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## Transformative learning in language arts as a method of guidance and counseling

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### Abstract

Learning in language arts as method of guidance and counselling has three levels: 1. Art level (interaction with the literature); 2 Psychology level (counselling); 3 Art level (interaction with the same piece of literature as in the beginning of the session, poetic summary of the session). Disclosure of personally important meanings is a key to self understanding and poetical thinking, our developed methodical system reduces emotional tension and strengthens interconnectedness between inner and outer world, and improves poetical understanding. In this article the methodical system of transformative learning and guidance is discussed.

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*Keywords: depression, poetical perception, schizophrenia, transformative learning ;*

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### 1. Introduction

Analyzing the qualitative data of transformative learning in language arts we revealed the psychological and artistic factors able to act on the mental state of personality, and to deepen the interactions with the literature art. Our reflection on the qualitative data lead to the improvement of educational work; personal educational insights and its comparison with the other researchers' theoretical insights were the basis to develop the methodical system for psychological guidance and counseling. Our research confirmed an effectiveness of spiral model. This model was developed working with depressed and schizophrenic individuals, individuals with anxiety disorders, and with healthy people. According to this model, the session of transformative learning in language arts starts from the interaction with the literature art and ends interacting with the same piece of literature. In the beginning of the session a poem reading serves for disclosure individual's personal meanings and gives the material for counseling. Creative exercises help to transfer individual's personally important experience into expressive poetic language, are useful to manage anxiety and to reduce tension. During counseling and guidance individual's self esteem and self evaluation are being improved, negative emotions are transformed, and individual is empowered to discover internal freedom. Inner changes act on the interaction with the poem, individual's ability to understand the literature achieves new quality. Changes in literature understanding allow improving self esteem, satisfying own emotional, spiritual and aesthetic needs; reduce the dependence on psychological counselor. In this article we give an explanation of spiral model.

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## 2. Basics

Transformative learning in language arts as a method of guidance and counseling is based on the existential philosophy, transformative learning theories, practical methods of bibliotherapy and creative writing. Personal development is often the result of responding effectively to pain and suffering, painful experience leads to “boundary experience” (Bühler & Allen, 1972), an individual encounters the boundaries of his (her) existing self - concept and cannot cope with a situation and its exigencies (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009). Cultural things are able to extend existential horizon and to transform individual’s feelings and thoughts. Mutual interaction with phenomena of the literature art and with phenomena of life is a creative process and leads to cultural and personal development. Learning to interact with the work of art can be defined as a cultural, artistic development as well as self cognition and self creation. In the centre of individual’s existential project is the truth of individuality, a manifestation of self – concept. Individual’s truth is inseparable from the conception of reality and personal values. Finding a new meaning an individual extends the field of consciousness.

In the transformative learning sessions we meet a challenge to involve the client into the learning to experience poetry and to reflect on this experience. The product of the transformative learning in language arts can be defined as a new quality of existential and artistic understanding, and as a new quality of understanding the Self. Counseling and guidance to more healthy life creates preconditions for personal growth, for increasing of self awareness and existential knowledge. Poems or other literary works are used as a tool for deepening the therapeutic dialog and for discovering new insight. Before this research it was supposed that disclosure of personal meanings strengthens collaboration with the counsellor and is a key to better interaction with the art, and with new knowledge. The importance of personal meaning disclosure in teaching to understand music and the Self was confirmed by Piliciauskas(1998), conversation about personally important meanings was known and confirmed in interactive bibliotherapy (Hynes, 1994). All forms of the art can be used for disclosure of personal meanings, but language is most important tool in understanding the self and the reality (Pennebaker, 1997). Unconscious knowledge can reach consciousness during creative process, but internal freedom is a necessary condition for creativity. Individual’s sense of inner freedom is inseparable from individual’s ability to sense identity, and is an obligatory condition for creativity. Creative individual can be observer of his (her) situation and make choices.

