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Story and Transformation in a Reading Laboratory for the Elderly in Pandemic Times – An Experience Report

Maria Teresa Mendonça De Barros [α], Professor Dante Marcello Claramonte Gallian [σ] & Professor Simeão Sass Ph.D [ρ]

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I. Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic has brought countless challenges in several social and educational aspects, and mainly a more attentive look about public policies that concern the elderly. The combination of fear of catching the disease and the fear of dying, together with imposing and long social isolation has caused much anxiety and has increased the risk of mental illness, mainly depression. Here we ask a guiding question in order to conduct our article: what can we develop as group activity that allows virtual meetings that provide a personal reflection on life and relationships, but can also promote a pleasant esthetic experience?

That question has led us to suggest literary text as a foundation of the reading Project with our target population chosen for the present study: the elderly group of the Open University for the Elderly (Uapi). Literature has always been one of the most significant ways to express human condition through art and creativity. Therefore, it is a way to reach a major understanding of living and sharing. We intend to approach both topics under a humanization viewpoint. The main reason is that literary texts are a suitable starting point to establish a group discussion in order to make possible to increase the experience in the being's environment.

The idea came from several experiences that had already been developed by the study group on History and Philosophy of Health Sciences (CeHFI), a group we have been connected with since 2014. The Reading Laboratory inside CeHFI has existed for more than 18 years. Gallian & Bittar (2020) write that the experience "allows the launching of perception and attitude that approaches a more humanistic perspective and allows the expansion of the scope of the being's presence". There is a massive production of Ph. D. thesis, master's dissertation, and articles. They cover different aspects of that activity, done for different public, inside and outside university environment.

Named "Reading Laboratory", it is a three-step activity: the first step occurs when the person talks about the experience of a lonely reading; during the second step, they discuss the text itself as well as the relation with personal experience; the third one ends with the report on the impact on group experience.

Within this context, personal narration establishes a "dynamic relation that links language and reality" (id.). This looks to us very appropriate when one works with the purpose of humanizing relationships. This is the matter proposed and discussed in the present article. In order to corroborate the option for a project on literature, we recall the words by Paulo Freire (1982) in the introduction of his book *The importance of the act of reading* from 1982: "Reading the world precedes the word reading. Thus, the subsequent reading of the later cannot forego the continuity of the reading of the first one. Language and reality are linked together in a dynamic manner. Text interpretation to be achieved by its critic reading implies perception of the relations between text and context". We believe the exchange of experiences stimulated by literary texts allows, among those who have already a long life way, the expansion of their awareness regarding the world and himself/ herself.

When we think of public policies for the elderly, we reach for Kalache (2020), who points out the need to develop policies in favor of an active and healthy aging. The foundation would lie on health promotion, permanent learning, by encouraging civic participation

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and protecting the weakest in advanced age. During pandemic, the importance of actions linked to elderly people has become more evident as this age group have already been dealing with the risks of isolation and fragility either physical or mental well before 2020.

Furthermore, the social relevance of the present study on this age range increases as we face an accelerated aging of the Brazilian population. Therefore, it is necessary a discussion about public policies that comprehend this population segment and help to perform a critic reflection in order to improve health services for the elderly. Leandro-França (2014) bring the history of current public policies, and both point out data scarcity regarding policies as well as studies conducted about the elderly. The main milestones of public discussion on health promotion for the elderly have been developed from the legal texts following the 1988 Federal Constitution (FC/1988), mainly the Elderly National Policy (PNI) of 1994 and the Elderly Statute of 2003.

The way we refer to the elderly may indicate if the attitude towards them is out of respect or contempt. Altman (2011) stresses the difference between old and elderly: old is the person who lost his/her capacity or skills to continue his/her active life; elderly is the one with an older age, but did not necessarily lost his/her autonomy. Leandro-França & Murta (2014) underline the importance of preventive actions concerning mental illness, including emotional illness, and refers to the work developed in open universities as one of the options.

Usually, the elderly already faces several challenges in regular times as the place he occupies inside his/her family and society has changed. The emergence of depressive symptoms is very frequent in this life stage where countless losses take place. Brasil et al. (2013) mention, for instance, the somatic manifestation of illness that exposes human fragility and finitude the elderly must face inexorably, increasing the feeling of vulnerability besides the risk of isolation and loneliness. Another point that is common during this life stage is the loss of personal autonomy, mainly female elderly who is used to a routine of taking care and not to be taken care of.

