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Gender consciousness through applied theatre

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Gender consciousness through applied theatre

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Abstract

This paper describes an experience of the use of applied theatre for the promotion of gender equality. The fact that women continue to face multiple forms of discrimination as human beings, citizens and professionals justified the search of alternative training models. The Empowerment Labs focused on the amplification of power, freedom and action of two groups of women: university students and unemployed women. The core of the approach followed was guided by a fundamental question: 'can theatre raise consciousness and empowerment in the context of gender equality?' The results obtained through different internal assessment tools provide evidence of change in what feminist awareness and personal empowerment are concerned. We present and discuss the process and results of this experience including the advantages and limitations of applied theatre in certain types of outcomes.

Keywords: applied theatre; consciousness; empowerment; gender (in)equalities; transformative learning

Introduction

Access to employment is strongly affected by the political, economic and social context of a country. As in many other European countries, unemployment rates have progressively rose in Portugal during the recent financial crisis. In 2013, 16,4 % of the Portuguese population was unemployed (Eurostat, 2016). Young people and women were particularly affected. The population aged under 25 experienced one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe in 2013: 38,1 % (Eurostat, 2016). Whereas Portugal has



noticed an increasing female emancipation in the labour market since the late seventies (Coelho & Ferreira-Valente, 2014), the crisis appears to have reversed the integration of women in the workforce mainly due to the unemployment escalation (Sales Oliveira, Villas-Boas & Las Heras, 2013). As highlighted in a report from the European Commission (Bettio, Corsi, D'Ippoliti, Lyberaki, Lodovici, & Verashchagina, 2012), one of the consequences of the crisis was the situation of 'discouraged workers', i.e. people that do not look for a job because they think they will not find it. The same report also recognised an increasing number of women working part-time as an effect of the crisis. Both phenomena seem to have contributed to a silent exclusion of women from the labour market (Sales Oliveira, Villas-Boas & Las Heras, 2013).

In 2013, women counted for 50,2% of the unemployment rate in Portugal (Employment and Vocational Training Institute [IEFP], 2013). Unemployment rates were significantly higher in the inner country of Portugal. Covilhã, known as the city of wool and snow, is one of the main urban centres of the region of Beira Interior with a university (with seven thousand students). This municipality is, however, characterised by an ageing population and where young people experience serious difficulties to put down their roots. Based on these data, it was imperative to change the alarming feminised unemployment and related gender inequalities in Covilhã. The aim of the project *Empowerment Labs* (whose definition and process are presented in detail below) developed in 2014 was to contribute to this change. Performance arts and social intervention were brought together to empower young women (who would soon initiate their professional lives) as well as unemployed women.

The lack of awareness regarding gender inequalities in the labour market is a concerning reality. This was clearly evidenced when one of the youngest participants asked at the very beginning of the theatre workshops: 'why do these Labs *only* target women if they aim at raising awareness about equal opportunities between women and men?' (C., 22, Lab1). The *Empowerment Labs* were conceived as mechanisms of affirmative action (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2007; Portuguese Network of Young Women for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men [REDE], 2010) important to reverse unequal situations as those evidenced above. They were oriented to promote emancipatory knowledge (Amâncio, 2003), and aimed at amplifying women's power, freedom and action. At the same time, by generating 'critical meanings or even new meanings' (Pollock, 2002, p. 205), the *Labs* were intended to boost individual and collective strategies to denounce and overcome multiple forms of discrimination that women are still confronted with as human beings, citizens and professionals.

Being an adult learning project with a feminist focus, the challenge of this experience was how to operationalise these objectives (Manicom & Walters, 2012) without falling into simplistic views (English, 2006). The methodological approach followed to facilitate the *Empowerment Labs* combines pedagogical influences of authors such as Paulo Freire, Peter Jarvis, Jack Mezirow and Leona English. Freire's pedagogy is among the roots of theatre practices aimed at raising critical awareness and encouraging personal and social engagement as it catalyses a creative basis of discussion, analysis and action on political and social problems (like gender inequality). On the other hand, and adopting the perspective that "personal is political", the *Empowerment Labs* also invested in the "transformative" nature of learning. That is, the belief that the experiential learning gives way to the construction of self (Jarvis, 1999, 2007) and also the critical consciousness, by the individual, about her/himself and about the surrounding reality (Mezirow, 1997, 2006). Critical and self-reflective thought on the process and position of the educator(s) was done all through the project (English, 2006) which identifies itself

with the spirit of the second wave feminism informed by the concerns with diversity and inclusion of the third wave.