We have assumed that focus on individual’s personal meaning during the interaction with the work of literary art strengthens one’s sense of identity. Questioning, whether is possible to use the same poetical symbol to express personally important meaning create precondition for unconscious reorganization of information, strengthens one’s sense of identity. When an individual loses his sense of identity he loses the ability to speak authentically. In this situation counselor meets challenge: how to develop the dialog, how to focus on personal meanings when an individual isn’t able to speak authentically? According Freire social emancipation learning theory, symbolic material helps the client to recognize own problems and gives a power to speak up. Authentic speech is unique, typical to concrete individual, and is inseparable from his (her) reality conception and ability to live here and now, to be an observer. Cultural spiritual transformative learning tradition emphasizes on Spirituality, on human and meaning making, sense of wholeness, interconnectedness of all things (Tisdell, 2003). All art therapy forms focus on client’s psychological needs, on social skills development, on the promotion of self expression; our transformative learning in language arts as a method of guidance and counseling has the same therapeutic goals, emphasizes on the development of verbal skills and expressive language, and has a goal to develop abilities to understand the Self and literature art. The field of understanding is extended when we come back to the same poem or other form of literature after discussion of personally important meanings.

Helping an individual to find the Self as a creator and to discover own existence as a creative, we create the conditions for creative interaction with the literary work. Explanation of the creative interaction is based on philosophical poetics: on a democratic idea claiming that the roles of both the author and the other that has to understand are of equal importance in the process of understanding (Kacerauskas, 2006). This process is tied to the development of the world outlook and self-perception. Philosophical poetics opens up the space for cultural

investigations as a means of the human world outlook development; the transformative learning in language arts, as a method of guidance and counseling opens up the creative space in living world to discover the Self.

**3. Methods**

Our research started from the phenomenological field. Transformative learning project started as voluntary experiment and was developed many years. Different groups of adults (healthy, depressed, schizophrenic, clients with anxiety disorders) were involved into the transformative learning project. We had 5 meetings with every group of 4-6 persons, and session’s time was approximately one hour. One third of the informants attended individual and group sessions, other attended only group sessions. 8 persons continued participation in transformative learning project approximately 2 years. The project of transformative learning and counselling ran 10 years in two different Lithuanian towns. 30 healthy people, 20 schizophrenics, 15 depressed, 10 with anxiety disorders attended transformative learning groups. Phenomenological observation was used to observe their activities, behaviour and mood. Thick descriptions of the observed sessions were made. Individual deep interview was conducted with 4 schizophrenics, 4 depressed, 3 ill with anxiety disorders, 5 healthy people. An interview material was written. Content analysis was used for qualitative data analysis and some tendencies were revealed. The qualitative data were analysed asking questions: what problems are typical for all clients, what problems are specific for one or other group of clients, what kind of literature is more useful to disclose personal meanings, what symbols are most important to disclose personal meanings, is the guidance an artistic or rational process? The qualities emerged during reflection on the data and the findings were compared with the theoretical insights of other scientists, grounded theory was used for data generalization. The process of teaching and guidance were observed by other researchers, and the expertise of methods of transformative learning in language arts were made by Lithuanian, Romania, USA and Great Britain experts.

Poetry or prose reading was used to disclose personal meanings and served as a catalyst in the therapeutic discussion; creative exercises were given having purpose to help the clients to express their personal experience sensually or symbolically.

**4. Results**

*4.1. Spiral model*

Phenomenological observation revealed that people more educated in language arts or in other arts have more abilities to understand the main idea of the literary text and to experience it emotionally. This tendency was noticed in the different groups of people: healthy, schizophrenic, depressed, ill with anxiety disorders. In the first sessions all our informants were able to understand the mood of poem; in each group 4 of 6 or 3 of 4 schizophrenic individuals had difficulties in understanding the main idea: their responses only sometimes were close to the literary text, their emotional responses often were indifferent. Depressed individuals were able to understand the main idea of poem, but some individuals with more severe depression had difficulties in understanding the main idea and sometimes their personal responses weren’t close to the literary text. Sometimes more depressed individuals felt strong anxiety after reading. 5 of 6 individuals with strong anxiety often identified themselves as victims and tried to avoid responding, and their typical reaction to the reading of one or the other poem was anxiety. In conclusion, it is possible to notice that literary understanding depends on mental illness. These insights were discovered in the qualitative research, not tested in quantitative research. Insights lead to the creation of methodical system able to promote perception of poetry and the Self.