There is still another fear regarding social death, which would surely lead to illness or even to death wish. Isolation is always a threat that surrounds physical and mental balance, and it increased in 2020 with Covid-19 pandemic. Hammerschmidt, Bonatelli and Carvalho (2020) comment on the difficulty in valueing the elderly's biological, psychological and social background within the current public policies. It is also difficult to appraise the place he/she occupies in the family scope: his/her financial help, but he/she has no voice, he/she remains in the listening position, without space to express himself/herself. That fact worsened during pandemic. According to a document issued by the State Secretariat of Health of a southwestern state, in September 2020, the authors encourage the establishment of activities and spaces, including virtual ones, in order to promote the dialogue and elderly listening as a strategy to decrease affective spacing and to avoid the increase of depressive symptoms and illness risk and even suicide. That will be our reflective journey, which has brought the establishment of a triad for reflection: elderly, literature and technology.

A short bit of the story of the Open University 21th anniversary, and 2020 turning point

By contextualizing the project of the Open University of the Elderly (Uapi), at Unifesp, the project has been part of the Geriatrics and Gerontology department, since 1999. The minimum age to participate is 60 years old, and diplomas or education certificates are not necessary to join the project.

Uapi is a very suitable research field for post-graduates and undergraduate research internship. It is linked to the Dean's Office for Graduate and Research Studies of Unifesp. It started in Campus São Paulo and today it extends to other campi of the University. Their goal is to foster reflection on the needs of the aging process.

Uapi is founded on three pillars: 1) an educational planning that links undergraduate and each campus extension; 2) encouragement of the organization of the newcomers in associations, and 3) college management with undergraduate professors and alumni. All activities aim at encouraging the interaction among generations in order to develop healthy relationships with the elderly as well as the acknowledgment of his/her support in building family and social life. Professors and monitors are spontaneously invited to assist the development of Uapi senior participants.

According to her report, Uapi coordinator states that the main goal is to give a better physical and mental quality of life to the elderly. It also intends to provide their cultural and social integration by giving guidance regarding physical, mental and spiritual health under the scope of integrative care. By means of classes, lectures and experience, it occurs an upgrade in general knowledge in studies such as Law, Psychology, History, Fine Arts, Memory Workshop, Portuguese Language, Literature, among others. Activities are free and take place twice a week. The course lasts 8 months (academic year), but it is possible to last longer, which occurs to many participants.

In 2017, we were invited to participate in Uapi activities. We accepted the challenge, which gave us the opportunity to conduct a research on the elderly. Since the beginning, it had become very clear the importance to conduct an activity that could bring the already mentioned benefits regarding enhanced mental illness

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prevention due to isolation and feeling of worthlessness. Cognitive stimulus through reading and text discussion increases the possibility of growing self-confidence, which makes feasible the opportunity to be listened and points out the existence of value in their individual narrative.

It was possible to note the impact in one of the participants' statement during on-site activities in 2017:

> I think that [Lablei meetings] moved me. I think that the three [three short stories], but this one (The Imaginary Invalid), I think it had a strong emotional impact on me. Another day we went to have some coffee, and I enjoyed it. Because people get together. (Debora, 2017)

II. Method

This experience report discusses the experience performed with the group from Open University of the Elderly (Uapi), at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp). Among Uapi activities, we will focus on the experience at the Reading Laboratory (LabLei). We will use the methodology developed by Gallian and his coworkers at the Center of Studies of History and Philosophy of Health Sciences (Gallian, 2002; Sakamoto, Gallian, 2004; Gallian, Reginato, 2009; Bittar et al. 2013, Lima et al. 2014; Gallian, 2016; Carvalho, 2017; Logatti et al. 2019). During these pandemic times, some adjustments had to be done to attend the elderly as well as to adapt them to the virtual environment.

It is about an elderly group formed by 65 people between 60 and 84 years in 2017 and 2018. The number of people corresponded to places available in order to join the Uapi yearly schedule. In 2020, the number of participants were between 40 and 80 as we were dealing the changes imposed by the pandemic, both for the format (which became virtual) and for the number of participants. in the beginning there where three coordinators formed by the Center of Studies of History and Philosophy of Health Sciences (CeHFi).

The criteria for choosing the texts were based on the consideration if there would be a more suitable literary genre to such a different group of people, with great differences in education and family background. In terms of reading habits, they range from no reading activity to those who call themselves "avid readers". We also took into consideration short stories themes, and we searched those that had sensible themes for the elderly. We have chosen: "O Mergulhador" (The Diver), by Karen Blixen; "O Espelho" (The Mirror), by Machado de Assis; "O Doente Imaginário", (The Doctor in spite of Himself) by Molière (all from 2017); "O Pássaro Encantado" (The Enchanted Bird) and "A Volta do Pássaro Encantado" (The return of the Enchanted Bird), by Rubem Alves in 2018; "Alicerce" (Foundation) by Geni Guimarães and "A Menina que Carregava Bocadinhos" (The girl who carries small bits), by Valter Hugo Mãe in 2020. We decided to consider short stories that would not inhibit their desire to read, as they would be too long and complex. The practical application would allow us to check the adequacy of the choice made.

