Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC) Volume 14 No. 2 September 2025
pp.168-179 ersc@mandela.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070
DOI: https://10.17159/2221-4070/2025/v14n2/a11

Decolonising Our Teaching by Embracing Drama Pedagogy and Theatre in Education in Higher Education Classes

Logamurthie Athiemoolam
ORCID No: 0000-0002-7844-1434
Nelson Mandela University
Logamurthie. Athiemoolam@mandela.ac.za

Martin Braund
ORCID No: 0000-0002-1943-0698
University of York
Martin. Martin.Braund@york.ac.uk

Abstract

The pedagogy that characterises higher education classes tends to align predominantly to a banking approach to teaching, where the lecturer is central to the teaching process while the students are passive recipients of the knowledge with limited opportunities for critical engagement and reflection on the content presented to the class. The outcome of this approach to teaching and learning is the development of a passive citizenry with limited critical and creative thinking skills; the kind of citizenry required by a neoliberal society with its market-driven economy, capitalistic outlook, and profit-driven agenda. The implementation of drama pedagogy and theatre in education in our university classes offers the potential to subvert this narrative by tapping into the students' funds of knowledge and stimulating students to think critically and creatively as they engage with specific themes and issues covered in their university lectures. It is with this background in mind that we provide a critical reflection, in this article, on how drama pedagogy and theatre in education have the potential to contribute to decolonising teaching and learning by focusing on the development of students' critical and creative thinking skills so that they can become agents of change to confront social injustice. Through our engagement with these arts-based pedagogies, we will shed light on the crux of their epistemology, their historical background, and examine their pedagogical significance based on our personal insights and experiences, and how they could be applied within university classes to decolonise students' thinking.

Keywords: drama pedagogy, theatre in education, arts- based approaches, teaching and learning, decolonising pedagogy

Introduction

There is widespread student dissatisfaction with teaching in higher education, fundamentally with pedagogical practices that perpetuate colonised curricula, exclude minority voices, limit collaborative learning, and draw on restrictive assessment regimes (Govender, 2015; Segabutla & Evans, 2019). These practices, negatively impacting students' engagement, have been exacerbated by a dominant turn to neoliberalism in the last 30 years. This neoliberalist trend has meant higher education has become more corporate-based, maintained through managerialism and top-down control, developing a culture of employee accountability imbuing a sense of fear to be innovative and creative.

Decoloniality, as it applies to pedagogy and curriculum, has been defined as an inherently plural set of practices interrupting the dominant power/knowledge matrix in educational practices in higher education (Morreira et al., 2020). These practices affect both what knowledge is produced via research and then selected for a curriculum (what content is taught), and the ways in which teaching and learning and assessment occur. Morreira et al. (2020, p. 2) went further, suggesting that pragmatics and action are now required to move beyond theorisation of decolonisation arguing,

> that while debates on decoloniality and decolonisation have proliferated at a theoretical level, work on operationalising them within the academy is just beginning; and that there is a gap between high level decolonial theory and its practices of implementation.

For us, in this article, a decolonising agenda is an imperative that goes beyond challenging Eurocentrism of curriculum design and colonially inherited pedagogies (though these are important to address), to design approaches celebrating cultural and individual diversity while challenging hegemonic knowledge production and power relationships embedded in neoliberal education. In this, we are responding to Giroux's (2010, p. 185) critique of higher education as having,

> Bare pedagogy [one in which] compassion is a weakness, moral responsibility is scorned because it places human needs over market considerations . . . [and] education is stripped of its public values, critical contents, and civic responsibilities.

A restrictive set of didactic pedagogical practices, assuming learners as passive recipients of bodies of knowledge, has dominated education for much of its history. Despite developments in scholarship and research in the psychology of learning in the latter part of the 20th century, for example, through constructivism and socialised learning, teaching practices have been slow to change. We still see students trapped behind desks or tables, lecturers marooned behind lecterns and imprisoned by dependence on technology. In this way, higher education teaching maintains a metaphysical dualism that splits the mind from the body (Sutherland, 2011). To address neoliberally dominated and colonised practices of higher education and this dualism, and to respond to Morreira et al.'s (2020) calls for action on implementation, we propose turning to the arts and in particular, drama. We explore the potential of drama pedagogy and theatre in education as approaches to decolonise our teaching within university classroom spaces. In doing so we aim to get beyond Giroux's (2010, p. 189) "bare pedagogy" to "provide students with the humanistic knowledge, technical knowledge, scientific skill, and a mode of literacy that enables them to engage and transform, when necessary, the promise of a global democracy."