Table 1. Literary text perception in the beginning of first three transformative learning sessions

Group	Ability to understand poem’s mood	Ability to understand poem’s main idea	Ability to understand poem’s main idea	Emotional response
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Healthy adults	good	good	Yes, it is close	Catharsis
Schizophrenic	good	sometimes	sometimes close	Indifferent
Depressed	good	goodoften good	often is close	Catharsis or anxiety
Ill with anxiety disorders	good	good	Often avoidance to respond	anxiety

Observing the transformative learning in language arts sessions and trying to improve its quality the most effective system of psychological approaches and techniques was revealed. Our research confirmed an effectiveness of spiral model. The session of transformative learning in language arts begins from the interaction with literature art; and at the end the learners interact with the same poem or other form of literature art again.

We found that transformative learning in language arts as method of guidance and counselling has three levels:

1. LEVEL OF ART (macro level). Interaction with literature (reading) serves for the refreshment of feelings and imagination (stimulation and induction); for reviving of memories; for inner freedom and self-discovery.

## 2. LEVEL OF THE *PSYCHOLOGY*

2.1 *From the arts to the psychology* (mezzo level). Educator's and client's discussion of personally important meanings: has our client the same experience as literature hero? What reminiscences are revived? What problems have the client to deal with?

2.2 *From the psychology to the arts* (micro level). Client speaks from within, speaks sensually (concrete season of the year, weather, colours, sounds, smells, test...); looks for similarities between mental state and nature, tries to use the metaphor for self expression, makes creative exercises.

2.3. *Psychology* (mezzo level). Discussion of new experiences, insights: educator – therapist helps to summarize, what clients have learnt in the session.

3. LEVEL OF ART (macro level). Reading. Collaborative poem with the educator's poetic interludes serves for the summarizing of emotional, spiritual, cognitive experiences. At the end we read the same poem or prose as in the beginning of the session.

The framework of this methodical system is psychotherapeutic, educational experience. Before this research it was known the benefit of disclosure of personally important meanings in teaching to understand music and personal emotions (Piličiauskas, 1998), and in bibliotherapy (Hynes, 1994; Mazza, 1999). Interactive bibliotherapy / poetry therapy have the roots in psychoanalysis, psychodrama, and Adler individual psychology (Mazza, 1999), so the focus on personal meanings is clear.

During phenomenological observations we noticed that interaction with literature depends on mental state: on the ability to be open to impressions and to focus on the individual personal meaning. As more incomprehensible things exist in inner world as more difficult it is to be open to impressions of external world, because outside world frightens. Literature, especially poems, are in the middle between inner experiences and impressions of external world, so poetic words are the tools in educator's work, these words like free associations help to develop the dialog and to get more information about individual's inner life. When an individual deals with difficult and sometimes not understandable emotional experience the help is needed. Dialog with the specialist, there is a way to get a help. Some client's existential problems are clarified in rational way. Emotional tension often is reduced in artistic (poetic) way. An educator speaks with the client very concrete, but at the same time an educator looks for poetic similarities and uses poetic comparisons in his/her speech. For example, "You feel yourself an exhausted as wasteland, yes?" "You feel yourself without energy as dried up river?" The clients listen to the educator – therapist and try to discover own poetic comparisons by doing creative exercises. Creative exercises are given having a goal to disclose personal meaning and to ease the expression of complicated feelings.

Focus on personal meanings and poetic comparisons help to grasp poetry, and develop metaphorical thinking. Metaphor is a mobile component: brings wisdom (spiritual existential knowledge) into individual's level; expresses individual's outlook and emotional state, and empowers to experience Spiritual wholeness in a concrete place and time (Rojcewicz, 2001; Sucylaite, 2011). Metaphor is a tool for emotional transfer from universal to concrete, and from concrete to universal. Experiencing metaphor's beauty an individual strengthens a sense of identity and discovers interconnectedness between personal experiences and Natural phenomena. Individuals define this state as inspiration or tranquillity. The metaphor's impact on human psyche is known and can be explained philosophically (Ricour, 2001) or psychologically (Jung, 1999). Transformative learning in language arts as a method of guidance and counselling is a process of moving in a spiral to new understanding.