Altogether, we had 20 meetings: 11 took place in 2017; 4 in 2018, and 5 in 2020. In 2017, there were three om-site meetings on literature. Applying group discussion suggests a path that can be followed. The purpose establishes the enlargement of the dialogue among participants, encourages the individual expression that rescues, in narratives, what had been lived during life. In 2018, there was only one meeting, with three on-site meetings. In 2020, we had two new opportunities to try out the activity, this time virtually. Here, benefits were maintained and even expanded. The given dynamic made possible an exchange of rich personal experiences among all people involved. It also allowed many personal discoveries together with some surprises on their own development potentials.

Therefore, we thought about another guiding question towards the future: how can that on-line activity helps the present context? They were asked to talk about their experience during the laboratory meetings by writing it, which we called "stories about social interaction".

a) Method applied in reading laboratory

Our project is part of a research umbrella of the Center of History and Philosophy of Health Sciences based on Literature in Health Humanization work. Sakamoto and Gallian (2016) describe the reading laboratory as a method developed by CeHFi named as Laboratory of Humanities. It refers to a subject offered in modules to students, professors, university employees as well as to the general community with a varied number of meetings depending on the length of the selected literary work.

The main goal of the reading laboratory is to provide a new look and a new place to Literature, by allowing an esthetic and humanizing experience, as a space of reflections on challenges and anxieties concerning human existence. It is like one of the project planners:

> [...] the Reading Laboratory, as a place of experience that works with this magical and mysterious subject, cannot be understood under the modern and scientism perspective of the word (as a space of mass technique), but preferably under the old perspective, where *labor* (work, experiment) takes place from *oratio* (prayer, contemplation). (Gallian, 2017:211).

The experiment is divided into three parts organized along a pre-determined period. We started with *Reading stories*, when everyone tells if they had read and how was the individual and solitary reading. The second part is named *Discussion itinerary*, and that is when the exchange of ideas in the group and the participants' spontaneous manifestation is prioritized. That is a very enlightening stage, when the participants

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can realize the diversity of viewpoints and feelings that arise in other persons of the group when they enjoy the same text. At last, at the last meeting, we have Stories of social interaction, where everyone talks about the experience of collective discussion and are invited to write a small report about the experience.

It has been more than eighteen years of the Reading Laboratory. There were many formats and environments studied by Sakamoto (2016), Carvalho (2017), Bittar (2020), *Logatti et al. (2019) (2020)* Mituti, Sass and Gallian (2021). The results were relevant, and appeared the possibility to extend the experiment to the elderly group.

Our experience at Uapi was the first to include an elderly group in the research team of CeHFi. Since the beginning, it became very clear the importance of promoting an activity that could bring the benefits of preventing mental illness, in an environment worsened by pandemic due to isolation and feeling of uselessness.

III. Discussion

The Open University of the Elderly of Unifesp and the Reading laboratory are certainly spaces to support the building and promotion a healthy aging. Covid-19 pandemic increased the need to look at the elderly more closely and help them maintain or attain a larger confidence to face their daily life as well as avoid the negative impact of information on cases of death or physical and mental illness.

The even greater isolation from family members, mainly in the first months of pandemic, pointed out the elderley's need to look more frequently to himself/herself as well as to find out new ways to keep the contact channels open to the exterior world. One of the concerns regarded autonomy itself, in other words, the fear of losing autonomy, which is a recurring topic among the participants of the group. That was one of the topics that came out in several group discussions.

Uapi activities, that have been on-site since 2019, became virtual with synchronous and non-synchronous moments. This implied the choice of more suitable technological resources, which came from presentation and training to their use.

The exchanges in classroom were fulfilling to the elderly as well as to the invited professionals, who participated in the meetings voluntarily. For many of them, it was an opportunity to be reinserted in group activities, that leaves an isolation situation inside the family circle.

Cognitive stimulus through reading and text discussion improves self-confidence and makes us believe that it is possible to be listened and to exist some value in personal narratives. As an example, we brought the statement of one of the on-site activities in 2017:

> In the LabLei what happened to me is that I pick a book, read at least twice – in the first one I don't understand much; in the second, I take notes. The best is that in the group, Estela has an opinion, Ramona has another one, and Clara a third one. (2017, Estela).

