

# A scoping review on applied drama methods used in social work education

**Cheryl McMullin<sup>1</sup>, Thomas Maguire<sup>2</sup>  
and Paula McFadden<sup>3</sup>**

**Abstract:** This article presents the findings from a scoping review on the occurrence of applied drama used in social work education. Evidence from the last decade has highlighted the efficacy and use of simulation-based learning and role-play in social work education to prepare students for practice, but less is known regarding applied drama methods. The review focused on identifying the use of applied drama and interdisciplinary learning that exists in social work education. There were fifty-three articles retrieved and forty-eight papers in total included in the review but only nine used applied drama techniques and five of which evaluated or specified the use of theatre of the oppressed. This paper will focus on the methods and findings of the application of drama in social work education, as this area has had less attention than simulation-based learning and role-play methods, which the other thirty-nine articles reviewed addressed. This paper only focuses on the findings relating to applied drama methods and the small but burgeoning interest in the use of theatre of the oppressed approaches developed by Augusto Boal in the 1970s. The review identifies a gap in current research on the use of applied drama and how it might potentially enable further development of skills and competence for social work students.

**Keywords:** applied drama; social work education; theatre of the oppressed; pedagogy; scoping review.

1. Cheryl McMullin PhD Researcher, Social Work, Ulster University.
2. Thomas Maguire, Professor of Contemporary Dance and Performance, Head of the School of Arts and Humanities, Ulster University.
3. Dr. Paula McFadden, Senior Lecturer, Social Work, Ulster University.

**Address for correspondence** [McMullin-c6@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:McMullin-c6@ulster.ac.uk)

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## Introduction

There has been a paradigm shift in social work practice, research and education engaging with arts-based methods (Sinding & Barnes, 2015; Heinonen et al., 2018; Leonard et al., 2018; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019). Interdisciplinary understanding can enable new perspectives on issues and enhance problem solving for social work (Hafford-Letchfield & Huss, 2018). Social work needs to continue to cross interdisciplinary boundaries (Nissen, 2019) to try and creatively meet the challenges in the social work profession (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2012). There is a synergetic relationship between the humanities and social sciences, the arts and social work (Chamberlayne & Smith, 2019). Interdisciplinary understanding has the capacity to integrate knowledge from different disciplines to explain phenomena or problem solve, which would not be possible with a singular discipline (Golding, 2009). Interdisciplinary education can be transformative and there is an emerging 'niche in social work' for this to be developed further (Bussey et al., 2021, p.149). This paper will primarily focus on the findings from the scoping review on the use of applied drama and more specifically the use of Boal's (1974) theatre of the oppressed methods in social work education.

Social work education needs to be adaptive and creative in trying to enable students to cope with the current realities in practice (Gómez-Poyato et al., 2020; Tham et al., 2021). The literature reviewed identified a need for developing new methods, and as Campbell (2012) highlights the need for teaching practices and education to evolve to ensure students are ready for when they graduate for the realities and challenges of professional life. Carruthers & Albett (2020) promote using creative methods including applied drama, and specifically theatre of the oppressed to enable critical thinking and transformative social work education. The research question examined the extent of applied drama methods evident in current social work educational literature and identified and appraised the current available knowledge. This paper will examine the methods, findings and highlight the theoretical frameworks and key pedagogical approaches that emerged from this scoping review, which was one part of a broader empirical research study. A discussion and conclusion will explore the gaps and potential opportunities for further research and application in social work teaching and learning.

## Methodology

This was a scoping review that used a systematic method to identify relevant literature and to understand how other research is conducted on the topic and identify gaps that exist (Munn et al., 2018). The scoping literature search aimed to gather ‘an unbiased sample of the available literature’ (Foo et al., 2021, p.1705). The search methods included the use of seven databases to try and capture and include work from both disciplines the social sciences, arts, and humanities. These included SCOPUS, ERIC ProQuest, British Education Index, Web of Science Core -Arts & Humanities Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index, Social Sciences & Humanities (SAGE), MLA (Modern Language database) and U-Search Ulster Universities own database tool. Total hits were eight hundred and twenty-seven and one hundred and eleven relevant hits and fifty-three retrieved articles selected initially based on the abstract. To address researcher bias in the selection, process another reviewer was used with an inter-rater agreement and deselection process adopted (McFadden et al., 2015). The final agreement of the inclusion of forty-eight articles were analysed, thirty-nine relevant to role-play or simulation-based learning and nine were identified as specific to the theme of applied drama methods. All work included in the search was over the last decade from (2011-2021) and the timeframe for the review search was from the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2021 to the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2021.

## Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

The papers selected encompassed, broadly, drama methods. These included, for example, role-play, simulated interviews, and specific applied drama techniques such as theatre of the oppressed. The search returned an extensive volume of literature on this topic and classifying the methods and techniques was a complex process. The various methods were synthesised into three main pedagogical teaching methods, namely role-play, simulation-based learning and applied drama methods. This paper only explores the potential benefits and limitations of applied drama for student learning and specifically theatre of the oppressed and how these techniques might contribute to social work education.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were challenging because of the undefined terminology and broad understanding for this area of social

work education for example most of the studies reviewed required student social workers to take on a role and ‘act out’ scenarios or situations as part of the learning, therefore they were included. There were also hybrid models and approaches identified and included among them drama and social work students in the study from [Duffy et al. \(2021\)](#). The review excluded applied drama methods and health as it is already extensively used over many decades in allied health education ‘Drama has been incorporated in various medical education modules, due to its ability to actively engage its audience’ ([Reeves et al., 2021](#), p.362). Only one interdisciplinary study was included with nursing and social work education specifically using drama a study by [Villadsen et al. \(2012\)](#).

Excluded from the search were educational quality bench marking, or regulation and proficiency policies. Some information was available from doctoral studies and websites on applied drama teaching, learning and education, these grey literature sources were included for depth and scope of knowledge ([Foo et al., 2021](#)). Seminal textbooks were included, and even though these were out of the ten-year timeframe for example [Goffman’s \(1956\)](#) work ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’ this added further knowledge and gave some contextual and theoretical frameworks the findings included in the wider study but not in this paper.

## Search Formulae

The research question was an ‘exploration of the available literature on applied drama in social work education’. The deconstruction of the research question helped to shape the choice of text terms, key concepts, synonyms, and groups which were very important in terms of identifying the right material to help answer the research question. The search text terms included Theatre of the Oppressed, Theatre for Development, Role play, Simulation/Simulated Interview. The synonyms included were Drama, Dramaturgy, Dramatic Art, Dramatics, Dramatization, Theatrics, Acting/Actor, Performance/Performing, Spectacle, Action, Activity. Key words and concepts were used and grouped together, and a search string refined and then applied in all the databases to ensure a consistent approach. Boolean logic, truncation and wild cards were used these are crucial in terms of specificity and reaching the relevant material for the topic it also made it easier to find the material and concepts on the databases ([Holland et al.,](#)

2021). In this search the concepts were grouped for example (“applied drama” or theatre or theatre or drama or role-play\* or simulat\*) AND (“social work” or “social casework”) AND (teaching or learning or student or curriculum or educat\* or trainee).

The search process can be time consuming, onerous, and technical (McFadden et al., 2012) that is why a good search strategy formula is a valuable tool in this complex search process. Sensitivity was the first measure of the data bases performance, and this is the number of articles retrieved from any given database search whilst precision reflected the quality of articles and materials relevant to the topic (McFadden et al., 2012; McGinn et al., 2016). There is a delicate balance and a ‘trade off’ in database searching between sensitivity and precision (Rutter et al., 2010, p.40). New material, research and publications are being produced all the time even whilst conducting the scoping search, so the evidence is reflective of the best available research at time of the search (Alfandari & Taylor, 2022).

## **Applied Drama**

Drama and theatre are not synonymous in practice or theoretical frameworks this interchangeability and difference in the language and interpretation made defining and synthesising the methods in the literature review more challenging. The findings from the scoping search revealed that there are two most dominant approaches used in social work education which were simulation-based learning and role-play. However, for the purpose of this paper the focus is on the findings of specific applied drama methods as less is known about this process. It was interesting at the time of the search that only a limited number of publications and research was available exploring the possibilities of employing these techniques in social work education. Out of the nine identified studies that were synthesised under applied drama methods theme five were specific to exploring theatre of the oppressed and the other four used a variety or combination of drama methods. Applied drama is a practice that utilises drama methods in various settings with people either in educational, therapeutic or community settings (Nicholson, 2014).

The findings resulted in the identification of many differing approaches and included hybrid models of application, for example an interdisciplinary study with social work and nursing by Villadsen et al. (2012) utilised

psychodrama and role-play. Leonard et al. (2016) adopted also an interdisciplinary approach with drama and social work, using applied theatre. Another study by Todd (2012) utilised improv theatre and simulated interviews in a blended approach for social work students. Hitchin (2016) combined role-play and drama methods. The topics covered in the teaching had a very broad scope, for example, being applied to interprofessional working, including sensitive topics such as abuse, interview skills, ethics, law and in preparation for practice in social work. The range of application demonstrates that drama methods are both flexible and reflexive for social work education. However, there is not yet an empirical evidence base or specific style of practice for application in social work education.