#### 4.2. *Speaking up – the method to solve identity problem*

Low Self esteem and low Self evaluation have negative impact on ability to understand the metaphor. Low self evaluation is connected with disappointment and negative experience. Trying to avoid negative emotions an individual suppresses feelings, individual's internal life loses connections with external world, ability to grasp wholeness decreases. Speaking up about personally important meaning is a way to reduce emotional tension and to ventilate negative emotions. Verbal skills are connected to mental status; schizophrenic and depressed people have difficulties in finding words to express inner experience. The term *alexithymia* is known in psychiatry and clinical psychology. Low self esteem and self evaluation is connected to alexithymia and depression symptoms (Sucylaite, 2011), depressed or schizophrenic individual with low self esteem and low self - evaluation seldom is able to identify personally important meanings without help of therapist. Author of social emancipation learning theory Freire used the symbolic material (photographs, literature) having a goal to help stigmatized persons to speak up. Speaking about personally important meanings is a way to identify individual psychological problems, to discuss how to solve them, to get emotional support and useful knowledge. The work of visual art or poem is a tool to promote reminiscences and facilitate speaking up. When individual's depression is difficult, and self evaluation is very low, individual isn't able to concentrate on the listening to the poem, but he (she) is able to remember one word from the text. This word is a key to personal meaning. Speaking about personally important meaning, interaction with the therapist strengthens sense of identity, leads to transformation of emotions and self understanding. *Speaking about personally important meaning* strengthens sense of identity, is able to cause the transformation, and can be defined as an agent of personal transformation. We can argue that sense of identity is tied to the self - evaluation and self-efficacy. According Bandura (2000), self-efficacy is in the middle between cognitive and emotional systems of personality and has regulative power.

Method's evaluation. Healthy people emphasized on the possibility to know each other better, to find group members' inner beauty. People with anxiety disorders noticed that learning in the group is a chance to know each other better. Depressed persons evaluated possibility to share inner experiences and to reduce emotional tension, few schizophrenic persons evaluated the power of speaking up as a possibility to escape alienation and possible suicide in future.

#### 4.3. *Poetical comparison – the method to transform negative emotions*

Every individual tries to escape negative emotions. Schizophrenic and depressed people often haven't enough knowledge about feelings; usually they ignore emotions and haven't developed self expression skills. Observed individuals with anxiety disorders were shamed of sadness, identified it with weakness, denied alienation. They suppressed these feelings, but suppression of feelings lead to suppression of senses, and caused a lack of energy. One way of the help is to arouse emotions and to discuss of them, other way – to push negative emotions and to liberate senses. The second way is poetical. Looking for poetical comparison an individual finds a concrete visual form (symbol) to express negative emotional state. Symbol expresses unconscious and conscious material, so client's discovered poetical comparison reduces emotional tense, and liberates elementary senses as well as sense of identity. According scientific literature, client's therapeutic growth occurs as a consequence of the unconscious reorganization of information. In the opinion of some theoreticians (Ericson, 1992, Josephs, 1992) the therapeutic changes occurs despite the fact that unconscious information is not explicated in consciousness level; according to neo -Freudian paradigm the unconsciousness is reservoir of memories and skills layed down the past, therapeutic changes occurs when unconscious information is explicated in conscious level. In our opinion, when one's reflective skills are developed and one's poetic comparison is tied to personal meaning it may cause unconscious reorganization of information.

According Levine (1999) the unconsciousness knowledge is directly channelled into alternative modes of expression such as action and art and especially during interpretation of literature. Discussion of the literary works and symbols reduces emotional tense, stimulates senses and insights, but schizophrenic and sometimes seriously depressed individuals aren't able to listen to poem and to grasp it. Strong anxiety blocks ability to concentrate on listening.

When one's sense of identity is diminished or even lost this results the inability to deal with psychological and social problems, to act in society, to be open to external world impressions, to speak from within and to interpret literature. Knowing these facts, at the beginning of the session we focus only on the individuals' personal meanings, read out the poem and leave it till the end of the session, we keep a dialog and try to disclose individuals' personal meanings and help them to discover poetical comparisons.

Metaphor expresses complicated feelings and liberates inner freedom, but we want to notice one necessary precondition for conceiving the metaphor: the sense of identity can't be diminished or lost, and the understanding of simple things must be clear.

