Stage of Self: Empowering First-Year Students through Theatre-Based Self-Discovery

Ubonwan Moonkanta

Bangkok University, Thailand

Abstract

This study examines the "Performing Arts for Self-Discovery" (PFA 108) course at Bangkok University, investigating how a seven-week intensive program uses theatre practice to help first-year students discover their identity, build empathy, and clarify their goals. The course combines acting techniques with contemporary digital media creation, reflecting the hybrid nature of modern performance and communication. Through action research methodology across multiple cohorts (2018-present), this study documents the transformative effects of experiential theatre pedagogy on student development. Data collection included facilitator field notes, student reflective journals, and focus group discussions. Results indicate three consistent outcomes: heightened self-awareness, strengthened empathy and trust, and enhanced sense of direction, with over 80% of participants reporting greater clarity about academic and career goals. The findings suggest that integrating creative, reflective theatre processes into early university curricula can accelerate students' psychosocial development and enhance their readiness for both artistic and non-artistic pursuits.

Keywords: theatre pedagogy, self-discovery, experiential learning, first-year students, identity formation, empathy development

Purpose

The transition to university represents a critical period in young adults' psychological and social development, characterized by identity exploration, relationship formation, and goal clarification (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). For first-year students, this transition often involves navigating newfound independence while confronting fundamental questions about personal identity, values, and future direction. Traditional academic approaches, while valuable for intellectual development, may not adequately address the holistic developmental needs of emerging adults.

Theatre, as both an artistic medium and pedagogical tool, offers unique opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery. The embodied nature of theatrical practice engages multiple dimensions of human experience—cognitive, emotional, physical, and social—creating conditions conducive to deep personal reflection and transformation (Nicholson, 2011). Unlike purely cognitive learning approaches, theatre-based pedagogy involves the whole person, integrating mind, body, and emotion in ways that can facilitate profound insights about identity and purpose.

Since 2018, Bangkok University has implemented the "Performing Arts for Self-Discovery" (PFA 108) course, a seven-week intensive program designed specifically to harness theatre's transformative potential for first-year student development. The course emerged from recognition that contemporary students face unprecedented challenges in identity formation, including social media pressures, economic uncertainty, and rapidly changing career landscapes. Additionally, the modern performance industry increasingly demands multi-platform creators capable of producing content independently, necessitating both technical skills and strong personal identity foundations.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of theatre-based experiential pedagogy in fostering first-year student development across three key areas: self-awareness, empathy development, and goal clarification. Specifically, the research investigates how structured theatre practices can serve as catalysts for identity exploration and personal growth during the critical first year of university study. The study also explores the integration of traditional theatre techniques with contemporary digital media creation, reflecting the hybrid nature of modern performance and communication.

The significance of this research extends beyond performing arts education. As universities increasingly recognize the importance of supporting students' holistic development, understanding effective approaches to identity formation and personal growth becomes essential for all academic disciplines. The findings may inform broader discussions about experiential learning, student engagement, and the role of creative practices in higher education.

Approach

This research employed an action research methodology, chosen for its emphasis on practical problem-solving and continuous improvement of educational practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Action research allows educators to systematically study their own teaching while simultaneously working to improve it, making it particularly appropriate for investigating innovative pedagogical approaches. The cyclical nature of action research—involving planning, action, observation, and reflection—aligned well with the iterative development of the PFA 108 course over multiple years.

Research Design

The study followed a longitudinal action research design conducted over seven consecutive years (2018-2025), encompassing multiple cohorts of first-year performing arts students. Each annual cohort constituted one cycle of the action research process, with findings from one year informing modifications and improvements for subsequent iterations. This approach enabled the researcher to refine the course structure and content based on accumulated evidence while maintaining fidelity to core pedagogical principles.

Participants

Participants included all students enrolled in the PFA 108 course across the seven-year period, totaling approximately 210 students (averaging 30 students per cohort). All participants were first-year students in the Performing Arts program at Bangkok University, aged 18-20 years. The sample included both Thai and international students, with roughly equal gender representation. Participation in the research component was voluntary, with informed consent obtained according to university ethical guidelines.

