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How to embed performative 'Theatre of the Oppressed' in Higher Education systems

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Abstract

This article analyses the implications of the adoption of Theatre of the Oppressed as practice art-based methods in Higher Education programmes. The Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is a form of popular and participatory theatre that fosters democratic and cooperative forms of interaction in order to sustain processes of personal and collective reflections (Boal, 1985, 1996). The epistemological framework underpinning TO relies on Freirian practices of transformative learning through the use of the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire, 1970). This tradition can be usefully supplemented by drawing on practice-based theory, actor network theory and feminist approaches to transformative learning theory.

If TO is a situated practice-based methodology focusing on the dynamic character of the intra-actions among heterogeneous elements (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018), how does TO enact collective reflective practices in higher education classrooms? In what ways can TO shape and enhance transformative teaching and learning in these settings? What does TO do in situated practices and how does the study of TO contribute to practice-based studies? Starting from those questions, we discuss a framework for performative art-based learning in higher education. This grows out of a comparative re-analysis of notes and narrative data gathered from previous experiences in which Theatre of the Oppressed was adopted during the training course of Certification for future teachers in an Italian university. The hypothesis is that through TO teachers in training are supported to:

- Surface tacit beliefs, implicit expectations, feelings and judgments that unconsciously direct and shape their representations of social reality.
- Collectively recognise and critically interrogate shared problems and underlying assumptions.
- Speak out against prejudices and reaffirm commitment to a just and equitable society.

Keywords: Collective Reflection, professional community, identity, Theatre of the Oppressed.

The Theatre of the Oppressed: Dialogue, play and learning leadership

TO is a practice which builds directly on Freire's approach (1970) to liberatory education: it promotes a transformative model of learning based on dialogue and collective reflections. In TO, dialogue is brought about through the creation of a playful environment in which people express, analyse, and collectively change scenes of their reality according to their desires and their ability to change (Boal, 1985, 1996). Play is designed to activate a 'problem-posing' learning process where participants examine and analyse their reality starting from a situation of personally lived oppression and/or injustice. According to Boal (1985), TO has two fundamental principles: (1) to help the spectator become a protagonist in the dramatic action so that s/he can then (2) apply those theatrically practiced actions s/he lives in real life situations. Building on these principles, participants create scenes based on their own direct experiences and explore unresolved conflicts stemming from political or social problems. Each story represents the perspective of an oppressed protagonist actively engaged in implementing a strategy for the resolution of a conflict; the protagonist usually fails in resolving the conflict. Participants are invited to analyse the power relations and the etiological causes of the oppression, through the scenes performed. Finally, they are invited to act to transform the situation according to their vision of possible alternatives.

In the performance of the TO, the distinction between thinking, language and gesture collapses in a holistic and embodied practice of collective story-telling through the representations of the story of oppression.

The purpose is to move away from oppressor/oppressed dichotomies, otherness, or simplistic solutions to explore the true complexity of social systems. There is not just one guilty or one innocent, one oppressor and one oppressed. This perspective is influenced by understanding group and community as an integrated living organism (Diamond, 2007), where all the members and the parts are intertwined and influence each other, and by placing the focus on collective relationships and power asymmetries. The ultimate goal of this method is to empower participants to take action, to engage in leadership for emancipatory social change, to explore the root causes of inequalities and injustice, and to collaborate with others, as a group, to resolve them. Creating a physical 'brave space' (Dugan *et al.*, 2017, p. 422), where participants can rehearse how to address problems, challenge oppressive behaviours or envision how to engage in a leadership process, can positively impact both leadership efficacy and capacity. Participants' leadership skills, their internal beliefs that they can successfully effect change or engage in a leadership process, determines whether or not they could take on a leadership role (Dugan *et al.*, 2017). Leadership is in this sense based on relationships—a collaborative process where people intend to effect changes for the common good (Komives *et al.*, 2011).

