Letter to the Sender: a Method Proposal in Clinic of Activity

Louanne Carneiro de Oliveira1 · Francisco Pablo Huascar Aragão Pinheiro1 · Jorge Tarcísio da Rocha Falcão2 · Veriana de Fátima Rodrigues Colaço3 · Cássio Adriano Braz de Aquino3 · Nayana Rios Nunes da Silva1 · Quitéria Alves Melo4 · Lorena Aélio de Melo4 · Victória Maria Freitas Pedrosa4 · Gabriele Sousa Costa4

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Abstract
The Clinic of Activity acts in the relationship between activity and subjectivity through interventions that seek to promote health for the workers. For this purpose, it uses methods such as self-confrontation and instruction to the double. This study analyzed the processes of semiotic mediation in interactions during an intervention with seven participants to evaluate the effectiveness of a new technique named Letter to the Sender. The generated corpus passed through microgenetic analysis. We considered five markers that concern a good method in Clinic of Activity, and they were adopted as categories of analysis: (a) subject as an observer of himself; (b) construction of new meanings and means of action; (c) dialog as a tool to elaborate on the activity; (d) emergence of controversies; and (e) expansion of the power to act. The technique led to discussions, controversies, creation, and strengthening of bonds, as well as construction of new action horizons. The activities were set in motion, which enabled the development and expansion of the power to act, as well as the emergence of exotopy and new perspectives regarding the experienced situations. Thus, the Letter to the Sender proved to meet the goals of the Clinic and was considered effective for interventions in workplaces and to promote health for the workers.

Keywords Clinic of Activity · Method · Intervention · Zone of proximal development · Mediation

From the perspective of the Clinic of Activity, work is understood as having a central role in health and identity formation. When coming across a task, the workers deal with resistances that limit their action but can still reinvent their procedure to...
come across these limits and recreate themselves when they find dialog support in
the collective and meaning in what they do (Clot, 2007).

Aiming to revitalize the work, the Clinic of Activity is a theoretical-methodological
approach to change the work context by acting at the intersection between activity and
subjectivity (Pinheiro et al., 2016). The intervention, from the perspective created by Yves
Clot, is directed toward the action and seeks to develop and expand the workers’ power to
act regarding themselves, the organization, and the work environment (Clot, 2017).

Concerning the power to act, Clot (2013) clarifies that humans are meant to create
contexts, i.e., they are not adapted to live in contexts that are imposed on them. There-
fore, being the subject of one’s own actions means freeing oneself from pre-estab-
lished profiles. Thus, when the possibility of creating is diminished, when the workers
cannot recognize themselves in what they do, survival is the only thing that remains.
The power to act is, therefore, defined as the capacity of creating and being responsi-
ble for transforming and giving new meaning to the activity. In this respect, the notion
of health is reconfigured because being healthy does not mean being free of illnesses
but having authority over one’s own work to recognize oneself and one’s activity.

The role of one who conducts the interventions in Clinic of Activity in work contexts
(intervener, intervenant in French, originally) is not to prescribe good practices because
it is understood that the workers must speak and act on their own activity (Althaus &
Banks-Leite, 2017). Therefore, one must mediate dialog exchanges that allow the sub-
jects to free themselves from their own and from others’ activities to expand their power
to act (Clot, 2010). For this purpose, methods such as instruction to the double (Batista
& Rabelo, 2013; Silva et al., 2016), crossed self-confrontation (Rezende et al., 2018),
and photo workshop are used, the latter developed in Brazil (Souto & Osório, 2019).

According to Clot (2010), these methods allow the subject to be an observer of
himself and facilitate the workers’ dialog with themselves and their peers. The use of
language allows the subject to relate with himself, with the other and with the world
(Kostulski, 2013). Therefore, the repetition of the activity is allowed without actually
repeating it. This way, the activity is decomposed and recomposed so that the workers
can dissolve and remake bonds between what they see, what could be done, what they
wished to do, and how they would like to redo it, among other possibilities of action.

In this respect, the experience of an object is transformed into an object of analysis,
which will later integrate new experiences (Yvon & Clot, 2004). Thus, from the profes-
sional multilingualism and the exchange of comments, several controversies about how
to conduct an activity emerge, and several ways to reach a goal are recognized as well.

This way, the intervener explores the dissonance and the controversies of
the activity (Clot, 2010). Through these experiences, new ways and meanings
of the action are constructed because, by transforming activities into language,
they become open to changes and reorganizations. Thus, “consciousness is the
unfolding of what has been experienced, which is re-experienced to experience
something else […] The language […] returns to the object, analyzing the effects
of this exchange” (Clot, 2010, p. 208–209). In the interactions provided by the
abovementioned methods, different languages and ways of communication are
unfolded. It is through this communication that the participants’ activities are
kept and developed (Kostulski, 2013).
In this context, it is worth clarifying the distinction between methodology and method. Methodology implies a reference to the principles that support the way of structuring the intervention tools. Method, in turn, refers to the employed techniques. For the latter, there are several forms and variations, but they need to be coherent with the historical-developmentalist methodology in a historical-cultural perspective (Clot, 2010).

The notion of development is intrinsically related to history. The historical study, on its side, deals with something in motion. From this, we can analyze an object, and this is a fundamental requirement of the dialectic method. The historical-developmentalist principle consists of decrystallizing psychic processes to make it possible to understand their operation (Vygotsky, 1995).