Facebook conducted the first lab experiment on virtual reading. However, some difficulties in interacting with the elderly via chat rose such as lack of a speedy typing and missing the train of thought if the elderly try to interact through chat. As the coordinator pointed out:

> As the migration has become successful, we realized that it worked well and everyone got used to the innovation of turning off the audio, and turn it on again if you are going to speak. […] *It's funny how we become able to do that* [bold added].

Based on challenges, the coordination cared about creating an instruction manual adapted to the elderly. A ludic and well designed booklet was created. It includes every button and function. Pruchno (2019) writes about the intersection between technology, and acknowledges the challenge for the present elderly generation, that did not start their lives already plunged into the virtual world. At the same time, that intersection mobilizes their adaptive capability.

The coordinator herself was surprised by the well-succeeded initiative, although many veteran participants had not joined the new format fully. One group chose to keep contact only during non-synchronous activities that had been gradually offered.

At first, the group that attended the virtual meetings varied from 50 to 80 participants out of the 130 enrolled in February.

The narrative of Uapi's coordinator help understand the context of the Open University, and provided a record on the development and changes of the group activities, in charge of the development of successful solutions found during pandemic times. She realized that many changes came for good, and one of them refers to the feasibility of maintaining the hybrid model. She is very enthusiastic about the results: "Well, we beat lots of teenagers in the way we deal with the quarantine."

The narratives of the group participants confirm what she had said: "In the beginning, being in lockdown was almost the idea that I was going to a spiritual retreat" (Clara). "I, Ramona, have already said that this pandemic was amazing. I did not enjoy reading and now I have already read 14 books so far."

Considering losses and gains of the project in changing from on-site meetings to virtual ones, we notice some losses that had been partially made up due to the attention and participation of participants even if that happened through computer or cell phone.

> Regarding Uapi, at the beginning, I thought it was awful… I am very fond of affection, hugs… and I have lost it at Uapi, during pandemic. That was very restrictive. I do not have a family; I have no place to go to enjoy nature, that I love so

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much… so, all this made me a little mad at Uapi. I said I would not attend Uapi any longer. Zoom technology has nothing to do with me. I am not against technology, for God's sake. Not at all. It is cold, distant." (This is Estela talking about her response to virtual meetings).

It seems we have a greater interaction, instead of one behind the other… here you show yourself. Roberta, but I say that this gave us the freedom to be one with the other. (Clara)

During the experience, we discovered some positive aspects that we have never thought of like the attendance of individuals who, in some other way, would not be there: "I am going to an appointment with the doctor"; I am here in the waiting room and I am attending the meeting"; "Oh, I am travelling"; "I am in the countryside". The virtual environment opened doors to things that the on-site relations do not allow. However, the feeling of human warmth was there. A participant realized the same thing: in virtual environment, the feeling of support and presence remained:

In on-site meeting affection rises etc. It something shows up, and I hug someone and tell him/her something, only the person hears. However, when I am on a virtual meeting, whatever I want to say, everyone will hear. If someone embraces my feeling, if I cry, if I get upset. *All of them (either she or he)* [bold added]. Even if Lucila says that on-site meetings we would be hugged, *we know that in a given moment, in silence, in that look, there is a presence.* [bold added]. […] by attending a virtual meeting, there is a possibility of being present. It is not as cold as everyone says. *I say we are more focused* (Clara 2020) [bold added]

Another advantage was the opportunity to collect records that will certainly be a rich source of future considerations of such an important project like Uapi. Allowing a deep plunge into the Self was fundamental to live these pandemic times. Many activities were planned in order to help participants to cope with the isolation of family and friends: "Classes of musical memory, taste memory, movies, discussion, things that allowed that non-synchronous moment was as rich as the synchronous one" (Lucila, 2020).

In the light of the above, we believe it is important to perform a brief reflection on the technological issue regarding the elderly population. The second leg of the tripod referred in the introduction refers to the insertion of technological resources in the project developed with the elderly. The "new normal" brought up by pandemic accelerated the need, previously detected, to integrate the elderly in on-line activities in order to avoid them from being even more isolated. It is obvious that it is a big challenge, sometimes impossible, mainly concerning populations that have fewer financial resources or live far from big centers.

There are many positive perspectives by using technology, although there is a risk of an inaccurate use. In this sense, it is important to identify the elderly's purpose by connecting the internet. During a conversation via zoom technology with Uapi elderly, one of them mentioned that she decreased the amount of literary readings as she was spending much time in social networks. Reversely, another participant, who is already used to the virtual world when pandemic started, became the coordinator's main assistant to conduct the virtual meetings and interaction with other participants.

Back to technology matter, a special issue of *The Gerontologist* (vol. 59 of 2019) journal on the interface between elderly population and technology releases a series of relevant studies. The studies focus on the viewpoint of gerontologists, engineers, developers and researchers, among others. The articles approach as technological issues as those linked to behavior, development, physical and mental health.