## Theatre of The Oppressed

The literature review found that simulation-based learning and role-play, were the most dominant choices of facilitating interactive and participatory learning in social work education which is distinctively different from applied drama. The difference is, for example, that the theatre of the oppressed method is underpinned by a pedagogical framework. The first publication of this method by Boal was in 1974, with the work heavily influenced by the methodology of Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Huss & Bos, 2018). Boal's theatre of the oppressed appeared in the search with the methods from this work evident in the wider literature. Boal's (1974) work includes techniques such as games for actors and non-actors and poetic methods, drawing on theatre of the oppressed, which can explore oppression and enabling change (Sajani et al., 2021). Boal created methods that allows spectators to become actors or 'spect-actors' (Babbage, 2018). This means the learning experience for social work students is interactive and participatory.

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The main methods evident in the review included legislative theatre, forum theatre, newspaper theatre and image theatre. Forum theatre appeared more frequently in the social work education studies (Giesler, 2017; Burroughs & Muzuva, 2019; Garcia et al., 2019; Fantus, 2020). Theatre of the oppressed offers a huge range of diversity, choice and reflexivity and reinterpretation but this can also be a problem as it is used in 'a wide range of contexts with a bewildering plurality of content' which can be challenging for those seeking a specific guide to Boal's work (Campbell,

2019, p.6). This reinforces the need for collaboration with experienced drama practitioners and their expertise for interdisciplinary working when using this method.

## **Forum Theatre**

Forum theatre uses ‘real life experiences’ to explore issues of injustice and oppression (Bala & Albacan, 2013, p.394). It encourages participation and exploration of different options for dealing with a problem or issues (Campbell, 2019) and a variety of problem solving can happen in a forum (Bala & Albacan, 2013). There are recognised structures and roles that are assumed in the forum. Fundamentally the issue is manifested in the conflict between a protagonist and an antagonist, with other roles available to each in pursuing the conflict. The conflict is played out in a scenario and then under the guidance of a facilitator or ‘joker’ figure, replayed with opportunities for audience members to stop the action and step into the roles to explore the conflict. This means there is no conventional audience but spect-actors, who can intervene in a reflexive interchangeable role between performer and audience.

Building relationships was another benefit highlighted by Garcia et al. (2019), arguing that forum theatre enabled play and energy and connecting with other students which is echoed in (Giesler, 2017). Fantus (2020) reported that using these methods aligned to the idea of students constructing and deconstructing knowledge. Given the small number of available sources and differing applications, for example, ethics, cultural awareness, or social justice approaches, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions. However, all studies reported benefits from these methods for social work teaching, but the topic requires further exploration and research.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

The theoretical frameworks emerging from the literature on applied drama and social work education revealed the importance of experiential learning and reflection. Although this is not a new discovery in social work education and practice, what was interesting is that it confirms the value

and potential synergy that exists between theatre of the oppressed methods and the potential benefits of this type of learning for social work students. A praxis exists between [Boalian \(1974\)](#) and [Freirean \(1970\)](#) pedagogy of the oppressed ([Barak, 2016](#)) and alignment with [Goffman's \(1956\)](#) dramaturgy ([Denzin, 2018](#)).

## **Praxis**

Constructivist learning and critical thinking, emerged as a dominant theme, reinforcing the importance for adult learners in constructing their own knowledge through a 'process of inquiry' ([Freire, 1970](#), p.45). According to [Gutierrez \(2013, p.11\)](#) theatre of the oppressed and the use of the 'spectator... is very closely related to [Freire's \(1970\)](#) concept of praxis'. Highlighting the ability of the method to enable connection of theory to practice and transformative learning. [Geisler \(2017\)](#) reinforces this stating that:

'Boal's use of the theatre applied Freirean principles to performance, a model that social work educators can use to inspire social change in their students'. ([Geisler, 2017](#), p.347).

[Barak \(2016\)](#) explored critical consciousness and the work of both Freire and Boal for social work practice, and theatre of the oppressed methods. He posits that using theatre of oppressed can give students the opportunity to understand other voices and experience oppression and discourses for example power and potential for change and to help develop students' critical consciousness. These frameworks situated in the literature highlight how using these methods and experiences for the students can nurture critical thinking.