Participation, problem posing and critical reflection

The TO aims to help people discover their theatrics, seen as an instrument to know reality, and to make the viewers protagonists of the stage, so that they could be in life.

Methods of the TO provide analysis tools, liberation and awareness through a dialogic relationship, which deconstructs aspects of violence. The influence of Freire's thought inherits an educational approach not indoctrinating, but rather Socratic and maieutic. Without giving answers, processes of

question-storming create contexts useful for finding collective solutions. The construction of the script, the performance and the scenic representation are useful for the analysis and the transformation of oppressive situations, discomfort, conflicts in daily life. Icebreaker exercises and techniques aim to dissolve the 'mechanization' (Boal, 1985) of our body/mind/emotion, crystallized in the so-called 'social mask'. Boal proposed many techniques, eventually coalescing into different theatrical styles, using a different process to achieve a different result.

The metaphors of the tree is often adopted to describe the different techniques of the TO: images, sounds and words as the roots, ice-breakers, Image Theatre and Forum Theatre ascending up the trunk, and other techniques represent limbs stemming from these. The two most important techniques are Image Theatre and Forum Theatre.

Image theatre is a performance technique in which one or more persons, acting as sculptors, mould one or more people acting as statues, through only touch and avoiding words or mirror-image modelling. Variations could be added to the original techniques, especially for inviting people to work on a variety of topics and issues (such as gender issues, discriminations, conflicts).

Forum Theatre is a performative method that provides acting's action taking on the character of a public discussion or series of proposals, only in dramatic format. The audience is encouraged to not only imagine change but to practise that change, by coming on stage as spect-actors to replace the protagonist and act out an intervention to break the oppression (Boal, 1996; Romano, 2014). Everybody who attends a Forum Theatre session participates. The actors who welcome the spect-actors volunteering onto the stage can play against the spect-actor's attempts to intervene and change the story, offering a strong resistance so that the difficulties in making any change are also acknowledged. The joker is the facilitator of the process: the joker never comments upon or intervenes in the content of the performance, while supporting the writing down and sharing of the stories of oppression, the acting and the discussions after each representation. During a performance acted by participants, the joker indeed may interrupt the scene and ask the audience to recognise and problematize the situation of oppression, and to try to identify an oppressed and an oppressor. In his/her role of facilitation of TO processes, the joker opens a dialogue on why oppressive conditions exist and how they can be changed. Participants explore rigid patterns of perception that generate miscommunication and conflict, as well as ways of transforming them. Through questions, participants speculate about the situation performed and begin to encode and decode that reality represented in the stage action. The joker asks: *if you were the oppressed, what would you do? How would you react? If you were the oppressor, what would you do? What would you think of doing to resolve the conflict?*

The changes and transformations (Mezirow, 1991) are achieved through the development of self-criticism, awareness and reflection on oneself and others as well as through the development of a capacity of ethical behaviour and reflective processes (Kokkos, 2010).

Drawing on Heron (1992), TO methods facilitate learners in discovering ecologically embedded, embodied, symbolic and presentational ways of knowing (see also Gherardi, 2017). Through the body, people bring the whole self into their learning experience: they bring mind, soul, body and spirit into learning. It allows the collective reflection about what aspects hold/prevent someone from doing something, from imaging and practicing a diverse reality, a transformed reality. In a recursive process of action-discussion-reflection-transformative action, Theatre Forum combines theorizing, reflecting and being active (Lundgren et al. 2017). This promotes the kind of deep learning that can foster the development of individual social agency and the recognition of the social power of the group. Through the dramatic sequences, participants have the chance to identify how social constraints had influence on the nature of their opinions and attitudes. As Boal (1996) understood well, Theatre of the Oppressed is an embodied process in which people think through their bodies. Boal's holistic approach challenges the conventional wisdom that treats verbal language as the sole medium for thought, dissolving the distinction between language and gesture and leading us towards an understanding of sense-making and reflecting that is at least as much phenomenological as semiotic. Hence the idea that we can 'feel' thinking, we can feel consciousness raising and that we can react to oppression through acting and performing.