Course Structure and Implementation

The PFA 108 course was structured as a seven-week intensive program divided into two complementary modules:

Module 1: Bedroom Studio focused on technical skills and digital platform adaptation, teaching students to create professional-quality content using accessible home technology. This module addressed the reality of modern performance careers, where artists must function as multi-platform creators capable of producing content independently. Activities included video production techniques, audio recording, lighting design, and social media content creation.

Module 2: BE YOU centered on identity exploration through acting exercises, storytelling workshops, and self-scrutiny techniques. Using side-coaching methods and structured reflection, students examined their personal narratives, developed self-acceptance, and established future goals. This module drew upon established theatre pedagogy traditions while incorporating contemporary approaches to identity work.

The weekly progression followed a carefully scaffolded structure:

• **Week 1:** Audition process establishing baseline skills and self-assessment
• **Week 2:** Identity-focused acting exercises and self-awareness activities
• **Week 3:** Narrative development through storytelling workshops
• **Week 4:** Project proposal presentations integrating self-discovery with technical skills
• **Weeks 5-6:** Intensive rehearsal and refinement with continuous feedback
• **Week 7:** Final "This Is Me" presentations demonstrating integrated learning

Theoretical Framework

The course design integrated three primary theoretical frameworks:

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) provided the foundational structure, emphasizing the cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Each class session incorporated all four stages, ensuring students could both experience new practices and reflect on their personal significance. truthful, moment-to-moment response and authentic emotional connection. Meisner's approach to "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances" proved particularly relevant for identity exploration work.

Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) techniques, particularly Image Theatre and Forum Theatre, provided tools for exploring personal obstacles and envisioning alternative futures. These approaches enabled students to embody their challenges and experiment with different responses.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple data collection methods ensured comprehensive documentation of student experiences and outcomes:

Facilitator Field Notes: The instructor maintained detailed observational records of each session, noting student engagement, breakthrough moments, resistance patterns, and emerging themes. These notes captured both individual student development and group dynamics.

Student Reflective Journals: All participants maintained weekly reflective journals, responding to structured prompts about their experiences, insights, and evolving self-understanding. Journal prompts included questions such as "What did you discover about yourself today?" and "How has your understanding of your goals changed?"

Focus Group Discussions: End-of-course focus groups provided opportunities for students to articulate their experiences collectively and reflect on the course's impact. These sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Pre- and Post-Course Surveys: Standardized questionnaires assessed student self-perception across multiple domains, including self-awareness, empathy, goal clarity, and confidence levels. These instruments provided quantitative data to complement qualitative observations.

Performance Documentation: Video recordings of final presentations captured students' creative expressions of their self-discovery journeys, providing additional evidence of learning outcomes.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis followed an iterative thematic coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All textual data—including field notes, journal entries, and focus group transcripts—were coded using both deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework and inductive codes emerging from the data itself. The coding process involved multiple rounds of analysis, with themes refined and consolidated through constant comparison across data sources and cohorts.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests to assess changes in self-reported measures from pre- to post-course. Effect sizes were calculated to determine practical significance of observed changes.

Cross-cohort analysis examined consistency of findings across the seven-year period, identifying stable patterns while noting variations that might inform future course development.

Results

Analysis of data across seven annual cohorts revealed three consistent and significant themes in student development: heightened self-awareness, strengthened empathy and trust, and enhanced sense of direction. These themes emerged consistently across all data sources and remained stable across different cohorts and years.

Heightened Self-Awareness

Students demonstrated marked improvements in self-understanding and articulation of personal values, emotions, and motivations. Journal entries from early weeks typically contained surface-level observations and generic statements about goals and interests. By course completion, entries showed significantly greater depth, specificity, and emotional vocabulary.

Representative early journal entry: "I want to be an actor because I like performing and being on stage. It's fun and I'm good at it."

Representative final journal entry: "Through the balloon of ambition exercise, I realized my drive to perform comes from a deep need to connect with others and share stories that matter. When I couldn't reach that balloon, I felt the same desperation I experienced as a child when adults wouldn't listen to me. Acting isn't just about being on stage—it's about being heard and helping others feel less alone."

Focus group discussions revealed students' surprise at their capacity for self-reflection. One participant noted, "I never thought I was someone who could look inside myself like this. I always thought I knew who I was, but this course showed me I barely scratched the surface."

