

A Study on Strategies for Cultivating Empathy in University Students Through Educational Drama Curriculum

Tingting Zhao

Zhujiang College, South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510900, China

ABSTRACT

The digital revolution is reshaping societal structures at an unprecedented pace. In this transformative era, emotional empathy is essential for effective communication, cross-cultural collaboration and innovative problem solving. It also serves as the psychological foundation for building harmonious social relationships and cultivating civic virtues and social responsibility. However, contemporary university students, although enjoying technological conveniences, face the risk of emotional detachment and an 'empathy gap' caused by superficial interpersonal interactions. Traditional moral education courses often prove inadequate in fostering deep emotional engagement. Addressing these challenges, educational drama curriculum emerge as a promising solution. This presents relevant research on strategies for cultivating empathy among university students through educational drama curriculum. It is intended as a reference for colleagues in the industry and others who are interested.

KEYWORDS

Educational drama; Empathic ability; University students; Emotional education

1 Introduction

Educational drama is a pedagogical methodology that integrates education with theatrical elements. Consequently, the integration of educational drama courses within university curricula is indicative of a comprehensive adoption of the "holistic education" philosophy. The approach is designed to enhance students' emotional awareness, cultivate their social understanding and ethical judgment, and establish a solid foundation for building meaningful interpersonal connections in public life and demonstrating exceptional collaborative competencies.

2 Theoretical basis

2.1 An overview of educational drama

The genre of educational drama is distinct from technical training for professional actors. Fundamentally, it embodies a comprehensive pedagogical framework dedicated to holistic human development. One of the institution's primary functions is the skilful integration of theatrical elements, including character dynamics, situational conflicts, dialogue, improvisation, and performance, into potent educational instruments. These elements are designed to guide students in acquiring multidimensional experiences, encompassing emotional awareness, within the dramatic milieu they are tasked with creating. In contradistinction to professional stage productions, educational drama curricula prioritise the process over the result, with a focus on students' internal journey of participation, experience, reflection, and growth. The forms of educational drama are diverse and distinctive: some deeply embed it as a methodological tool across disciplines, enabling students to explore knowledge through theatrical means; others centre on social issues, using dramatic strategies to immerse students in virtual theatrical worlds where they solve real-world problems. This finding indicates that educational drama functions as an inclusive system, offering students a hypothetical world that facilitates self-awareness, understanding of others, and comprehension of society, thereby ultimately empowering comprehensive development.

2.2 Multiple interpretations of the ability to empathize

As a multi-layered psychological construct, empathy extends far beyond the simple act of feeling empathy. It represents an individual's capacity to deeply understand others' emotions and respond to them appropriately. Modern psychology typically breaks empathy down into two interconnected yet distinct components: cognitive empathy, which involves understanding others' perspectives and perceiving their mental states, and emotional empathy, which is characterised by automatic emotional resonance that shares and responds to others' emotional experiences and is often accompanied by prosocial motivations such as care and concern. Truly empathetic individuals manifest "empathic care" — intentional actions driven by emotional resonance aimed at alleviating others' difficulties. Therefore, empathy integrates cognitive, emotional and motivational dimensions. It serves as the foundation for effective interpersonal

communication and as a psychological lubricant that fosters positive social relationships and promotes cooperative, altruistic behaviours.

3 The current implementation status of educational drama on university campuses

3.1 It is generally believed that drama is a form of performance that has nothing to do with school

In university culture, the term 'theatre' is often narrowly associated with professional stage performances, which overshadows its profound educational value. This entrenched misconception has kept educational theatre marginalised in mainstream academia for decades. Many non-professionals mistakenly view theatre activities as time-consuming distractions from academic priorities and believe that they offer no direct benefits to grades, GPA or career prospects, essentially dismissing them as 'unproductive pursuits'. Such utilitarian academic attitudes severely limit the adoption of educational theatre programmes, making it difficult to gain official policy recognition. Even when implemented, these initiatives typically take the form of achievement-driven 'club performances' or 'theatre festivals', emphasising awards rather than the learning process. This results-oriented approach perpetuates the misconception that 'theatre equals performance', obscuring its immense potential as an interdisciplinary teaching method with the power to foster empathy, enhance collaboration, and deepen understanding.