On the basis of the practice and research of TO, we believe there is therefore a clear rationale for incorporating art-based practices like TO to support a performative art-based transformative approach to teaching and learning in Higher Education settings (Ferguson et al, 2018, p. 281). Our hypothesis is that TO performative art-based learning does encourage critical reflection on assumptions in students, teachers in training, professionals about their professional identity and role.

The turn to practice in the Theatre of the Oppressed

The adoption of performative and art-based teaching and learning methods contributes to expand the post-humanistic approach and practices in Higher Education systems. The reference to practice puts the interest in the body and re-opens the discussion on embodiment, embodied knowledge, and epistemic practices. The turn to practice and sociomaterial dimensions of embodiment address the attention to embodied knowing and sociomateriality. The art-based dimension transcends the view of the body as an object and instead emphasises the temporality of a form of knowing and learning that is situated, partial, provisional and affective (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018). Through the Theatre of the Oppressed, we argue in favour of the concept of inter- and trans-corporeality for positioning bodies (of all human and more-than-human entities) in the "in-between-ness" (*ibid*) of inter-acting and intra-acting bodies.

The lens through which we look at the TO is that offered by a posthumanist approach to practice, based on relational materialism. According to this approach, the world we inhabit is something routinely made and re-made in practice using tools, discourse, and our bodies. The social world appears as a vast array or assemblage of performance made durable by being inscribed "in human bodies and minds, objects, and texts, and knotted together in such a way that the results of one performance become the resource for another" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 2). A "posthumanistic practice theory has its roots in the sociology of translation" (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018), such as in the principle of symmetry between humans

and non-humans, in the relational epistemology (Law and Hassard, 1999). Human agency is here reconfigured as a capacity realised through the intra-action of humans and materiality: practices and the world they conjure are highly situated in historical and material conditions. Relational materialism assumes an ecological model in which agency is distributed between human and non-humans and in which sociomaterial relationships can be subjected to inquiry.

The accent on *sociomateriality*, derived from feminist onto-epistemology, focuses on the generative entanglement of meaning and matter, the social and the politics that are inseparable (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018). Behind all the apparent features of the world, there is some type of productive and reproductive work, and each social perception and structure is first a socio-material accomplishment. Moreover, agents, individuals, bodies, objects, and things, are part of a unique constellation inextricably intertwined. This sheds new light on the nature of knowledge and discourse, and reaffirms the centrality of interests and power struggles in everything we do and in interactions and intra-actions (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018). In TO, these intra-actions are performed and embodied into the collective dramatic actions of the stories of oppression: sense-making processes are not intangible mental phenomena, but performance located into material and discursive activity, body, artifacts and habits that populate the dramatic representations of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Doing, knowing, creating and performing are not separated in the TO: participants, scene, actions, things constitute one another in the here-and-now through intra-actions; subjects and objects are dynamically and iteratively co-articulated in intra-action (Gherardi, 2015). The idea of giving non-human actors agency became more radically incorporated by drawing upon actor network theory (ANT) (e.g. Latour, 2005, 2007; Law, 1991). A combination of human and non-human actors create, and simultaneously is, the product of practices (see, e.g., Bruni, 2005; Gherardi, 2015).

The involvement of non-human actors and forces reaches far beyond any designed purpose or function. They take an active part in producing practices by participating in, enabling, mediating, facilitating, mitigating, constraining and resisting the creation of the sociomaterial dramatic representation (Bruni, 2005; Gherardi, 2015). The term 'intra-activity' in the Theatre of the Oppressed expresses how roles and meanings of actors are not determined before the dramatic enactment: they co-emerge.