In the Clinic of Activity, the worker’s action is not exclusively a manifest behavior, so that it is essential to adopt indirect methods that allow analyzing its genesis. Each activity is a choice that, as such, has several non-accomplished possibilities. This way, what is real in the activity goes beyond the limits of the performed activity, extrapolating the visible, fossilized, daily, and sometimes automatic behavior (Clot, 2010).

Under the historical-developmentalist principle, Clot (2009) states that, to know the real activity, one must set it in motion and deautomate what had been established, thus triggering its development. It is necessary to transform to understand. According to the author, the opposite of this statement (i.e., understand to transform) is a legacy of positivism, which he opposes. From this movement, we can study the real (possible and impossible) development and its origins (Clot, 2010; Roger, 2013).

Based on these discussions, our study aimed to analyze the processes of semiotic mediation that occurred during the interactions of an intervention in a Clinic of Activity to evaluate the effectiveness of a new technique named Letter to the Sender. Semiotic mediation is understood as the creation and use of socially developed signs that function as psychological tools. In the same way that technical tools are interposed in the relationship between humankind and nature, the signs mediate the psychic. This broadens the limits imposed by the environment and phylogeny (Vygotsky, 1995).

Over the interactions, the emergence of zones of proximal development (ZPD) is considered. ZPD corresponds to an intersubjective space of semiotic mediation and relates to the possible learning developed by an individual in a mediated and dialogic situation. This is a continuously emerging phenomenon focused on communication and interaction, so that learning guides development (Frade & Meira, 2012). The construction of this learning includes the historical dimension; thus, the development of future structures is based on past experiences.

**Procedures for Applying the Letter to the Sender**

In general terms, the Letter to the Sender method consists of writing, together with the workers, a letter that tells, based on their activities, their work trajectory and, from this, make reflections about it. The technique is conducted in three
stages. Before the start of the meetings, an encounter is held with the workers to present the intervention proposal, in which doubts are clarified and a collective deal is established on how the subsequent meetings will take place.

**First Stage: Dialog**

This is a moment to talk and discuss the letter’s content with a volunteer. Three instructions are given: (a) the worker is asked to tell his work history through activities performed over his period of work; thereafter, he is required to (b) advise his “I from the past” regarding the professional path and (c) tell how he would like to finish the writing. During this stage, besides the previous notes, the intervener and other participants can ask questions to the volunteer. These moments are recorded in video or audio and the transcriptions of the meetings are used in the stage described below. If necessary, the content discussion of a volunteer’s letter can take more than one meeting.

**Second Stage: Preparation**

The intervener alone, after the first stage, writes a preliminary version of the letter, a draft in which the message is addressed to a third person, the worker’s “I of the past.” Thus, the “I” of the discourse can progress toward the “I” of the action in contrast to other actors and possibilities of action. With this process, the peers’ perspective fosters a movement of the dialog toward creativity (Clot, 2010).

The written correspondence can orient the analysis to someone else with the same level of expertise, the sender himself. Therefore, the dialog is directed to an object (the letter) and to the activity of the one that makes the record (the intervener) as a means of making this other feel, think, and act according to the perspective of the worker himself. The fact that the letter is written by the intervener is justified because, different from the volunteer’s co-workers, the intervener conveys, even through silence, an estrangement that is completely different from that of the “expert peer.”

The participants fight against the incomplete understanding of their interlocutors and seek to take control of this understanding to change it from their perspective. Consequently, they can observe their activity at the distance, as if they were analyzing someone else’s activity. This movement can help the workers find something new in themselves (Clot, 2010).

**Third Stage: Repreparation**

Finally, there is a moment of repreparation in which the draft is presented and discussed by the work collective and is eventually reshaped by the volunteer who told the story. This step can take as many encounters as necessary. The intervention
continues carrying out the cycle of the three stages until the number of volunteers ends up. A final meeting is held for the evaluation of the process by the participants.

**The Rationale for the Development of a New Technique**

Beyond the aspect of innovation that is part of making science, the development of a new technique in the face of the already available ones needs to be justified even if its efficacy is shown empirically. In this specific case, one must answer the following question: How pertinent is the Letter to the Sender in the intervention over the already existing methods in the Clinic of Activity? To elucidate this question, we will use the notion of catachresis (Clot, 2007).

The action can be reduced or prevented when the subject is stuck in the same assumptions that could make him move forward: operational-technical and subjective-social. Thus, a real conflict emerges, and, from it, one must get rid of automatisms and even personal or social systems. As a result, there are initial withdrawals and, later, innovations that play a crucial role in subjectivation by converting vital tensions into mental intentions. The subject gets rid of those assumptions through his own development. Therefore, catachresis assigns new functions to the tools to overcome obstacles that oppose the activity to itself, which encourages the recreation and redesign of techniques in a subverted or even displaced way (Clot, 2007).

In this context, the methods established by the Clinic of Activity assume synchronicity with the performed activity in a specific context. This makes their use unfeasible with workers that are neither employed nor inserted in a daily work activity. Therefore, we propose the use of a new technique, the Letter to the Sender, which can expand the intervention alternatives with individuals that are not working, such as unemployed or retired people or those who are off work due to health reasons or personal leaves. Retrieving the activity in a historical context can favor the recovery of the power to act, as well as the rehabilitation or insertion of these individuals in a job. Despite these aspects, we applied the method in a context that is considered “classical,” synchronous, and governed by the complexity of the work routine to understand if it would be effective in the same scenario as the established methods.