Pruchno (2019) stresses the intersection between technology and ageing as well as the dramatic growth of ageing in the last years. The author acknowledges that there is a long way to cross and alerts that, when there is no integration among different knowledges, there is a major risk of wasting resources in products that, in practice, do not work properly as we did not listen to the demands and limitations of the target population.

The advantages regarding internet also include a broader access to information about health and quality of life. Croff et al. (2019) point at the growing need of a preventive work with the elderly that is not linked to medical treatment. The authors criticize the lack of scope of several strategies linked to the work with the elderly. That is due, either because they focus on one single risk factor or one certain subgroup, or because they do not take into consideration the social, economic or cognitive reflections linked to the well-being of the population that is the study target. When we think under the integrative perspective, we look not only at the individual but also at community factors.

Besides identifying the elderly's purposes when they use internet, it is necessary to understand the reasons that hinder their adequacy to such technologies even when they are active users. Technological development is very dynamic which makes difficult follow-up and absorption of new technologies. Furthermore, as Czaja (2019) suggests, it looks relevant to establish a dialogue with the elderly when equipment or software are developed for them. It is necessary not to consider the concept that the elderly resist to changes and are not willing to interact with technological products. Available data lead to the opposite direction, and point out that the elderly are more receptive to the use of computers, for instance, which is confirmed by the Uapi coordinator regarding the elderly excitement during computer classes. Nevertheless, it is not possible to deny that it occurs a cognitive and motor coordination loss that hinders the elderly's interaction in on-line training programs. Thus,

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technology must be introduced in an intelligible way to people that are outside the digital generation.

During her interview on Uapi on pandemic times, the coordinator confirms Cajza's opinion, including the quality of technological resources available for the elderly:

> The use of an older cell phone. Many get it from their sons and daughters when they replace them. Here lies a little criticism because this must be taken into consideration. It is not because the person is older that he/she can have old cell phones. It is not about a device that can do wonders, but a device that allows that communication exists for the elderly. If the device is not useful to him/her, this is a cognitive mistake; a limiting belief he/she is building by saying that he/she is unable to use it. Actually, it is the own device that does not give special conditions.

In case of Brazilian reality, Miranda & Farias (2009) add that difficulties rising from limiting economic or cultural issues in developing countries such as Brazil are not provided with data on the real improvements that a regular use of cell phone can offer to that public (p. 386).

Even though, the advantages brought by internet are undeniable as internet introduces new ways of information, of cognitive stimulus that can assist in communication as well as in leisure. It also eases the access to general and scientific information about health, which is relevant to persons whose age bracket demands a major health care. That set of resources is useful to prevent social isolation, estrangement and emotional instabilities. It also encourages brain activity. Similarly, it promotes social interaction as well as it helps overcome the limiting barriers. This happens mainly to the elderly that did not have a broad network of social contacts. Games, videos, libraries, distance education, virtual communities are some of the possibilities, and we add the possibility of virtual collective meetings, which is the way chosen by Uapi. Reading laboratory also activates these advantages.

The experiments indicated that it is necessary the elderly to consider the use of technologies as something useful, easy and relevant to the accomplishment of diverse tasks as well as education. Consequently, it appears a network among the elderly themselves of a horizontal exchange of knowledge. Similarly, it enlarges the possibility of contacting relatives and friends; decreases loneliness and increases well-being according to the study conducted by Szabo, Allen, Stephen and Alpass (2018). Contact with peers (emotional benefits) eases group learning, where a participant who has more capacity can help the other, by using an adequate language. That language leads the elderly to identify himself/herself with, understand and make use of it.

As the access to information and active participation in different experiences becomes larger, a trademark in a global society, the elderly has the opportunity to reach several scopes, including leisure. He/she will also be able to give a new meaning to his/her life, apprenticeship, to his/her importance as a citizen who has rights and legal guarantees, to his/her own ageing and levels of his/her effective participation inside society (Gaspari, Schwartz, 2005, p. 74).

Therefore, we get to some questions: (1) why technology is difficult to use in so many cases; (2) how to develop technology aiming at an easier and more effective use, and (3) how effectively teach persons to use and embrace the available technology. Those are vital reflections to adapt technological resources to the elderly group, a part of the tripod of our considerations.