Personal is political

(...) gender equality doesn't touch people the same way. I think this laboratory should be done with all kind of people and not only unemployed or university women [because] the issues worked here lead to a different perspective (...) of what is (...) gender equality, or rather inequality that still exists in society and that few people are aware of. (H., 34, Lab 2)¹

Despite some significant advances in reducing inequalities between women and men, the still lingering *male domination* remains as a “difficult issue” in the words of Pierre Bourdieu (1998). Today, women have a growing participation in economic and political life, and they see recognised their equal status in institutional and legal terms. However, in the twenty first century, women from different social classes, ethnicities, ages and nationalities continue to be the main victims of discrimination and inequality. Discrimination is characterised as a behaviour influenced by prejudice or attitudes (generally negative) not justified by personal experience but by stereotypes assimilated through different means (Macedo & Amaral, 2005).

Feminist movements have been focusing their efforts on both the fight for equality and the deconstruction of the category of “woman”. This last objective has been carefully worked because all gender stereotypes and ideologies tend to imprison both men and women even if in different ways (Nogueira, 2005). It is possible to distinguish here two tendencies: equality approaches that mainly fight the masculine domination and establish this fight as a political priority; on the other side, approaches more focused on strengthening women's social role and women's specificities (while also considering their diversity), as well as different ways to see and act upon the world.

Within this project, we are particularly interested in this “second wave” of feminism(s) aimed at creating new “significant places” and the affirmation of new notions of self, gender and sexual difference, allied to creativity, art and performance (Pollock, 2002). These new “significant places” have changed the relationship between the individual and the social, between the public and the private. The slogan “personal is political” works here as a key expression of these movements in the sense of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2009) that establishes women's individual experiences as a social and political process. One of the ways to express the concerns of the feminist demands has been artistic and social activism with theatre representing a major role. Since the seventies of the last century feminist theatre and performance have been important in expressing cultural and aesthetical concerns of the feminist movement (Carlson, 1997). Many of the plays created by feminist companies in the late seventies for example, were collaboratively devised rather than scripted by a playwright. This offered women the opportunity to practise theatre collaboratively and democratically (Aston, 2005).

The use of theatre in social and political causes has its roots both in the political theatre of the XX century (for example the epic theatre, the *agitprop* and the radical street theatre) and in the pedagogies oriented to the democratisation of the teaching-learning process (Butterwick & Roy, 2016; Nicholson, 2005). Among these we can highlight the relation between the writings of Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970, 1972) with the theatre method of the director Augusto Boal named *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1985; Denis, 2009; Picher, 2007).

The concepts of *applied theatre* (AT) (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009) or *applied drama/theatre* (Nicholson, 2005) appear as a “portmanteau term” that includes educational drama, theatre in health education, development theatre, theatre in prisons, community theatre and memory theatre, among others. Such typologies of applied theatre share an engaged, social and artistic phenomenon whose practices do not fall within the institutional theatre models, happen in non-conventional places and are organised to specific communities or social groups. With “applied theatre” and “community performance” models, the artistic practice moves away from an institutional approach and spreads into unconventional contexts ‘facilitating creative expression as a means to newly analyse and understand life situations, and to empower people to value themselves and shape a more egalitarian and diverse future’ (Kuppers, 2007, p. 5-6).

The AT raises pedagogic issues like where the knowledge is located, what kind of knowledge we value and how to share the knowledge. From Nicholson’s perspective, AT knowledge is ‘embodied, culturally located and socially distributed’ (2005, p. 39). The AT process asks for the physical and emotional involvement of participants and therefore enhance the physical embodiment of learning (“embodied pedagogies”) (Davids & Willemse, 2014; Lund, 2013; Nicholson, 2005). At the same time, it shares meanings and powers, and exposes new forms of social and cultural capital. AT is frequently used by feminist educators for engendering critical consciousness (Manicom & Walters, 2012). To understand the relation between AT and pedagogy it is important to be aware of the concept of psychosomatic learning. In this context, AT is a cyclic model of learning that frames new questions and perspectives in the course of the theatre practice and drives the participants to possible new meanings (Nicholson, 2005).

