

# **Creative Improvisation through Literature – Innovation in Unifying Personal Development through Spontaneous Story-Writing Preliminary Study**

**Vasile Constantin\*<sup>v</sup>, Flavia D. Cardaş\*, Irina R. Petreanu\***

**\*Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Psychology Department,  
University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania**

## ***Abstract***

***Introduction:*** Creative improvisation through literature is an original technique within the Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy, which aims to use spontaneously written stories, developed during personal development groups, as a provocative analysis support. The technique-based study aims to validate and capitalize on creative improvisation through literature, which serves as a model of Unifying Personal Development.

***Objectives:*** The aim of this study is to capitalize on the literary technique, as well as to highlight its implementation during an ongoing research program. Upon the completion of the program, both qualitative and quantitative results will be displayed.

***Methods:*** The technique used during the study is the literary improvisation. It was applied in an experiential manner and in accordance with the Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy method in a personal development group of 24 participants.

***Results:*** So far, we have noted that the technique's projection method and the aspect of becoming aware of some issues have proven to be effective, all the participants gaining access to previously unresolved emotions, experiences or blockages.

***Conclusions:*** After the first sessions of personal development through literary improvisation, we have observed its effectiveness, which drives us towards a more profound approach of the research program in the near future, in order to highlight even more qualitative and quantitative results.

***Keywords:*** literature, expressive-creative therapies, unifying, creativity

<sup>v</sup> Corresponding author: Vasile Constantin, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bucharest, Panduri 90, District 5, Bucharest, 050663, Romania. E-mail: valush\_constantin@yahoo.com

## **I. Introduction**

The present study aims to illustrate the applications of a new metaphor-based unifying experiential technique, which, through its highly creative nature, can contribute to the processes of unlocking, becoming aware and granting new meanings, mainly within an experiential group, as well as within individual work. We named this new technique Creative Improvisation through Literature, which, as its name suggests, is a highly creative technique of dynamic meditation that allows each participant to extend their personal awareness by creating stories. This process can ease their personal development, personal transformation and balance.

In essence, the technique, which works as a provocative, projective and psycho-diagnostic pretext, offers the participants the chance (during every session) to take up the role of a writer who creates his or her own stories (based on a given topic) and to put personal thoughts and emotions down in writing as well as to breathe life into new characters. They are given the opportunity to grant new meanings to certain events, to come up with a meaningful title for their stories, to “play” with the characters, to create their own narrative, as well as to come up with solutions and an authentic ending (a personal and self-representative ending).

We believe that creative improvisation through literature can also be harmoniously intertwined with other Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy techniques such as drama therapy, dance therapy and art therapy. The resulted restructuring process is intense, profound and highly unifying. Creative improvisation through literature is a spontaneous technique, because the participants create ad-hoc stories during the allocated time. Therefore, they come up with characters for which the “predefining” time is relatively short. Moreover, the literary value (if we can call it as such) of the created stories stems from the very authenticity of the participants’ experiences. They do not have to be accomplished writers, famous for their literary talent. The participants grant meanings to their stories especially through the emotional load and the elaboration of the characters (inspired by significant individuals from their lives) and, maybe even more important, by using their talent and other possibly blocked or unnoticed resources (a good opportunity for some of the participants to discover artistic tendencies yet unknown to them).

Moreover, we can observe the original and unique nature of this technique. Although there have been some therapists who have tried to use the metaphor of stories in their work with patients, this technique has yet to be studied and validated on a large scale, and in no circumstance under the holistic and

experiential form that we wish to explore during our research program. We believe that the development of this technique from a unifying experiential point of view and its inclusion in the technique-set of Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy does not only constitute a good opportunity to offer those with literary inclinations the possibility to unlock and develop this resource (while involving a therapeutic element), but it may also contribute to the provocative problem solving element of the experiential-unifying therapeutic process practiced within P.E.U. The technique is yet another art-therapy approach that will add value and creativity to both group and individual work.

## **II. Method**

Our study, which is currently in progress, aims to validate and emphasize creative literary improvisation, primarily in the field of unifying personal development. To this end, we have commenced a preliminary study, which will result in the completion of another one, a somewhat more consistent stage of the research program. The final goal of the entire program is to establish literary creative improvisation as an experiential-unifying technique to be used within a personal development group.

Thus, the present study group consists of 24 participants, aged 20 to 30, university graduates working in different fields: psychology, human resources, training, social care, IT, journalism, fine arts and education. The meetings of the development group take place weekly, for approximately 2 hours and a half, during which we employ expressive-creative techniques for emotional blockage-removal (both of the body and of the mind). However, the unifying literary improvisation technique plays the main role.

We used the Rosenberg scale for the measurement of self-esteem, the emotional intelligence test developed by Daniel Goleman and Bar On and the STAI anxiety questionnaire as evaluation instruments. At the end of the study, we would like to compare the initial and the final results of the experimental group (by applying the pre-test - after test procedure) with the results of a control group, which has not been involved in a personal development program. The purpose of this comparison is to observe the extent to which the participants of the creative literary improvisation development group obtain significantly different statistic scores when it comes to the already mentioned variables: self-esteem, anxiety, emotional intelligence (compared to the control group).

As for the procedure, we will illustrate the creative literary improvisation working method by describing one of the exercises applied during the personal development group.

The exercise is called "THE MIRROR": we asked the participants to look into a mirror found in the meeting room as if they were looking into a different dimension; we asked them to make up a character for their story out of their own reflections. Furthermore, we asked them to pick one of the characters, analyze it and subsequently create a story based on the character. After the exercise, we started an individual analysis with each participant, with the purpose of making them connect with themselves and the others. We also aimed for self-acceptance and the acceptance of those around them, as well as for the encouragement of the integration of certain polarities (my child self as opposed to my adult self or the actual shy person as opposed to the extraverted person in the mirror). After the polarity integration process, some of the participants came to terms, at least partially, with some aspects of their shadow. Moreover, some participants associated the characters in the mirror (a projection of their own reality or needs) with the insecurity and uncertainty of their couple relationship or with the difficulty of accepting someone else within their personal space.

