

EXAMINING EXISTING PRACTICES OF THEATRE ART USE: DEVELOPING STUDENTS' SPIRITUAL-MORAL COMPETENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article examines international and national practices of applying theatrical arts in higher education institutions to develop students' spiritual-moral competence. The study analyses the "Drama in Education" concept developed by Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton, Germany's Theaterpädagogik pedagogical model, and the experience of Students' Theatre Studios in Uzbekistan. The research demonstrates that students who regularly participate in theatre activities exhibit 30-40% higher indicators of moral stability, self-regulation, and conflict-resolution skills compared to their peers. The article substantiates that innovative theatre methods - Forum Theatre, Psychodrama, and Improvisation - effectively transform students from passive observers into active, morally engaged decision-makers. The paper proposes the "Artistic-Pedagogical Cluster" model as a framework for the systemic integration of theatrical pedagogy into higher education. Monitoring tools including "Ethical Diaries," "Reflective Reports," and "Psychological Portraits" are recommended to ensure qualitative assessment of students' moral development trajectories.

Keywords: theatrical pedagogy, Forum Theatre, spiritual-moral competence, Drama in Education, improvisation, emotional intelligence, higher education, moral reflection, Artistic-Pedagogical Cluster, Psychodrama

INTRODUCTION. In contemporary international pedagogical discourse, theatrical art in higher education is regarded not merely as a form of cultural recreation, but as a fundamental mechanism for the socialisation of the individual [1]. In the context of accelerating globalisation, traditional propagandistic methods of moral upbringing are rapidly losing their efficacy. Consequently, innovative theatrical methods - including Forum Theatre, Psychodrama, and Improvisation - have demonstrated significant effectiveness in enhancing students' socio-ethical engagement and moral awareness.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of international and national practices of theatrical art application in higher education and to substantiate the methodological potential of theatrical pedagogy in developing students' spiritual-moral competence.

The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What models do international practices of theatrical art application encompass? (2) What is the current state of these practices in Uzbekistan's higher education institutions? (3) How do Forum Theatre and Improvisation methods affect students' spiritual-moral competence indicators?

The theoretical significance of this research lies in systematising international experience and developing an integrated model for incorporating theatrical pedagogy into higher education. The practical significance consists in the elaboration of specific methodological recommendations applicable to the real conditions of Uzbekistan's higher education system.

METHODS. This study employed a multi-method approach comprising the following: (1) comparative analysis of international scholarly literature on theatrical pedagogy and moral education; (2) pedagogical observation and sociometric surveys conducted in Uzbekistan's higher education institutions; (3) empirical comparison of student groups that regularly participate in theatre activities versus those that do not; and (2) axiological assessment of spiritual-moral competence indicators.

The empirical base of the research was established over several academic years at Tashkent State Pedagogical University named after Nizami and the State Institute of Arts and Culture of Uzbekistan, specifically within the Students' Theatre Studio programmes. Selection criteria included regular participation in theatre activities (a minimum of twice per week) and active engagement in the educational process.

The following criteria were adopted as indicators of spiritual-moral competence: emotional stability, level of empathy, capacity for ethical decision-making in conflict situations, and sense of collective responsibility. The data collected were processed using descriptive statistical analysis, and results were cross-validated through observational field notes and structured interviews with participating students.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research: participation was voluntary, anonymity of respondents was guaranteed, and the data collected were used exclusively for academic purposes.

RESULTS. International Practices. In Western Europe and the United States, the "Drama in Education" (DiE) concept has developed since the latter half of the twentieth century, grounded in the theoretical contributions of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton [1]. This approach posits that theatrical exercises cultivate moral reflection in students - the capacity to observe and evaluate one's own behaviour from an external perspective. In leading British universities, the methods of "Role-play" and "Staging Moral Dilemmas" serve as core tools for developing students' professional ethics, enabling them not only to acquire acting skills but also to develop competencies such as preserving human dignity in adversity, exercising just decision-making, and practising empathy - understood as the ability to comprehend the suffering of others.

The German Model. In Germany, Theaterpädagogik (Theatre Pedagogy) is taught as a discrete academic discipline in higher education institutions [3]. It enhances students' communicative competence while simultaneously fostering their sense of social responsibility. This approach strengthens the future specialist's ethical positioning in society and functions as an internal moral shield against ideological manipulation and mass-culture influences.

