



Educação & Formação
ISSN: 2448-3583
Universidade Estadual do Ceará

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Teatro aplicado no ensino superior: um projeto inovador para a formação inicial de educadores1
Educação & Formação, vol. 7, no. 1, e5528, 2022, January-April
Universidade Estadual do Ceará

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25053/redufor.v7i1.e5528>

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Applied theatre in higher education: an innovative project for the initial training of educators

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Abstract

Drama presents multiple possibilities for promoting and enhancing communication, literary, and emotional skills in future educators. Theatre and dramatization have a direct impact on affectivity, provoking truly significant learning with a capacity for transformation, within a playful environment. In this paper, we present the design of an innovative proposal in the university context, which introduces theatre as an educational strategy in the four bachelor's degrees taught in the Faculty of Education (Pre-School Education, Primary Education, Social Education and Pedagogy) at the University of Granada (Spain). This project is implemented by an interdisciplinary team composed of education specialists and drama specialists. The starting point for this work emerges from confidence in the potential of education and communication through words, and also through arts. The fundamental objective is to develop new curricular competencies in the participating students that might be essential to transform the current society in crisis. The expected results of this project would help to achieve a full creative and emotional linguistic-literary education, helped by the impulse and animation to the reading of literary, philosophical, and social texts while showing commitment to the complex and diverse society of today.

Keywords

Applied Theatre; Theatre in Education; Educational Innovation; University; Curricular Competencies.

Teatro aplicado no ensino superior: um projeto inovador para a formação inicial de educadores

Resumo

O drama apresenta múltiplas possibilidades para promover e melhorar as habilidades de comunicação, literária e emocional em futuros educadores. O teatro e a dramatização têm um impacto direto na afetividade, provocando um aprendizado verdadeiramente significativo com capacidade de transformação dentro de um ambiente lúdico. Neste artigo, apresenta-se o desenho de uma proposta inovadora no contexto universitário, que introduz o teatro como estratégia educacional nos quatro bacharelados ministrados na Faculdade de Educação (Educação Pré-Escolar, Educação Primária, Educação Social e Pedagogia) da Universidade de Granada (Espanha). Este projeto é implementado por uma equipe interdisciplinar composta por especialistas em Educação e Dramaturgia. O ponto de partida para este trabalho emerge da confiança no potencial da educação e comunicação através das palavras e também através das artes. O objetivo fundamental é desenvolver novas competências curriculares nos estudantes

participantes que possam ser essenciais para transformar a sociedade atual em crise. Os resultados deste projeto ajudariam a alcançar uma educação linguístico-literária plena, criativa e emocional, ajudada pelo impulso e animação à leitura de textos literários, filosóficos e sociais, ao mesmo tempo que mostrariam compromisso com a sociedade complexa e diversificada de hoje.

Palavras-chave

Teatro Aplicado; Teatro em Educação; Inovação Educacional; Universidade; Competências Curriculares.

El teatro aplicado en la enseñanza superior:**un proyecto innovador para la formación inicial de los educadores****Resumen**

El drama presenta múltiples posibilidades para promover y mejorar las habilidades comunicativas, literarias y emocionales de los futuros educadores. El teatro y la dramatización tienen un impacto directo en la afectividad, provocando un aprendizaje verdaderamente significativo con capacidad transformadora dentro de un entorno lúdico. En este artículo, se presenta el diseño de una propuesta innovadora en el contexto universitario, que introduce el teatro como estrategia educativa en las cuatro licenciaturas que se imparten en la Facultad de Educación (Educación Infantil, Educación Primaria, Educación Social y Pedagogía) de la Universidad de Granada (España). Este proyecto lo lleva a cabo un equipo interdisciplinar compuesto por expertos en Educación y Dramaturgia. El punto de partida de este trabajo surge de la confianza en el potencial de la educación y la comunicación a través de las palabras y también de las artes. El objetivo fundamental es desarrollar en los alumnos participantes nuevas competencias curriculares que puedan ser imprescindibles para transformar la sociedad actual en crisis. Los resultados de este proyecto ayudarían a conseguir una educación lingüístico-literaria plena, creativa y emocional, ayudada por el fomento y la animación a la lectura de textos literarios, filosóficos y sociales, mostrando al mismo tiempo el compromiso con la compleja y diversa sociedad actual.

Palabras clave

Teatro Aplicado; Teatro en la Educación; Innovación Educativa; Universidad; Competencias Curriculares.