Things are not independent of the way we describe them (Iedema, 2007). Their intra-actions provide multiple 'realities', and possible alternatives to the reality represented. This challenges the ordinary actor/spectator division by pointing out how role and agency of actors (people performing) are worked out during the performance of practices (in this case the representation). Agency is created through the dynamic performance of intra-acting and not attributed only to actors and spectators, which also suggests that it is not only a human performance (Barad, 2003; Nyberg, 2009). The rationale for a turn to posthumanistic practice theory is to de-center the human subject as the center seat for agency, and to move beyond problematic dualisms such as mind/body, nature/culture, social/material. Sociomateriality implies that the social and the material are co-constituted, but also that nature and

culture are entangled and co-constructed. In this sense, embodied practices of the Theatre of the Oppressed express the materiality of bodies encountering material-semiotic environments, made by a network of human and non-human actors.

We propose to look at the Theatre of the Oppressed as situated practices focusing on the dynamic character of the intra-actions among the human participants into the performance, non-human (technologies, devices and place of the encounter), and other material, discursive and communicational elements, pointing the entanglement of heterogeneous elements that achieve agency in their interconnections.

The construct of in-between-ness (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018) resonates both with the phenomenological concept of intercorporeality and with the posthumanist elaboration of intra-action. Bodies encounter in the Theatre of the Oppressed other bodies and other materialities sensed via touch, hearing, smell, sight, and taste, which reveal their active intercorporeal involvement in the process of producing sensible knowledge. Intercorporeality is understood here as the basis of embodied knowledge, as an alternative source of social cognition focusing on the experience of one's own body and that of other. Intercorporeality is the redefinition of intersubjectivity and transcorporeality that include movement across bodies, interchange and interconnections between various bodily natures, material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world.

Through this vantage point, we would like to offer methodological pathways to engage with emancipatory practices, acts of resistance, and visions of alternative futures that evolve from ongoing processes of socio-spatial re-figuration. By foregrounding postcolonial and intersectional approaches, we seek to challenge notions of inevitability and reimagine the outlines of a just society. Those approaches, indeed, place importance on the intersections among gender, ethnicity, sexuality, economic exploitation, social conditions, bodies, and other material boundaries as manifested in the scenario of the multiple complex identity and sociomaterial conditions of the individuals.

Postcolonial approaches take into account the various overlapping of social inequality that constitute the matrix of domination, vectors of oppression and privilege, in which differences among people (sexual orientation, class, race, age, etc.) serve as oppressive measures towards specific groups of people (women, minority, disabled) and decrease the experience of their power and agency in society.

Posthuman premises are the empirical side of the intersectional and postcolonial approach, highlighting how imperialist and discriminative policies are incorporated and reproduced into the discursive and material practices through which the multiple identity knot of anyone is constructed.

Researching the transformative potential of the Theatre of the Oppressed

We would like to reinforce the positions hereby presented through the re-analysis of the cross-case study *TOTP: Transformative Potential of the Theatre of the Oppressed* (see Romano, 2014; 2016) in

order to stress how and to what extent the adoption of TO methods in Higher Education with teachers in training is helpful in promoting critical reflection related to the framework of practice-based study (Mezirow, 2000; Gherardi *et al.*, 2018).

The experience with the teachers in training were conducted in the academic years 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 at the University of Naples, Italy. The structure of the TO laboratory included workshops associated with a class in Adult Development at the certified training course for teachers. Participants engaged over two days in a Forum-Theatre workshop, which aims to support them to actively explore in body-based practices how development unfolds across multiple domains (social constraints, personality growth, cognitive maturation, participation into cultural practices, etc.) and how their personal identity and their professional identity are shaped and shapes socio-cultural norms in a society where, cultural and political forces, intragroup and intergroup dynamics are continuously evolving (Wijeyesinghe, and Bailey Jackson, 2012).

