

Teacher Training in Pedagogical Communication Through Drama-Based Practices

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Abstract

The integration of digital technologies into education is reshaping the role of the teacher, placing renewed emphasis on the development of strong pedagogical communication skills. Effective communication remains central to successful teaching and is increasingly recognized as vital for supporting students’ emotional and mental well-being in both traditional and digital learning environments. This study explores the impact of drama-based training programs on the development of communication skills among pre-service teachers in Portugal. Two cohorts participated: one engaged in a long-term course embedded within a higher education curriculum, and the other in a short-term Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) involving international collaboration. Data were collected through participant questionnaires and reflective activities, including verbal feedback and written diaries. The results indicate that drama-based learning fosters greater confidence, emotional awareness, and interpersonal competence – key components of effective pedagogical communication. The study draws on the theoretical frameworks of Dorothy Heathcote’s (1995) *Mantle of the Expert* and Augusto Boal’s (1979, 1995) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, highlighting the potential of drama education to enrich teacher training and prepare educators for the communicative demands of contemporary classrooms.

Keywords: drama education, pedagogical communication, teacher education, experiential learning, higher education.

1. Introduction

The growing integration of digital technologies in education is transforming the way teaching and learning take place. As classrooms become more technologically equipped, new modes of accessing knowledge and developing skills emerge. However, these changes extend far beyond the tools themselves, profoundly affecting the interaction between teachers and students.

Where face-to-face communication once formed the foundation of classroom interaction, digital platforms and online learning environments now play a predominant role. This transformation reflects the expectations of a generation of students who have grown up surrounded by digital media and are accustomed to interacting with content through technology. Artificial intelligence (AI) also plays an increasingly significant role in education: for teachers, it offers tools to generate content, personalize instruction, and assess student learning; for students,

it provides support in completing assignments, conducting research, collaborating in groups, and preparing for exams. Alongside these evident benefits, however, crucial questions arise regarding the appropriate use of technology and the need to maintain a healthy balance within the educational process.

Despite these advances, it is important not to forget that pedagogical communication remains central to effective teaching. Whether in digital or face-to-face contexts, the teacher's ability to communicate clearly, empathetically, and meaningfully is essential. In teacher education, the development of relational and communicative competencies is a key element in preparing future educators to navigate the complexities of contemporary classrooms.

In this current context, researchers are increasingly concerned about some unintended effects of the digital transformation in education. Studies suggest that growing dependence on digital tools may contribute to a decline in meaningful human interaction in schools (Woodruff et al., 2024). Likewise, the reduction of face-to-face communication may compromise the development of students' emotional intelligence, empathy, and social sensitivity. Selwyn (2024) notes that although AI can perform repetitive tasks efficiently, it lacks the capacity to handle the emotional subtleties and relational dynamics that often arise in real educational settings. Furthermore, as digital technologies streamline learning processes, some students may lose access to deeper learning experiences that develop through effort, dialogue, and interpersonal engagement. The convenience of obtaining instant answers can come at the expense of exploration, critical thinking, and emotional growth.

An OECD report (2025) on child well-being in the digital age raises similar concerns. The document introduces the concept of digital well-being, which encompasses the physical, emotional, and educational effects of technology on children (OECD, 2025: 31). The report highlights the close connection between students' online and offline lives, showing how their digital experiences shape behaviors, relationships, and school engagement. As children spend more time in digital environments, many become progressively disconnected from real-world social interactions.

Considering their developmental stage, children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of this disconnection. Therefore, support strategies should not be limited to controlling screen time or access to digital content; it is necessary to provide real, face-to-face opportunities to develop emotional awareness, practice self-expression, and cultivate healthy digital habits. UNICEF (2024) promotes a comprehensive framework for child well-being that includes emotional regulation, creativity, self-confidence, and social connection. These competencies are important not only for personal growth but also as protective factors within a digital context. Teachers, as daily points of contact in children's lives, play a crucial role in fostering these abilities. Educators are not merely facilitators of knowledge, they are communicators, mentors, and emotional guides.

Effective pedagogical communication is fundamental to creating safe, inclusive, and responsive learning environments. It is also a determining factor in student development and mindset formation (Tokhirova, 2023), involving intentional interactions that build trust and simultaneously support students' academic and emotional growth. Therefore, initial teacher education must strengthen the essential skills needed to create supportive environments grounded in positive communication and acceptance within the classroom and the wider educational community.