Evaluation of this method. Depressed clients noted metaphor's power to liberate from the strong anxiety and told that they were not able to find the metaphor without the specialist's help. Clients who are ill with anxiety disorders admitted that they have never tried to express inner state symbolically and to look for the symbol having a goal to get out of difficult mental state; few of them confessed that their life could be more successful if they had a good language art teacher in the secondary school. Schizophrenic clients needed more time to clarify their life situation here and now and only after counseling they were able to find the metaphor. Healthy people relaxed looking for the metaphor.

#### *4.4. Poetical answer with focus on senses – the method to manage anxiety*

When self-evaluation is very low an individual wants to run from reality. External world gives him (her) painful information about lost dreams and alienation, individual's emotions become negative, and an individual suppresses emotions. Emotional tense is, but feelings are suppressed. This mental state is very difficult, and individual ignore elementary senses (smells, colors, sounds), sometimes loses ability to perceive this information in adequate way, and loses the sense of identity. Schizophrenic and depressed people lose ability to verbalize what they feel; people with anxiety disorders feel strong anxiety when we focus on their life situation. When people read and conceive poem, they establish relation with the Self, that's why reading helps to disclose client's mental state. Focus on personal meaning can be painful and can cause strong anxiety or anger when our clients are ill with anxiety disorders or sometimes with depression. This situation acts on the educator and gives challenge. How can we deal with this problem? If some reminiscences were revealed, we ask our clients to verbalize senses (What is concrete place? How it looks like? What sounds are there and ct...). Educator is able spontaneously to create simple poetic text from client's words. Client's words give information about situation. Poetically retold this information acts, and its impact is more positive when future perspective is showed and relation with the past period of life is given. Therapeutic requirements: to confirm contemporary time, to show that previous life difficulties are left behind or to show that the good life in previous period gives tranquility and let to relax, and to confirm life's direction to the more light future. When client recognizes personal meaning in the therapeutic poetic language, he (she) becomes inspired and motivated to continue poetical communication.

Evaluation of this method. Psychotherapeutic value – client's confirmation confirming client's word or phrase. Client recognizes his (her) told word in poetic composition. This word is connected with the sense of identity, personal needs and values, and has a place in poetic spiritual language. A sense of this mystery strengthens feeling of creator inside and inspires: transformation of emotions or new insight is typical in this situation. Individual's inspiration or relaxation was noticed in each group and was not depended on clinical diagnosis.

#### *4.5. Poetic improvisation*

Methods of cognitive therapy are useful to clarify depressed person's life situation and to facilitate his (her) mental state, but these methods often aren't able to cause personal transformations. Rational intelligence solves logical problems, emotional intelligence deals with feelings; transformation of personality is possible when rational intelligence and emotional intelligence interact and serve for goal attainment and problem solving. In our opinion spiritual intelligence manages interaction between thoughts and feelings, according Sisk and Torrance (2001) spiritual intelligence encompasses all of intelligences. Knowing that the quality of life indicators were lower on the scale of spirituality in the groups of depressed and schizophrenic (Goštautas, 2007) we looked for the method able to

promote spiritual growth. Poetry reading is a way to experience catharsis and has a positive impact on depressed person's emotional state, therapeutic discussion acts on rational problems' understanding, our suggested poetical improvisation has more power to cause individual's transformations, because it encompasses rational and emotional, and synchronically acts on individual's emotional and cognitive levels. Poetic improvisation is focused on the confirmation of client's personal meaning, helps to discover the interconnectedness between inner and outer world.

Healthy individuals can improvise and create collaborative poem. This activity develops community feeling. Our created poetic improvisation's method has specific differences. First: an educator-counselor is very active, an educator summarizes clients' problems, insights and guides to spiritual wholeness. An educator shows the direction and speaks poetically. Phenomenological observation and reflection on this material revealed effective model of poetical guidance. Symbols *the way* and *the tree* are the most powerful symbols to express integrity of all life events.