1 Introduction

Dramatization, as an educational tool, continues to be neglected in the curricula of the various specialties of teachers in Spanish public universities, as Navarro Solano (2003) anticipated. To foster the communicative, literary, and emotional skills necessary for future educators, drama should be of interest due to its integral and creative nature and mainly because it directly impacts affectivity, provoking truly significant learning with

a capacity for transformation (FELIPPE; SILVA, 2017; MOTOS; NAVARRO 2021; NAVARRO, 2011).

Following the work of several researchers in the field (ACKROYD, 2000; MOTOS; FERRANDIS, 2015; SEDANO-SOLÍS, 2019), this project is part of the “Theatre in Education” initiative, one of the possible variants of “Applied Theatre”. Applied Theatre proposes “[...] a practice that generates critical knowledge from practice to guide it into practice, with the desire to contribute to social change in favor of respect, equality, access to goods and solidarity through the educational capacity of the arts” (MOTOS; FERRANDIS, 2015, p. 11). It involves three essential characteristics (LANDY, 2012; NICHOLSON, 2005; TAYLOR, 2002 *apud* MOTOS; FERRANDIS, 2015): *intentionality* (it seeks to transform personal behaviors), *hybridization* (it refers to theatre as an interdisciplinary praxis) and *otherness* (focused on the other: on benefiting individuals, communities, and societies). In an educational context such as the one being discussed here, theatre applied to education is put at the service of educational objectives in various contexts, both formal and non-formal.

In Spain, the recently created network “Dramatiza”, similar to its homonymous version in Argentina, shows the growing efforts to recognise the essential role of theatre in educational settings (MÉNDEZ-MARTÍNEZ, 2019). In the Spanish context, the development of theatre in education has been promoted by Tomás Motos and Domingo Ferrandis (2015), authors of the first publication in Spain that includes the designation “applied theatre”. Other researchers who are currently promoting the study of the educational possibilities of theatre from different angles and whose work represents a fundamental background to this project include Fernández Rial (2016), Méndez-Martínez and Fernandez-Rio (2020) and Vieites-García (2015).

A brief conceptual nuance can be made between theatre and dramatization. Núñez Cubero and Navarro Solano (2007, p. 227) define *dramatization* (a term commonly used in the educational field) to refer to practices involving theatre, as “[...] socio-personal practice and as a means of communication”. Some authors (MOTOS *et al.*, 2013) differentiate between dramatization and theater, indicating that the latter requires the existence of an audience for its verification. Dramatization, therefore, emphasizes educational processes, while theater focuses more on the results of those processes. In this paper, both terms are used interchangeably, since the educational-

theatrical practices designed for the project, although mainly focused on the processes that are developed with the students, are also presented before an audience at the lecture hall of the Faculty of Education.

The design of the teaching innovation project “INVENTaTe” was presented with the aim of developing new curricular competences for educators in training. It follows an experiential approach, in which the dramatization of texts allows students to rethink their educational role within the school as future teachers and previously as students of these bachelor's degrees. In other words, it is not only the oralising of texts, but also the use that must be made of them through body language, movement and musicality, which leads students to reconsider their educational role. The potential of “INVENTaTe” is derived from the proposed and creative activities that converge in the creation of the title of this project, composed by the lexeme (INVEN-) of the inflexible (-Ta-) Applied Theatre and the suffix (-Te), Theatre in Education.

The fundamental objectives of the proposal are the following: 1) to acquire the necessary literary training through the reading and dramatization of texts of a diverse nature (literary, philosophical, ethical, social); 2) to encourage collective and individual development (BALDWIN, 2014; GARCÍA-GARCÍA; PARADA-MORENO; OSSA-MONTOYA, 2017; MOTOS *et al.*, 2013) through creative strategies; 3) provide social cohesion and empowerment mechanisms for students; and 4) enhance both children's and young adults' knowledge of literature for the specific competence of the future primary School teacher.

2 Methodology

The aim of this project was to promote the creation of a teaching innovation team that adapts the teaching and learning processes to the social and educational challenges of the current context. Through theatre and dramatization, the main goal was that students of the various bachelor's degrees taught in the Faculty of Education (Pre-School Education, Primary Education, Social Education and Pedagogy) could benefit from this tool to improve their oral language, diction, gesticulation, and posture. This could have a positive impact on their careers as students, as they are often required to give oral presentations to their teachers and other classmates, along with oral tests, along with

individual or group tutorials. We also hoped that through the project they would develop key competences as future teaching professionals. In their professional future, they will have to deal with their students, work colleagues, school directors, and inspectors, with whom they are expected to communicate fluently and effectively in order to achieve their objectives.