3.2 Insufficient investment in tangible resources such as teachers, venues and funds

Implementing educational theatre faces three major challenges: faculty shortages, limited facilities and funding limitations. The foremost issue is the acute shortage of specialist instructors. Effective educational theatre requires teachers to possess expertise in the dramatic arts, as well as mastering pedagogical theories, psychological methodologies and workshop facilitation skills. However, universities generally lack such versatile professionals. Most instructors are part-time Chinese literature teachers, counsellors or student club advisors who often struggle to design drama activities that deeply integrate educational objectives, resulting in superficial teaching outcomes. Additionally, dedicated performance spaces are essential for educational theatre courses — spaces that allow physical expression and emotional release while ensuring privacy and safety rather than conventional lecture halls or classrooms. In practice, however, such professional venues are usually reserved for art students, which makes them inaccessible to students from other disciplines. Finally, hiring external mentors, procuring workshop materials and maintaining facilities all incur costs. Yet within university budget systems, these non-quantifiable educational activities often face a scarcity of resources, hindering the development of sustainable course ecosystems.

4 The internal mechanism of empathic ability cultivation in educational drama

4.1 Contextual immersion

The primary mechanism behind the effective cultivation of empathy through educational drama lies in its 'immersive scenario' characteristic. Through narrative techniques, sound effects, scene design and simple props, educational drama combines theatrical strategies to detach students from the real classroom setting and immerse them in a 'simulated emotional environment' that blends reality and virtuality. This environment requires participants to temporarily suspend their doubts and fully engage with the current situation. The explicit 'role-playing' element provides crucial psychological security. Within this safe space, individuals can shed the shackles of their daily identities without worrying about the authenticity of their words and actions, thereby creating the prerequisites for bold emotional expression. It is precisely this deep immersion in a safe environment that enables participants to release their defensive mechanisms, open their emotional 'reception valves', and create space for others' stories and emotions to flow in. This initial emotional engagement and acceptance is achieved through this process.

4.2 Role-playing

In traditional drama education, students are assigned roles in scripts, regardless of their background, stance or experiences. They must attempt to 'walk in others' shoes', immersing themselves in character-building while maintaining their authentic 'primary self'. Educational drama workshops, however, offer a different approach. Participants act as both observers and performers, engaging in role-playing while maintaining detachment. This profound emotional practice involves students deeply analysing characters, interpreting their reasonable reactions in specific contexts and expressing these through personal language and physical actions. This cyclical process of stepping out, internalising and re-emerging provides intensive 'perspective-taking' training, breaking down students' self-centred thinking and enabling

them to embrace potentially unfamiliar inner worlds. Such immersive experiences significantly expand psychological boundaries, enabling students to empathise with the joys and sorrows of individuals from different social backgrounds and cultures, thus bridging the gap between cognitive understanding and emotional resonance.

4.3 Emotional venting

Aristotle's concept of 'catharsis' in tragedy — the idea that emotions are purified by evoking pity and fear — holds true for Educational Drama. Students experience a range of emotions, such as struggle, joy and sorrow, while role-playing. These pent-up feelings can be safely released through sharing, discussions or ritualistic practices. However, the reflective process guided by educators is more crucial than catharsis. Participants collectively reflect: 'When I played the misunderstood character, I felt deeply wronged. Doesn't this remind us of our own past misinterpretations in real life?' This process makes students' emotional experiences open to rational scrutiny, enabling an embodied understanding of emotions. Without reflection, theatre activities yield only fleeting emotional fluctuations, whereas reflective practice transforms individual empathetic experiences from impromptu performances into enduring psychological frameworks.