A central point in this discussion concerns how teachers can use appropriate teaching techniques to ensure classroom effectiveness. Some researchers distinguish between instructional communication and communication pedagogy (Goodboy, 2018): instructional communication emphasizes clarity of instruction, the choice of linguistic tools for the precise expression of ideas, and the explanation of new concepts; communication pedagogy, on the other hand, encompasses

relationships between students and teachers, classroom interactions, and the creation of a positive atmosphere that promotes teaching and learning. The set of competencies involved in pedagogical communication includes, among others, the ability to question, listen, and reflect critically

A key challenge is to develop these competencies during university training, before the start of the teaching career. Experiential learning and educational drama hold great potential for promoting the development of these communicative skills.

1.1 Drama and education

The concept of theatre as a space for dialogue—where social learning takes place through connection with others, the construction of life's meaning, and the empowerment of individuals to communicate and express themselves – has been further developed by numerous scholars and practitioners (Wagner, 1976; Bolton, 1998; Boal, 1979, 2006; Jackson, 2007; Neelands & Goode, 2015). Through their contributions, drama and theatre have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to foster competence, agency, and meaningful engagement, serving both as powerful educational tools and as transformative experiences within the classroom.

The relationship between drama and education has been profoundly shaped by pioneering practitioners and researchers such as Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton in the United Kingdom, who developed and disseminated innovative approaches for integrating drama and theatre into educational practice during the 1960s and 1970s. Their theatrical methods, techniques, and dramatic strategies actively engage students in constructing their own learning. One notable approach, the *Mantle of the Expert* (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), enables students to explore various areas of the curriculum through dramatic enactment.

Dorothy Heathcote, initially as a teacher in English schools and later as a professor at the University of Newcastle, developed a pedagogical method in which children and young people are challenged to assume the roles of “experts” and to act with the authority of expertise. In this framework, students adopt active roles and, through dramatized narratives, are encouraged to articulate ideas, emotions, and perspectives, thereby fostering empathy and mutual understanding. By assuming responsibility, exercising judgment, and engaging with awareness, students observe, assess, and act with intentionality. This empowerment stimulates participants' intrinsic interest, transforming them from passive observers into active, engaged learners.

The use of theatre for educational purposes has evolved differently across contexts. Anthony Jackson (2007) has suggested that perhaps the most significant and far-reaching influence on what is known as Theatre in Education and Theatre for Development derives from Augusto Boal's advocacy of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979, 1995), particularly his Forum Theatre techniques, which have been widely adopted and adapted in diverse educational and developmental settings.

By fostering new forms of communication and dialogue between performers and observers, these theatrical forms and drama-based educational methods center the active engagement of the audience as a fundamental component of the learning and transformative process. The provocative concept of the “spect-actor” challenges the traditional boundary between audience and stage, establishing a direct and tangible connection between the events occurring within a theatrical performance and their potential impact in the world beyond Forum Theatre – a technique in which fictional narratives based on real-life problems are performed and subsequently replayed and modified by the audience to explore possible solutions – transforms spectators into active participants, or spect-actors (Jackson, 2007: 136).

In educational contexts, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator and mentor, guiding both the group and individual students through the exploration of dilemmas, thereby fostering

critical reflection and nurturing creative thinking (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). This approach cultivates horizontal pedagogical relationship, characterized by trust, reciprocal communication, and shared responsibility, which is essential for the development of effective pedagogical interaction (Tokhirova, 2023).

The present research focuses on pedagogical communication and aims to analyze the perceptions of university students from different educational and cultural contexts regarding their readiness to perform the professional role of teachers, emphasizing a transformative learning attitude during their initial teacher education at university through exposure to the Educational Drama approach. The primary objective of the study was to assess how students perceived the impact of drama-based training on the development of their communication skills.

2. Methodology

The research indicators focused on key components of transformative learning, specifically participants' awareness of the expectations associated with the teacher's role and their perceptions of the teacher's function in contemporary schools, particularly in relation to teacher–student communication and interaction.

The study involved a total of 151 undergraduate students enrolled in pedagogy-related degree programs, who were divided into two groups according to the format and duration of the communication skills training delivered through drama-based methods.