We focus on the current time. After discussion we know how every client feels the self, we know their discovered poetical similarities and them important objects in the session's room. The main thing is to take one or three words from each client and to repeat these words in the improvised poetical poem. First, we remember that *the way* comes from the previous period of life. Symbol *theway* can be a core of poetical composition. We remember clients' reminiscences: concrete details or poetical comparisons, so we can take one or three words from each client and repeat them in improvised poem. Depressed or schizophrenic clients usually haven't future dreams, but we try to stimulate their imagination, ask to imagine nice future day. We ask them to imagine the sky, weather, or a nice place, where they would be able to feel themselves good. Many times we noticed that this task is difficult and painful. After the conversation about future we take one three words from each client. When improvisator has all clients' words he (she) can imagine himself (herself) as traveller and testify observed images and life's wholeness. He (she) tells what is in front of him (her), how he (she) feel himself (herself) now, what was left is the past, what is now, what is in horizon. The main thing is to repeat all clients' words and to show the direction to the hope. I as a poetical improvisator sometimes identify myself with the tree and testify my growth. I tell, how looks my land (dry land, wet land), how it looked earlier, how my roots look like, how my branches look like, my top, the sky. Again the most important thing is to repeat clients' words and to confirm the growth. Useful symbols: roots – history (personal, national), land (conditions to live), the top (desire), the sky (desire), night, darkness, dark clouds (difficult period), the buds (state before changes), sunny sky (good conditions to live, joy). Clients recognize their words in the poetical text and feel themselves very inspired. This tendency was seen in all groups: healthy, depressed, schizophrenic. In depressed individuals' groups was seen a big influence on person's verbal skills. After poetical improvisation all persons, especially depressed individuals want to share their feelings and thoughts.

Evaluation of the method. Symbols *the tree* and *the way* have a power to integrate individual's experiences into one sense of being and inspire. Precondition of this mystery – openness, ability to recognize personal meanings and to express them verbally, individual's efforts to connect personal meanings with the symbols *the tree* and *the way*.

#### 4.6 Empowering to experience beauty of the poem

We begin from poetry reading and use the text as a tool to disclose personal meanings. In the session we strengthen the sense of identity, self- esteem and self evaluation, we reduce emotional tension and strengthen interconnectedness between inner and outer world, and we transfer personally important meanings into global existential, spiritual context. These efforts bring fruit: an individual becomes more creative personality, more able to interact with the work of art and to experience beauty. We notice first positive personal transformations after 5 meetings, life quality changes were fixed after 1, 5 -2 years.

Liberation from low self esteem and self evaluation is one of the goals in the transformative education. In our opinion, it is useful to help the client to transfer from the therapeutic context into the context of healing arts. When our clients read the same poem in the end of the session they testify discovered power to grasp the poem. When they are able to understand poem's mood and poem's content, and are able to sense identity, we evaluate them as creators, and use the paradigm of philosophical poetics to explain their interaction with art.

Table 1. Literary text perception in the end of first three transformative learning sessions

Group	Ability to understand poem's mood	Ability to understand poem's main idea	Ability to understand poem's main idea	Ability to understand poem's main idea
Healthy adults	good	good	Yes, it is close	Catharsis
Schizophrenic	good	often good	Often is close	Catharsis
Depressed	good	good	Yes, is close	Catharsis
Ill with anxiety disorders	good	good	Yes, is close	Catharsis

Schizophrenic individuals are more able to understand literary text in beginning of 4 and in later sessions, and their ability to perceive literature and the Self growth all time.

## 5. Conclusion

Suggested methodical system *spiral model* has double value. First value is the deepening of poetical perception. Interaction with the work of literature art begins from the first image, poetic language acts on psyche, on consciousness and unconsciousness as well, and people recognize what is identical or similar to their experience. When recognized experience is very chaotic and painful clients aren't able to push it away, perception of literature art breaks down.

After discussion of personally important meanings clients have less emotional tension and more inner freedom, they get a power to push everyday problems and to interact with the art deeper, and to find new insight. Second value is the therapeutic impact on personality.

Perception of literary text depends on sense of identity and emotional tension, the dialog with the focus on personally important meanings can strengthen individual's sense of identity, speaking about senses reduces emotional tension and strengthens interconnectedness between inner and outer world, and promotes poetical thinking. Poetic comparisons used for expression of personally important meanings reduces emotional tension and develops poetical thinking, personal meanings transferred from everyday language into poetical language gives spiritual inspiration, strengthen verbal skills and motivates to concentrate energy to achieve the goal. Conversation induced by literary reading and based on the exploration of personally important meanings strengthens the sense of identity, inner freedom and ability to perceive the poem or other form of literature. These tendencies were discovered observing and analyzing qualitative data, collected in groups of schizophrenic, depressed and persons with anxiety disorders, but are seen in the groups of healthy people as well.

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