4.4 Collective creation

Educational Drama is fundamentally a highly collaborative art form. It is not the work of a single individual, but rather relies on continuous listening, keen observation, timely feedback and selfless support among all participants. Every audience member acts as both an actor and a spectator of others' performances. This highly interactive process requires individuals to shift their focus away from themselves and fully immerse themselves in their peers. They must perceive emotional shifts, embrace spontaneous creativity and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This creates a profound interdependence, whereby individual expressions only gain meaning when they are perceived, heard and responded to. Through intensive verbal and non-verbal exchanges, students become exceptionally sensitive to the emotional signals conveyed through others' micro-expressions, tone of voice and body language. This significantly enhances their interpersonal insight. The successful experience of collective creation fosters a strong sense of group belonging, and positive emotional bonds naturally become fertile ground for empathy. Within this community of mutual trust, students instinctively learn to appreciate differences, empathise with others' challenges and collaborate willingly towards shared goals.

5 Practical strategy system of cultivating college students' empathy ability in educational drama course

5.1 Educational drama courses are incorporated into the general education system

The fundamental solution to revitalising its role in holistic education and achieving inclusive, sustainable development is to systematically integrate educational drama into university general education curricula. Universities should establish formal credit courses such as 'Educational Drama and Emotional Expression' or 'Applied Drama Workshop: Empathy and Collaboration' to cultivate students' empathetic abilities. These courses require meticulously designed syllabuses structured around modules such as 'Self-Awareness', 'Emotion Recognition', 'Interpersonal Conflict' and 'Social Issues', incorporating experiential learning cycles through diverse methodologies. One innovative approach is to embed 'dramatised teaching modules' that create interdisciplinary synergy. For example, forum theatre simulations could model doctor-patient communication dilemmas in Medical Ethics classes, role-playing case interviews could enhance Social Work Introduction courses and improvisational theatre training could develop leadership skills in Business Management courses. This strategy significantly increases the appeal of specialised subjects by immersing students in authentic professional scenarios where they can hone the essential empathetic competencies required for their future careers. Through these transformations, educational drama evolves from an isolated art course into a versatile pedagogical framework applicable across disciplines, ultimately realising the grand vision of 'holistic education'.

5.2 Vigorously support the development of drama clubs

Student clubs are the most dynamic organisational form on university campuses. Supporting application-oriented drama clubs is a community-driven approach to cultivating educational drama. However, these clubs must distinguish themselves from traditional performance troupes. Their mission is not to stage plays for competitions, but to become a low-threshold platform for empathy practice accessible to all non-professional students. Universities should provide them with instructors who specialise in educational drama and dedicated rehearsal spaces. They should also encourage regular weekly activities themed around 'Playback Theatre', 'Forum Theatre' and 'Drama Games' to attract students from a range

of different majors. Here, there are no judgements or evaluations, only sincere expression and active listening. Participants can share personal stories, dramatise them and observe how others interpret them, experiencing the profound feeling of being seen and of seeing others.

5.3 Theatrical elements are deeply integrated into campus cultural activities

Higher education institutions can effectively incorporate these elements into mainstream activities, significantly expanding their societal impact. For example, within flagship programmes such as Freshman Orientation, Mental Health Awareness Month, Career Planning Week and the International Cultural Festival, schools could incorporate immersive theatrical components. This could involve replacing tedious rule briefings with role-playing simulations, using forum theatre discussions to address common psychological stress, running improvisational workshops to enhance soft skills in job interviews, and using role-playing exercises to foster cross-cultural understanding. Universities could also establish dedicated events, such as 'Campus Drama Festivals' or 'Empathy Culture Weeks', which would showcase student-created short plays, forum theatre productions and documentary theatre works addressing social issues and personal experiences. Open post-performance dialogues should be organised to facilitate in-depth discussions among students. As more students experience emotional resonance through these narratives, they will naturally engage in collective reflection on their own and others' performance experiences. Ultimately, drama becomes a medium for public discourse, subtly cultivating a culture of compassion throughout the campus.

6 Conclusion

In response to the potential for empathy blunting and interpersonal alienation among contemporary university students, there is an urgent need for a teaching model that deeply resonates with students' inner worlds. Educational drama offers an innovative approach that transcends traditional classroom settings. This represents a revolution in pedagogical methods and a return to the essence of education: the holistic development of individuals.

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