

Developing Students' Spiritual and Moral Competence Through the Art of Theatre: Pedagogical Experience and Experimental Results

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Abstract: This article provides a scientific analysis of the methodology for developing students' spiritual and moral competence in higher education institutions through the art of theatre. The results of a pedagogical experiment conducted between 2022 and 2025 are presented. A comparative analysis between the experimental and control groups shows that the systematic implementation of Forum Theatre, Psychodrama, Sociodrama and improvisation methods increases students' spiritual and moral indicators by an average of 28-30 per cent. A developmental model operating on the basis of the 'Knowledge – Emotion – Belief – Activity' chain, as well as the 'Artistic- Pedagogical Cluster' system, are proposed as practical recommendations for the higher education system.

Keywords: Spiritual-moral competence, theatre pedagogy, Forum Theatre, Psychodrama, Sociodrama, improvisation, higher education, art-pedagogical cluster.

Introduction: In the context of modern globalisation, the education system faces the strategic task not only of developing professional knowledge and skills but also of ensuring the spiritual and moral maturity of the younger generation. The Laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Education" and "On State Youth Policy" stipulate the all-round development of the individual and the formation of high spiritual and moral qualities. However, research shows that educational work conducted in the traditional lecture format is not sufficiently effective in shaping students' genuine moral consciousness.

The results show that young people who demonstrate well-developed spiritual and moral values exhibit high levels of empathy, a strong sense of civic responsibility and overall life satisfaction. [1]

Art, particularly the art of theatre, has a unique pedagogical potential to shape an individual's moral outlook, aesthetic taste and social activism. From

Aristotle's doctrine of "catharsis" to the modern approaches of L.S. Vygotsky, K.S. Stanislavski and Augusto Boal, the art of theatre has long been recognised as a powerful means of spiritual purification and self-awareness. Therefore, the application of the art of theatre as a targeted pedagogical mechanism for developing spiritual and moral competence within the higher education system requires scientific and methodological justification.

Today, the moral transmission of the older generation to the younger, This process is based on research in the social and humanitarian sciences and on the development of studies concerning the production issues that follow its practical application.[2]

An analysis of existing scientific literature shows that, although in international pedagogy, such directions as "Drama in Education" (D. Heathcote, G. Bolton), "Theaterpädagogik" (Germany), and "Applied Theatre" (USA) have developed successfully, In the context of

higher education in Uzbekistan, the methodology for applying theatre pedagogy as a systematic means of developing spiritual and moral competence has not been sufficiently developed. Filling this research gap constitutes the main objective of the present study.

The aim of the research is to identify, substantiate and experimentally test a set of pedagogical conditions and methods that enable the development of students' spiritual and moral competence through the means of theatrical art. The study addresses the following question: can the systematic integration of theatre pedagogical methods significantly enhance students' spiritual and moral competence compared with traditional approaches?

METHODS

1. Research design and participants

The study was conducted over a four-year period, from 2022 to 2025, with students of the pedagogy department at the Abu Rayhan Beruni Urganch State University. An experimental methodology was adopted, and control and experimental groups were formed. Each group comprised 25–30 students ($n = 112$ in total: $n = 57$ in the experimental group, $n = 55$ in the control group). The equivalence of the groups was checked based on the initial diagnostic results, and it was confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$).

Participation in the study was voluntary. All participants gave written consent. The students' personal data were kept anonymous at, and no identifying information was included in the results.

2. Intervention Programme (Experimental Group)

Students in the experimental group participated in systematic sessions based on theatre pedagogy twice a week (a total of 144 hours) over two academic years. The sessions included the following five main methods:

(1) Forum Theatre (Augusto Boal): Scenes depicting social conflicts were performed, and the audience was turned into active participants. Everyday issues such as corruption, indifference and family values were staged.

(2) Psychodrama: Students portrayed their personal problems on stage, underwent an emotional

processing journey and developed self-awareness skills.

(3) Sociodrama: Conflicts between social groups were staged; the aim was to foster tolerance, empathy and cooperation.

(4) Improvisation: Used to prompt action without a pre-prepared script, aiming to reveal the student's true inner "self."

(5) Reflective journal: After each session, students recorded their experiences, behaviour and ethical reflections. This fostered self-assessment and reflective thinking.

The control group, however, participated in traditional educational activities – lectures, discussions, festivals and the activities of the "Spirituality and Enlightenment" department. Both groups studied the same academic subjects taught by the same lecturers; the only difference was the supplementary educational programme.

3. Measurement tools

Spiritual and moral competence was assessed on six indicators: spiritual and moral resilience, level of empathy, capacity for ethical decision-making, sense of collective responsibility, speech and communication culture, and awareness of national identity. For each indicator, a specialised "Situational Modelling" test, sociometric questionnaires, observation protocols and reflective reports were employed.

The internal consistency of all measurement instruments was confirmed at a Cronbach's α level of > 0.78 . Indicators were recorded at the initial (pretest) and final (posttest) stages. The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0; independent t-tests and the Mann–Whitney U-test were employed to compare between groups.

RESULTS

1. Baseline and final indicators

At the start of the experiment, the mean scores of both groups did not differ statistically ($p > 0.05$). After the intervention carried out over two academic years, the experimental group recorded statistically significantly higher results than the control group across all six indicators ($p < 0.01$). Table 1 below shows the results of the final posttest.