Rather than a literature review or purely theoretical exercise, we conceive this article as a polemical statement of our position as regards the use of drama in its different forms in achieving improved pedagogy, challenging the deleterious impacts of colonisation and neoliberalism in higher education. In our discussions of drama pedagogy and theatre in education or applied theatre, we provide examples from our own practices with students but, while we explore the beneficial impacts for learning and wider student emancipation, we are mindful of the developmental needs for faculty. Before considering some of the specific features of theatre in education and drama pedagogy, it is necessary to set these in the context of wider inclusion of arts-based pedagogies in higher education.

Arts-Based Pedagogy

In the last 10 years, there has been increasing systemic activity in educational systems, recognising the value of the arts and the contribution they make to improving the pedagogical landscape at multidisciplinary and subject levels (Braund & Reiss, 2019; Li & Qi, 2025). We see this as partly connected to the historic and colonially derived structuring of education into disciplines. Disciplines of the curriculum create boundaries limiting cross-disciplinary collaboration. Subject discipline boundaries, generally strengthened by an accountability and performance culture embedded in educational systems, mitigate against a more open agenda and epistemology where collaboration and creativity contribute to investigative and problem-solving approaches (Harris & de Bruin, 2018). It is here that arts-based pedagogies have potential as boundary-crossing methodologies providing increased student engagement and empowerment through improved and more equitable access to knowledge and skills.

Hunter and Frawley (2022) defined arts-based pedagogy as a process by which students can observe and reflect on an art form to link different disciplines, thus encouraging students to lean into uncomfortable subject matter and explore their place within it in the wider world. Arts-based pedagogy encompasses creating, performing, observing, using, integrating, and reflecting on art to understand other areas of knowledge and experience. For example, considering the use of fine arts, medical students at the University of California used masterpieces by Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Kandinsky, and Da Vinci to improve observation and pattern recognition skills in clinical situations (Shapiro et al., 2006). An unexpected outcome was that medical students following the fine arts programme developed better skills in emotional recognition, cultivation of empathy, identification of story and narrative, and awareness of multiple perspectives. In the wider context of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education, there have been moves in several countries to include the arts, redefining the STEM acronym as STEAM. An extreme manifestation of how far arts-based pedagogy has influenced curriculum policy and design is seen in South Korea, which has redefined STEM education as STEAM across all phases in a call to improve creativity and innovation (Baek et al., 2011). We wonder, however, if this is not just an example of pandering to neoliberal capitalism in improving industrial competitiveness, rather than for more altruistic educational benefits for students.

Perhaps arts-based pedagogy strategies work because they tap into the visual thinking of student learners. It has been said that today's young people inhabit a multimodal world dominated by television, video games, computers, tablets, films, and so on. However, it has also been claimed that visual thinking translates into problem-solving ability. Visual thinkers literally "see" their answers to problems, enabling them to build entire information systems using their imaginations (Gangwer, 2009). We add a note of caution here because what we envisage, as we explain in the next section, is using methods from the drama and theatre world that allow students to be highly active and collaborative and not mere recipients of visualised experiences. In achieving this, our aim is to challenge and address what Lehmann (2006, p. 16) saw as the weakening, "of active energies of imagination . . . in a civilization of the primarily passive consumption of images and data."

Drama Pedagogy and Theatre in Education

Drama and theatre work in educational contexts goes by many names, including, drama in education, theatre in education, applied drama, applied theatre, educational drama, dramatic inquiry, role-play, creative drama, improvisation, process drama, and forum theatre. The key difference we conceive between drama work and theatre in education is that, while the former is non-performative in nature or "process orientated," the latter is directed towards a "performative product," but often for an audience that is participative rather than one in a conventional theatre, which is passive (Dawson & Lee, 2018, p. 5). The focus of both drama pedagogy and theatre in education can be characterised as exploratory and reflective in nature given that their focus is on inquiry into specific themes and issues explored by the participants through interactive meaning-making, predominantly in educational settings. In the context of this paper, we aim to examine the potential of drama and theatre in education to decolonise teaching and learning within higher education contexts through a focus on process and practice. Interspersed with our discussion of key aspects and intentions of these forms of drama in education are some examples from our own teaching and, more occasionally, from studies reported in the literature.

Drama Pedagogy (DP)

According to Dawson and Lee (2018, p. 17), drama pedagogy is an approach that uses "active and dramatic approaches to engage students in academic, affective and aesthetic learning through dialogic meaning-making in all areas of the curriculum." As a pedagogical approach, it aims to balance both the form and content of drama so that the participants can embrace the dramatic experience by learning about issues and concepts raised through drama (Bethlenfalvy, 2020).). DP, as we have said, is conceived variously but within the context of this article, we will use the terms drama pedagogy (DP) and applied drama (AD) as we interrogate its value as a decolonised pedagogy based on its processes and practices.