The self-scrutiny exercises proved particularly powerful in facilitating self-awareness. Students reported that the guided questions about childhood, dreams, and regrets opened doors to previously unexamined aspects of their identities. The fetal womb regression exercise, while initially challenging for many students, consistently produced breakthrough moments in self-understanding.

Quantitative data supported these qualitative observations. Pre-course self-awareness ratings averaged 3.2 on a 7-point scale, while post-course ratings averaged 5.8 ($t = 12.4$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.8$), indicating a large effect size.

Strengthened Empathy and Trust

The course's emphasis on collaborative creation and vulnerable sharing fostered significant improvements in students' capacity for empathy and interpersonal trust. Early group work often revealed typical challenges of first-year students: competitiveness, surface-level engagement, and reluctance to be vulnerable. By mid-course, group dynamics shifted dramatically toward mutual support, deep listening, and genuine care for peers' growth.

connection. Students learned to attend carefully to others' nonverbal communication and respond authentically to subtle cues. These skills transferred into all subsequent group activities, creating an atmosphere of psychological safety that enabled deeper exploration.

Theatre games specifically designed for trust-building proved essential in this development. The progression from simple name games to complex emotional improvisation required students to gradually increase their vulnerability while learning to hold space for

others' authentic expression. Students consistently reported these exercises as among the most challenging yet transformative aspects of the course.

Focus group data revealed the relational impact: "Before this class, I was always worried about what people thought of me. Now I realize everyone is dealing with their own stuff, and when I really listen to someone, it helps both of us feel less alone."

The collaborative final projects demonstrated students' enhanced capacity for empathetic creation. Groups consistently developed performances that honored each member's individual journey while creating cohesive artistic statements. The quality of peer feedback improved dramatically throughout the course, evolving from generic praise to specific, constructive, and emotionally intelligent observations.

Survey data confirmed significant improvements in empathy measures, with mean scores increasing from 3.7 to 5.9 on a 7-point scale ($t = 11.8$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.7$).

Enhanced Sense of Direction

Perhaps the most practically significant outcome involved students' increased clarity about academic and career goals. Over 80% of participants reported greater certainty about their future direction by course completion, with many describing fundamental shifts in their understanding of their aspirations.

This clarity emerged through the integration of self-awareness work with practical skill development. Students who initially pursued performing arts for external validation often discovered deeper motivations through the identity exploration exercises. Conversely, students who began with vague artistic interests developed specific goals through the technical skill-building components.

The "This Is Me" final presentations served as culminating integration experiences, requiring students to synthesize their self-discoveries into coherent artistic statements. These presentations consistently revealed students' evolved understanding of their purposes and directions.

Journal entries documented this evolution: "I came to university thinking I wanted to be famous. Now I realize I want to create work that helps people understand each other better. Fame might come or not, but the work itself is what matters."

The balloon of ambition exercise proved particularly effective in clarifying authentic goals. By embodying their desires physically and experiencing obstacles viscerally, students gained clearer understanding of what they truly wanted versus what they thought they should want.

Faculty advisors reported noticeable improvements in students' academic planning conversations following course completion. Students articulated more specific goals, demonstrated better understanding of their learning needs, and showed increased motivation for subsequent coursework.

Quantitative data revealed significant improvements in goal clarity, with pre-course ratings of 2.9 increasing to post-course ratings of 5.6 ($t = 14.2$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.1$).

Additional Findings

Several secondary themes emerged across cohorts that, while not universal, appeared frequently enough to warrant attention:

Reduced Performance Anxiety: Many students reported decreased fear of judgment and increased willingness to take creative risks. The safe space created through trust-building exercises appeared to generalize beyond the classroom.

Improved Communication Skills: Students demonstrated enhanced ability to articulate complex emotions and ideas, both in artistic contexts and everyday interactions.

Cultural Bridge-Building: For international students, the course provided valuable opportunities to share their cultural perspectives while learning about Thai culture through local classmates' stories.

Career Flexibility: Students developed broader understanding of creative career possibilities, moving beyond narrow conceptions of "success" in the arts.

Challenges and Limitations

The research revealed several consistent challenges that informed ongoing course development:

Initial Resistance: Approximately 20% of students initially resisted the vulnerability required for deep self-exploration. These students typically required additional support and modified exercises to engage fully.