In the first meetings, a set of exercises and techniques based on creativity, self-expression and improvisation skills are proposed to participants. Warm-up activities that help to: create a safe and trusting environment; make participants familiar and comfortable with embodied learning; and begin to explore issues of power and oppression are used, such as icebreakers, mirror activities and Image Theatre activities (Boal, 1985).

Then, participants work in two groups. Each group is asked to write a story of oppression, violence or injustice that they have experienced or known. Once they write the plot together, they are asked to perform it in front of their colleagues. One group, for example, represented the story of abuse and violence between an engaged couple: they stressed the male gender issues related to male role social stereotypes and expectations as well as female characters' powerless conditions and social pressure. Adopting drama techniques, participants were involved in representing and performing their beliefs about sexual behaviour, social relationships and understanding of how the internalised social model of gender roles affected their behaviours and expectations.

The cohort of teachers in training chose to represent their story of job insecurity: they are temporary employees that usually work with fixed terms, which are renewed year by year. They feel like second class teachers due to the uncertainty of their contract, which in turn undermines the perception of their professional identity. In their story, meanwhile, there is an accent on public/personal dimensions of the role of the teachers.

Intentional sampling is adopted (Creswell, 2007) involving more than 100 teachers in training. These participants were enrolled on a certified special course which are national programs in Italy required to teach in High School, run by universities and generally last for 18 months. Data are gathered at the end of the laboratories. Participants are required to write narrative accounts and to complete two surveys, the *Learning Activities Survey (LAS)* (King, 2009) and the *questionnaire on TO* (Romano, 2014). The

data are interpreted in combination with the frame offered by the facilitator's notes and the researcher's perspectives.

Data Analysis

The first analysis conducted is the phenomenological analysis of all the narrative 'accounts'. For the phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2007), a panel of researchers (included the Author of this article) are asked to analyse the data using NVivo: initially they work individually and then compare and discuss their findings. Through the phenomenological analysis we (a) identify core categories which feature strongly in the narrative 'reports' produced by participants, and (b) measure the frequency and occurrences of each core category. The first coding step includes both open and selective coding procedures. The researchers work with the narrative data directly, fracturing and analysing it, initially through open coding for the emergence of core knots and categories. The term 'knot' is intended as a unit, which is particularly dense embedded into the text. This method of analysis builds on the commitment to a practice-based standpoint enunciated above. The relations and the practices participants narratives put into the text are explored from inside, as experienced. Practice-based knots are molar units of analysis, they are complex wholes composed of other smaller elements, for example bodily motions, simpler actions and interactions.

Subsequently, in the phase of axial coding, theoretical sampling and selective coding of data are highlighted to theoretically saturate the core concepts. Theoretical saturation is achieved through constant comparison of incidents (indicators) in the narratives to elicit the properties and dimensions of each category (code) (Creswell, 2007; Holton, 2007).

Later, the researchers analyse for each participant (a) the LAS questionnaire in order to evaluate changes in meaning perspectives, and (b) the TO questionnaire to understand the subjective experience of the process of the TO during all phases of the laboratory. These various sources allowed the researchers to assess for each participant whether any transformative learning occurred using four criteria (Marsick, 2015) asking if:

1. A process of questioning and critical reflection is present?
2. A change of meaning perspectives is discernible?
3. More inclusive, open and differentiating perspectives are shown?
4. New pattern of actions as a result of this transformation are in evidence?

Research outcomes. Formalising practice art-based transformative learning

Starting from the re-analysis of the outcomes, it is possible to formalise practice art-based transformative learning as an understanding of social agency and collective empowerment through an embodied dialectical process. The model of practice art-based transformative learning (Romano, 2019) allows the tracking of the *dialectical* tension between the phases of Theatre of the Oppressed methods

and the steps of the transformation of meaning perspectives. The shared feeling of complicity, the discursive intersubjectivity as participants, emerged in a relational dynamic and in an unexpected experience in which the affective resonance left a sociomaterial trace in the way art-based performative methodologies transformed personal stories in a *sayable* story. It is also a collective experience which is problematized and re-worked through the discussion within the group, and which is viewed in the light of transcorporeality among the participants and the meaningful environment. The original standpoint of the participatory approach of the Forum Theatre is to create physical arenas and spaces in which participants and facilitators can collaboratively generate knowledge and informed actions (Boal, 1985). From the post-structuralist perspective, however, participation and collective reflections in Forum Theatre are never neutral resources for human agency of spect-actors with specific regards to power and empowerment (Kesby, 2007).