In their analysis of the key features of DP, Dawson and Lee (2018, p. 17) averred that it aims "to engage students in academic, affective and aesthetic learning through dialogic meaning-making in all areas of the curriculum." Hence, there is a clear alignment to sociocultural and critical theories of learning (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994, Vygotsky, 1978) in the classroom, where participants co-construct their understanding and personal identities as part of the classroom culture (Dawson & Lee, 2018). This pedagogy enables the participants to not only be actively engaged in the meaning-making process through interactive drama-based activities, but also to reflect on the processes, issues, and activities (Dewey, 1934/1994). Consequently, through the process, the participants use a variety of communication approaches to construct, convey, and reflect on meaning derived from the experience. Hence, DP offers opportunities for new ways of approaching, exploring, and deepening understanding of the content (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025). Techniques commonly include the use of tableaux, improvisation, slow motion, thought-tracking, inner thoughts, eavesdropping, and hot seating (Neelands, 2009). During the process, verbal language, gestures, spatial placement, movement, costume, and objects can be used (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025).

One of the most important figures in the development of DP in education was Dorothy Heathcote (Bolton & Heathcote, 1995). For Heathcote, a *process drama* involved participants and facilitators stepping into situations and taking different roles that develop by their involvement in the drama. The drama process, which is initiated with a *pre-text*, conceptualised as a preliminary plan, focuses on how to proceed, what drama strategies to use, and what issues to explore (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025). This pre-text stage often involves participants having researched background for the roles, approaching the drama from the idea of having assumed a *mantle of expert*. Consequently, although the facilitator guides the process, it is often adapted or spearheaded by the participants, and is perceived as fluid in nature, because the participants become co-creators of the process. A key feature of DP of this type, that we will loosely call

"process drama," is that the "dramatic piece" evolves in relation to the participants' input, while they are participating in the experience and engaging with the drama activities facilitated by the educator (O'Neill, 1995; Österlind & Hallgren, 2025).

Within the context of our own teaching in higher education contexts, we used tableaux, improvisation, and role play to interrogate discrimination in society based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, socio-economic status, religion, and disability, amongst others. The students' engagement with these issues, through embodied learning experiences, enabled them to share their own stories relating to discrimination, present them through drama activities, and to critically engage and reflect on the issues that they raise (Athiemoolam, 2018). In this way, we consider our teaching practice to be decolonising in nature because it creates spaces for our students to critically reflect on and engage with issues of discrimination, marginalisation, and othering, which are features of colonised, neoliberal approaches to teaching and learning (Athiemoolam, 2018). Thus, we consider DP as a decolonising approach to teaching and learning, because it promotes student voice and does not perceive the lecturer as the only purveyor of knowledge in the classroom (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1970).

Given its transformative nature, DP, furthermore, has the potential to contribute significantly to decolonising teaching and learning in higher education contexts because it affords students the opportunity to explore social issues through multiple lenses, thereby deepening their insights. To provide an example from our own teaching, our students in a third-year Bachelor of Education (Intermediate Phase) module, Issues and Challenges in Education, demonstrated how, through the creation of tableaux with their bodies, hegemony manifests in society, by depicting a scene that portrayed two groups: those who achieved success in a capitalist society, and those who were marginalised (Athiemoolam, 2018). Through the application of DP and a process of action and reflection (praxis) the students were able to engage more interactively with the concept hegemony than had we adopted a banking model, which tends to predominate in higher education contexts (Freire, 2018). In this way DP offers embodied modes of expression that critically engage with power and oppression, thereby drawing the epistemological and practical aspects of drama together through a process of interactive meaning-making (Blair, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2025).

Given that building trust, navigating through struggle, and learning how to co-create as a community of students are key artistic skills in DP, students feel comfortable to use their imagination and body to convey their stories (Dawson & Lee, 2018). The community of practice and support created through the drama process motivates students to tap into their creative potential, thereby contributing to enriching learning experiences for all of them. According to research, higher education institutions, in many respects, fail to foster and promote a feeling of belonging amongst students, which is crucial for their psychological well-being (Osterman, 2010). DP, however, offers a way to build upon and incorporate a sense of belonging or ensemble among lecturers and students that is vital for student success (Dawson & Lee, 2018). In our workshop sessions with students in our third-year Education module, we discovered that they felt comfortable working collaboratively with their peers as part of a community of practice because they perceived it as a safe space where they could share their ideas freely and spontaneously (Athiemoolam, 2018, 2021). An advantage of such a process is that it enables critical engagement with issues of concern, thereby encouraging dialogue, debate, reflection, and critique, which serves to frame a decolonised approach to teaching and learning in higher education contexts (Freire, 2018).