Applied theatre, learning, empowerment and consciousness-raising

At the end of each session, I felt a growing strength inside me because of the great environment of the laboratory and the union between us, women, who felt able to do everything! (C., 22, Lab1)

We have developed our senses and sensibilities for a more conscious life in community/society. (A., 25, Lab1)

[The lab] made us look “inside” and see who's there. Sometimes it's not who you think about, and it turns out it's so much better. (H., 34, Lab2)

The alignment between the pedagogical vision of applied theatre presented by those who practised and theorised it (Kuppers, 2007; Nicholson, 2005; Prendergast & Saxton, 2009; Thompson, 2009) and perspectives on adult education transmitted by authors like Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow, Peter Jarvis and Peter Alheit, is very noticeable. Specifically mentioned is its valuation as empowerment tools, particularly with regard to women, and the presence of common concerns around the perspective transformation and consciousness-raising. It is also very close to feminist pedagogy as this has much in common with Freire’s perspective but also has a critical perspective of his work (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009). Specifically, the feminist perspective is particularly attentive to power issues claiming that education and training is always power-ridden and even when we are genuinely aiming to promote empowerment still we are guiding participants (English, 2006). Leona English argues that adult education didn’t keep pace with the third wave feminism and tend to still treat women learners in a paternalist manner.

In fact, empowerment is a complex process that requires a delicate balance between the role of the educator and the learner, being essential that the educator become a co-learner (English, 2006). During the seventies, the term *empowerment* was adopted by the civil and human rights' movement and by the feminist movement. This term was used to explain that people who are discriminated, aggressed or oppressed need alternative forms of power that are not limited to formal and legislative instruments in order to overcome such situations. These alternative forms of power are crucial for personal capacitation (Catalá, 2009). Ideologically, the concept of empowerment is connected to minority rights, particularly the fight for civil rights of Afro-Americans, the feminist movement, as well as the pedagogic methodologies of Paulo Freire (Catalá, 2009; Sadan, 2004).

The connection between the personal and politics that characterises the feminist approach was vividly adopted by the empowerment theory: feminism is valid not only for women but for all who are oppressed and marginalised. Catalá, (2009) argues that if the lack of power is culturally and politically learnt, so empowerment can and should be. This rationale supports and guides the empowerment workshops for women that follow feminist principles such as the elimination of power relations based on dominance, the fight for freedom and the respect for human diversity. According to this author, these kinds of workshops are aimed at developing the sense of power which is understood as power for life and not power for dominance, so it is very important to be attentive to how power flows in the relationships (English, 2006). The empowerment process is then understood as an appropriation, access and acquisition of the following resources:

- Psychological (understanding the dimensions that are related to gender, ability to deconstruct myths and stereotypes)
- Material (basic resources such as housing, food and clothing; money; access to technology)
- Intellectual (knowledge, ideas, access to information)
- Ideological (capacity to create and defend values, attitudes and behaviours).

It is essential that women are aware of the importance of these resources in their lives because, as argued by the feminist movement, the formalisation of women's rights is not enough to ensure its realisation (English, 2006).

On the other side, feminists have learned that efforts to empower adult women must include not only literacy training but also transformative education content through non-formal and informal learning (Stromquist, 2014). And that the gain of control over one's own life demands a previous critical consciousness about the sources and nature of inequalities and exploitation. As Joe Curnow (2013) suggests, marginalised groups may establish sub-communities of practice and learning, wherein they experience consciousness-raising that reshapes their understandings of gender and hierarchy, motivating their resistance to gender-based discrimination. Freire defines it as the experience of conscientization.

Often learners are unaware of being oppressed; they internalise the values of the oppressors. Freire has shown how to help them understand how they have traditionally misread their situation so that some kind of appropriate social action is possible. This 'deconstruction' of reified frames of reference often must precede action on one's own behalf. (Mezirow, 1997, p. 62).

According to Freire (1972) (a key reference for non-formal education), people are capable of critically analyse the world as long as they have tools to allow its perception and action towards reality. The educational activities that Freire undertook in Latin America –

“capacitation courses” – were supported by the idea that “conscientization” is a liberating learning process that guides people beyond the acceptance of the existing systems and motivates their intervention skills in the world by fostering critical consciousness and agency (Manicom & Walters, 2012). Already quoted, Jack Mezirow, also advocates that transformative learning begins with a critical reflection or critical self-reflection on assumptions (critical assessment of the sources, nature and consequences of our habits of mind), our own and those of the others. This subjective approach becomes a priority since we are increasingly facing “ill-structured problems” (Merriënboer & Stoyanov, 2008) which are determined by the new societal challenges and defy our ability to understand the world: the dynamics of uncertainty and the combination of multi-contextual influences; the existence of alternative and often conflicting approaches; the lack of a clear-cut problem solving procedure; no agreement on what can be accepted as an appropriate solution, and a solution that may not always be recognisable as such.