Bringing back the experience on the reading laboratory, the reflections comprehended on-site experience as well as virtual experience in 2020. The reading laboratory, in its different versions, and depending on the public it aims at, always brings a wide range of emotional benefits, as it was confirmed in the reports of participants from different public, generations and education:

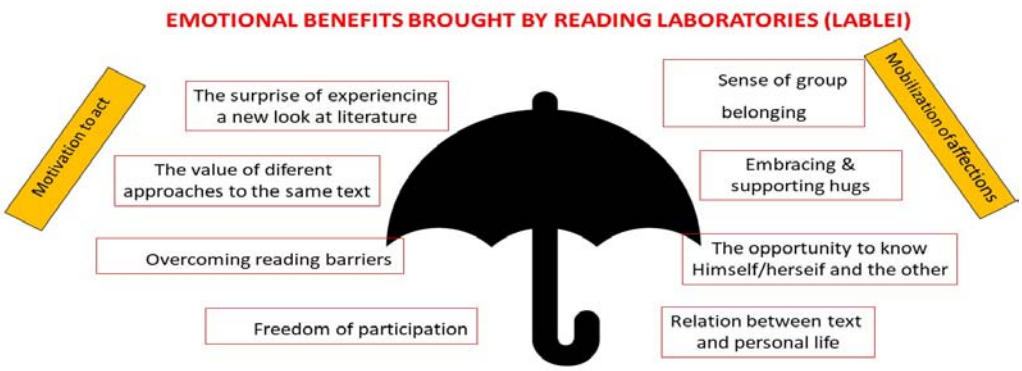

Fig. 1

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Regarding Uapi experience in 2020, we have:

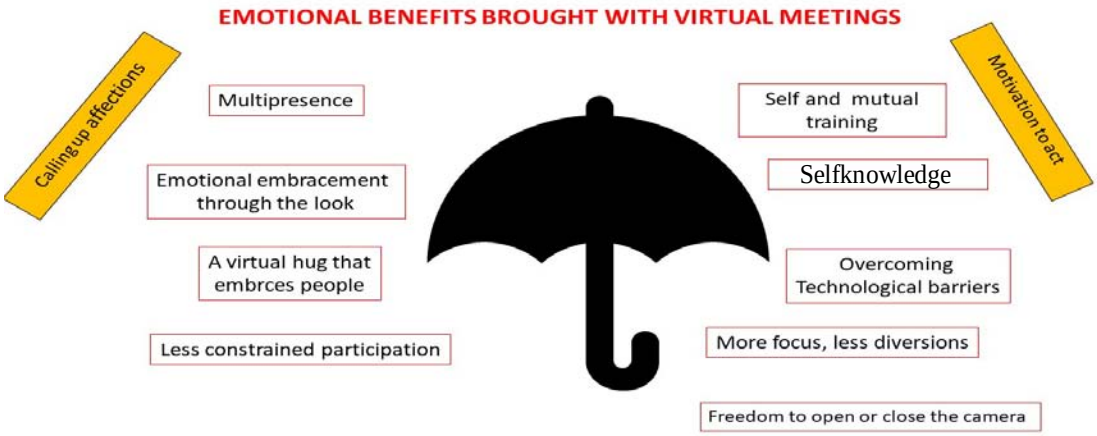

Fig. 2

In some moments during group meetings, we hear reports that now it is possible to participate when we are at home, in traffic or in a waiting room. Another advantage is that it is possible to reach persons who are in further places, even in other cities, and who have more difficulties to connect with the elderly group whether because of the absence of elderly people in the place where they live, or as a result of not knowing such activities.

Within a perspective of disadvantages, we may mention the difficulty or even the resistance of a group that gave up the course either because they were not acquainted with technology or because they alleged the lack of presence warmth, rustling, contact with friends from the group. Summarizing the losses:

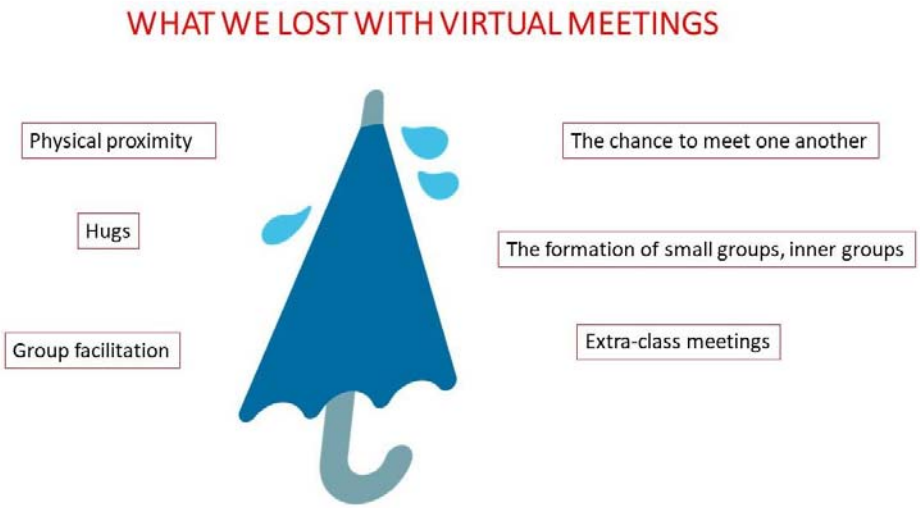

Fig. 3

Nevertheless, the Uapi's coordinator herself realized that, although she misses the on-site contact, she was surprised by the positive results of the on-line version: "I have never experienced such a significant growth of myself and of the others in the last 21 years at Uapi". That is a comment that rewards the effort of adaptation and encourages us to continue, in a promising future.

Since the first intervention, we were able to notice the surprise and the pleasure before a new activity. According to what Clara (2020) states about her perception of the reading laboratory even before taking part in Uapi in 2017:

> At some moment [2017], I heard people saying, "Wow, four classes is too much for us to talk about". That is because there is a dynamic. At first, I read something about that

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experiment on Vida Simples magazine, where Dante gave an interview. I thought, "How blessed those guys are as they share that experience". It is so good to have someone that helps me look at the text, enjoy it. When Uati appeared I said, "Wow, the universe is conspiring in my favor again".

This positive comment did not lose its way in the transition to the laboratory on-line model. Every time we were with the virtual group, we noticed a more significant participation of persons that bring several approaches to the same text. Even the participants that criticized the amount of meetings in every reading cycle acknowledged that they learnt a lot. The results surprised, as Raissa states in the "stories of acquaintanceship":

> Having a day and time to talk about what we read was amazing! I sensed what it would be like when I received the short novel and the survey. I was very curious and could not wait to get here, today, at 2 p.m. It was very nice. I want more of it. Please, come back soon. (Raissa, 2020).

For most participants it is difficult to express themselves during the meeting. However, they come to talk about it through the written record. The record is encouraged, but it is not compulsory. This is the case of Maíra (2020): "Teacher, I have some difficulty in speaking in public. My words get mixed up, and it is difficult to me to make myself clear when I read something. I would really like to be eloquent". Another aspect that may be studied in a future project: if we ask for some feedback after the experience through the virtual channel, through WhatsApp that will lead to more answers. At the several laboratory interventions, I received very few written stories on conviviality. Does that make a difference as we are before a group that is not obliged because it is not about an elective of an undergraduate course?

Nevertheless, even the shyest ones acknowledge the group encouragement, and many of them are able to overcome the original shyness. We also noticed there were a larger participation in the comments made on virtual meetings, which makes us consider if on-line meetings decrease some shyness. Shyness proves to be more frequent in laboratories of on-site readings of 2017 and 2018. However, we must confirm that.

By whatever means, the experiment at the Reading Laboratory provided, to many of them, the opportunity to carry on with the journey through literary texts in search of personal achievement. As one of the participants of the experiments of 2017 and 2020 said:

> Well, I think that kind of work makes people to question things, from the story, from the text, because not all of them understand the same viewpoint. What moves you? It is because the text reaches nearer the issue you live and feel. Thus, many people willingly joined a reading club owed to the laboratories. (Clara, 2020).

Another characteristic that the virtual meeting confirms is something we had already noticed at the on-site meetings. Besides the esthetic experience obtained from the encounter with Literature, people have the chance to correlate parts of the short story with their own life experiences:

> Like the character pictured in the short story, I searched the end of submission. The sense of feeling is beyond words. The girl from the short story might have felt the same emotion. It seemed the thicket she ran to, was going to burst into flame. (Maria, 2020)

> The class reminded my childhood. The young girl [of the short story] took off her dressy outfit, that made her beautiful, and rushed to obey her [employer] […] How many times, in childhood, I had to obey. What I wanted to be, they decided in my place. (Clarice, 2020).

> It was a marvelous experience to roll back time as I was able to realize how much I must thank God for the achievements and life appreciation!!! (Milena, 2020)

There is a new perspective as well as a new relation with books and literature. The dynamics of the reading laboratory is an invitation to think about life. As a 2020 participant puts it very well:

> This is something I did not figure out because when I read, I saw in books, in stories things that belonged more to my world than to the reading. I did not get into the character by bringing it to me. Unless when the book was romantic (laughs). Now, I see another reality by entering the characters, the story and bringing an analysis of our life. (Ramona, 2020)

Those words inspired us to summarize the process that lies in the dynamics of reading laboratory: "Because the book each of us reads is not totally the same as it was read by the other. At the meeting and together we were able to bring things to think about that had not occurred to us. Sharing experiences increased the perception about oneself, the other, the short story itself, the author himself" (Clara, 2020).