Group 1 comprised 133 undergraduate students from the Bachelor's Degree in Basic Education at the School of Education, Polytechnic Institute of Porto (ESE-IPP). The course *Dramatic Expression/Theatre* is part of the first-year curriculum of the Bachelor's program at ESSE – IPP, with 67.5 contact hours over one semester.

Group 2 included 21 students from various European universities, namely the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (Portugal), Sofia University (Bulgaria), the University of Maribor (Slovenia), the University of Valencia (Spain), and the University of Bucharest (Romania). These students participated in a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), supported by the Erasmus+ program, entitled *Applied Theatre in Education: Communication and Development in Learning Communities*. This 35 present hours, short-term intensive program, held in Poro, Portugal from June 24 to 29, 2025, emphasized the application of drama and theatre techniques in educational and social contexts and featured highly practical, collaborative, and immersive in-person sessions.

Data were collected through:

- Participant questionnaires, designed to capture students' reflections, levels of satisfaction, and perceptions of skill and competences development during and after the training.
- Reflective activities, including verbal feedback (audio recordings collected at the end of sessions, addressing the impact of the techniques and exercises on participants' communication, openness, and interpersonal relationships) and written diaries, in which students described and reflected on their experiences, emotional responses, and perceptions of personal and professional challenges and transformation throughout the program.

The indicators for the questionnaires, used in the survey are based on the document *Perfil dos Alunos à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória* (PASEO, Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Education), approved by the Portuguese Ministry of Education through Dispatch No. 6478/2017 of July 26. This document serves as a national reference framework guiding educational policies and practices, defining a common matrix for curriculum design, planning, implementation, and evaluation across all schools. It emphasizes the development of

key competencies – complex combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes – that are central to students' education during compulsory schooling.

Data analysis followed a mixed-methods approach: quantitative and qualitative. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize questionnaire responses, while content analysis was applied to the diaries and audio recordings to identify recurring themes and qualitative evidence related to the development of communicative and relational competencies.

The primary objective of the study was to assess how students perceived the impact of drama-based training on the development of their communication skills. The study also aimed to identify the specific ways in which drama techniques contributed to the development of pedagogical communication among future teachers.

Convinced that “Art is a special form of knowledge” (Boal 2006: 20), to better analyze and understand the processes and impact of drama-based practices - such as drama games, image and forum theatre (Boal, 1979, 2009), or frozen frames and process drama (Heathcote, 1976, 1995; O`Neil, 1992) – and their subsequent reflection and processing, as well as the individual and collective creation of theatrical pieces, this study seeks to explore the following question: How does one move from statements such as “theatre isn't for me,” “I'm a shy and reserved person,” or “I don't like being exposed,” to expressions like “I didn't know theatre could be like this” or “I didn't know I would love doing theatre”? Furthermore, how does this transformation influence participants' understanding of the teaching–learning process?

3. Results

In both groups analyzed, a common finding emerged: a growing awareness of the importance of educational drama activities in fostering positive and open attitudes within the “Self – Group” relationship. Participants also demonstrated a distinctly positive attitude toward the potential influence of these techniques on their future professional practice as teachers, recognizing themselves as future agents of positive communication within their classrooms. Overall, the data highlight the recognition of drama's relevance in shaping teachers' professional identity and in developing tools that enhance teacher – student communication and relationships.

The analysis also compares students' perceptions “before” and “after” the training, revealing the awakening of an awareness that, for many, had previously remained dormant. When asked to self-assess across several competencies, based on PASEO (2017), we considered as significant for their role of teachers (awareness and control of body and voice; ability to improvise and be spontaneous; creativity and imagination; artistic competence and aesthetic sensitivity; knowledge of drama and theatre languages; communication and interpersonal relationships; collaboration; autonomy and initiative; ability to internalize and reflect; critical thinking; problem-solving; resilience; and self-confidence), the results reveal a clear pattern. Observation of the data visualizations indicates that while the pre-training responses were more evenly distributed, the post-training responses clustered predominantly in positions 4 and 5 (on a 5-point scale, where 1 represents the minimum and 5 the maximum), with only residual representation in positions 1, 2, and 3. This shift demonstrates a qualitative leap in students' self-awareness regarding their personal and professional growth, their relationships with themselves and others, and their development as future education professionals.