Facilitating discussions, interrupting the scene and asking people from the audience to take the scene and try alternative conversations and actions, the Joker helps peer groups of teachers engage and discuss experiences of oppression and violence around daily conditions, such as the story of the violence in the couple. The possibility to act something different from the original scene gives participants the opportunity to address stigmatising attitudes and eventually violent situations within the safety of the stage. However, the key point is that such playacting causes participants to explore how all social relations (such as gender, sexuality, race) are similarly contrived and therefore can be transformed/performed differently (Butler, 1990; 1993).

The process of consciousness raising and of empowerment is here an effect of a communicative and material continuous performance, which result actions, behaviour, imagination, creativity brought into the specific context of the dramatic representation (Kesby, 2007). The Theatre Forum enables empowerment resources as an "altogether different guise of power" (Kesby, 2007, p. 2818) which, rather than being hierarchical, vertical, dominating, and exploitative modes of colonialist power over others, is reciprocal, lateral, accountable, and facilitative mode of agency with others. Processes of participation are not linear: resistances, opposition, the inability of some to participate or mobilise effectively are common and frequent, especially in the case of the teachers in training.

In the scene of violence in the couple, many elements of Boal's theatre of the oppressed are functional in examining a cyclical pattern of daily hidden abuse, dating violence, and sexism in school. The first scene portrays male violence in the home and how the cycle of violence inhabits a honeymoon illusional period in which the abuser is sorry, yet inevitably perpetuates more violence. Participants are facilitated to draw a connection between male violence in the home and what often happens in schools. In the workshop with the second group of teachers in training, one of the scenes represented is about power asymmetries among students, and between teacher and students with impairments. Another is about how teachers-in-training are perceived by others as attributed the tendency of being "low-profile" and low-skilled teachers. Here following there are some of the excerpts from participants' first-person reflective narratives:

“The theatre of the oppressed allows us to transform the unease hidden in explicit conflict, allows us to make ‘visible’ the daily oppression; create a unifying symbolic object, a social ritual of community, to get used to react to discomfort with the change; give a solidarity and collective dimension; create links for new actions in people lives; emotional and energetic activation, as well as the intellectual side, are roiling other resources to address the problems and activates a secure testing of possible changes; projection into the future through visions, can reveal and shake what is the individual and collective imagination, powerful means of prefiguration of the future.”

(M., teacher-in-training, 37-years old)

“In the theatre of the oppressed, I had the chance to convert so many humiliations and to represent my idea of being professor and director who is not founded on the power games but on dialogue with respect to roles. I felt as if I were experiencing a déjà vu. Taking the stage evoked memories about myself, not only as a teacher but also as a student. The resurgence of these memories allowed me to understand the state of mind of students and teachers when they suffer or exercise oppressive behaviours.”

(G., teacher-in-training, 48-years old)

The scene is stopped at critical points in which audience members are able to act out suggestions that might improve the outcome of the scene. The interventions do not always work as the audience member have envisaged. However, the discussions about these interventions are rich with possibilities and lead to topics such as trust, true friendship, and ways to assert oneself in situations that often felt disempowering (Twomey, 2005).

“We imagine, build and realise all about experience-based reflection, then make autonomous educational action, conscious and critical in the management of plural and alternative practices aimed at awareness building on the experience of thought and socio-educational action.”