**Method**

In the Clinic of Activity, there is a separation between research and intervention because they have different goals and temporalities so that they are independent and non-coincident (Althaus & Banks-Leite, 2017; Clot, 2008). At first one develops the intervention, which seeks to promote the workers’ health and expand their power to act. The research, in turn, despite using material generated in the interaction between intervener and workers, occurs later and answers the researcher’s questions (Clot, 2008; Gomes et al., 2015). Overlapping these two stages would put the final goal at risk. Thus, research must occur after the action of the interveners in the work context (Brandão, 2014).
Considering the primacy of the intervention and the commitment to the workers’ health, it was clear to the interveners that, if the technique of Letter to the Sender was not efficient to promote the discussions about the participants’ occupation and activities, its use would be discontinued and already established methods would be employed, such as instruction to the double and self-confrontation. However, as we will see, this action was unnecessary, and the interventional process described below enabled the investigation proposed in this study.

The Intervention Path

The intervention was conducted in an Autonomous Service of Water and Sewage (Serviço Autônomo de Água e Esgoto, SAAE) of a city in the state of Ceará, Brazil’s northeast. This is a municipal public company in which workers are hired through public calls. The SAAE in question serves several localities, from residences to commerce and industries, and had, at the time of the intervention, more than 70,000 water connections and 45,000 sewage connections. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the company’s workers of the operational sector continued with the activities conducted in the field, such as the maintenance of the water and sewage-treatment networks. However, there was a high index of work leave due to suspect of infection by SARS-CoV-2, and one employee died due to the disease.

The context described above led to a series of situations with which the workers were unable to deal: the fear of contracting the disease and infecting the family and the loss of the colleague. The need for intervention was identified by the SAAE’s relations management staff, which registered the complaints of psychological distress among the workers. This staff established a partnership with the Laboratório de Práticas e Pesquisas em Psicologia e Educação (Universidade Federal do Ceará) to organize a group of psychological support.

Seven employees engaged in a group of work analysis in which the technique of Letter to the Sender was used. Between December 2020 and March 2021, 14 meetings occurred online to keep the restrictions of social contact and the sanitary measures imposed by the pandemic. The meetings were repeated once a week, lasted on average 1 h and 30 min, and were recorded on video. The technique of Letter to the Sender was applied with three volunteers. The method’s stages, except the elaboration, were conducted in a group and had the collective participation of the workers.

Participants

Six participants were men, and there was only one woman. Lindsay, 30 years old, was at the institution for the past five years and worked as a technician of chemical analyses. At the time of the intervention, she worked with customer service through WhatsApp because she was pregnant and her work at the water treatment plant (WTP) was considered unhealthy. Antony, 59 years old, was an operations assistant for four years, working in the maintenance of water networks and branches, but was transferred to an administrative function after being affected by a work disease caused by a bacterium. Leone, 47 years old, had the position of general services
assistant for five years. He worked as a driver but had previously worked in the maintenance of the sewage network.

Gehard, 52 years old, worked as an operations assistant for seven years. During this time, he performed the interruption and re-establishment of the water supply. Shortly before the start of the intervention, he was relocated and started to work in the maintenance of the water network. Sidney, 49 years old, worked as general services assistant for seven years and was relocated to customer service after physical lesions due to work.

Andrew, 55 years old, and Patrick, 29 years old, worked together and, despite having different positions—general services assistant for 20 years and operations assistant for six years, respectively—were assigned to interrupt household water supply. All participants, due to different reasons, had experienced transference of either sector or function.

Research Design

Data Construction and Analysis

The data were constructed from the meetings conducted during the intervention. We transcribed about 20 h of records and adopted fictional names for the participants and mentioned people. We also suppressed location and other information to avoid the identification of the workers. We numbered the paragraphs of the excerpts to facilitate their location in the text.

The produced corpus underwent microgenetic analysis (Góes, 2000). In this method, for the study of human functioning, one considers the intertwining of the semiotic, historical, and cultural dimensions (Góes, 2000) and seeks to understand the steps of the developing individuals to explain the concerned constructions and cognitive changes. The concept of micro refers to the analysis being oriented toward details, while the concept of genetic, in turn, is linked to the history and the movement of psychological processes.

To this end, the relationship between micro-events and the experienced macrosocial conditions is considered (Barboza & Zanella, 2005; Góes, 2000). It is necessary to pay attention to the details to prepare a thorough report in which one can see the evolution of the relationships between agents and situations, where psychological processes can be developed in short periods of seconds or minutes. The focus lies on the meaning of the activities, actions, and processes in specific sociocultural contexts (Meira, 1994). Thus, we selected the interactive episodes that occurred during the intervention with the workers, so that it was possible to evaluate the functioning of the individuals, their intersubjective relations, the constructions of choice, and the social conditions of the experienced situations.

Results and Discussion

We delimited markers that characterize a good method in Clinic of Activity, viz., (a) placing the subject as an observer of himself, (b) constructing new meanings and means of action, (c) allowing dialog as a tool to elaborate on the activity, (d) making
the emergence of controversies viable, and (e) expanding the power to act. These markers were adopted as the categories of analysis presented below.