Table 1. Assessment before starting the experience

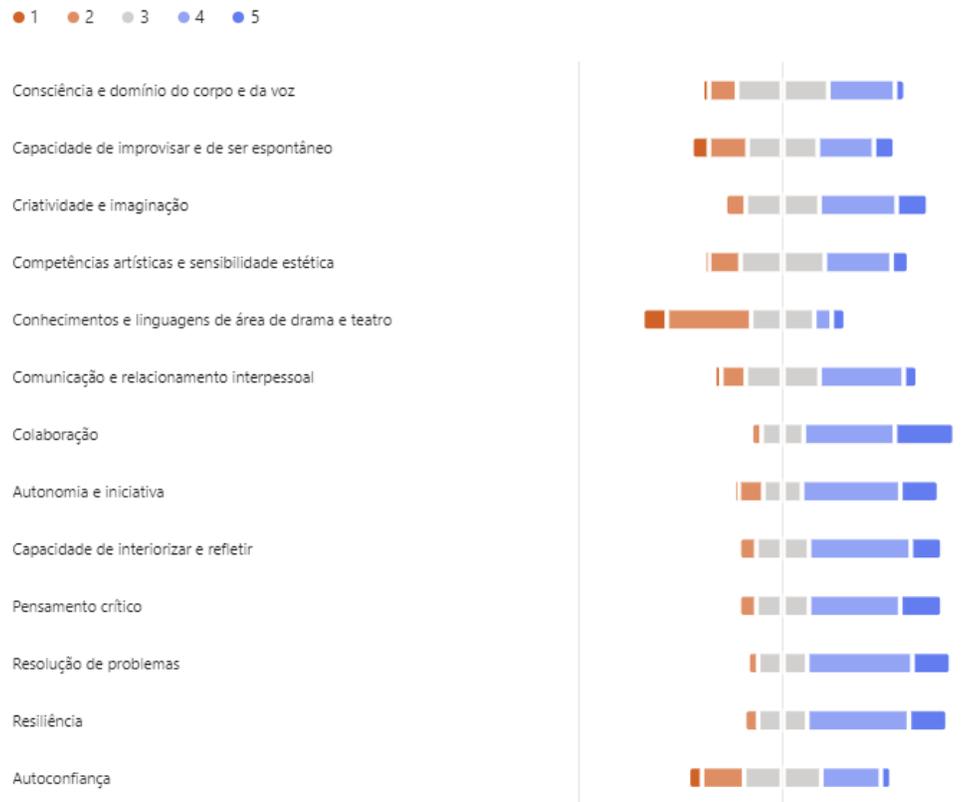


Table 2. Assessment after completing the experience



When analyzing the testimonies recorded in the Logbooks and shared orally in group circles at the end of sessions, a clear pattern emerges: each participant demonstrates an individual awareness of the challenges they will face in their future professional practice – the “stage” they will occupy in front of their classes or groups, guiding and mediating the teaching and learning processes of their students. Participants expressed intense emotions and reflective thoughts, such as: “*How can I truly teach each of my students?*” or “*How can I develop a global communication with my body that fosters participation, attention, and curiosity?*” There was unanimous recognition of the positive impact of Educational Drama on the development of various personal and interpersonal competencies, including increased self-confidence and self-esteem, greater emotional awareness and empathy, and enhanced interpersonal competence through collaborative dialogue, active listening, and valuing the perspectives of each group member.

“Drama Expression is much more than performance: it is listening, it is empathy, it is presence.” – Participant A

“Observation proved to be a powerful technique for understanding others better. I realized that each person has their own unique way of expressing themselves: some use their entire body to communicate, while others convey emotions with just a glance, a facial expression, or a simple gesture.” – Participant B

“By observing them I first learned that we are all capable of bringing out things in ourselves that are as spontaneous as they are beautiful, that we all have the chance to fail but also another opportunity to try again, and mainly that if we contribute our opinion, we can improve something.” – Participant C

“I discovered that I am more creative, more open, and more capable of engaging than I thought. I can work well with others, even when barriers arise.” – Participant D

“I realized that I don’t need to be perfect or know everything to be present in the moment. I can be nervous, I can make mistakes, but that doesn’t prevent me from growing.” – Participant E

“Throughout this course, I learned through the body, gestures, gaze, and presence. And that taught me more than many theoretical contents. I realized that dramatic expression is not ‘theatre to show to parents’; it is a language for personal and collective development.” – Participant F

Other reflections from students highlight how the practice in sessions influenced their envisioned professional practice:

“Attending this class has been a continuous, practical, and reflective learning experience; I enjoyed learning in every session and observed my own evolution as well as that of my peers.” – Participant G

“These activities have been highly important for our future work as teachers/educators. For example, using non-verbal communication to energize activities helps students understand that communication can take multiple forms.” – Participant H

In Group 1, participants also recognized that the process of empowerment and activation of communicative capacities, whether through creating or being observed by the group – is inherently transformative, sometimes challenging but ultimately fostering personal and collective growth:

“...another learning experience was realizing the power of improvisation.” – Participant I

“Although our story creation supported by objects was not fully structured, when it was our turn to present, we managed to tell a story, even generating good ideas we had not considered during the discussion.” – Participant J

Reflections, both written and oral, emphasized the positive effect of the sessions on the development of skills, qualities, and meaningful learning, suggesting transferable principles, methods, and best practices for communication in university and school contexts:

“We leave with our ‘teacher training backpack’ much fuller in terms of knowledge, and filled with emotion and enthusiasm to carry out our practice with even greater motivation.” – Participant K

4. Discussion

As a pedagogical approach, Educational Drama integrates theatrical practices with the aim of promoting meaningful learning, socio-emotional skills, and personal development. It differs from traditional theatre in that it does not seek to produce a performative object for presentation but rather uses the creative process of theatrical language as a space for reflection, social interaction and the construction of knowledge and learning (Neelands & Goode, 2015). This approach strengthens participants’ critical and creative abilities, allowing them to experience multiple realities and reflect on complex situations of everyday life in a safe context, mediated by the teacher or educator, who acts as a facilitator of the process and a guide for reflection. By valuing creative process, emotional expression, and critical reflection, this approach places aesthetic experience at the service of learning, while simultaneously promoting pedagogical, relational, and artistic development, capable of fostering deep learning, strengthened interpersonal relationships, and essential life skills for social participation.

In both Heathcote's and Boal's models, the use of theatrical techniques in educational contexts enables the creation of cooperative learning communities in which error is understood as an integral part of the creative process and improvisation as a space for freedom and discovery. In addressing the challenges faced by contemporary education, these models demonstrate that this approach facilitates not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the formation of citizens capable of thinking critically, communicating effectively, and interacting ethically and responsibly within society (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Ultimately, it allows for a profound integration of cognition and affectivity, supporting transformative learning by making of meanings (Jackson, 2007).

The contributions of educational drama to the acquisition of communicative and relational tools, as well as to the construction of professional identity, can be found into some strategies and languages of Drama and Theatre like active participation, quality presence – “here and now,” individual and collective creation as an experience. In Drama-based activities students are engaged physically, emotionally, and mentally. The whole person participates in performance, bringing their integrity:

“I learned to use my body and voice in different ways to express and communicate with others. Through this, I discovered aspects of my personality that had been ‘hidden’ from me.” – Participant M

“Certain exercises, especially body and voice warm-ups, helped me become more uninhibited and open to spontaneity. Many of my difficulties related to introversion and speaking softly were largely overcome.” – Participant N

The analysis revealed a significant shift in participants' perceptions of theatre and its role in education. Initially, many participants expressed resistance or apprehension, describing themselves as shy, reserved, or uncomfortable with exposure. Through the engagement in drama-based practices—particularly forum theatre, image theatre, and drama games—participants began to experience a sense of inclusion, agency, and creative freedom.

The resonance of these experiences persists in students' bodily and emotional memory, emphasizing the importance of learning by doing:

“At the end of our warm-ups, I felt a release of tension and was more focused on what was to come.” – Participant O

“The warm-up marks the start of the class, integrates the group, and can prepare children for upcoming activities.” – Participant O

Teacher training begins with developing the ability to engage entirely in the “here and now,” which is foundational for authentic, human communication. Presence in this state creates transformative learning opportunities in dramatic activities:

“I had many ideas coming to mind whenever the teacher gave new tasks, ideas that grew even bigger with help from classmates.” – Participant P

This quality of presence is particularly challenging for a generation constantly online. Fully engaging in the present moment fosters self-confidence and internal satisfaction.

A recurring theme across participants' reflections was the discovery of theatre as a collaborative and exploratory process rather than a performative or evaluative one. Statements such as “*I didn't know theatre could be like this*” and “*I never thought I would enjoy doing theatre*” illustrate this transformation. Participants reported increased self-confidence, enhanced communication skills, and a greater willingness to engage in group dynamics.