(A., teacher-in-training, 32-year old)

The process of collective reflection and critical dialogue unfolds across the criticism of previous beliefs, the participation into a disorienting practice-based learning experience, the identification of needs and expectations and the testing of new schemes of actions and strategies for problem-solving (See Figure 1).

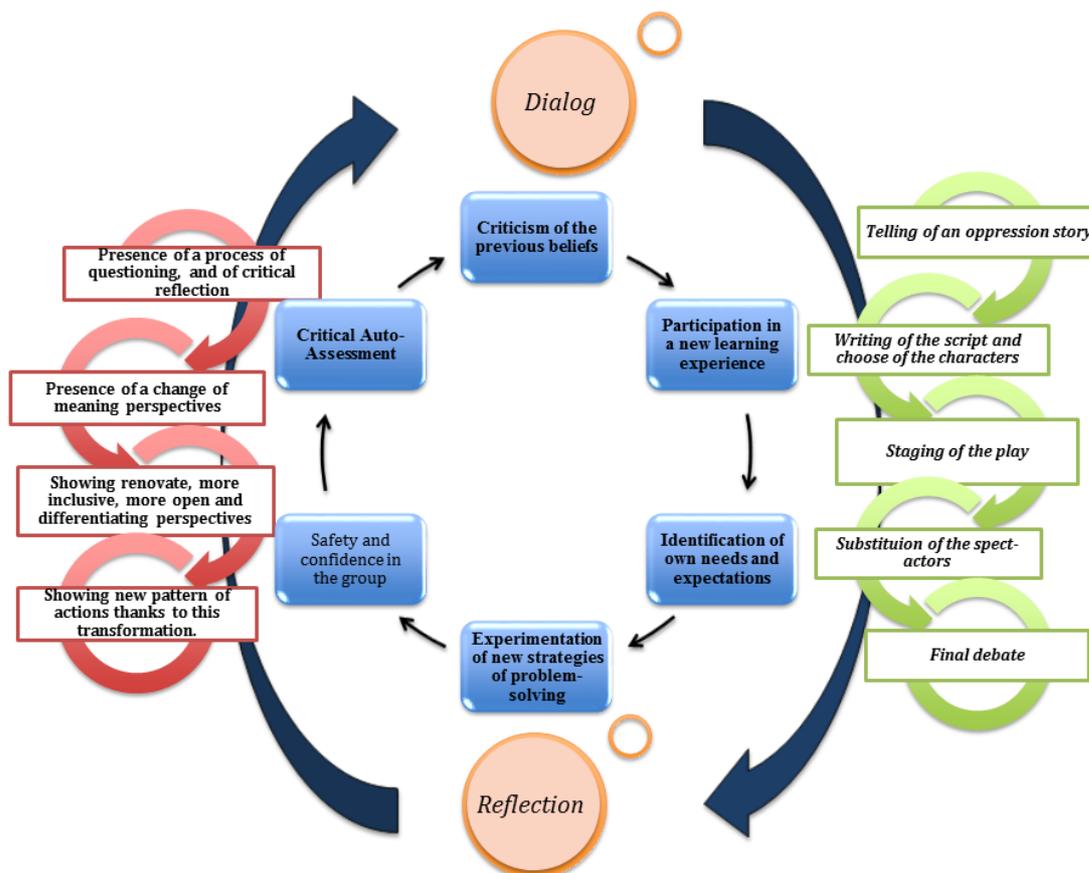


Figure 1: Practice art-based transformative learning through the Theatre of the Oppressed.

And what happened to people that do not report any process of empowerment or any change towards transformations? Power and resistance are entangled, and resistance involves power and possibility to react and to rehearse (Sharp *et al.*, 2000). Forum Theatre opens up sociospatial arenas governed by a set of discourses and practices quite unlike those that order everyday spaces and agency (Kesby, 1999; 2005). Within these arenas, local frameworks that "normally position individuals are circumvented by the deployment of resources such as 'free speech', 'peer equality', 'collaboration', 'facilitation,' etc, which enable the discussion of controversial issues, mediation of disputes, and the contribution of people whose voices would normally be marginalised" (Kesby, 2007, p. 2823). While constituting a 'free space' they are themselves products of power. What happened for participants who do not pass through a process of transformation may not only be because a period of participation did not last long enough but also because the environment of participation into the dramatic scene did not extend far enough.