In general, by means of the discursive strategy of dramatization, a number of key competences are involved in the teacher training of any university bachelor's degree offered at the Faculty of Education and, in particular, in the bachelor's degrees participating in this project. These include linguistic competence as a basic competence, and strategic competence as part of the communicative competence (QUILES, 2021). In this sense, non-verbal communication, body language and gesture movements, which complement words, proxemics or distances between interlocutors and paralinguistic (related to intonation, volume, tone of voice, and facial expressions) are essential. In addition, the lexical competence and rich vocabulary of the students from the Pre-School and Primary Education bachelor's degrees are developed through the readings of the dramatic texts provided. Moreover, those readings must demonstrate good artistic competence of the university students through body language and physical movement (BITTENCOURT; BASSALO, 2021), musicality, and expressive intonation. This is because dramatization consists of representing real or imaginary actions, generally in dialogue, capable of arousing the interest of those who act as spectators. Dramatization has a potentially integrative feature in which one or more characters develop an action using monologue or multi-managed discursive strategies (dialogues, conversations and talks). It uses not only words, but also gestures, pantomime and corporal or musical expression. Thus, dramatization is considered a very complete activity as it combines the four basic tools for this purpose: 1) linguistic expression, 2) corporal expression, 3) visual and artistic expression, and 4) musical rhythmic expression.

The project was implemented by four professors from different departments of the Faculty of Education Sciences at the University of Granada, all of whom have a clear interdisciplinary profile and are connected by a shared purpose: to introduce theatre and dramatization into their teaching practice. The project also included an undergraduate student (who participates in the project through a grant, and who has a theatre and

musical background), along with a theatre teacher, María Megías, from “La estupenda”, Performing Arts, S.G., Granada (Spain).

The previous knowledge of the team encouraged the establishment of working synergies between university teachers, establishing a culture of collaboration and cooperation, which is necessary in this area. Through the tasks of the project, the teachers, together with the professional collaborator of the Performing Arts and the undergraduate student of the project, have generated dynamics of learning between peers, where they could share ideas and educational strategies that result in an overall improvement in the quality of teaching.

The participants of the project were undergraduate students of Primary Education, who were enrolled in the subjects taught by the collaborating teachers. The indirect beneficiaries of the project are the teachers and collaborators themselves, as well as the students of the other bachelor's degrees taught in the Faculty of Education at the University of Granada, who might attend the exhibitions and shows resulting from the work process and who have not participated directly in the project.

Regarding the phases of the project, a first phase was established at the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year in which the first contacts were made between the members of the work team. During this stage, the bibliography was co-analyzed and the material was selected in a collaborative way.

It is understood that evaluation is a process aimed at making decisions with the objective of promoting improvement and reaching higher levels of quality. Therefore, when planning the evaluation of the “INVENTaTe” project the intention was to assess the degree of achievement of the project's objectives in order to make improvements.

In education through Arts, it is not enough to simply call for experiential processes without encouraging subsequent reflection on these processes. Art not only serves to teach how the world is, but “[...] also to show why it is like this and how it can be transformed” (BOAL, 2011, p. 115). Therefore, the evaluative component is an essential aspect of the implemented activity. Likewise, a training session has been held by the acting teacher, with the aim of providing dramatic resources to the teachers of the subjects involved and the holder of the project's support scholarship. In sum, the techniques offered are as follows: to make sense of the text, to breathe, to not move without a defined goal, to project the voice, vocalizing, giving rhythm and melody to the

text, having a clear intention, giving emotion, feeling the body and facial expression and enjoying the performance.

In a second phase, the group-class has demonstrated active involvement in observing and evaluating the creative process of each student, through various diagnostic tests. The third phase consisted of analyzing the results of the diagnostic tests, and the adjustments considered pertinent in the teaching planning (practices), as well as in the evaluation of the subjects involved in the project. In the fourth phase, dramatization activities were incorporated into the planning of practical tasks of the subjects involved (story writing, life stories, theatre, and music) and the intermediate evaluation of the project was carried out.

The fifth phase was reserved for the final evaluation of the subjects involved. The project has initially been evaluated in a procedural and summative way. Special emphasis has been placed on the importance of evaluating the intermediate effectiveness of the process, as this allows for improvements to be made to the educational process underway and adjustments to be made as necessary.