## **Experiential Learning and Reflection**

Boal's participatory methods present opportunities for experiential learning. By using this technique social work students as adult learners are also able to bring into the classroom their placement experiences and share them in the learning ([Askeland, 2003](#)). [Fantus \(2020\)](#) argues that using the

different theatre of the oppressed approaches, works well if students bring their own knowledge and experiences into the work. Forum theatre is well placed as a method to enhance experiential learning. Garcia et al. (2019) suggest that it can deepen and expand learning and develop social work students' imagination and ideas. This was not an unanticipated finding given the participatory nature of this type of learning, but it reinforces the continued need for students to experience learning in both the classroom environment as well as in the practice field or placement setting.

Dewey (1913) contends that the best way of learning is by 'doing' blending movement, thinking and emotion in learning (Askeland, 2003, p.364). Reflective practice is a well-established core element for social work education and practice (Ferguson, 2018; Watts, 2019). Reflection and debriefing are embedded within applied drama methods and can enable the development of this important practice of critical reflection for social work students (Burroughs & Muzzuva, 2019). Barak (2016) highlights the alignment with Fook and Gardner's (2007) critical incident reflective model including 'authentic reflection' and engaging in understanding of critical incidents, which brought about an enhanced experience for students by exploring issues, using the theatre of the oppressed method (Barak, 2016, p.1778).

## Discussion

The key benefits to using Boal's theatre of the oppressed is that it has a theoretical framework enabling depth and critical consciousness supporting students to integrate theory and practice. It supports a deeper understanding of the realities of the world they live and work in and the intersection of social work practice and learning. It can enhance the development of areas such as cognition and emotion and empathy (Giesler, 2017; Garcia et al., 2019).

Although only a small number of studies were reviewed there are benefits of applied drama methods for social work education. However, this type of learning does not appear to be explicitly embedded within social work education or the curriculum. These methods have been explored in a more experimental way and offer potential opportunities for further application. The models and structures around how to facilitate and de-

liver interdisciplinary work, needs more empirical evidence and guidance (Bussey et al., 2021).

It is important given the current issues with recruitment and retention in social work practice and education that social work academics, practice educators do everything we can to develop our teaching practices including trying to learn with other disciplines. The signature pedagogy of social work education is often identified as the experience student social workers gain on placement or in field work (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Asakura et al., 2018). Social work education in the classroom can also develop and evolve to mirror and address the challenges and realities. Social work students may not always feel prepared for practice, and we cannot just rely on practice placement alone to prepare students for dealing with these complexities (Wilson, 2013). By using interactive and participatory learning there are opportunities to develop more in-depth skills regarding critical thinking, empathy and reflection.

Interdisciplinary work can be incredibly rewarding for those facilitating the learning as well as developing the knowledge and skills of students. Social work educators need to continue to try new teaching and learning techniques, rather than using only role-play and simulated based learning. Although these methods are beneficial, the techniques of the theatre of the oppressed can offer definite possibilities for social work education. Leonard et al. (2018) argues that there is synergy between arts and social work:

‘...arts can be used as pedagogical tools and approaches to mirror the values of the profession, as well as to measure aspects of learning such as affect’ (Leonard et al., 2018., p 301).

## Conclusion

The main limitation of the search was the availability of specific research on applied drama in social work education. With only five papers identified in this search over the last decade, highlighting theatre of the oppressed. However, this does suggest a modest shift towards the use of these methods. There is evidence of some interdisciplinary teaching between social work and drama in social work education, but having completed the review there is a gap and potential for more interdisciplinary work. There was no consensus in the application of the methods, and some studies used

teaching notes, rather than empirical research, on the benefits of theatre of the oppressed, which is an identified gap. The studies that evaluated and or used theatre of the oppressed had positive findings and promoted this type of learning for students (Barak, 2016; Giesler, 2017; Burroughs & Muzuva, 2019; Garcia et al., 2019; Fantus, 2020). The studies reviewed highlighted how resource intensive the work is for example the preparation and debriefing, interdisciplinary partnership, time, training, physical and financial resources needed for implementation.

There was limited evidence to suggest these methods are embedded in the curriculum but rather 'one off' projects or workshop experiences. There are challenges in relation to trying to integrate this learning into an already very full social work curriculum and there needs to be further research on social work curriculum design (Burgess, 2004).

To conclude, it is hoped that within the next number of years, further research and interdisciplinary teaching opportunities will occur, to build on the current knowledge on the use of applied drama in social work education. There is potential in this being a very worthwhile social work education tool and it will be important to evidence this progressive development.

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