Reflections for methodological implications

The TO dialogical practices and performative methods help to develop collective reflection processes *in, on* and *through* action; to challenge and resolve personal and collective disempowerment; and to imaginatively explore 'what if' and 'what could be' possibilities for social change and effective interventions.

Through the lens that considers individual, group and transformational learning processes (Lawson *et al.*, 2014; Marsick and Neaman, 2018), including these TO methods, offers an emancipatory transformative standpoint that allows learners to:

- a) Explore the relationship between knowledge and power, eliciting critical examination of how as knowers they are positioned in a network of human and non-human power arrangements that constrain or enable their lives (according to the perspective offered by the actor network theory)
- b) Re-elaborate their life and social experiences, and the way these influenced and determined reproductive tendencies and distortions of perspectives about gender, relationships and politics.
- c) Work on identity and empowerment issues, developing creativity and fostering autonomy and self-awareness.

Forum Theatre provides helpful experience-based instructional scaffoldings that facilitate teachers in training in discovering ecologically and physically embedded, embodied, symbolic and presentational ways of knowing (Heron, 1992; Gherardi, 2017) and in performing, first-hand, the kind of interconnections with sociomaterial conditions that enable or prevent their social agency (Lundgren *et al.*, 2017; Latour, 2007; Gherardi *et al.*, 2018). This strengthens the rationale for incorporating art-based practices like TO to support experience-based transformative and post-structuralistic feminist approach to teaching and learning in higher education (Taylor, 2006). Those approaches, far from individual, disembodied acts of cognition, focus on learning in terms of relationality, sociomaterialities, processes, immersive environment and settings.

In the study described, teachers-in-training are supported to (a) surface tacit beliefs, implicit expectations, feelings and judgments that unconsciously direct and shape their representations of professional identity; (b) collectively recognise and critically interrogate shared problems and underlying assumptions; and (c) speak out against oppression, exclusions and injustice and reaffirm commitment to a just and equitable society.

The entire workshop experience of Theatre of the Oppressed is characterised as a disorienting dilemma. The transformation of assumptions (Mezirow, 2000) are achieved through the development of self-criticism, awareness and reflection on oneself and on others as well as through the development of a capacity for ethical behaviour, and of collective reflective dialogue on the dynamics of oppression. In the use of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1996, for example, reflective practices are essential as a means to convert into explicit knowledge tacit assumptions, behaviours and policies impacting practices (Ferguson *et al.*, 2018).

Participants are solicited to step out of their comfort zones. They are supported to have courageous conversations, to perform entangles with someone different from themselves but with the same

distortions and troubles, and truly listen to the explication of the hidden side of their perspectives about power management (Romano, 2019).

These results call for the enfleshment of transformative learning that moves the theory (and the researchers who hope to expand the transformative learning theory) away from cognitive-centred abstraction and separations of the body, specifically in the cognitive-focused approach (Merriam, 2004; Hoggan, 2016; Dix, 2016; Tisdell, Tolliver and Villa, 2001).

Through a sociomaterial approach, we stress the importance of noticing art-based transformative learning as sociomateriality situated in performative practices. This consideration of embodied epistemic performative practice methods leads to a reflection on power and ethics, made possible by including the materiality of bodies and relations of knowledge in society.

Understood within this context, the Theatre of the Oppressed can support groups and organisations to engage in essential debate over strategy and process to work for social change and collective perspective transformations, and to enhance their learning converting it into revolutionary praxis, a critical praxis that encompasses reflection, dialogue, action and transformation in an on-going alliance.

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