During the drama process, students are often invited to create new meaning based on what they know about and see within a situation, which stimulates their imagination (Dawson & Lee, 2018). When people are afforded opportunities to imagine, they fill in the gap between what they know and what they believe is possible. Rather than just working in the *as is* world, DP affords participants the opportunity to bring the as is world into the *as if* (Bolton & Heathcote, 1995), creating and recreating and imagining and reimagining the world of the classroom and the world of the story (Edmiston, 2014). Through their

engagement with the as if world, they can escape from reality and use their imagination to create whatever future they would like to be a part of. We see this as stimulating interactive meaning-making, which has the potential to develop students' critical and creative thinking skills, and helps subvert neoliberal approaches to teaching and learning that focus on the principles of measurement and testing (Morreira et al., 2020).

Theatre in Education

We conceive theatre in education (TiE) as the use of theatre and drama practices for interactive learning experiences so that the audience is actively engaged in the piece of theatre in various ways, and not alienated or disconnected from it. This contrasts with conventionally staged theatre where the audience is passive. According to Lu (2002), the aim of this form of interactive theatre is to stimulate creative learning through theatrical experiences so that the audience is fully engaged. The TiE process is initiated by the sharing of ideas on a social issue that culminates in the development of a piece of theatre that engages the participants and the audience during the process (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995).

From now on, we conceive this interactive version of TiE as applied theatre (AT). According to Prendergast and Saxton (2013) AT includes TiE, theatre of the oppressed, museum theatre, community-based theatre, and theatre for development. Hence, it is an inclusive concept that encompasses a range of theories and practices that make use of theatre for a variety of purposes (Massó-Guijarro et al., 2021). This is especially significant within higher education contexts if we are entrusted with the role of creating a critical citizenry who espouse a problem-based approach to learning, and who adopt critical ways of knowing and thinking (Freire, 1970). Plays that adopt the applied theatre format strive to involve the audience interactively in the scenic game, which narrows the gap considerably between the audience and the actors in the play.

During one of our workshops that we presented in our third-year education module, Issues in Education (PGED 302), students workshopped a play entitled *Still I Rise,* which was based on how a young boy, growing up in a gangster-ridden environment, was able to realise his dream of becoming a motivational speaker. The students felt that the play, which was loosely based on a true story, should be presented to a wider audience because it had an important message to convey (Athiemoolam, 2021). Later, the play was showcased to disadvantaged learners from poor backgrounds, for whom a space was created to interact with the actors and to also share their own insights and stories, based on their experiences. In this way, TiE can have a wider purpose, especially if it offers opportunities for the audience to engage with the issues highlighted to share their own stories, and to reflect on how the issues engaged with in the play resonate with their own experiences (Boal, 1979). Cordero Ramos and Muñoz Bellerin (2019), found that because AT created spaces for recognising people in vulnerable situations, they were motivated to combat the feeling of invisibility they usually experienced. Consequently, as suggested by Songe-Møller and Bjerkestrand (2012), inclusive spaces could be established to combat ignorance, stereotypes, and the stigmatisation of various groups, thereby breaking down prejudices and creating spaces for decolonised approaches to teaching and learning across multiple contexts (Athiemoolam, 2021).

It is with this in mind that Prendergast and Saxon (2013) viewed play building as a continuous process of negotiated meaning-making where all the members of the group work collaboratively in a workshop type setting for the creation of the play. Such a process changes the work relationships between the producer and the participants, especially in terms of how the process is managed, given that a producer's role changes to that of a facilitator rather than as the traditional producer of a piece of theatre for a passive receptive audience. Hence, the story line created in this way, could either follow a linear pattern or incorporate various intertwined stories based on a nonlinear approach (Prendergast & Saxon, 2013). It is through this collaborative meaning-making process, as we discovered in our own practice, that social issues can be more effectively interrogated, critiqued, and engaged with.