In this process, the authors insist on an important condition: lifelong learning cannot be limited to its “psychological” dimension, the one that ‘is concerned with people’s inner subjective world of thought and feeling, combined with sensitivity to their outer world of social relationships set in a context of wider structural relationships set in a context of wider structural inequalities’ (West, 2006, p. 39). It should also consider a collective and dialogical dimension, the one that connects personal troubles with public issues (Sutherland & Crowther, 2006) and feeds the intersubjective knowledge production (van Stapele, 2014). According to Alheit and Dausien (2006) reflexive learning processes (or biographical learning) do not exclusively take place “inside” the individual, but also comprise biographical setting up of networks and social processes, of collective knowledge and collective practices. When reflection happens together, shared insights deepen and extend that experience.

Feminist pedagogy involves teaching/training methods, strategies and even an ideology (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licon, 2009). In this sense, the position and perspective of educators is essential as their voice and position is also part of the process. Applied theatre provides the conditions for this fruitful but delicate combination biographical and the dialogical dimensions of transformation and consciousness-raising of different actors:

[T]he arts enable the kind of distance and viewpoints that help participants to understand where they have positioned ourselves, the potential for change and perhaps, transformation will only occur through reflecting on what has happened in the safety of a metaphoric world that the theatre experience has created. (...) Within the richness created through reflection can always be found new ways of thinking about ourselves and the world (...) through the act of theatre. (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. 204-205).

As mentioned, one of the strengths of a reflective approach in the theatre lies in the way it favours the interaction between the learner and the environment, hence incorporating the opportunity to experiment a wide range of possibilities. By rehearsing different viewing possibilities, the individual is challenged to establish a critical relationship between the way he/she reads the world (from different points of view) and becomes aware of his/her own weaknesses and opportunities. Greene (in Butterwick & Roy, 2016) draws attention to the ability of art based adult education to engagement and community building by stimulating imagination and creating the conditions for empathy. Still, attention to diversity is essential. As English (2006) points out, not all learners want the same things, the educator must pay attention to resistance and be comfortable with some degree of uncertainty.

Objectives and Methodology

The *Empowerment Labs* were part of of NÓS (meaning “we” in portuguese), a project of social and artistic intervention developed by Quarta Parede (a civil society organisation of performative arts) in collaboration with Beira Interior University and with the support of the IEFP - Portuguese Employment and Professional Training Institute. The project was funded by the Active Citizenship Program/EEA Grants 2013/14 and managed by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The framework context was the difficult social and economic situation that Portugal has been living in recent years and the way it has worsen women’s situation, particularly in the labour market. Inequalities, discrimination and injustice experienced by women in the labour market are especially concerning in the inner country where employment opportunities are scarce. The proposed approach for this project was innovative because it was based on the collaboration of performance arts and social sciences focusing on the challenges experienced by young women who would (try to) enter the labour market in a near future and those who were unemployed for a certain period of time. As a whole, the project aimed to i) empower and improve the participants’ resilience, ii) promote innovative forms of minimising the impact of women’s unemployment and iii) raise gender equality awareness among the project’s participants and the general population.

Divided in two editions according to the two different groups of participants, the *Empowerment Labs* were an initiative of non-formal education consisting of a multidisciplinary process aimed at developing knowledge and transversal soft skills for the participants’ future involvement in the public realm and labour market with a higher gender awareness. From a (feminist) adult education perspective our aim was to ‘enable the voices of underrepresented individuals and communities to take shape and form’ (Butterwick & Roy, 2016 p. ix).

The Labs included non-formal activities and theatre workshops. The Labs were conceived as a place of creation, training and change, where artistic expression and creativity emerge as tools to promote meaningful relationships (within the self and with others) and opportunities for participation and empowerment (Johnston, 2005). Each Lab was composed of three conceptual chorus: Theatre, Gender Equality and Employability. The three components were designed by a team of specialists from performance arts, psychology and sociology. The driving idea of the laboratories was to establish a dialogic relationship among these three components (Sales Oliveira, 2014).

The methodological approach of the *Empowerment Labs* was a process of action research with an applied participatory laboratorial practice, using theatre as privileged pedagogical instrument (FIA, 2010). Two characteristics are associated with this methodology that combines research with social intervention (Monteiro, 1995): on the one hand, action-research approach reflects a collective process that involves both the researchers and the social groups as subjects of investigation and intervention; on the other hand, it is a process that aims to simultaneously fulfil three articulated objectives, namely, the production of new knowledge through research procedures, the modification of social reality as a result of innovative practices and the promotion of “social learning” through the involvement of different stakeholders in dynamic skills training.

