate and discussion among students, peers, colleagues, experts or professors allow a significant learning, a deep

understanding and help to develop problem solving strategies, to consider different opinions, explaining to others own his/her in order to build knowledge together. Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers; cooperation is a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through people working together in groups.

Cooperative learning, otherwise, is defined by a set of processes which help people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal or develop a final product, which is usually, content specific. It is more directive than a collaborative system of governance and closely controlled by the teacher. The fundamental approach is teacher centered whereas collaborative learning is more student centered. The structural approach to cooperative learning is based on the creation, analysis and systematic application of structures, or content-free ways of organizing social interaction in the classroom.

The ‘places’ of learning (Striano, 1999) can not be considered only physical locations, but should be also virtual spaces: the adjective virtual refers to the mind as an extended place of learning, and to formal, non-formal and informal educational settings. In the era of the cyber-culture, widespread during the first decade of the twenty-first century, there was a multifaceted extension of the human mind, thanks to chips and networks systems. In many educational institutions participation in learning could occur through digital networks such as virtual learning environments (VLEs) and the Internet. In our research, virtual community of practices can act as a forum for reciprocal teaching or peer collaboration; learners can help each other to solve a problem more effectively than if they had worked alone.

### **3. The research on virtual community of practices**

The study explores strengths and weaknesses linked to trajectories of educational practice that support the situated, constructed, relationally, tacit, and distributed knowledge that constitute the virtual community of practices in a digital environment. This is a pilot and descriptive empirical study, whose interest is to propose the basis for the investigation of a model of the processes of transformation that happened in the virtual community of practices.

The On-Line groups are schematized as systems characterized by an inherent capability of learning: their members, students and the administrator, who works as facilitator of the on-line interactions and exchanges, are epistemic subjects who develop knowledge to deal with the open-endedness of the situations through which they move. The On-line groups evolved from an existing semester course on learning processes that explored theory and practice, analyzed strategies, and considered opportunities and challenges in the field of adult education. Participants are 80 Bachelors’ Degree students in Psychological Sciences and Techniques at University of Naples “Federico II”: their on-line community is a constellation of dimensions, concerning the meanings that people attribute to the daily experiences in which they participate, the practices of construction and reproduction of activity systems in which they are involved and the reflexivity processes that are promoted in person and virtually. Exploring the virtual community through these constructs solicits to bring into focus a constellation of dimensions, concerning the meanings that persons attribute to virtual life, the daily experiences in which they participate, the practices of

construction and reproduction of activity systems in which they are involved and the reflexivity processes that are backed (or less) within this community. The virtual community activities lasts for four months and at least once per week the facilitator posts questions-stimuli on the group page.

Merriam and Bierema (2014) point to a continued gap in the literature regarding transformative learning in on-line environment. We share Cranton's (2006, p. 8) view that transformative learning online can be fostered as it is in other contexts, «through meaningful interactions among learners in which people feel free to express divergent points of view and feel supported and challenged by their peers and their teacher». Garrison and Kanuka (2004) argues that a source of transformation in learning «stems from the ability of online learners to be both together and apart—and to be connected to a community of learners anytime, anywhere, without being time, place or situation bound» (p.96).

Assuming that virtual groups respond to the criteria of the VCoPs, it is interesting to take into consideration the indications that this perspective provides on how learning occurs and on what is needed to do for promoting it in reference to formal and informal learning experiences. VCoPs leverage various information technologies for knowledge sharing, including blogs, wikis, forums, chat rooms, and question-and-answer systems. In our study, we use a typical technological infrastructure of VCoP, such as Facebook groups as forum, whereby content is organized into topics, and topics comprise threads that include posts and discussions raised by these posts. Members typically post information to a suitable thread, and other members can respond to or comment on the post.

We adopt a structured questionnaires with multiple choices of answers in order to understand the perception of the experience of taking part to the virtual community of practice in participants. The value of such a device lies in its ability to pose stimuli-questions where participants can feel free to interrogate the implicit and explicit epistemic structures underlying their practices, to deconstruct and reconstruct, to produce forms of knowledge and meanings that can be recognized as a framework common and expendable for new actions taken critically and responsibly. The purpose is to put people in a position to recognize their problems, to define them as objects, to question and experiment with possible changes with respect to themselves, that is, to contribute to developing participants' reflective identity.