**Observer of Himself**

In the third meeting, the letter of the second volunteer sender (Patrick) was initiated. The first instruction asked the participant to tell his work history based on the activities performed over the years at the SAAE. At first, he said to have worked in only one sector until that moment and proceeded with summarizing all the performed activities, such as interruption and re-establishment of water supply, as well as maintenance and inspection of networks and equipment.

By the end of the explanation, the intervener asked the participant to confirm that he had always worked in the same sector. This triggered another participant (Lindsay) to ask Patrick’s co-workers that had also been transferred. This led to a discussion about the deviations from function and transfer of employees (Lindsay: “This is why they keep using people to make rotations”). This moment raised the argument that, when one intends to “punish” a worker, the worker is transferred to the sector in which Patrick worked (Patrick: “Supply interruption became a sort of purgatory. When they want to punish someone, they send them to the interruption”). The sender of the letter said that he did not understand why this would be a punishment because he liked his job. In the following excerpt, we can notice apparently diverging topics: enjoying one’s job and performing a dangerous activity.

1. Intervener: Patrick, you said that you like to work, that the sector of interruption and re-establishment is a good place to work, but you also said it is dangerous. What is this danger? How is it? How is it for you to deal with liking it and it being dangerous?
2. Patrick: Well, dangerous like... Uhm... There are situations, right, in our work, in our daily routine, in which we are threatened. It ends up that we have to be all the time, have to be at the people’s homes, right? We enter someone’s home to interrupt the supply or fix a leakage... Especially the interruption. Then you arrive and have to explain to that person that their water supply will be interrupted, even though that person knows that there is a debt. Then you assume that they will not understand. Because there are people who do not understand. They threaten us: “Hey, if you are going to interrupt my water supply you’re not gonna leave his place! I lock the door and you’ll see what happens…” [He simulates what was said by a client] A guy once threatened us with a gun, right? He did not point the gun directly toward us, but he raised his shirt and showed the gun at his waist. Then what? There in [district’s name]. In the [district’s name] Complex, which currently is a place where no one wants to go to interrupt, that no one wants to go to make any service because there is... You are subject to something happening with you at any moment because that is an extremely dangerous place. Andrew knows that, that we went through several threat situations in [district’s name] due to criminal groups... Groups threatening us. We went there to make an interruption. And the guy:
“Look, here is [number of the criminal group]” [he simulates what has been said by the client], which is the [name of the criminal group] and stuff… “If you remain here, we will catch you because I already memorized your face” [he continues the simulation]. They made these sorts of threats to us. They already knocked down the motorcycle, stole the tools, and pushed us away not to let us interrupt the supply. We went through all sorts of situations… It has already been reported to the manager, reached the ears of the SAAE, the president, director, but nothing. They did not solve anything, right? The worker, who they say is the greatest legacy, they do not care at all about the worker. The thing is “whatever”.

The initial situation between Patrick and Lindsay led to a new perspective about the sender’s job and pointed toward the construction of a ZPD when the contradiction between enjoying and being dangerous was indicated by the intervener. As a result, the participant recovers the activity and the situation that characterizes the danger (2 — “have to be at the people’s homes, right?”). He takes up that the worker enters the people’s homes to do a job that will harm them (interruption of water supply). There is also the attempt to put the intervener in the participant’s place (2 — “Then you assume”). This way the worker tells what would be necessary to undertake the task: It is necessary to make up a scene and assume that the user does not understand the reason for the service. For Patrick, even if the people are aware of the reason for the interruption (non-payment), they do not seem to understand that interrupting the water supply is part of his job (2 — “there are people who do not understand”). For this reason, situations of danger and threat emerge. Therefore, the worker is vulnerable in an environment that is only familiar to those who threaten him.

The discussion about danger continued in the fifth meeting, still during the moment of dialog. The relationship between transfer and punishment was clarified when Patrick agreed with Antony regarding the difficulties and dangers experienced during the execution of the function’s inherent activities. Antony: “The point raised by Patrick, interruption is a difficult sector to work in, although I never did, because interruption will usually remove a benefit from the user, isn’t it? … The criminal groups, no one knows who the leader is, no one knows where they are, how many they are, who they are. You may be talking to someone who looks like a decent person but is a scout of a group and, if you say something wrong, the guys come after you the next day.” The sender also received a new dimension of risk when Leone remarked: “So, in Patrick’s function, he is at risk from the moment he leaves the SAAE because—I don’t know if he still works on the motorcycles— those who work using motorcycles, right, they carry the tools on the motorcycle, right? So, there is the risk of the traffic, right?”’. This awareness became part of the process of writing the letter and paved the way to other important questions that were part of Patrick’s activities, such as inadequate uniform, and concerned the same threatening dimension since not being adequately dressed hindered his insertion in the field.

Patrick goes on to explain the dimension of the experienced danger, which was concrete and went beyond the verbal aspect since he had already been threatened with guns (2 — “A guy once threatened us with a gun, right?”). He also mentions that he worked in areas occupied by criminal groups and concludes, by facing the
work’s organization, that the company let him helpless because there is no institutional support concerning the risks he faces, even if he seeks helps (2 — “They did not solve anything, right? … The thing is… Whatever”).

