

The Application of Educational Drama in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Drama, as an ancient art genre, carries the ancient wisdom and diverse civilizations of humanity. In modern social context, AI technology dominates the productivity development, rationality reigns supreme, and consumerism occupies the mainstream of mass consumption but drama still leaves thinking space for human being to know himself and world. In modern society, people have various ways to interact with drama. In higher education, in addition to professional drama colleges and majors, drama teaching in other universities mainly focuses on appreciation and literary criticism of theatrical texts, while some universities hold activities such as watch and practice theatrical performances. Many universities also establish student drama clubs and hold drama festivals. Based on the nature of drama, this study clarifies the concepts of Educational Drama and Theatrical Education, highlights the educational functions of educational drama, emphasizes the humanism connotation and aesthetic value of educational drama, and explores the teaching and practical status of educational drama in higher education.

Keywords: *Educational drama, Theatrical education, Humanities, Aesthetic education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle had great admiration for drama, especially ancient Greek tragedy. He defined “tragedy” in Poetics and held the belief that tragedy affects the audience by catharsis, or purgation of pity and fear, [1] which means the audience can purify the soul with sympathy and awe when they watch tragedy. Basically, it was the first time Aristotle mentioned the educational function of drama. In the 18th century, Rousseau proposed the integration of drama and education. In 1896, Dewey, an American educator and philosopher, founded the Laboratory School of University of Chicago and practice the drama teaching in school education. Dewey advocated “learning by doing or learning by dramatic doing”, which played an important role in promoting and popularizing educational drama. [2]

Since 1920s, Europe and America have gradually integrated drama into general education. Although the development of educational drama was delayed by several decades in China, it is now growing vigorously. And the education objects also expand from kids to college students. In the system

of China’s higher education, professional academies of drama and some comprehensive universities have theatrical education and dramatic majors while more comprehensive universities offer drama appreciation courses, they also have student drama clubs, and hold theatrical performances. However, integrating it is a huge challenge to integrate drama teaching, performance practice, and aesthetic education together. With preliminary investigation and surveys, the result shows that educational drama is an important part of aesthetic education in higher education system. Although most colleges show different attitudes towards drama education, and present different development situations, it cannot be denied that the application of educational drama is increasingly widespread and holds promising prospects for cultivation of undergraduate students.

2. EDUCATIONAL DRAMA AND THEATRICAL EDUCATION: UNIQUENESS AND CONSISTENCY

Educational drama emphasizes the educational function of drama, cultivates students' language expression, communication skills, and teamwork cooperation abilities through role-playing, scenario simulation, script interpretation, and improvisation in drama performance. The educational function of drama practice also promotes students' empathy with the characters in the play and helps students to perceive and empathize with the ideas contained in the script. And in the interaction between teachers and students, other values have been realized imperceptibly, such as the ideological guidance of socialist mainstream values, students' abilities of problem-solving abilities and critical thinking.[3] At present, educational drama has a certain degree of application in primary and secondary schools as well as early childhood education. In higher education, the application of educational drama is also receiving increasing attention. For example, in the context of carrying out Curriculum Ideology and Politics in universities, teachers integrate education on the history of revolution with drama disciplinary, and encourage students to compose plays with positive values. Therefore, the significance and connotation of aesthetic education is expanded in education drama, and students get the abundant practical opportunities for the unity of knowledge and action.

Theatrical education focuses on professional and systematic feature of drama teaching, including drama performance, drama writing, academic research on diverse approaches and cultivation of drama talents, such as cultivating professional talents in drama creation, performance and theory research as well as educator of theatrical education and educational drama. From the perspective of curriculums and majors in drama (theater) academies, it is more standardized and rigorous in theatrical education, especially the inheritance of theatrical art. In comprehensive universities, drama courses are also offered in the field of humanities, such as drama appreciation courses, appreciation of classic Chinese and foreign drama scripts, and text reading courses from the perspective of literary criticism. Some universities with solid humanities backgrounds are committed to the interdisciplinary study of drama. For example, in the first "Philosophy Drama Festival", Philosophy School and the Art Education Center of Tsinghua

University jointly held lectures, seminars, and high-level theatrical performances, which integrated philosophy and drama together to show the aesthetic dimension and ideological depth of drama. [4] Many universities establish Students' Drama Associations and support students' drama performances and communications regularly, which promote theatrical education to a broader stage.