Moreover, this attitudinal change extended beyond the artistic experience itself, influencing participants' broader understanding of the teaching–learning process. They began to view learning as a participatory and co-creative act, rather than a unidirectional transmission of

knowledge. The findings suggest that drama-based pedagogies not only promote personal expression and social connection but also foster a more holistic and experiential approach to education.

The impact of Educational Drama is evident as a pedagogical tool that aligns with contemporary educational models emphasizing the holistic development of students, encompassing not only individual growth but also the enhancement of group cohesion and the strengthening of interpersonal communication. Through collaborative engagement, participants develop skills in teamwork, conflict resolution, and shared responsibility, thereby reinforcing interpersonal relationships and fostering an appreciation of cultural and social diversity.

The recognition of drama and theatre as essential components of teacher education and professional development has become increasingly urgent in the digital age, particularly given the challenges it poses for developing in-person communication skills. Higher education institutions therefore bear a critical responsibility in designing and implementing programmes that prepare and support a new generation of educators, capable of adopting comprehensive, holistic, and flexible pedagogical approaches while fostering the interpersonal and expressive competencies necessary for effective teaching and meaningful engagement.

The methodologies intrinsic to Drama and Theatre – such as active participation, heightened present-moment awareness, and processes of individual and collective creation – play a substantive role in developing learners' attitudes, skills, knowledge, and competencies. Moreover, these practices underscore the pedagogical relevance and transformative capacity of drama based methods, positioning them as both instrumental tools and integral aims within contemporary educational frameworks.

5. Conclusion

In a generation increasingly immersed in the digital realm, the cultivation of a meaningful and authentic presence through drama-based activities emerges as both essential and urgent, yet inherently challenging. Engagement that integrates physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions within social interactions through drama facilitates experiences of intrinsic satisfaction and deep psychological immersion, even within constructed or fictive realities. Such immersive participation not only supports the development of self-confidence and personal fulfillment but also fosters enhanced interpersonal connectedness and communicative competence. Through this iterative and reflective process, participants are able to interrogate and reaffirm their identities, cultivate empathetic and effective modes of communication, and advance their learning trajectories in socially, emotionally, and cognitively enriched contexts, thereby highlighting the transformative potential of drama as both a pedagogical tool and a vehicle for holistic education

In an educational context increasingly shaped by digitalization and changing communication modes, it is imperative to refocus on the essence of teaching and learning and on the role of the teacher. Beyond being a mere transmitter of knowledge, the teacher acts as a mediator of experiences, a sensitive communicator, and an emotional guide whose actions directly influence both learning quality and student well-being.

Within this framework, drama practices in education – as developed by Dorothy Heathcote and further explored by Gavin Bolton and Augusto Boal – assume renewed relevance. Drama, understood as an experiential and relational methodology, provides a safe space where teachers and students can experiment with roles, listen, question, act, reflect critically, and develop affective, social, and communicative skills (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Boal, 2006, 2009). These practices integrate body, emotion, and thought into a learning process that transcends rationality, valuing dialogue and empathy as core dimensions of human formation.

Through strategies such as *Mantle of the Expert*, dramatization, or *Forum Theatre*, educators create opportunities for students to actively engage in problem-solving situations, developing self-confidence, emotional awareness, empathy, and interpersonal competence. Dramaturgical experiences significantly contribute to holistic education, help students understand the world and themselves more deeply, promoting transformative learning.

In an era in which communication is increasingly mediated by digital technologies, drama functions as a pedagogical counterbalance to depersonalized educational relationships. It underscores the value of human encounter, attentive listening, and presence, fostering the capacity to perceive others with sensitivity and understanding. Drama is not merely a teaching technique but an educational philosophy that places human beings – creative, relational, and ethical – at the center of the learning process.

Consequently, it remains essential to continually reflect on the essence of education, balancing technological innovation with pedagogical practices grounded in human experience. Drama-based activities are fundamental in both initial and continuing teacher education, as well as in social sciences instruction, supporting the integration of knowing, feeling, and acting. Furthermore, collaborative and international learning experiences should be encouraged to facilitate the exchange of perspectives and pedagogical practices across cultural contexts. Such global dialogue reinforces drama as a universal language of empathy and mutual understanding, contributing to the formation of critical, creative, and emotionally aware citizens.

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