From the construction of Patrick’s letter, the discussion about the activity was evidently expanded to the worker’s occupation. This was further enhanced by the interaction between the co-workers and the sharing of experiences. Thus, the technique of the Letter to the Sender and the facilitation process allowed the volunteer to experience a place of exotopy by moving away from his activity and facing it. We can see that, when the dialogue was associated with a third voice in the words of the subject, he was able to estrange himself. Thus, it is necessary to clarify to oneself and the other the questions that emerge during the development of the activities discussed based on the technique (Clot, 2010).

**Construction of New Meanings and Means of Action**

During the 10th meeting, the group was participating in the repreparation of Patrick’s letter. The reading revealed that, in the last paragraph, he reports that he would like to retire working at the SAAE. He advised himself to stay at the company for 20 or 30 more years. Despite the intention of remaining at the institution for this period, over the text he had exposed several daily difficulties, limitations, and problems, such as the lack of equipment, inadequate uniform, vehicles in a bad condition, the danger while performing his functions, colleagues that suffered harassment, and administrative reforms that harmed the workers. In the face of this apparent contradiction, the intervener, after finishing the reading, questioned if it made sense to him to remain at the SAEE performing his function.

The participant said that he would keep the job but expressed doubt about remaining for the mentioned period. Other participants continued the reflection and presented comments about the possibility of other public calls and the political and economic reality of the municipality in which they worked. For example, when Leone explained that, during the pandemic, he was transferred to work at a sector where 15 employees received a work leave due to COVID-19, he finished: “And what we received from our mayor was the loss of rights, loss of benefits… I don’t see at the moment, I don’t see improvements with the current mayor”. Additionally, they brought back the negative points that Patrick had mentioned in his letter. Then, the sender listed some factors that supported his thought of leaving the SAAE, e.g., the fact that he was single, did not have children, and had free time to study so that he could prepare to try another public call. Once more the intervener performed an intervention, which can be observed below.

1. Intervener: Patrick, so would tell Patrick from 2014 that he should join the SAAE, or would you tell him to give up from applying to the work at the SAAE and seek other opportunities?
2. Patrick: [laughing] Yeah, no, when I consider, you see... When I analyze this letter and seeing the comments of my friends, thinking about it, eh... At first, I thought that the right choice for Patrick would be to study, right?
And continue at the SAAE. But, eh, the situation at the SAAE is reaching a point... When we see these administrative reforms, right? At least during the administration of the current mayor, right? In his first term and his second, it is reaching a point where, in the future, we’ll have to worry, right, about keeping these benefits: meal vouchers, health insurance plan. We have to worry about privatization. We have to worry about several things. I would say, I would say to Patrick that, eh... he should dedicate himself more and really look for another public call in the same area, although at that time he was unemployed, no... Unemployed, so, because he was working at the hearing office before... When I applied for the job at the SAAE, I was working at the hearing office of the mall, the mall here in [name of the city]. It was an area that I was already used to because I was studying administration, right? It was an area that I was already used to, adapted to that, but it was something temporary. Then the SAAE’s call appeared. I already knew for some time that this call would happen, and I wanted to apply, but having all the information I have today, in 2021, I would tell him that, despite the current context not being so, eh, not being so, not being favorable, despite all the difficulties he would have, right, he should wait a little more. It is not that the SAAE is a bad place to work, right? There are good people, and it is even a good place to work. But the lack of equipment, tools, these difficulties, these political problems, these administrative reforms, all would give him a headache in the future. That he should think well, right? He could even do it, but he shouldn’t let such a long time pass, he shouldn’t have this idea of spending 20, 30 years at the SAAE, that as soon as possible he should study for another call to leave the SAAE, that’s it. This would be my final advice to him. He should spend a maximum of five, six years at the SAAE and study, dedicate himself to be able to leave the SAAE as soon as possible. That’s it. That would be my advice.

As we can see, the intervention of the intervener after the reading of the letter and the discussion among the co-workers requested Patrick to take a position in the face of the exposed reality. Therefore, the situation made him consider the doubts that he presented previously and the contradiction that emerged from it, viz., the negative aspects of the job and the desire to remain in that environment. While he answers, he uses the letter and the comments of the others as a starting point for the reflection (2 — “When I analyze this letter and seeing the comments of my friends, thinking about it”). This highlights that the interaction made a new ZPF emerge so that the volunteer stresses the importance of his friends’ comments in the process because, from there on, he was able to review the meanings and reorganize and give new meanings to the facts.

Thus, he retakes the construction of the thinking and meaning for the presented content. We can see that the technique allowed Patrick to take his analysis, externalize himself, and elaborate on what occurred as someone else, as when he refers to himself in the third person (2 — “I would say, I would say to Patrick that, eh... he should dedicate himself more and really look for another public call in the same area, although at that time he was unemployed...”). The analysis was so profound
that, even in the face of the precarious work condition in which Patrick was before joining the SAAE, he considered that he should have looked for other paths for his career.

Patrick goes on with the discussion and indicates that he considers all the data highlighted by the letter, the colleagues, and his own conceptions about the work, the developed relationships, and the institutional reality. Therefore, the technique and the interactions that it provided allowed the consolidation and refocusing regarding the experiences about his activity and occupation (2 — “but having all the information I have today, in 2021, I would tell him that ... he should wait a little more”).