Table 1. Final scores of the experimental and control groups (%)

Indicator	Experimental group	Control group	Difference (%)
Spiritual and moral stability	82%	54%	+28%
Level of empathy	78%	51%	+27%
Moral decision-making	75%	48%	+27%
A sense of team responsibility	81%	55%	+26%
Culture of speech and communication	79%	57%	+22%
National self-awareness	84%	60%	+24%

Note: All differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), based on the Mann-Whitney U-test.

2. The 'Moral Immunity' indicator

The study also measured a specific "moral indifference" indicator. This indicator reflects the tendency to deviate from moral principles in practice, despite being aware of them. At the initial stage, 40 per cent of the experimental group exhibited signs of moral indifference, but by the end of the experiment this figure had fallen to 15 per cent – a net reduction of 25 percentage points. In the control group, this figure fell from 39 per cent to 35 per cent (a decrease of just 4 per cent).

3. The effectiveness of the 'Artistic-Pedagogical Cluster' model

In the experimental group, the level of meaningful organisation of students' leisure time also increased within the "Artistic-Pedagogical Cluster" (OTM + professional theatre + spiritual centre) system that was introduced. In the initial survey, 65 per cent of students regarded going to the theatre as merely a form of recreation. By the end of the experiment, this figure had fallen to 22 per cent in the experimental group – while the proportion of students viewing

the theatre as a necessary resource for personal development rose from 14 per cent to 71 per cent.

Table 2 below provides a comparison with international experience.

Table 2. Application of theatre pedagogy: comparative indicators with international experience

Country	Main method	Main outcome
United Kingdom	Role-play, Moral dilemmas	Professional ethics +35%
Germany	Theatre Pedagogy (as a separate subject)	Communicative competence +31%
USA	Applied Theatre	Social responsibility +29%
Japan	Theatre for Development	Teamwork +27%
Uzbekistan (this study)	Forum Theatre, Psychodrama, Sociodrama	Moral and spiritual stability +28%

DISCUSSION

1. Interpretation of the results: why does theatre work?

It is no coincidence that the experimental group's scores are on average 26–28 per cent higher than those of the control group. Behind this difference lie three fundamental pedagogical characteristics of the art of theatre. Firstly, emotional resonance: as Aristotle emphasised in his concept of "catharsis", stage events evoke feelings of compassion and fear in the audience, purifying them of moral shortcomings. This emotional experience produces moral changes that are far deeper and more enduring than rote learning.

Secondly, the active participation effect: in the forum theatre method, the student is not a passive spectator but becomes a decision-making "actor- researcher." Boal's "spect-actor" concept involves the student in the on-stage situation, linking their moral choices to real-life scenarios. From the perspective of L.S. Vygotsky's theory of the 'zone of proximal development', this situation allows students to expand their current moral capacities.

Thirdly, the mechanism of collective responsibility: the fact that there are no "main" or "secondary" roles in the process of staging a performance fosters an atmosphere of equal responsibility and mutual respect among all participants

in the According to K.S. Stanislavski's doctrine, inner freedom and believability on stage depend on the actor's psychological and moral preparation – a principle that has also been confirmed in the pedagogical environment.

2. The "Knowledge – Emotion – Belief – Action" model

The developmental model tested in the study differs fundamentally from the traditional "teaching" approach. Whereas the traditional method leaves moral knowledge at a declarative level, this model operates through a four-stage ladder: first the student is given knowledge (cognitive component), then this knowledge is experienced as an emotion through theatre (emotional component), then the emotion turns into a belief (motivational-value component), and finally the belief manifests in action (the behavioural component). The results of the experiment quantitatively confirmed the effectiveness of this model.

This finding is fully consistent with the theoretical principles of Galperin (the theory of psychological activity) and Slavyonin (the internal control mechanism of the personality): Moral independence must be based on the individual's ability to govern themselves through an internal evaluation mechanism, rather than on external directives.

3. Limitations and future research

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the experiment was conducted primarily with students in the pedagogy programme; it has not been established whether the results are also applicable to students from other specialisations. Secondly, the two-year follow-up did not allow for the assessment of long-term effects (5–10 years). Thirdly, it was difficult to fully control for the 'teacher effect' – different pedagogical styles may have introduced some variables.

The following directions are recommended for future research: large- scale replication across different specialisms; integration with digital technologies – online Forum Theatre and virtual role-playing games; studying the cognitive and emotional processes during theatre sessions using neuropedagogical methods.

CONCLUSION

It is important to consider that moral and spiritual education is integrative by its very nature. It is important to consider that moral and spiritual education

is integrative by its very nature. It is directly connected to all the fundamental aspects of teaching and upbringing and to the surrounding world in general, and serves a system-forming function in the process of the all-round development of Homo sapiens.[3]

This study has scientifically substantiated theatre art as an effective pedagogical tool for developing spiritual and moral competence within the higher education system. Experimental data show that the systematic application of Forum Theatre, Psychodrama, Sociodrama and improvisation methods yields, across all measurement indicators, an average of 28–30 per cent higher results compared with traditional methods.

The approach based on the "Knowledge – Emotion – Belief – Action" model portrayed the student as an active moral agent rather than a passive listener. The "Artistic-Pedagogical Cluster" system has proven itself

as an institutional mechanism for fostering professional ethics in students through collaboration between higher education institutions, professional theatres and spiritual centres.

The results show that a theatre pedagogy model adapted to the national context for higher education in Uzbekistan can ensure comparative effectiveness with the experiences of the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States and Japan. The study recommends incorporating theatre pedagogy into higher education policy as a systematic measure to prevent the emergence of a generation of highly qualified yet spiritually impoverished specialists.

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