The Uzbek National Model. Since the years of independence, Uzbekistan has developed a nationally distinctive model for the application of theatrical art within the framework of systematic reforms aimed at the spiritual-moral upbringing of student youth. Students' Theatre Studios operating within higher education institutions constitute the practical core of this work [2]. At Tashkent State Pedagogical University named after Nizami and the State Institute of Arts and Culture, theatrical productions featuring students systematically embody the images of historical figures, transmitting their ethical principles to today's youth. However, empirical observation reveals that in the majority of cases, the activities of these theatre studios remain confined to festive events and competitions, such as "Tafakkur Sinovlari" (Intellectual

Challenges) and “Yil Talabasi” (Student of the Year). Theatre’s psychotherapeutic and educational functions are thus insufficiently utilised for sustained spiritual-moral development.

Forum Theatre and Improvisation. Forum Theatre methodology enables students to address morally painful problems - cyberbullying, intra-group conflict, injustice - through collaborative stage performance [3]. In this process, the student’s emotional intelligence (EQ) is developed: they learn to understand others’ emotions and to regulate their own behaviour in accordance with social norms. Improvisation, by contrast, requires the student to act without a pre-prepared script, relying solely on their internal moral resources. This reveals the student’s authentic “self” and provides a basis for analysing their value system [2].

Quantitative Outcomes. The empirical analysis demonstrated that students who regularly participate in theatre activities exhibit 30-40% higher indicators of spiritual-moral stability, self-regulation, and conflict-resolution skills compared to their peers who do not engage in such activities [3]. Pedagogical observations and sociometric surveys confirm that social adaptation proceeds significantly faster and more effectively among theatre-participating students. In addition, students who take part in theatrical performances in charitable settings - care homes, community centres, and secondary schools - develop altruism, generosity, and a sense of responsibility in authentic social contexts.

DISCUSSION. The findings of this study confirm that theatrical art in higher education warrants reassessment: it should be regarded not merely as a cultural supplement but as a complex pedagogical instrument that ensures students’ personal and professional maturity. Through theatrical participation, students transition from an “I”-centred conceptual framework to a “We”-centred one - a process that reinforces civic values and national solidarity [2].

A critical limitation of current practice, however, is that theatre studios predominantly function as venues for festive performances rather than as sustained environments for moral development. This finding aligns with the observation made by Azizxo’jaeva, who argues that the power of pedagogical influence lies in its vitality and emotional richness - qualities which theatre, uniquely among pedagogical instruments, embodies [3].

Abdullaeva’s research on interdisciplinary integration supports the conclusion that combining arts and pedagogy simultaneously enhances cognitive development and social-ethical responsibility [1]. Accordingly, the proposed “Artistic-Pedagogical Cluster” model - linking higher education institutions, professional theatre companies, and spiritual-enlightenment centres - addresses the systemic deficit in current approaches. This model ensures the continuity, interdisciplinary character, and practical effectiveness of spiritual-moral upbringing.

Furthermore, the introduction of “Ethical Diaries,” “Reflective Reports,” and “Psychological Portraits” as qualitative monitoring tools responds to the recognised inadequacy of purely quantitative indicators (e.g., number of events attended). As Quronov notes, the effectiveness of any educational influence is measured by the degree to which it takes root in the individual’s consciousness and manifests in everyday conduct [2].

A limitation of the present study is that the empirical data were collected from only two institutions. Future research employing a broader institutional base and a longitudinal experimental design is recommended to validate and extend these findings. Additionally, the potential of digital and hybrid theatre formats - online Forum Theatre, virtual role-plays - merits investigation as a direction for further inquiry.

CONCLUSION. The examination of existing practices of theatrical art use in higher education leads to the conclusion that theatre pedagogy must be systematically and methodologically integrated into the educational and upbringing process in order to effectively develop students' spiritual-moral competence. This constitutes a strategic imperative - one that guarantees not only the professional proficiency but also the high moral character, patriotism, and humanistic outlook of future specialists.

On the basis of this research, the following practical recommendations are advanced:

1. Introduce Forum Theatre, Psychodrama, and Improvisation as mandatory educational modules within the higher education upbringing curriculum;
2. Institutionalise the "Artistic-Pedagogical Cluster" model through formal partnerships among higher education institutions, professional theatre companies, and spiritual-enlightenment centres;
3. Reframe theatre studios from festive-event venues into laboratories for ethical reflection and spiritual development;
4. Modernise the spiritual-moral monitoring system by introducing qualitative assessment tools, including "Ethical Diaries" and "Reflective Reports";
5. Incorporate "Theatre Pedagogy" as a compulsory academic course within the curricula of pedagogical degree programmes.

In conclusion, theatre pedagogy represents a transformative pedagogical technology whose application in higher education ensures the formation of morally stable, socially responsible, and nationally conscious specialists - the primary objective of contemporary higher education in Uzbekistan.

References

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