The questionnaires has open-ended answers and is divided into four sections: in the first sections, the items explores the individual perceptions of the virtual community of practices, asking people if they had experienced before the tool of the virtual community of practice and which features this tool has. In the first sections are explored also the educational potentialities of the instrument, the interdependence between personal reflection and shared discourse, the critical questioning of beliefs and assumptions, the social presence for creating a secure environment for critical discourse, and the teaching presence that bridges these worlds effectively. Our hypothesis is that increased interactivity that can exist in online groups structured as virtual community of practices points to greater potential of creating transformative learning experiences of the students. The second section of the questionnaire interrogates the role and the impact of the group within the virtual community of practice, while the third section investigates the mechanisms that emerge thanks to the participation to the virtual community, the connections between formal and informal

learning, eliciting metacognitive skills in people who respond it.

The fourth section of the questionnaire looks into the weaknesses and the strength points of the virtual community of practice, inviting participants to express what they would like to change for the future virtual communities.

The adoption of the questionnaire allows, through processes of metaphorical creating, access to assumptions and worldviews otherwise hidden (Hoggan, Simpson, Stuckey, 2009). The use of such device inspires the ability to trace the daily routines, the emotional tonalities, the interaction modes, that characterizes the social acts of the participants. Using metaphors makes possible a gradual approach to explicit models, but particularly to implicit models, subtended to the ways in which people involved perceived, understood and interpreted their own virtual environment experiences.

Two key concepts, then, may be drawn from the idea of a community of practice: learning as situated and learning as participation. Those characteristics are present also in our virtual community of practices, where learners participate in the social practices of the community, have the opportunities to develop enquiry and learning skills and to create the dialogue to facilitate learning.

In our experience of the virtual community of practices, knowledge creation and exchange are identified as hallmarks of VCoPs. During specific sessions, generally after the in presence classes, typical knowledge creation activities in VCoPs include writing initial and creative posts and providing constructive comments to a discussion. Knowledge exchange typically occurs in the form of question-and-answer. Another typical form is post-and-comment. An initial post is often detailed, and a comment is often brief. The knowledge exchange process is also a part of the knowledge creation process. The discussion among members, including approvals and disapprovals, manifests a knowledge co-creation process that is beyond individual creativity.

In our experiential virtual sessions, with social networking support, a friend list makes an easy entry for a VCoP member to find and consult her friends: the member can read a friend's posts in one place and be informed of new posts from the friend, becoming easier to know a friend's expertise in a topic area, and one can show support for friends to strengthen interpersonal relationship.

The model of e-education proposed by Jung and Rha (2004) can fit with the framework approach that undergoes the virtual community of practices. We can use this model in order to stress how during the development and the evolution of the virtual community of practices a process of transformation occurs. Jung and Rha (2004) considered learner-centred, interactive and experiential e-learning and proposed that extended learning space was needed for three essential learning activities: acquisition, application, and construction.

1. Acquisition: in the extended learning space, learners can acquire knowledge, information and skills through a vast repository of multimedia resources available on the Web.

2. Application: the learners, individually or collaboratively, plan and carry out research, manage projects, and solve problems using digital tools and resources. In our virtual community of practices, connected to others, learners' ideas, knowledge and

findings can travel beyond the confines of their classes for resolution, confirmation and application. Throughout this process, the participants apply previously learned ideas and methods to new areas, critically examine sources and evidence, develop hypotheses, make judgments, and arrive at conclusions with broaden perspectives.

3. Construction: the extended learning space of the virtual community of practices enables the learners to work in teams, to create original ideas, products and processes, to identify trends and predict possibilities.

#### **4. Between mirroring and virtuality: VCoP participants' story**

The reflections that the participants formulated in respect to the virtual community experience show that learning process considered most relevant occurred in relation to seeing themselves in a context that legitimized questioning processes that are able to unlock the imagination to meaning prospects more inclusive, discriminating, open, permeable and reflective.

The reflection and critical-dialectical discourse are the conditions that allow involved actors to (begin to) explain, recognize and validate the perspectives and schemes of meaning underlying their actions and to gain awareness about the tacit structures of their knowledge. Participants take on a function of critical mirror that allow them to try to recognize and rediscover themselves through the eyes of the other.

Of the original 80 participants to the virtual community, just 20 responded to the questionnaire. Here following there are their answers.

The first question is 1.1. *Before the experience have you ever experienced the Virtual Community of Practice as an educational tool?*. 20% (N=4) of the participants answered Yes, while 80% (N=16) answered Never. For the Item 1.2 *Which are the characteristics of the Virtual Community of Practices?*, participants recognize those elements:

1. Sense of belonging to the group
2. Shared and mutual knowledge and exchange
3. Interactions and reciprocity
4. Active participation and collaboration
5. Group working
6. Confidence into the community
7. Learning by doing
8. Educational and transformative aims

One participant says: *Virtual Communities of Practices and learning are social groups with the aim of producing organized and high quality knowledge, to which each member has free access. In these communities, individuals aim for a continuous learning through awareness of their own and others' knowledge.* Another participant

adds: *A Virtual Community of Practices must initially be a heterogeneous group that is formed for the achievement of an objective, which usually concerns the production (of an artifact, a task, a cultural product etc.). The VCoP is thus a kind of new living beings environment that tends to perfection and autonomy thanks to synchronous operation of each member and their exchanges of informations. [...] The need for recognition of each individual member allows to better know each other until they see them as partners regarding a specific practice.* Participants confirm the idea that the virtual world, and specifically the virtual learning environment, can evoke profounder forms of learning, and at the same time can reinforce the group dynamics that facilitate the process of questioning personal prior assumptions.