The design of the theatre workshops was envisaged to allow for the compilation of a documented research-action portfolio, including: the sessions’ planning, photos, videos, trainer’s field diary, participants’ texts, evaluation instruments and materials produced in the sessions. All these materials represented vital methodological tools for the workshops as they contributed to the reflection process with the participants and also provided

valuable input to the project's dissemination instruments (such as the documentary and the blog).

From Labs experiences to the stage

Procedure and dynamics

When I started the project I had no idea what it was going to be. When I started to realise, I was motivated enough to look forward to the lab day. I take some lessons for my life (...) such as “breathing and realising why something went wrong” or “accepting and correcting my failures” or “respecting the mistakes of others without judging”. (...) These are important situations both in the personal and professional fields. (H., 34, Lab2)

In both Labs, the in-person sessions lasted four months and happened once a week. The approximate duration of each session was two hours and thirty minutes. Each laboratory began with a presentation session followed by two gender equality awareness-raising sessions led by a sociologist and a psychologist (both gender experts). The theatre workshop trainer was responsible for the theoretical research and practical frameworks to guide the artistic processes of group involvement while considering labour issues, empowerment and feminisms. The trainer together with the sociologist revised the syllabus outlined for the theatre workshops, taking into account the first contacts with the group of participants and the gender equality sessions. An additional gender equality session was organised after 8 weeks to reinforce the conceptual and theoretical background. This session was used to approach the specific discrimination problems, while the first two sessions were an introduction to gender issues. The Labs also included two sessions aimed at providing information about the Portuguese labour market and discuss strategies to search work. These sessions were led by employability professionals from IEFP, the local employment and training office.

The Lab1 targeted young women. The group was composed of 13 women aged between 19 and 29 years from different study fields and levels (bachelor and master) offered by the University of Beira Interior: Sociology, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Entrepreneurship and Social Work, Psychology, Communication Sciences, and Fashion Design. The group of Lab2 was made up of 9 women aged between 27 and 48 years, with education levels between secondary school and master, who were unemployed for a certain period of time (i.e. between three months and four years).

In both Labs, the theatre workshops were facilitated in an open environment focusing both on the participants' characteristics and the group dynamics. Whereas the topics 'work' and 'employment' were addressed through a gender perspective, the theatre practice was used as a tool to develop critical thought and transversal soft skills. This approach allowed promoting an association between learnings, theatre symbolic languages and the experiences of sensitivity, emotion and corporeality, in the sense of *embodied pedagogies* (Lund, 2013; Nicholson, 2005). The expected impact was to exercise the bodily responses, sensations and aesthetical pleasure in order to generate a sense of aliveness that prompts the participants' desire to connect and engage with others or ideas (Thompson 2009). For this purpose, the theatre workshops were organised in four different units: i) self-presentation ii) collective corporeality iii) dramaturgy of gender equality and iv) collective creation process. Each unit corresponded to three workshop sessions. In each session there was a theme that created a topical coherence to all practices, from the warm-up exercises to the core exercises of expression, creativity and *improvisational* theatre (Sales Oliveira, 2014). Some examples of the themes

discussed in the sessions include: “Gender stereotypes”, “Power inequalities”, “Power and participation of women and men”, “Work-family balance”, “Future perspectives” (Lab1) and “From me to the world” (Lab2). The themes were initially presented to the participants through the use of literary works (novels and poetry), newspaper articles and scientific papers. The same subjects were posteriorly transformed into theatrical exercises and symbolic performances. With these resources and practices, we were able to promote critical reflection and the development of personal and thoughtful visions of the world among the participants. This approach also created the conditions for the final step of each lab which was the collective creation of a performance to be presented to the community.