Finally, we notice that returning to the technique’s instructions (advising the “I” of the past) encouraged the sender to change his opinion and, thus, the recommendation he gave to himself during the first stage of writing the letter (2 — “This would be my final advice to him. He should spend a maximum of five, six years at the SAAE and study, dedicate himself to be able to leave the SAAE as soon as possible”).

The Letter to the Sender method, associated with the process of facilitation and development of the group, proved to be strong and fundamental to give a new meaning to what was already established and to update Patrick’s means of action. When the meaning of the activity changes, it is crossed by imagination and, thus, new bonds are established both in and by the activity, causing professional ambition and active affects, such as the sensation of possible success (Clot, 2010). In fact, by becoming aware of the contradictions, the sender was able to see a horizon of possibilities and conceive meanings, which highlights the historically and semiotically mediated character of the psychological processes (Barros et al., 2009).

**Dialog as a Tool to Elaborate on the Activity**

During the fourth meeting, there was a moment of dialog with the third volunteer (Sidney). From the report of the activities conducted over the years, the work disease that affected him because of such activities and several sector transfers, the intervener questioned about the “transfers as a means of punishment.” Sidney answered that he experienced it firsthand and mentioned the occasion in which he had to perform alone the activities that should be done by more than one worker. This caused the discussion presented in the following excerpt:

1. Intervener: You mentioned—not only you, but other people said it too—that many times you perform a task alone that was meant for two or more people. And I wanted to ask this question not only to you but to the whole group: how is that for you? How is it that you... Who went through this, about performing a task alone when it was for more than one person?
2. Sidney: For me, I think it is a way, most of the time, it can be sometimes, it can be lack of personnel, isn’t it? Because we work with little personnel. But other times we see that it is a form of... It looks like a form of moral harassment. I don’t say it as a whole, SAAE as a whole and stuff, because certain attitudes like this, sometimes, occur without the knowledge of the manager, the president, and stuff. Because there is a certain trust of the presidency on the person in the management, who are appointed to stay at the sectors. Some-
times things are so much in the hands of the people there, the manager, to do the things, that sometimes a behavior, there is no way to check if there is some behavior that... correct with the employees, isn’t it? I believe that sometimes, many times, this happens, right, that—because there is so much to do at the SAAE—some things go unnoticed, right? Other things not, other things not, other things are well known, isn’t it? I think that sometimes it is known, but it may happen that certain things, more inhumane attitudes, which occur where there is a rivalry or a pleasure in having that top job, the command, it may go to their heads sometimes, right? What’s bad is when we only find out when it is too late, when a serious accident happens, right?

3. Intervener: And how did you find this out? When have you become aware of this dimension of harassment, this inhumane dimension that you are presenting?

4. Sidney: It is because I experienced it firsthand. Many times, they sabotaged my vehicle there at the SAAE. I had to change my motorcycle from one place to another all the time not to have my rearview broken, the motorcycle’s signal light broken and stuff; and sometimes we also work there at the cleaning sector, of the operational division, and there were people there who had positions in the management and they took all the trash that we had gathered and they took the trash cans and threw the trash in front of the breakfast room. Sometimes they entered the room unauthorized and left a lot of torn paper on the floor.

As seen in the dialog, in the intervener’s first intervention, the participant was requested to construct a concept based on the concrete experience. This way it would be possible to prepare explanatory abstractions to reach that end (Schroeder, 2007). Sidney, then, starts the reflection by thinking about two dimensions of his own work: impersonal (2 — “it can be lack of personnel, isn’t it?”) and interpersonal (2 — “It looks like a form of moral harassment”). Because of moral harassment, which is characterized as situations of authoritarianism, disrespect, and abuse of power (Barreto, 2003), the participant also mentions the recurrence of serious accidents and that only at this moment the command becomes aware of the situations that have been reported for a long time.

Afterward, the intervener made another fundamental intervention for Sidney’s elaboration on himself and his own work (3 — “And how did you find this out?”). While at first the participant raised a hypothesis based on the question, at this segment, he was driven to recall his own experience to make the elaborated theory concrete (4 — “It is because I experienced it firsthand.”). Thus, several definitions, values, and judgments concerning the same object were considered. The opportunity for dialog provided by the Letter to the Sender technique and the facilitation process goes beyond the alternation of the speaking subjects and highlights the existence and retrieval of bonds and relationships with previous knowledge of the subject and others with whom he interacts, as well as the construction and mutual sharing of their points of view and world perspectives (Amorim & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2008).

The letter, when worked, discussed, and used as a mediation potential by the intervener, highlights Bakhtine’s (1984) idea about the dialog associated with the third voice which, coming from the subject’s singularity, is in himself and parts of the external manifestations through an identified or diffuse alterity. In this respect,
the worker returns to himself the activity of rediscovery and is capable of new productions (Clot, 2010).

Emergence of Controversies

During the fifth meeting, some points of dissatisfaction of the workers were discussed, such as uniforms, tools, and wage loss. In the meantime, a controversy emerged between two participants in the group about the action of the labor union and the number of associate members. They disagreed regarding the activity and the understanding of some of the dimensions of the work. In the Clinic of Activity, controversy is considered able to expand the dialog and enrich it with new objects, which makes it a source of change and development (Clot, 2017).