About the third item, I.3. *How did you connect the formal/ non-formal/informal learning testing the Virtual Community of Practices?*, all participants answer that they connect their formal and informal learning *Through group situations, through pedagogical laboratory, in which alternate moments of lectures in presence to virtual interaction and mutual exchanges, and moments of reflection in which we find the actual items that emerge from our works*, that in the experimentation of Virtual Community of practices they understand *how the border among three three areas of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) can be thin and malleable: the knowledge that one is to set up in these areas constitute the knowledge of the individual. And all knowledge is always in connection with other forms of knowledge. These connections have been made apparent from the virtual knowledge construction.*

All of them agree to indicate as common thread the lived experience: they say that it is thanks to the experience that they can connect and put in circulation their formal, non-formal and informal knowledge. Virtual Community of practices, according to participants, preserve the experiential dimension, even if it is mediated by technological devices. In this case, the prior knowledge and acquisitions are broaden thanks to the belonging to the virtual community of practices, *Knowledge, although initially thought static, becomes more and more connected to other cognitions. Thanks to the groupal work my cultural background has been enriched by comparisons, experiences, thoughts etc ... which helped to make me more open-minded.* Starting from this scenario, it is possible to recognize in the virtual world shared stories of learning characterized by an evolution and by the construction of knowledge, where the relationship between participants is bound by a previous story and open to future stories. The virtual communities of practices, at least in the early steps of their development, are the outcome of the encounter between learning styles that each participant developed through his/her original story of learning. Habits, value horizons, beliefs and expectations, more or less consciously, pass through each member of the nucleus.

For the promotion of an experience of transformative learning within the contexts of the virtual community of practices, it seems to be necessary the dialogue, the reflection and the mutual authentic listening, which can be riched also in an on-line learning environment. *I think it is essential listening and being predisposed to it. Instead in my virtual community, as well as I feel at ease, I felt just the desire to speak and express myself and at the same time the desire to listen to my colleagues. Further element of important value is respect for others, avoiding each instance to prevaricate, openness and mutual interests to understand the others.* This consideration is shared by all participants to the virtual community of practice that answer to the open-answers

questionnaire.

The repertory of the Virtual community of practices is consisting of sharing the same laboratory experiences, the same age and the same degree, the same languages and the same academic program. Those components facilitate the identification process with the other members of the virtual community, and also the process of critical reflection. Thanks to the virtual community of practices, people unveil the implicit community of practices in which are daily involved, like family, friendship, social networks: they acquire, or maybe they reinforce their ability to learn other's viewpoints, putting in questions their ones, the impact of social roles also in virtual contexts (who is the leader, who is the communicative leader and who is the task leader, who posts more contents on the platform, who tries to carry out the interactional exchange). They improve their metacognitive knowledge about their learning processes, according to the competence of learning to learn established by the guidelines for the lifelong learning drawn out from the European Community, but they foster also their intersubjective metacognitive skills, understanding how other members learn and which are their weaknesses and their strenghtnesses.

About the relationship between formal and informal learning, participants state that informal learning is a practical knowledge that should be integrated with formal learning, which is directed to a global holistic individual formation, and which is s sort of *learning from and by the experience*. The sessions of the virtual community is not free from difficulties and hard moments: *The session into the virtual Community of Practice, at first, was not easy: the experience was new and no one seemed to be ready to share and to build new experiences based on shared participation. Subsequently, the dialogue has become increasingly easy and automatic, based on listening to the other and the sharing of knowledge.*

No one of the group acknowledges that the virtual dimension can be an obstacle for promoting critical thinking in the virtual community of practices. Furthermore, even if in digital on-line environments, the members of the virtual community feel very strong the facilitation of the group, to the extent that they say that *without a group, it is not possible to have the community, also a virtual community, and that the group create the conditions for processing a personal thought about the task, for collaborative and cooperative learning, for exchange and for the development of empathetic resonances among people.*

The community is the space to create connections, links between formal and informal learning, to support self-disclosure and to share not only knowledge contents but personal memories, experiences, emotions, and feelings .