Hence, flowing from the above scenario, TiE enables teachers to work with a methodology open to creativity:

> Leading to a change in mentality, symbols or stereotypes; making possible the development of a critical capacity, self-reflection and interpretation of practices, aimed at the achievement of a comprehension of the world as a form of new conscience. (Solis, 2018, p. 31)

This creation of a new conscience is closely aligned to decolonised ways of teaching and learning and a notion of *conscientisation* espoused by Freire (1970). According to Freire (1970, p. 24), "teaching without learning does not exist" in the sense that teaching is not just transferring knowledge "if not to create the possibilities of its production or its construction." Like DP, the main feature of theatre is a focus on making theatre from a collective point of view in collaboration with others for enhanced meaning-making (Neelands, 2009). Theatre and theatrical techniques insist on participation and collaboration because they galvanise the group for enhanced meaning-making and critical reflection, as we have found in our own workshop sessions with our education students in the Issues and Challenges in Education module (Athiemoolam, 2021; Solis, 2018).

Freire's (1970) notion of critical pedagogy, combined with interactive performance practice (Boal, 1979), has the potential to lead to the creation of a learning community that empowers participants, generates critical understanding, and which promotes transformation (Boal, 1979). This was demonstrated in one enactment of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, where student performers created an interactive drama piece that explored body image related to social pressures. By participating in the play, students engaged in critical reflection on cultural norms and expectations and developed a richer understanding of the performance process. According to Solis (2018), the work of Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) provide a strong link between AD, social justice, and education. Boal (1979) demonstrated how social justice issues could be effectively interrogated through his development of Forum Theatre (FT).

For Boal (1979), FT is conceptualised as a rehearsed play that focuses on some form of oppression, which concludes in conflict. Its aim is to practise how to "counteract oppression, shift the power balance, and find better solutions" (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025, p. 21). The play always includes a protagonist, who is represented as a victim of oppression or injustice and an antagonist, an oppressor, who maintains the injustice, characters who support the oppressor, and bystanders who may or may not support the victim's efforts to change the situation (Boal, 1979). After the performance, the audience is invited by a Joker (facilitator) to assume the role of the oppressed, and to confront the oppression, try to overcome obstacles, and explore different ways of solving the problem. In this way, the members of the audience are transformed from being spectators to becoming a *spect-actors* (Boal, 1979), ready to take on the role and to confront the oppression (Österlind & Hallgren, 2025) so that the oppressive situation could be resolved through multiple lenses.

In an examination of Boal's (1979) work, FT represents the most well-known form of Theatre of the Oppressed, which evolved when his theatre company performed for peasants and workers in Brazil during the 1960s (Solis, 2018). Their performances first presented a conflict culminating in a crisis, then the audience was invited to suggest solutions on how to deal with the conflict, and these suggestions were performed by the actors. On one occasion, a spectator who was dissatisfied with how the actor performed the proposed solution was invited on stage. At that moment, a significant change occurred because from that moment on, no-one knew what would transpire. Consequently, this form of audience participation, which became a core practice in FT, has proven to be a powerful tool (Ganguly, 2010; Sedano-Solis, 2019).

According to Massó-Guijarro et al. (2021, p. 339), Boal's (1979) engagement with the concept spect-actors changes the passive receptive behaviour of the audience thereby leading to the creation of a mirror "in which the community can look at and actively question itself in a critical manner." Furthermore, within certain conventions of AT, there is a blurring of the boundaries between theatre and life because they are perceived as "representing dramatized images of the subjective realities experienced by each actor and by the collective as a whole" (Massó-Guijarro et al., 2021, p. 339). Hence, in this way, intellectual and emotional engagement are promoted for all those present in the performance, which offers opportunities for greater empathy and understanding—especially for those in vulnerable social situations (McQuaid & Plastow, 2017). This aligns to our own work in using TiE as a strategy to conscientise our students to social injustice and how these issues could be critically engaged with and interrogated using a play for critical reflection and enhanced meaning-making (Athiemoolam, 2018, 2021).

Discussion

In reflecting on the current neoliberal pedagogy that predominates in higher education contexts, we contend that there is a disconnectedness in teaching and learning because lecturers tend to focus on addressing the needs of the students' minds at the expense of their bodies. This leads to what Dawson and Lee (2018) described as the mind/body split in higher education contexts, which is disadvantageous for effective learning and meaning-making. Through the integration of the mind and the body, as espoused by DP and TiE, students are afforded opportunities to show who they are and to demonstrate their understanding in more dynamic ways, which have the potential to develop critical and creative thinking skills (Dawson & Lee, 2018). Furthermore, as noted by Vygotsky (1978, p. 84), every child in school "always has a previous history," including cultural experiences that can be incorporated into teaching and learning in university classes. Closing the mind/body split within the context of teaching in higher education contexts and creating opportunities for students to integrate their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2005) into their dramatic presentations could enhance students' critical and creative thinking skills, thereby enabling them to develop a greater sense of agency to confront social injustice. Furthermore, given that dance, drama, and music represent important modes of learning in African culture, incorporating these art forms in DP and TiE could contribute significantly to promoting learning in higher education contexts (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