Over the discussions, Antony explained that the abandonment and the dissociation of the workers was a crucial factor for the labor union’s lack of action. They mentioned that the SAAE has almost 400 workers and less than 100 are associate members. By contrast, Patrick argued that the lack of action concerning the SAAE is what causes the dissociation. He stated that during the pandemic there was no movement of the union’s leaders, and that the union was already inoperative in other questions, such as the wage campaign. Part of the debate can be seen in the following excerpt:

1. Patrick: Because, you see, I am among those who dissociated. Really, I dissociated. Until now I didn’t go back or anything. Why? Because I saw, I saw that they did not have an interest here at the SAAE of [name of the city]. For what reason? If it is a personal issue of the administration, the union’s president with some representatives from here, because we know there are things like that, unfortunately. This doesn’t concern me, no, because I am not responsible. It ends up harming the category and everyone. Sometimes we want to unite, we want to be in the union, right? We want to fight, claim, but those who are the bridge, who make the negotiation, end up being a case like this, right?

2. Antony: This is what… what I say.

3. Patrick: Because we are contributing, we are paying, but…

4. Antony: This is what I say, but the union will act if there is union here among us. We don’t have associate members. How can I demand that Javier comes here… I already called Georgina [union’s representatives] several times, talking with her. She never told me about these terms, but I, as an intelligent guy, I notice that the union is not strong because the SAAE is not strong either.

5. Patrick: Yes, it is the, the…

6. Antony: I give a lot of credit to that group of ours that has been created. But unfortunately… in our first meeting, no one showed up. Thirty-four members and only four showed up. Where the articulators… No one showed up.

7. Patrick: That’s true. No, you are absolutely right!

8. Antony: You know that!
9. **Patrick:** A meeting was arranged; I, I couldn’t go. I justified and explained the reason that I, I was unable to go. But, really, this way… A meeting was arranged. We would discuss these matters in the meeting. Only four people. That’s complicated. You are absolutely right. For the same reason, other people dissociated. The number of associate members of the [union’s name] here at the SAAE of [name of the city] reduced drastically. For this reason, I dissociated. The problem is that if the [name of the union] does not show interest—for example, let’s suppose there are five, 10 associate members. These people make a monthly contribution. The [name of the union] has the obligation to represent them, right?

10. **Antony:** Look…

11. **Patrick:** I understand that they want associations. They want a mass association, a larger number of associate members here in [name of the city], right? But if they don’t take action too, you see, don’t arrange a meeting as we are doing now, if Javier, Georgina do not gather a group of workers or the representatives, or you [referring to the worker to whom he is speaking], Henry and Bartolomeu, who are the representatives, make a video call, have a conversation with him, or even if they contact us… Because I got tired of messaging Javier on WhatsApp, I tried to call Georgina and had no answer, right?

As seen in the excerpt above, Patrick starts arguing that the reason for his dissociation was the union’s lack of interest in the workers of the institution where he is included. He then raises the hypothesis that this might be due to some quarrel between the union’s administration and someone from the SAAE and highlights that this factor does not justify the lack of action in the face of the associate’s demands (1—“This doesn’t concern me, no”). He stresses that the people are interested in the integration, but they do not find support among the representatives that act together with the employing institution (1—“We want to fight, claim, but those who are the bridge, who make the negotiation end up being a case like this, right?”)—the “case” here is the lack of interest). Continuing, he stresses that he does not see a return in the financial investment that he did in the union.

Then, Antony starts a controversy when he says that the union’s action depends on the number of associates and deduces a justification for the lack of action: 4—“I notice that the union is not strong because the SAAE is not strong either.” He supports his own argument by providing empirical data: A meeting was arranged, and no one appeared. Following, Patrick seems to agree and validates that the fact that no one appeared in the meeting cannot be questioned and counters that the union must represent the associates even if they are few: 9—“for example, let’s suppose there are five, 10 associate members. These people make a monthly contribution. The [name of the union] has the obligation to represent them, right?”

In this context, Patrick shows that he understands the situation and highlights that there will be no association if the union does not act. The discussion seems to reach an impasse as the arguments become circular: The union does not act due to the lack of associate members, and the people do not associate because the union does not act. Patrick finishes presenting empirical data that strengthens what was said about
the union’s inertia: 11 — “Because I got tired of messaging Javier on WhatsApp, I tried to call Georgina and had no answer, right?”.

After this dialog, Antony reacts, still disagreeing, by signaling that: “Now what I think is, you see, if you are going to become an associate only when the union starts to show their worth or demand Javier to come here simply because the union represents the SAAE, he will say: ‘With what representation does this SAAE want us to represent them?’ [he simulates the union’s representative]. So, I am associated with the union since 2017. I see that the union is not acting how it was supposed to act, how I expected, but this was the decision. I don’t dissociate because to speak for or against I have to be an associate. I cannot speak against the union if I am not an associate; I cannot speak for the union if I am not an associate.” On this point, Patrick agrees with his colleague, and they reach a consensus that a meeting must be arranged to re-establish a relationship with the union to solve the demand both for and of the associate members, which is what started the original divergence between the participants.

The reported moment was recorded during the construction of the second volunteer’s (Patrick) letter and led to a mobilization of the group to solve the situation that bothered everyone: the union’s lack of action. Therefore, the Letter to the Sender technique enabled these effects by showing the power of controversy, namely, to change and develop what has already been settled, the dissatisfactions, on possible ways to overcome the obstacles together (Clot, 2017).