Collective creation process and public presentations

The most significant moment for me was (...) to feel the union of us all, as well as the collaboration so that everything went the best way, from the rehearsals to the shows. But I will never forget how I have wandered around the room at the sound of music and to draw with the elbow. (E., 20, Lab1)

[The most significant moments of the laboratory]: The contact with some theatre techniques, the discipline that theatre demands, the final presentation (which I thought I wouldn't be able to do!). (H., 34, Lab2)

All sessions were important but no doubt that the final rehearsals and the public presentation were the highest moments of the entire laboratory. (...) It was fantastic, the spirit that united us. (J., 48, Lab2)

It is worth noting that this was the first theatre experience for most of the participants, in which they got acquainted with the different steps of artistic conception and production (e.g. contact with the stage, adaptation to the sound and lights, organisation of the scenic space, rehearsals, or the confrontation with the public). The participants were empowered to decide together on the objectives of the final presentations, on the topics to be covered, and on how and which messages would be conveyed in relation to gender (in)equality and the labour market. These aspects differed between the two participant groups. For instance, whereas object theatre, choreographies and theatrical role plays were used to convey the individual and collective messages from the Lab1, the participants from the Lab2 decided to perform shadow theatre, choreographies and read written texts by themselves or retrieved from relevant feminist books from national and international authors.

The final presentations raised some anxiety among the participants. As mentioned above, the participation in this project was the first experience with performative exercises for most women involved. The trainer had to manage the participants' expectations in relation to the final presentation. It was clarified that the intention was not to create a theatre play, but to challenge themselves to expose their experiences and learnings resulting from the workshop. This obviously created discomfort. The team made sure that each participant felt comfortable with her role in the process and in the stage. The participants also played a crucial role in creating a safe space for all, by showing one another that this performative exercise would be beneficial for them (to build a higher self-confidence, self-esteem). The awareness-raising benefits of the final presentations were also highlighted by the team and by the participants themselves (Sales Oliveira, 2014). These actions were essential to the final outcomes. The participants showed a strong commitment during the rehearsals and in stage. They were happy with

the end-result and proud of themselves for accomplishing this “mission”. To sum up, the final presentations were fundamental to consolidate the knowledge about gender (in)equality, to strengthen the participants’ self-confidence, to promote creativity, and to build communication skills.

Both public presentations took place in the spring of 2014 in the auditorium of Teatro das Beiras in Covilhã. These presentations represented crucial moments that allowed the participants to show all the personal and mutual achievements of the Labs. Each public presentation was a collective sharing of the most significant insights and experiences of the participants. The public presentations created community spaces of gender equality debate. The audience’s feedback was empowering to the process of developing the participants’ self-esteem and confidence.

As tangible results from this process, the public presentations mediated the laboratorial practice and its dissemination, creating a moment where the voices of the participants were heard (Butterwick & Roy, 2016). Allowing the audience to participate, these presentations increased the pedagogic, artistic and social impact of the project (Ferreira, 2015) making use of the empathy mechanism (Butterwick & Roy, 2016).

Achievements and challenges

At the beginning of the laboratory, I felt many doubts about my performance and my contribution to the group but through the sessions (...) I was able to overcome many fears, especially some shyness, and to have more confidence in me. (K., 22, Lab1)

Throughout the duration of the project, the team met regularly in order to share and discuss the progress, achievements and challenges faced. At the same time and from a feminist education perspective (English, 2006) the educators self-reflected on their role and participation and later shared these reflections not only with the team but also with the participants. There are pertinent lessons to be drawn from this experience.

Although the overarching theme guiding the project was on gender (in)equality in the labour market, the focus and approaches followed had to be tailored to the particularities of each group. In the group of young women, we decided to explore more in-depth their gender consciousness in relation to their academic life and professional future, to raise awareness on their rights as workers and citizens, to develop creative skills, and to facilitate a proactive socio-political participation (Ferreira, 2015). In the group of unemployed women, we opted to promote a critical reflection about the current gender inequalities in the labour market, their role in promoting change at personal and professional level, and to build new attitudes towards unemployment (Ferreira, 2015).

The initial gender equality sessions constituted important moments to deconstruct gender stereotypes and to raise awareness about gender inequalities in society and, more specifically, in the labour market. During these sessions, participants realised that some of their choices and behaviours may have been influenced by gender roles. This realisation/confrontation is part of the process, but creates, nevertheless, some internal, external, passive and active resistances towards the facilitator, the discussions and the activities. The facilitator needs to be well-prepared to respond to the questions of the participants, as well as to provide daily life examples that are close to the realities of the participants in order to overcome resistance.

In our approach theatre was used as a mean to transmit and produce gender equality awareness and knowledge among the participants and in the community in general (Sales Oliveira, 2014). In this sense it was the core of each Lab a state of permanent research in which the theatre practice facilitate the questioning and the experimentation of ideas. As

a result the participants explored new possibilities of meanings construction in Gender Equality themes.