Overall, both educational drama and theatrical education cannot need the participation and interaction of teachers and students. And they also have similarities and differences in teaching methods and implementation, each playing crucial roles in higher education. It is worth mentioning that when drama was introduced into China in the early 20th century, the term "drama" was translated as the drama of dialogues because it contains a large amount of dialogue between characters, which is completely different from traditional Chinese opera that is mainly based on opera. Subsequently, Western problem dramas influenced China when Chinese society was facing serious social problems. Playwrights created Chinese problem dramas to expose social issues, enlighten oppressed people, and Chinese problem drama played a certain role in enlightening people at that time. Until now, Chinese drama has been influenced by problem drama, highlighting the educational function of drama. However, Chinese drama is constantly correcting and reforming the influence of problem drama. Moreover, educational function of problem drama is completely different from the educational function of educational drama discussed in this paper.

3. EDUCATIONAL DRAMA IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATION AND INNOVATION

Being influenced by the early drama teaching practices and principles, children are the primary practice object of educational drama for a long time in past years. Being based on teaching practice of drama at Saxe-County primary school, English woman Harriet Finlay-Johnson published *the Dramatic Method of Teaching* in 1911. Subsequently, other educators and scholars have enriched and developed the theory of educational drama, and they also gradually have improved the practical forms of educational drama. Prominent scholar Dorothy Heathcote sorted out the concepts and methods of educational drama, her main research concern focused on young people, which

she thought young people should participate in living drama as the main form for them to engage in drama. Later, professor Gavin Bolton from Durham University developed a theoretical framework for drama teaching and published books such as *Toward a Theory of Drama in Education* (1979), he inherited the views of his predecessors and refined four teaching forms of dramatic teaching method.[5] Nowadays, educational drama has been promoted by scholars at home and abroad. And its connotation is increasingly expanding. Scholars such as educational drama experts Li Yingning and Zhang Xiaohua have promoted the development of educational drama in China.

In recent years, the development and application of educational drama in higher education have gradually become a hot academic topic. Ruixiang Hong (2023) explored the applicability of educational drama to higher education from two dimensions: the logical starting point and practical direction of educational drama in higher education, and this study provided a new development idea for the integration and development of interdisciplinary. [6] Xiaowen Wang (2021) did the research on educational function of educational drama from the perspective of its aesthetic value. She emphasized that educational drama can better enable learners to obtain a more three-dimensional and complete cognitive system of disciplinary, and help learners do artistic education aesthetic practice from the course, [7] while some other scholars have focused on the current situation and shortcomings of educational drama in higher education and proposed teaching strategies. Being compared to the primary stage of educational drama, in the higher education stage, educational drama should highlight its academic and aesthetic value; introduce the teaching of drama theory in the curriculum, such as the development history, theoretical viewpoints, and ideological changes of drama at home and abroad; rely on drama literature (script) and performance; integrate disciplines such as philosophy, literature, and education to achieve situational, experiential, and interactive theater education.

As an ancient art form, drama has carried the playwright's observations and experiences of social life as well as their insights and philosophical thoughts on life since the birth of drama. For thousands of years, the humanistic spirit contained in drama has been continuously inherited and developed, which is the crystallization of human wisdom. The development of Chinese drama began with the birth of Chinese civilization. From