**Expansion of the Power to Act**

As seen in the previous discussion, from the conflict through dialog, different perspectives of the problem were explored which, later, led the group to think of possible solutions: seek more engagement by the union, build dialog connections to meet the workers’ demands, and create their own union for the SAAE.

The expansion of the power to act, as well as other mentioned markers, was highlighted during the group’s process. Thus, we present here an excerpt of a dialog that represented this marker concretely. Still during the fifth meeting, mentioned in the previous topic, the situation of the union, after the controversies, caused the whole group to discuss and one of the consequences of this interaction is presented below.

1. Sidney: Uh-huh. And, I mean, a doubt that I had about Patrick, right? Why, speaking of union, right? Why isn’t there one of the SAAEs only? Because the SAAE exists in the whole country. Why has nobody ever thought of creating the union of Autonomous Services of Water and Sewage?
2. Patrick: Sidney. I even believe that someone already had this idea. If you take a look, here in our municipality, the city guard has the Sindiguarda, there is the Sindisems and the Sindiguarda. There are guards who are associated with Sindisems and there are guards who are associated with both. Everywhere, in both public and private service, there is always a lack of unity, there is always conflict with one another. I spoke with John, who had been a guard, with Dirk, who already worked with me and is now at the water treatment sta-
They always had conflicts between them, had problems, but at the time of uniting, to create the Sindiguarda, to make that action of Sindiguarda with Sindisems and press the public power, they did it, it worked! So much that, if you look today, they have uniforms, have motorcycles, cars, equipment, loading, and career plans. Most guards were promoted.

As we can see, the discussion made Sidney question the strategy of facing the situation and present his doubt to his co-worker. Patrick searched for an answer and gave examples of the same plan that Sidney suggested and that was used effectively by other workers. This report attested that the creation of their own union is plausible and tangible. That way, the group was encouraged to think of possible ways to overcome the obstacle.

The power to act can overcome the intended results and cause an unintended situation: the discovery of a new viable goal that is beyond what had already been made or imagined (Clot, 2010). Thus, the expansion of this power is visible when the appearance of a new subjective horizon remobilizes the workers for the creation of the SAAE’s own union. This was enabled by the Letter to the Sender method and its implicit facilitation process, as well as the controversy and divergence between the participants. This was interwoven in a movement of analysis, opposition, consensus, and creation of solutions as the debate reverberated after Patrick’s words.

**Final Considerations**

By uniting the Letter to the Sender method and the process of facilitating group engagement, we observed discussions, controversies, creation and strengthening of bonds, and the construction of new action horizons. Additionally, the crystalized activities were set into motion, which developed and expanded the power to act. Added to that is the emergence of new perspectives about the experienced situations, as well as moments of exotopy in which the workers became observers of themselves.

The participants were also able to reconsider their established concepts and the construction of their own thinking and the meaning of their actions. Consequently, the experienced occasions, the performed activities, and the work itself were strengthened, reset, transformed, and received a new meaning. There was also the opportunity to share opinions, experiences, and stories. Thus, the bonds, previous knowledge, and experienced relationships were recalled, so that the subjects were able to rediscover their activities and bring them back to themselves. Additionally, the group’s mobilization and dialogs allowed common obstacles to being rethought and solutions to be elaborated.

We concluded that all elected markers showed that the Letter to the Sender technique is valid and effective to intervene in work contexts and promote health among the workers, as well as to meet the goals proposed by the Clinic of Activity. This study is innovative and fills the application gaps seen in other methods, which are limited to interventions that occur concurrently with the worker’s activity.
The study’s weakness was the lack of opportunity to test the method in the situation where it is proposed as a differential: workers who are not inserted in the labor market or daily work.

Finally, the greatest difficulty, as well as a factor of gratitude, was conducting the intervention and the study during a pandemic moment to promote the health of the workers who perform an essential service. This led to the possibility of academic innovation in an adverse and hostile context. We expect to conduct future interventions and studies with subjects that are on work leave to test whether the technique is effective in the face of the hiatus that it is a challenge to overcome.

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**Data Availability**  The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Declarations**

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**  The project was evaluated by the Research Ethics Committee of the Vale do Acarau State University and authorized under number 43898921.0.0000.5053 according to all directives and regulatory norms described in the resolution CNS 510/2016. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict of Interest**  The authors declare no competing interests.

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**Authors and Affiliations**

Louanne Carneiro de Oliveira1・Francisco Pablo Huascar Aragão Pinheiro1・Jorge Tarcísio da Rocha Falcão2・Veriana de Fátima Rodrigues Colaço3・Cássio Adriano Braz de Aquino3・Nayana Rios Nunes da Silva1・QUITÉRIA ALVES MELO4・LORENA AÉLIO DE MELO4・VICTÓRIA MARIA FREITAS PEDROSA4・GABRIELLE SOUSA COSTA4

1 Programa de Pós-Graduação Profissional em Psicologia e Políticas Públicas, Universidade Federal do Ceará, 563 Coronel Estanislau Frota St., Centro, Sobral, CE 62010-560, Brazil

2 Departamento de Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil

3 Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil

4 Curso de Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Ceará, Sobral, Ceará, Brazil