In this pedagogical process focused in the performance the concept of praxis – meaning the synthesis of theory, method and practice – guided the team in the planning process. For this goal the theatre trainer promoted the creation of “now and here” experiences that favours reflexivity through exercises that demanded the use of sensibility, emotions and corporality of the participants. This option has improved the collective discussion and the critical capacity of the participants. It is important to highlight that performance was essential for the conscientization work, by using theatre techniques and tools like work on the presence, the look, the listening, the touch, the movement and the oral expression.

In what concerns the educators, the reflective process about their place and participation allowed them to understand that the project also have empowered them. The main trainer was the person that was responsible for the theatre component. With a background in Theatre and doing a master degree in Theatre and Community at the time of the project, this woman felt that the project requested her total involvement – as woman-artist-researcher-educator - demanding her to ‘to deepen and share in my artistic-pedagogical context and y involvement with the feminist cause’ (S., 32, artist, educator). The intersection between her artistic work and the political social dimension of the project forced her to position herself outside her “comfort zone”. This displacement led to new approaches in her artistic and pedagogical practice and also to a greater awareness of the permanence of *glass ceilings* to women artists.

The Social Sciences educator, teacher at UBI, felt some difficulty in making the groups forgetting she is a university teacher. This was particularly notorious with those participants who were her students at university, felling a clear tension between social roles (Villagante, 2016). Her participation in the labs was supposed to be the conduction of two sessions on gender equality. She is also a trainer in gender equality so she used her expertise in training to streamline those sessions. Having scarce experience in theatre contexts, she felt amazed with ‘the power of AT to embody gender issues’ (C., 40, feminist and sociologist) and the process was also revealing for her as a woman, contributing to raise her consciousness and improve her sensibility. For that reason her participation enlarged during the project and she was present at some more sessions, including final rehearsals.

Results and Evaluations

The dissemination products of the *Empowerment Labs* were a blog, the final presentations and related videos, as well as a documentary (video link: <https://vimeo.com/112373112>). Both public presentations took place in the spring of 2014 in the auditorium of a theatre company in Covilhã (Teatro das Beiras).

The Labs were subjected to internal monitoring and evaluation exercises (such as individual open and closed answer surveys and group discussions). This process aimed at collecting insights about the personal experiences of participating in the project, the perceived impacts, the participants’ self-assessment in relation to the knowledge and skills gained, as well as their viewpoints about the whole project.

Based on the perceptions gathered, it is possible to see that the participants recognised the contribution of the project to their self-knowledge and personal development, strengthening their well-being by-developing critical thinking, expressive capabilities and creativity:

I think the laboratory contributes to open up horizons and to accept me better as I am, despite being fully aware of my faults and failures. This loose and amusing way of exposing ourselves and discussing such key issues has contributed so much to my resilience because I always leave here with the spirit that change is possible. (C., 22, Lab1)

[The project] was an added-value for my personal life as the Empowerment Lab2 allowed to “open” myself to the world and be more confident in what I do and say, and, of course, gave me more personal and intellectual stability, I would say, more peace of mind. (D., age 27, Lab2)

In terms of acquired knowledge and skills, the participants considered that the project contributed to develop gender equality knowledge, communication skills (expression and perception), creative capacities, team work skills and to build social participation skills:

By making us more aware of this reality, this training has made us more critical, more analytical, more thoughtful and more conscious of these issues that we are confronted with on a daily basis. I believe that when I enter the labour market, I will often remember of the contents we have explored and discussed, and then ... I will be a person with more potential to demonstrate an active attitude towards moral and social ethics change . (F., 19, Lab1)

(...) I learned about the subject [Gender Equality], and I'm now more aware to the various events that arise around us constantly (...) because they are so common (...). Now it's impossible to look at these situations indifferently, and I can instead have a better critical judgement and confidence to defend what we call rights. (I., 19, Lab1)

Now I can see with greater awareness the problems of women in society and I feel much more prepared to face any challenge that society presents me with regard to gender inequality. (J., 48, Lab2)

Concluding remarks

Confronting the experience of the Empowerment Labs with the theory of transformative learning, our critical analysis supported by the testimonies of the women involved, is that the AT offers privileged circumstances for the development and maximisation of what Mezirow considers to be the:

optimal conditions for adult learning and education: a) to have accurate and complete information; b) to be free of coercion, distorting self-deception or immobilising anxiety; c) to be open to alternative points of view; d) to be able to understand, to weight evidence and to assess arguments objectively; e) to be able to become aware of the context and critically reflect on assumptions, including their own; f) to have equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of the discourse; g) to have a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or argument are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment (Mezirow, 2006, p. 25-26).