primitive religious rituals, to ancient Nuo opera (a combination of sacred ceremony and theatrical art form), and solemn system of rites and music from Zhou Dynasty, traditional Chinese drama finally came to the emergence in Tang Dynasty as a kind of ancient Chinese opera. In the following thousand years, with the continuous evolution of Chinese opera, Chinese drama has formed an artistic genre with distinct characteristics of Chinese civilization. In modern times, being with its broad inclusiveness, Chinese civilization has learned, accepted, and transformed Western drama, endowing Chinese people's temperament, charm and the aesthetic values with it. Meanwhile, Chinese Opera has also become an object of reference and learning for Western drama. This integration of Eastern and Western civilizations has enriched the diversity of human civilization, and it is also a manifestation of the endless vitality of humanistic spirit. In this profound historical context, educational drama provides young students with inclusive and diverse approaches to observe society. Being inspired by ancient philosophical ideas, educational drama encourages students to inherit traditional culture with a problem consciousness, shape core values, and cultivate cultural confidence.

4. THE EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF EDUCATIONAL DRAMA: UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

Emphasis is placed on the leading role of teachers in higher education. To be a leading reader in drama curriculum is the primary responsibility of a teacher who should guide students to grasp the macro-level meaning of the play through the interpretation and literary criticism, and teach student to gain the profound meaning hidden in the plot and characters in the text. Gradually, with "tutor to reading", students could get the guide to read relevant literature and continue to discuss the common human values contained in classic plays. Secondly, like directors or stage managers, teachers organize students to recite lines, do role-play, rehearse and perform on stage, so the heuristic and situational teaching methods could deepen students' thinking on emotions and actions of characters and help students to avoid passively accepting others' viewpoints. The mentioned features show the best interpretation of the saying "there will be a thousand Hamlets in the eyes of a thousand readers." Finally, teachers also play the role of observers. Whether in group learning, lectures,

theatrical performances, or even script creation, teachers observe and provide timely feedback to students, helping them engage in post-learning reflection and complete the teaching loop.

The principal role of students is indispensable in higher education. Educational drama ensures students' participation and subjectivity. Students can use their subjective initiative to interpret drama, participate in various aspects of drama performance, such as play writing, stage design and management, directing and performance. Through the living experience, students could touch human thoughts and reflect on life values in most direct way. The "learning by doing" is advocated by educational drama, which is a meaningful teaching form that integrates theory and practice, providing students with a new path of "unity of knowledge and action". At present, undergraduate students in colleges and universities are mainly students born after 2000, which group is called "Generation Z". The young people of Generation Z have a digital lifestyle, and their study, entertainment and life are inseparable from the Internet. Despite feeling confused and anxious about their lives and future, Generation Z pursues individuality and independence, they still adhere to traditional and mainstream norms of value, maintain their identification with the "a community with a shared future of mankind" and yearn for global cooperation.[8] Educational drama provides virtual contexts, action spaces, and observation methods for value education. As the main subject of teaching, students can experience different results brought by different actions in the virtual drama context, and make value judgments through reflection and observation.

5. CONCLUSION

The educational drama in higher education integrates teaching methods such as literature appreciation, academic research, drama performance, and theatrical performance. Drama teaching has achieved a spatial transformation from the classroom to the stage, and students have gained more performance and life experiences. The educational nature of educational drama is fully reflected. The influence of drama exhibitions and performances in universities is becoming increasingly widespread. For example, Beijing held its College Students Drama Festival in 2023, 44 universities in Beijing submitted 87 entries for the competition. And during festival, the original dramas were exhibited by college students. The Dream Factory Drama of Zhejiang University of

Technology has launched more than 140 dramas of education on the history of revolution, with a total of hundreds of thousands of viewers. It is worth mentioning that the play "A Choice without Regrets" was selected as part of the Ministry of Education's "Action Plan for Promoting College Original Cultural Products".[9] Undoubtedly, regional and university differences can lead to varying development status of educational drama. Still, educational drama has a lot of room for improvement for the limitation of teachers' teaching and ability of classroom organization. Due to different situations of strength and teaching emphasis, the development of educational drama in different colleges also varies uneven development. Educational drama still needs to constantly seize opportunities and create new situations at both theoretical and practical levels. So, educational drama will enrich the cultural life and the spiritual world of college students, and fully play the subtle and silent role in aesthetic education.

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