What about the transformative dimension of learning within the contexts of the virtual community of practices? *Surely the experience of the virtual community of practices allows you to develop a transformative process of formation, as it allows you to explore an issue and to arrive at a proposal for a solution. It also allows you to be in the process and to develop thoughts on their thoughts.*

Without the virtual community of practice, students would work alone by themselves, they would never be confronted with others' perspectives on the same topic, maybe they would understand and learn less, however, something in the process of learning by the experience would be lost. All people agree in telling that their perspectives of

meaning would never be open and broaden as they are thanks to the session of the virtual community of practices. Some of them (25%, 5 people) say that they understand really what means the community of practices theory thanks to the experimentation of the virtual community of practices.

Participants compare the experience of taking part to the virtual community of practices to interactive and positive learning processes focused on the group belonging and on the collaborative learning: *the virtual community of practice is like a set of drops of water that form a river flowing to the sea ... the river needs the participation of all the drops of water to achieve the common goal, the achievement of openness and freedom from the riverbanks into the sea.*

*Also the virtual community made me understand what a group is, a dynamic system subjects affect and influence each other in a dialectical process that tends to bring the community and the practices lead in it more and more towards autonomy and evolution.*

Virtual communities repertory is characterized by critical events or disorienting dilemmas -using the Mezirow language- that may be expected and predictable or unpredictable and unexpected. The critical aspect of the event resides in the fact that it is open to uncertainty, calls for a change and throws up new objectives that may either promote development or constitute an obstacle and a blockage for the community growth.

Within this framework, the transformative paradigm pushes us to wonder how the learning processes in virtual community systems -in their multi-contextual connections and compared to the dimensions of change- may facilitate or hinder transformative trajectories. The interest, by an educational viewpoint, is focused on the development of training devices able to accompany growth processes involving virtual formal educational contexts. In particular, the work done helps learners gain insight into their life experiences, engages learners in critical reflection on fundamental assumptions, values, beliefs and world views and supports dialogue within oneself and with others.

We can say that the virtual community of practices creates a virtual space for making all participants to the community itself, even if the most part of the participants refuse to reply to the questionnaire. What happened for those people? Did they have a process of transformation? Are they resisting against the instrument, which can be implemented, or against the virtual community of practices itself? Our hypothesis, based on the answers of the other 20 participants, is that they could be involved in the repertory and in the operative task and goal of the virtual community of practices until they were involved also in the class in presence. Once finished the class, they began to drop out of it.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presents the first outcomes of the testing study with the virtual community of practices. Those outcomes should be considered as trial for adjusting the virtual sessions for the virtual community of practices, but we would like to offer an opportunity to reflect about on-line digital contexts and transformative learning. How can we modulate virtual environments in order to create the conditions for promoting transformative learning? Which are the needed characteristics of the virtual community of practices? And specifically, how and where can we apply those laboratory sessions



for creating the dialogical conditions for questioning prior assumptions in formal and informal learning processes? The outcomes we find for the answers to the questionnaire suggest that all people who respond to the questionnaire are enthusiastic participants of the virtual community of practices, who describe the process of questioning of their learning processes but also of their perspectives about collaborative and cooperative learning. This reminds us the first two criteria of the transformative learning. Our proposal could be the beginning for creating, testing and validating a quantitative tool to assess participants' level of change and transformation thanks to the virtual community of practices, but also to formalize a model of interaction processes within the virtual community of practices in which we can recognize the steps of the transformative learning. The analysis of the communicative exchanges among participants, posted on the wall of the virtual community, shows the process of questioning prior assumptions and of opening mind psychological, sociolinguistic and epistemological perspectives to renovate and more inclusive ones.

We would like to elicit the dialogue and the reflection of the scientific research community on TL about the new Web 3.0 dialogical applications to the didactic contexts. Transformative learning theory, in fact, is a social constructivistic theory of situated learning, and we can not anymore ignore the spread and the omnipresence in our life and in our learning contexts of the digital technologies.

So, we could question our prior and maybe traditional way of conceiving the experiential session for creating the opportunity to live a transformative learning experience, in order to understand how can we facilitate and manage process of transformation in mind perspectives thought and by and in digital virtual communities.

Our findings should be interpreted with the limitations of the study. First, this study focuses on the quality of knowledge exchange and of participants' perception for the virtual community of practices. The limitation is the lack of a robustness check with other time spans and with other samples of participants. The sample size is too small for statistical analysis.

Would the integration of VCoP benefit knowledge exchange in the community within formal and informal contexts? This study provides an answer to these questions, suggesting that social networking support will enhance knowledge exchange in VCoP and empirically confirm the effect of enhancing social capitals in VCoP, providing a rationale for the adoption of the virtual community of practice model in promoting transformative learning.

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