When describing what constitutes education, many lecturers tend to focus on the academic curriculum or what is to be taught and examined. This picture provides a limited view of what happens in university classes. For Vygotsky (1978), the core components of our consciousness are intellect and affect. While the intellect can be thought of as the rational, logical, academic curriculum in the classroom, the affect refers to a hidden curriculum. University lecturers are astutely aware of how their teaching is impacted by cultural, social, and emotional learning (Dawson & Lee, 2018)—or we think they should be. When education attempts to separate "the intellectual side of our consciousness from its affective, volitional side," the result is separation "from all the fullness of real life, from living motives, interests, and attractions of the thinking human" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 14). We maintain that it is through the application of DP and TiE that the academic and affective components of the curriculum can be integrated for more holistic teaching and learning. Because the affect and intellect/academic components are mutually dependent according to Vygotsky (1978), DP and TiE, aligned to aesthetic experiences, are essential for enabling students to engage both the intellect (the mind) and the affect (the emotions; Boal, 1979).

Furthermore, because the process allows for the retelling and authoring of narratives, participants can examine whose stories have been told and presented as truth and whose stories are missing. This creates opportunities for re-examining stories in more inclusive ways by engaging in a process of retelling, which represents an important feature of decolonising work in education (Nicholson, 2005). In the retelling and authoring of narratives through drama, participants can also investigate whose stories have been told and accepted as truth and then attempt to counter these stories in more inclusive ways (Nicholson, 2005). Hence, through DP participants are motivated to "embody, explore, investigate, and rewrite narratives through their collective imagination" (Dawson & Lee, 2018, p. 21). Thus, AD and theatre processes can contribute to making the invisible visible by telling the other stories (McQuaid & Plastow 2017; Saeed, 2015). In one example, certain experiences of AT were aimed at empowering and making visible the capacities of disabled people by motivating them to show what they could do through questioning ableism, and using the social model of disability as opposed to the medical model (Athiemoolam, 2021; Genova, 2015). This enabled its transformative impact to be understood from a multidimensional, rhizomatic, and non-hierarchical perspective (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Freire's (2018) contention that inequality is sustained when most marginalised people are unable to reflect on their social conditions indicates that there is a need for pedagogy that engages participants

fully in the learning process. It is with this in mind that he believed that critical consciousness, praxis, and dialogue are crucial for interactive meaning-making. While he perceived critical consciousness as recognising and analysing systems of inequality, praxis enables participants to engage in action and reflection for enhanced meaning-making (Jemal, 2017), and dialogism promotes the sharing of ideas to deepen thinking and for critical engagement with issues (Hamilton et al., 2025). The above-mentioned principles highlighted by Freire (2018) are at the core of DP and TiE, thereby demonstrating their value in terms of promoting critical and creative thinking skills for enhanced learning.

Given that the notions of change and transformation are at the very heart of AT practices (Motos & Ferrandis, 2015) some authors have spoken directly of "theatre for change" (Landy & Montgomery, 2012, p. 20). Authors such as Hargrave (2010) and Haseman and Winston (2010) warned against the dangers of considering AT as a panacea that guarantees success and to instead focus on the contradictions and mismatches between the "good" intention and the real effects. Moreover, some studies on art and social transformation point out how these practices can be paradoxical in nature because they can reinforce stereotypes or increase the inequalities that they aimed to address (Infantino, 2020; Preston, 2011). Thus, it is imperative that facilitators democratise spaces by implementing strategies that subvert and deconstruct normative beliefs that certain groups are culturally inferior to others by encouraging inclusive participation of all people regardless of gender, age, social class, disability, or educational level.

Conclusion

In reflecting on our notion of what constitutes decolonising approaches to teaching and learning in higher education, we have endeavoured to examine the value of DP and TiE as pedagogies that could subvert banking, neoliberal approaches to education that tend to focus on teacher-centred approaches to teaching featured in standardised testing. In terms of the value of DP and TiE, based on our arguments, it emerges that these pedagogies have the potential to contribute significantly to developing students' critical and creative thinking skills. Furthermore, they have the potential to subvert narrow-minded parochial thinking that characterises current neoliberal approaches to teaching and learning in higher education contexts that deny students of a voice.