Besides being able to facilitate access to information, as well as a critical understanding of reality and active participation, this learning approach particularly favours the absence of coercion because the theatrical practice results from a collaborative work in which dialogue is horizontal and each participant explores the right to creative freedom. Even if, when facing the demands of embodied language and public expression, women have occasionally faced emotional states of immobilising anxiety. With regard to the openness to alternative points of view, theatre (as an exercise of gesture and word par excellence) emerges as a privileged universe to feel ‘the power of artistic practice to imagine new

ways of seeing our places in the world' (Kuppers & Robertson, 2007, p. 152) and also to create new places in the world.

The experience gained through the implementation of Empowerment Labs leads us to the conclusion that AT works as a first-rate method of promoting reflexivity and critical consciousness, adding to it a collective and dialogical dimension, provided by performative exercises where corporal and vocal consciousness are trained. During the Labs sessions, each participant learnt how to look into herself (in terms of corporality and expressivity) and to decentralise from herself through the interaction with the other participants (and with the public). As Freire (1972) argues, action without reflection is unproductive. The goal of the participatory component of applied theatre practice is one in which all those engaged with the performance (sources, players and audiences) are moved to become simultaneously active and reflective (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009).

However, our critical analysis also leads to two constraint findings. A first and very practical finding is connected with the attendance and punctuality of participants. It was notorious the difficulty of these women to maintain their commitment to the complete process of the *Empowerment Labs*. University students justified nonattendances with academic obligations or illness. Unemployed women justified their absences with the demand for employment and family responsibilities. There have also been some withdrawals of participants because they started academic internships, found employment or initiated vocational training programmes. In a society that greatly values the direct and immediate link between action and results, it is not easy to ensure long term commitments that do not translate into immediate and/or visible results. Also because this was a project that favoured logics of communicative learning that are far from the mainstream, which is directed to employability and the acquisition of key competencies valued by the market. As English (2006) claims, it is important to be attentive to resistance as it is the mean by which learners express themselves and exercise power. In that sense the project's team addressed the problem of attendance and tried to find alternatives to overcome such constraints in the future (e.g. in these discussions we concluded that the free participation in the project, outside from any professional or academic obligation introduces a vulnerability element because both groups of women were living a demanding life moment shaped by strong transitions: the students from academia to labour market and the unemployed women to reintegration in labour market).

The second constraint is connected with the limits of the transformative approach. Several authors have highlighted these limits (Imel, 1998; Kitchenham, 2008; Purcell, 2006) on the grounds that it does not adequately contemplate a dimension of individual and collective action facing social transformation. Other authors use the dichotomy empowerment *versus* emancipation (Inglis, 1997; Wildemeersch & Olesen, 2012) as argument to advocate that 'an individualist attitude towards empowerment and freedom' (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 109) is not enough by itself to move from personal transformation to social and political transformation.

Those critical analyses point out that transformative theories of learning are unsatisfactory because they only can help in the first step of political or social change. But, at the same time, they neglect the part of emancipatory education which leads to personal transformation. We claim that personal conscience is a vital part for social action. Educational practices must beware of placing learners in a vacuum by making them aware of the need for collective change, but without helping them to acquire the information and skills needed to take part of it (Mezirow, 1997). Such an option and priority appear to be in line with the most important features of the AT as alternative learning and training instruments.

Second, the concept of empowerment is multidimensional, demanding not only raising one's awareness of exploitation, but also the development of skills and strategies to engage in political action (Curnow, 2013; Stromquist, 2014). It is in this sense that feminist movements have advocated empowerment, while 'female investment in access to and exercise of power' (Macedo & Amaral, 2005, p. 154) aimed at eliminating power relations based on male dominance, the defence of freedom and the respect for human diversity (Catalá, 2009).

Finally, the association between applied theatre, embodied pedagogies and transformative learning promotes a 'shift in focus from *effects* to *affects*' (Thompson, 2009, p. 7) by which some limitations may be introduced, but from other point of view it also (re)opens new potentialities. 'By failing to recognise affect – bodily responses, sensations and aesthetic pleasure – much of the power of performance can be missed' (Thompson, 2009, p. 7). Beyond social utility and social impact, '[a]rtistic experience and practice are here best understood for their capacity to agitate at the level of sensation, and it is this force that propels a demand to know more.' (Thompson, 2009, p. 121). The stimulation of affect can be envisaged as an asset that predisposes the participant to think and to be engaged, to resist and be committed to change.

Notes

¹ Translation by the authors.

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