Finally, the sixth phase involves the scientific dissemination and networking of the most relevant results achieved through a blog created by the coordinator of this project (blogs.uece.br/inventate). In this project, evaluations are approached in a participatory way. Assessment is made not only of student learning within the bachelor's degree, but also of the development of teachers, considering that the project aims to introduce improvements (through drama tools) in teachers' performance and to renew certain pedagogical approaches that are considered obsolete. Therefore, there is an attempt to encourage critical reflection among the teaching group that has implemented the project, to rethink their own professional practice and to encourage the reflectivity of the teachers involved.

3 Results and discussion

The final results of the INVENTaTe project are summarized below:

- The development of teaching materials constitutes basic performance guidelines for the dramatization of texts in the university classroom.

- Audiovisual material for the final sample of the work done by both agents implicated in this project (teachers and students), in the subject *Didactics of Spanish Language and Literature* taught in Year 2 of the primary education bachelor's degree (Academic Year 2020/21).
- Audiovisual material for the final sample of the work produced by both agents implicated in this project (teachers and students) in the subject Language Education (4th year) Primary Education with a specialism in Special Education Needs (SEN) (Academic Year 2020/21).
- A final representative sample of the work created by the participating students, in which they are encouraged to use their imagination and creativity for staging the show. The show was initially expected to be held at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Granada, but was finally presented online due to the exceptional post-Covid-19 circumstances.
- Although the expected impact of the results of this educational innovation project was limited to the effective transformation of the teaching context of the participating interdisciplinary team, it was also anticipated that the final audiovisual documents are disseminated on the main channel intended for this purpose, through the creation of a blog ([Blogs.ugr.es/inventate](http://blogs.ugr.es/inventate)). Files and audiovisual documents created by the project coordinator will be uploaded, as well as all the materials created by the teaching staff to be used by the whole educational community.

All of the above audiovisual materials can be found on the blog created specifically for the innovative project (<http://blogs.ugr.es/inventate>), as a basic guide to the dramatizations carried out as part of the classroom experiences. This blog also incorporates entries with the most recent news of the events that are taking place in the city and province, as well as links to interesting websites related to theatre.

One of the sections that must not be forgotten in this blog is the one called "Dramatization Workshops". These workshops have been carried out since the 2018/19 academic year, as a non-formal educational and voluntary activity, through practice and as "Field Practices", an activity economically supported by the Support Program for Practical Teaching in the Vice-rectorate for Teaching at the University of Granada. In these dramatization workshops, we also cover dramatized reading, with very small

groups (maximum of 12 people) for a total duration of 15 hours (with 0.5 free credits). In these sessions, all types of suitable texts are used as tools to understand and put into action the potential of future teachers and educators as speakers. In addition, we introduce them to the technique of interpreting with the use of text-based resources.

Below is a summary of some of the personal opinions of the students who participated in INVENTaTe during the 2020/21 Academic Year:

I thought it was a very interesting proposal and, in my opinion, it should be continued with other courses. In this edition there were only a few of us who participated, but it was very good. I loved learning a bit about different techniques used in theatre, to express ourselves better, to lose our embarrassment [...].

Very interactive, very dynamic. It was great.

I loved it. As the sessions were going on I realized how much progress I made and it helped me to have more confidence in myself and to open up a little bit more to people. Besides, both teachers were great.

Through creative methods, theatrical practices can facilitate educational processes that promote the cognitive-valuable and praxis development of people. These practices allow for the development of creative and critical skills, questioning what is assumed about the world and deconstructing prejudices (MCKENNA, 2014). Likewise, the theoretical-practical formulas that combine theatre, education and social intervention constitute powerful moderating mechanisms of social vulnerability and contribute to the social transformation and empowerment of excluded groups (CAPOUS-DESYLLAS; MORGAINE, 2018; MACKEY, 2016), which are key issues in the field of social sciences and education.

Moreover, some studies have focused on the impact of artistic methodologies for professional development and teacher training (DOBSON; STEPHENSON, 2018; GARCÍA GÓMEZ; DE VICENTE HERNANDO, 2020). Others investigate the applicability of theatre (FLENSNER; LARSSON; SÄLJÖ, 2019; NURI; BAYRAM TOPDAL, 2014), music (LAGE-GÓMEZ; CREMADES-ANDREU, 2020; PALKKI, 2020) or dance (CONESA; ANGOSTO, 2017; ROKKA *et al.*, 2019) in educational improvement and the development of student creativity. The scientific literature discussing these experiences highlights the potential of the arts to promote collective and individual development and the learning of new codes of expression and dialogue

(MUÑOZ BELLERIN; CORDERO RAMOS, 2017). It also emphasizes their potential to develop strategies to deal with conflicts in a peaceful and creative way (AGUIAR, 2020).