Other types of exercises based on a creative literary support were also centered on the development of a story based on a drawing that the participant had sketched in advance: writing a paragraph as part of an ampler story, setting up a group of participants (group cohesion exercise) and creating a story intertwined with elements of drama therapy, using family as a central theme (in order to clarify the relationships between the participants and their parents or other family members).

### **III. Results**

Given that the present study is only preliminary - our immediate aim was to illustrate the working method of the narrative technique - and because the research program that we started is still ongoing, when it comes to results, we will merely be concentrating on the qualitative observations, the result of the first six meetings with our participants.

We will synthesize some of the participants' breakthroughs, thus resorting to the observation method (constantly applied by the facilitators in personal development groups, in order to obtain an experiential diagnosis, as well as the observation of the changes occurred in the participants' physical, facial, expressive and behavioral aspects - as a result of their accounts). We would like to add that we also want to draw up a quantitative study, in which we will illustrate the statistic results of the research at the end of this pre-experiment of familiarization with the creative literary improvisation technique.

From a qualitative point of view, we have noticed (for every one of the 24 participants) an increase in the creative flow and flexibility during the program, as well as a greater ease in elaborating spontaneous stories within the work group. This fact may coincide with the creativity stimulation and the individual's playful nature, which has been unlocked in the case of the participants and it is more easily noticed during the literary improvisation group.

Moreover, we detected an increase in the consciousness and self-knowledge levels. The participants started to express themselves freely, as well as to voluntarily answer the questions, while perceiving connections with some aspects of their lives during the program. In other words, they have already started to gain the "self-assistance" ability, which was more difficult to achieve during the first meetings and therefore required increased attention on behalf of the facilitators who needed to catalyze their way towards certain breakthroughs.

During and after the literary improvisation exercise, combined with drama therapy, one of the participants realized that she was always trying to be at her best in absolutely all of her activities. She was unconsciously wishing to be "seen" by her father, with whom she had not been in touch for 8 years and with whom she had parted in a painful way during the divorce of her parents. After the analysis and the reestablishment of the contact with her father in an experiential context, she came to realize that he might bear feelings for her and that the communication breakdown was only a consequence of the mother-father relationship, and had nothing to do with the daughter. At the end of the session, the participant declared she felt she got rid of an "emptiness" in the pit of her stomach, which proves the provocative effect of the exercise (because it engaged her psycho-somatic energy, a breakthrough that can lead to the participant's self-sufficient personal balance).

Through the same exercise, another participant came to realize she had chosen the role of a mother in her story because of the frail relationship between herself and her mother, as well as out of fear of becoming a bad mother, fear generated by a lack of a positive example. Afterwards, the participant adopted a personal analysis in order to find a solution to her problem.

During the previously mentioned mirror exercise, a participant realized that she had difficulties in writing a story because she felt inferior to those around her. Moreover, after describing the character in the mirror as being a shy person, much as herself, we worked in an experiential manner in order to unblock her inner resources, seemingly frozen at the level of her throat, where she described the presence of a sort of

tension. Subsequently to the challenge and the analysis, the participant came to realize her fear of being judged by others and, with the help of the group, we worked on boosting her self-esteem. A very important indicator of the fact that the exercise worked was the way in which the participant was massaging her neck at the end of the session, the place in which she said her courage of coming forth and asserting herself was blocked.

These are just a few examples of the working method based on literary creativity and the changes that occurred in some of our participants. As the program progresses, we expect to observe even more frequent moments of awareness through which our participants manage to know themselves better and grow.

#### **Discussions**

Considering the data we have just presented, as well as the practical experience within the personal development group, we expect to see the following results in the participants at the end of the research program:

- An increase in self-esteem,
- The facilitation of inter-personal relationships,
- An increase in spontaneity and creativity,
- A higher level of emotional intelligence,
- A decrease in the anxiety level

Moreover, we are also able to underline the originality of the study, which makes it especially important in the field. The creative literary improvisation technique has never been used this way before, although there have been authors who used stories within the therapeutic frame (Paola Santagostino used story writing as a mean of establishing a psychological diagnosis and Nossrat Peseshkian used Eastern fairy tales in order to help his clients reach certain insights). The methodology presented in this article, the experiential character and the work with stories within the personal development technique and its inclusion in the set of expressive-creative techniques specific to Unifying Experiential group are the premises of the original nature of the Psychotherapy. Therefore, not only do we wish for the research program described in the article to yield results, but we also wish for its continuation, as well as for the validation of the technique at a larger scale.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

As a conclusion to this preliminary study, we can observe the utility and the originality of the technique, as well as the high creativity level involved. Following the presentation, it may be noted that the use of the literary creative improvisation technique (or Literary Unifying Improvisation) has yielded certain changes for the participants within the personal development group because they managed to get more in touch with their emotions and thoughts. We believe that its use, both in groups and in individual therapy, can be wrought successfully in order to help clients overcome their blockages and solve some of their issues.

Furthermore, we wish to go further with this type of intervention, to finalize the first stage of the program and to provide quantitative results, meant to contribute to the validation of the information presented in this study. Moreover, by stimulating creativity and a playful attitude, we believe the technique will also bring positive effects in our everyday lives. The fact that the technique is based on the experiential method and that it integrates the participants' unresolved experiences, unifying polarities while increasing self-acceptance and the acceptance of others constitutes important premises for the confirmation of the presented method as a technique of the Unifying Experiential Psychotherapy.

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