Another participant of 2017 and 2020 considered us responsible for making her get interested in reading literary text. We do take the blame with much delight and joy.

We were also surprised by the creative production of some participants and we bring two examples. At our last laboratory meeting, we had the poetic creation of two participants. Both were inspired by the text read in 2020. This gathers a collective memory of important landmarks for the elderly generation – words like clothesline, sewing, the self-discovery, and the discovery of several selves:

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Who's this that lives inside me?
There are so many…
Several versions of the same girl-origin,
A scribble made with a piece of chalk,
Which can be erased and remade,
Null and void, but with marks that remain,
Memories, hope, dreams…
Improve as time goes by
And make this person grow, with different facets, images,
The border of myself,
In the core, one single person, divided
In stages, ages, moments
Who is that who represents me, faces me and questions me?
There are plenty of me, which wander right inside me,
Meetings and disconnection, in search of some identity
Strong, determined, passionate personality
To be still tamed
As a girl, never finishes her apprenticeship
Fragments of several kinds, sizes, kept, hung,
Inside myself like a clothesline
Several versions, colorful or colorless models
Sometimes it is even impossible to recognize that first one,
Layers of faces, facts, pictures (Janice, 2020)

The thin needle with a long thread
After all, it is not about a mere sewing
Both enter in one side
And leave from the other
Permeating all sides
In different times
Sometimes crying, others, smiling, sometimes bursting into laughter
Together in one single thread
The thread now is tight, and then it is loose
Now it is with us, and then it is cut
Dreams become true one by one, the ones that are ready to become true
And others that are still to come
They impel us to fly. (Bruna. 2020)

Here, we reviewed all the results. The reading laboratory has the benefit of featuring a low-cost activity at on-site modality. It can be replicated in other environments that embrace the elderly. In turn, virtual modality requires some investment in technology regarding spaces to welcome the elderly and the elderly themselves. However, the number of people who have at least a cell phone is high. Finally, we believe the changes that occurred in meeting format, provided a wide range of possibilities of access by the elderly public that frequently have some difficulty in on-site participation.

One of the greatest findings is that the "60+ group" is not exactly a passive group, mainly when they discovered or re-discovered they still have a voice. The awareness of oneself and of the other can serve as a lot of inspiration, as a new attitude towards personal recognition and appreciation. It helps avoid the feeling of not being important to others anymore. That feeling is present in complaints about depression. Some

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participants found out their personal talent. Inspired by the last meeting, Raissa states: "I thought it would be better to write right now, grabbing the peak of the conversation". Human warmth returns to warm up aged hearts, full of personal experiences, and rich in creative potentials that have not been discovered or acknowledged.

Briefly, we suggested a low-cost activity that comprises literature followed by group discussion. It can be developed in elderly assistance center, community centers, and open universities to the elderly or any other institution for this kind of public.

Advantages and challenges were approached in the present text. The transformations endured during the literature project for the elderly in 2020 stressed the relevance and the contemporaneity of the proposal directed to a group that felt threatened by the new situation. The reading laboratory is an experience that allows the integration of individual and collective activities.

Our research ended by being crossed by the pragmatic need of unexpected changes. However, those changes were not less founded as we hope we made it clear through the text. It was an experiment that can be replicated in many places of our vast Brazil. It is a low-cost activity, but its benefits to the elderly are high.

IV. Conclusion and Implications

Our article dealt with "an experience inside another experience". In other words, the impacts and results of the reading laboratory in its on-site and virtual versions in the program of the Open University for the elderly.

The reading laboratory underwent some important changes in the interaction format regarding the number of participants at on-site meetings as well as considering the pandemic. Those initiatives allowed the continuity of the group, and overcame the feeling of strangeness during lockdown period. It also brought benefits to the development of the elderly participants, who did their best to get new cell phones in order to participate in the group. Nevertheless, part of the group gave up pursuing the meetings due to personal issues.

Studies on this matter are not very frequent in Brazil. However, the concern about the relation between digital technology and ageing has increased in the last years. It is also due to the growth of the population above 60 years of age. Within this context, Uapi can provide a field of study of a successful example of adaptation to the new reality, mainly in pandemic days. Our proposal on a reading laboratory, adapted to senior population and to virtual reality joined the challenge to further the same activity in different ways: passive (silent and individual reading of the text, and listening moments of the group), and active (discussion and reports written at the end of the activity).

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Abbreviations

Unifesp	Federal University of São Paulo
Cedess	Center of development for University Teaching in Health
Uapi	Open University for Senior Citizens
LabLei	Reading Laboratory – Literature group discussions
CeHFi	History and Philosophy of Health Sciences

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