5 Final considerations

One of the aims of “INVENTaTe” was to encourage students to develop civic and citizenship skills and to develop critical attitudes and commitment to the education profession. Dramatic literature is put into play in a dialogical and participative way, thus encouraging students to share their readings and use their dramatization tools as they acquire them, with the aim of arousing their interest in the reading experience. It is hoped that this project contributes to the cultural and personal enrichment of today's society by creating individuals who understand their environment and encouraging desirable “healthy habits”, such as reading habits, which promote the sustainability of a better and fairer world (MOLINA; DEL MORAL-BARRIGÜETE, 2019).

Another of the strengths of the “INVENTaTe” project is that it promotes the use of new technologies to record and impart knowledge. This issue is of vital importance nowadays, after the circumstances of forced confinement resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The project promotes a critical appropriation of digital resources to foster the development of digital and communication skills, which are essential in the 21st century society. Thus, technologies are using as a working tool, recording the sessions so that both students and teachers can see their practices, advances, and possible improvements. These recordings also strengthen their skills and knowledge and, subsequently, are useful to continue transmitting this knowledge through online classes and group practices, among others. It is hoped that the interpretative skills shared through technological means can help students to gain confidence, to speak in public, to be familiar with their personal tools to transmit stories to an audience, to generate attention in their audience, as well as to feel more at ease during the classes attended and taught in the future.

Likewise, dramatization as an interactive tool promotes the use of verbal, non-verbal, literary, artistic, and musical language, for more effective forms of communication

that are more human and integral to people in today's society both inside and outside the classroom (whether this is face-to-face or virtual, depending on the circumstances).

In short, dramatization is an appropriate tool for understanding and putting into action the potential of our future teachers and educators as speakers, using techniques of interpretation with dramatic texts. In stage creation, the individual and the common, the self and the others, come together simultaneously; dramatization thus stands out for its capacity to appeal to the group, while allowing the expression of singularity.

Art allows us to work from a plurality of perspectives and to emphasize the richness of the processes of joint construction and exchange of knowledge. It also allows to construct meanings and senses together, and to break with the excesses of narcissism. In this regard, the professor Fernández-López (2015, p. 95) states:

The artistic group exercise re-educates us in humility, in the common project, in responsibility, co-responsibility and beyond, in the shared experience and pleasure of the process, the product and its exhibition to others. In all these processes we learn to recognize mistakes in front of others, to exchange criticisms, to support and sustain the others, to contain the group, to learn to let ourselves be helped and to maintain the individual levels that together make up a whole.

The creation of an artistic stage production requires a joint and coordinated effort to awaken and renew links with the environment (ALLAN, 2014). That is why the union of several teachers from different areas of knowledge in education, together with professionals from the dramatic arts, represents an opportunity to establish a dialogue between disciplines and people with various types of different knowledge, which can lead to an overall improvement in educational practice and the training of future educators.

To sum up, the expected results of this project have been achieved. We believe that a full creative and emotional linguistic-literary education has been fulfilled, aided by the promotion and encouragement of reading literary, philosophical, social texts committed to today's complex and diverse society which promotes gender equality, healthy living and environmental sustainability through dramatic texts that can offer a quality education. In addition, this educational experience has raised the awareness of future societies to promote an optimal coexistence with others and with our planet. INVENTaTe also aimed to promote the creation of an interdisciplinary team that makes use of innovative teaching practices such as this one, which could reinvigorate teaching and learning processes so that these are adapted to the current society in crisis,

combining creativity, language and literature, music and Applied Theatre (AT) in Education. This interdisciplinary team involves the following three departments: *Didactics of Spanish Language and Literature*, *Didactics of Musical Expression* and *General Didactics and School Organization*.

With all these didactics principles, it was successfully articulated an innovative training proposal, aimed at increasing the training of the future primary school teachers, providing students with learning opportunities to incorporate knowledge, scientific work processes and skills or resources specific to the professional of this bachelor's degree.

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Responsible editor: Lia Machado Fiuza Fialho

Ad hoc reviewers: Luís Mattos and Zósimo Pena

How to cite this article (ABNT):

DEL MORAL-BARRIGÜETE, Cristina; GUIJARRO, Belén Massó. Applied theatre in higher education: an innovative project for the initial training of educators. *Educ. Form.*, Fortaleza, v. 7, n. 1, e5528, 2021. Available at:

<https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/redufor/article/view/5528>



Received on June 7th, 2021.

Accepted on July 12th, 2021.

Published on January 1st, 2022.