We argue in this article, that if teaching and learning in higher education contexts is to transform young minds to engage with social justice issues in more palpable ways for enhanced learning, then it is incumbent on us as academics to explore how this could be realised through arts-based approaches. It is with this in mind, that we present a case for the implementation of DP and TiE in higher education contexts given that they have the potential to engage students more interactively for enhanced meaning-making and to give them a voice. Furthermore, through the processes of dialogical engagement, problem-based learning, and reflective practice, these pedagogies have the potential to promote critical and creative thinking on much higher levels and, in the process, decolonise teaching and learning in higher education contexts.

References

Athiemoolam, L. (2018). The value of drama-in-education as a decolonising pedagogy through embodied drama strategies in a higher education classroom. *Journal of Education, 72*, 55–72. https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i72a04

Athiemoolam, L. (2021). An exploration of pre-service student teachers' understanding of social justice issues through theatre-in-education. *Educational Research for Social Change*, *10*(2), 161–177. https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2021/v10i2a10

Baek, Y. S., Park, H., Kim, Y. M., Sukgoo, N., Park, J.-Y., Lee, J., Jeong, J.-S., Choi, Y., & Han, H. (2011).

STEAM education in Korea. *Journal of Learner-Centred Curriculum and Instruction, 11*(4), 149–171. https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:113783720

Bethlenfalvy, A. (2020). Drama in education. In A. Cziboly (Ed.), *DIVERSE: Guidance book for teachers—diversity project* (pp 6-23). European Commission. https://diverse-education.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/guidance-book-for-teachers_-1-compressed.pdf

Blair, R. (2019). Theatre and embodiment. *Theatre Symposium*, *27*(1), 11–23. https://doi.org/10.1353/tsy.2019.0001

Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Pluto.

Bolton, G., & Heathcote, D. (1995). *Drama for learning: Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach to education*. Heinemann.

Braund, M., & Reiss, M. J. (2019). The "great divide": How the arts contribute to science and science education. *Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics, and Technology Education, 19*(3), 219–236. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42330-019-00057-7

Cordero Ramos, N., & Muñoz Bellerin, M. (2019). Social work and applied theatre: Creative experiences with a group of homeless people in the city of Seville. *European Journal of Social Work*, 22(3), 485–498. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1366298

Dawson, K., & Lee, B. K. (2018). *Drama-based pedagogy: Activating learning across the curriculum*. Intellect.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus*. Continuum.

Dewey, J. (1994). Art as experience. In S. D. Ross (Ed.), *Art and its significance* (3rd ed., pp. 204–220). SUNY Press. (Original work published 1934)

Edmiston, B. (2014). *Transforming teaching and learning with active and dramatic approaches: Engaging students across the curriculum*. Routledge.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Herder & Herder.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 50th anniversary edition*. Bloomsbury.

Ganguly, S. (2010). *Jana Sanskriti: Forum theatre and democracy in India*. Routledge.

Gangwer, T. (2009). *Visual impact, visual teaching: Using images to strengthen learning*. SAGE.

Genova, A. (2015). Barriers to inclusive education in Greece, Spain and Lithuania: Results from emancipatory disability research. *Disability & Society, 30*(7), 1042–1054. https://10.1080/09687599.2015.1075867

Giroux, H. A. (2010). Bare pedagogy and the scourge of neoliberalism: Rethinking higher education as a democratic public sphere. *The Educational Forum, 74*(3), 184–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2010.483897

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Routledge.

Govender, S. (2015). Students' perceptions of teaching methods used at South African higher education institutions: Part 1. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *29*(3), 23–41. https://doi.org/10.20853/29-3-486

Hamilton, G. A., Cureton, A., & Christensen, M. C. (2025). Enacting social justice: Exploring applied theatre's influence on anti-oppressive social work. *Practice, 37*(2), 117–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2024.2405606

Hargrave, M. (2010). Side effects: An analysis of rind the gap's boo and the reception of theatre involving learning disabled actors. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *15*(4), 497–511. https://10.1080/13569783.2010.512184

Harris, A., & de Bruin, L. R. (2018). Secondary school creativity, teacher practice and STEAM education: An international study. *Journal of Educational Change*, *19,*153–179. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9311-2

Haseman, B., & Winston, J. (2010). Why be interested?' Aesthetics, applied theatre and drama education. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *15*(4), 465–475. https://doi:10.1080/13569783.2010.512182

hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Hunter, L., & Frawley, E. (2022). Engaging students using an arts-based pedagogy: Teaching and learning sociological theory through film, art, and music. *Teaching Sociology, 51*(1), 13–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X221096657

Infantino, J. (2020). Senses of the critical, political and transformative potential of the arts. *Cadernos De Arte E Antropologia 9*(1), 12–28. https://doi:10.4000/cadernosaa.2581

Jemal, A. (2017). Critical consciousness: A critique and critical analysis of the literature. *The Urban Review, 49*(4), 602–626. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-017-0411-3

Landy, R., & Montgomery, D. (2012). *Theatre for change*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lehmann, H. T. (2006). *Post-dramatic theatre* (K. Jürs-Munby, Trans). Routledge.