Cultural Considerations: Some cultural backgrounds emphasized individual privacy over public sharing, requiring culturally sensitive modifications to sharing exercises.

Time Constraints: Seven weeks, while intensive, sometimes felt insufficient for students who needed more time to process their discoveries.

Sustainability: Some students struggled to maintain their insights and motivation after course completion, suggesting need for follow-up support.

Conclusion

Theatre-based experiential pedagogy, when delivered in an intensive, intentionally scaffolded format, functions as a powerful catalyst for first-year students' personal growth and development. The consistent emergence of heightened self-awareness, strengthened empathy, and enhanced direction across seven cohorts demonstrates the replicability and reliability of these outcomes.

The study's findings contribute to several important conversations in higher education. First, they provide empirical support for the value of creative, embodied approaches to student development. While universities increasingly recognize the importance of supporting students' holistic growth, concrete evidence for effective approaches remains limited. This research demonstrates that carefully structured theatre experiences can produce measurable improvements in key developmental areas.

Second, the integration of traditional theatre techniques with contemporary digital media skills offers a model for bridging classical artistic training with modern professional demands. Students developed both timeless capacities for self-reflection and empathy alongside practical skills for digital content creation, preparing them for careers that require both artistic depth and technological fluency.

Third, the research highlights the particular value of intensive, immersive educational experiences for identity formation. The seven-week format created conditions for rapid development that might not emerge in traditional semester-long courses with less frequent meetings. The compressed timeframe appeared to intensify students' commitment and accelerate their growth processes.

The study's methodology—longitudinal action research—proved valuable for continuous course improvement while maintaining research rigor. This approach enabled the researcher to refine pedagogical practices based on accumulated evidence while preserving fidelity to core principles. Future research might benefit from similar methodological approaches that honor both educational innovation and scholarly investigation.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest several practical implications for higher education:

First-Year Programming: Universities seeking to support student transition and development might consider incorporating similar theatre-based experiences into first-year programming, either as standalone courses or integrated components of orientation programs.

Faculty Development: The success of the approach depends heavily on instructor capacity to create psychological safety while maintaining appropriate challenge. Faculty development programs could help educators across disciplines incorporate elements of experiential, reflective pedagogy.

Cross-Disciplinary Application: While this study focused on performing arts students, the core principles of embodied self-reflection and collaborative creation could potentially benefit students in other fields.

Assessment Innovation: The multiple assessment approaches used in this study—combining traditional measures with creative expression and reflective writing—offer models for evaluating holistic student development.

Future Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for future investigation:

Longitudinal Follow-Up: Tracking students' continued development beyond course completion would provide valuable data about the sustainability of observed changes.

Comparative Studies: Comparing theatre-based approaches with other experiential learning methods could help identify the unique contributions of theatrical pedagogy.

Cross-Cultural Research: Investigating how these approaches translate across different cultural contexts could inform international applications.

Disciplinary Extensions: Exploring applications of similar approaches in non-arts fields could broaden the impact of these findings.

Final Reflections

The transformation consistently observed in students participating in the "Performing Arts for Self-Discovery" course reflects theatre's fundamental capacity to serve as a mirror for human experience. By creating safe spaces for vulnerable exploration and providing structured frameworks for reflection, theatre-based pedagogy enables students to encounter themselves more fully and relate to others more authentically.

The course's success suggests that universities have opportunities to support student development in profound ways by integrating creative, embodied approaches into their curricula. As students face increasingly complex challenges in identity formation and career preparation, educational approaches that address the whole person become not just valuable but essential.

The research demonstrates that when theatre is used with intention and care, it becomes far more than entertainment or even artistic training—it becomes a pathway to self-discovery, empathy, and purposeful direction. For first-year students navigating the critical transition to adulthood, such pathways may prove invaluable in establishing foundations for lifelong learning and growth.

Through continued research and application, theatre-based pedagogies can contribute meaningfully to higher education's evolving understanding of how to prepare students not just for careers, but for lives of authenticity, empathy, and purpose.

References

Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.

McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2011). *All you need to know about action research* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Nicholson, H. (2011). *Theatre, education and performance: The map and the story*. Palgrave Macmillan.