Li, J., & Qi, Y. (2025). Arts education and its role in enhancing cognitive development: A quantitative study of critical thinking and creativity in higher education. *Cognitive Development, 74*, April–June 2025, 101544. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2025.101544

Lu, Y.-H. (2002). *Theatre in education: Catalyst for change* [Unpublished master's dissertation]. University of Montana.

Massó-Guijarro, B., Peréz-García, P.,& Cruz-González, C. (2021). Applied theatre as a strategy for intervention with disadvantaged groups: A qualitative synthesis. *Educational Research, 63*(3), 337–356. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131881.2021.1945476#abstract

McQuaid, K., & Plastow, J. (2017). Ethnography, applied theatre and Stiwanism: Creative methods in search of praxis amongst men and women in Jinja, Uganda. *Journal of International Development*, *29*(7), 961–980. https://doi:10.1002/jid.3293

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (2005). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. In N. González, L. Moll, & C. Amanti (Eds.), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms* (pp. 71–88). Routledge.

Morreira, S., Luckett, K., Kumalo, S. H., & Ramgotra, M. (2020). Confronting the complexities of decolonising curricula and pedagogy in higher education. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal, 5*(1/2), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2020.1798278

Motos, T., & Ferrandis, D. (2015). *Teatro aplicado: Teatro del oprimido, teatro playback, dramaterapia [Applied theatre: Theatre of the oppressed , playback theatre, drama therapy].* Octaedro.

Neelands, J. (2009). Acting together: Ensembles as a democratic process in art and life. *Research in Drama and Education. 14*(2), 173–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780902868713

Nicholson, H. (2005). *Applied drama: The gift of theatre*. Palgrave Macmillan.

O'Neill, C. (1995). *Drama worlds: A framework for process drama*. Heinemann.

Österlind, E., & Hallgren, E. (2025). Introducing applied drama for learning in higher education. In T. Wall, E. Österlind, & E. Hallgren (Eds.), *Sustainability teaching for impact: How to inspire and engage students using drama* (pp. 13–23). Routledge.

Osterman, K. (2010). Teacher practice and students' sense of belonging. In T. Lovat, R. Toomey, & N. Clement (Eds.), *International research handbook on education values and student wellbeing* (pp. 239–260). Springer.

Prendergast, M., & Saxton, J. (2013). *Applied drama: A facilitator's handbook for working in community*. Intellect.

Preston, S. (2011). Back on whose track? Reframing ideologies of inclusion and misrecognition in a participatory theatre project with young people in London. *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 16*(2), 251–264. https://doi:10.1080/13569783.2011.572370

Saeed, H. (2015). Empowering unheard voices through "Theatre of the Oppressed": Reflections on the legislative theatre project for women in Afghanistan—notes from the field. *Journal of Human Rights Practice 7*(2), 299–326. https://doi:10.1093/jhuman/huu028

Sedano-Solis, A. S. (2019). The Applied Theatre as an interdisciplinary field of research in theatre studies. *Artnodes: Revista de Arte, Ciencia y Tecnología, 23*(2), 104–113. https://doi:10.7238/a.v0i23.3260

Segabutla, M. H., & Evans, R. (2019). Lack of lecturer clarity during instruction: Possible reason for poor throughput? *South African Journal of Higher Education, 33*(3), 115–131. http://dx.doi.org/10.20853/33-3-2224

Shapiro, J., Rucker, L., & Beck, J. (2006). Training the clinical eye and mind: Using the arts to develop medical students' observational and pattern recognition skills. *Medical Education, 40*, 263–268. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02389

Solis, R. P. (2018). Theatre and education creative and innovative experience in vocational education and training. *Journal of Education and Social Policy, 5*(3), 28–34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.56916/ejip.v4i2.1151

Songe-Møller, A. S., & Bjerkestrand, K. V. (2012). Empowerment of citizens in a multicultural society. *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 12*(3), 1–8. https://hdl.handle.net/10642/1551

Sutherland, A. (2011). The role of theatre and embodied knowledge in addressing race in South African higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(5), 728–740. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.593620

Tarlington, C., & Michaels, W. (1995). *Building plays*. Pembroke Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.