Aligning Pedagogy with Experimental Theatre Practice

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Abstract: *This article explores how experimental theatre pedagogy can address the structural tensions of contemporary higher education, especially under conditions of scarcity, institutional constraint, and socio-cultural pressures. It argues that aligning pedagogy with experimental theatre practice requires treating learning as an iterative, inquiry-driven process, where knowledge is produced through action, experimentation, and reflective documentation. The article highlights the need for interdisciplinary partnerships, practice-as-research approaches, and longitudinal studies to track the impact of training on artistic careers. Focusing on the Romanian context, it identifies gaps in longitudinal research and calls for curriculum reforms that integrate applied, community-engaged projects. Ultimately, the article proposes a roadmap for transforming theatre education into a laboratory for creativity, adaptability, and social engagement, ensuring its relevance in a rapidly changing world.*

Key words: *experimental theatre, pedagogy, practice research, interdisciplinarity, Actor-Network Theory (ANT).*

Introduction

Experimental theatre in undergraduate and postgraduate contexts operates under a central instability, determined by how creative, emergent practices persist and develop within higher education structures marked by scarcity, institutional constraint, and socio-cultural tension. This instability is negotiated across three intersecting yet frequently conflicting stakeholder groups. Students seek transformative artistic experiences while also pursuing viable career pathways in precarious labour markets (Giorgino 2016). Faculties confront limited resources and institutional pressures, with contextual behavioural methodologies scarcely researched in performing arts curricula (Messer 2025, Bulley and Șahin 2021). The politics of practice-as-research under neoliberal academic regimes shapes the reasons why PhDs are pursued, producing structural tensions between professional practitioners and theorists (Kowalczuk-Waledziak, Lopes and Menezes 2023), while conventional PhDs are increasingly completed immediately after

MA programs, constraining extended engagement with practice-based scholarship. Institutions and policymakers prioritize sustainability, measurable outputs, and reputation, often instrumentalizing experimental practices for prestige while limiting pedagogical breadth (Bush and Middlewood 2012). Across European higher education, emergent patterns suggest a divide between students oriented toward innovative, critically engaged practices and those adhering to more traditional modes, which show limited cultural exposure and critical participation. This divide can be understood as the product of intersecting structural, social, and affective dynamics that shape student engagement, sense of belonging, and agency in cultural production (Hardt 2024; Butler 2023; Ahmed 2025). We derive this perspective from examples such as the *Theatre of Debate* at University College London, Leeds University's *Don't Smile* project, and the collaborative *Applied Theatre: Theatre as Social Work* MA program at the University of Bayreuth and Coburg University of Applied Sciences. These initiatives show how applied theatre in higher education links learning, interdisciplinarity, and community, fostering socially responsive practice.

In the broader field of theatre and pedagogy, it is also important to acknowledge DIE (Drama in Education) and TIE (Theatre in Education). While DIE generally emphasizes process-based learning through participatory dramatic exploration (Bolton 1979; Heathcote and Bolton 1995), TIE more commonly refers to theatre practices developed with explicit educational aims for school or community contexts (Jackson 1993), this article does not attempt an extended mapping of these pedagogical traditions. Instead, it focuses specifically on the instabilities that emerge when the experimental nature of theatre is not structurally integrated into higher-education curricula. Experimental theatre functions within these dynamics as a process-oriented, interdisciplinary laboratory. Its practices immerse students in diverse frameworks, fostering exploration and application across relational domains through institutional partnerships, from theatre to medicine, law, engineering or AI. Early engagement with such complexity challenges younger students but also positions experimental theatre as a method for navigating systemic instabilities and for fostering adaptive capacities in response to broader socio-cultural and institutional pressures.

I encourage all readers to explore and discuss within their departments the research conducted on second wave practices by the *Centre for Practice Based Research in the Arts* from Leeds and Kingston Universities, especially *Practice Research - Report 1: What is practice research? and Report 2: How can practice research be shared?* (Bulley and Şahin, 2021). Practice research, as outlined in Hann's *Second Wave Practice Research* lecture (Hann 2016) is presented as an iterative, process-driven form of knowledge that challenges traditional academic expectations of fixed outputs. It highlights how embodied, creative inquiry generates research value that cannot be captured solely through written documentation, and it traces how UK academia has gradually begun recognizing practice research as legitimate scholarship. The talk emphasizes documentation as a method of sustaining knowledge beyond ephemeral performance and calls for frameworks that better support artistic inquiry within institutional research systems.

The connection to my research lies in the shared epistemological shift: both practice research and experimental theatre pedagogy treat knowledge as something produced through situated action, iterative testing, and embodied problem-solving rather than through the delivery of stable content. Practice research legitimizes artistic processes as research precisely because they generate understanding through experimentation, adjustment, and reflective documentation. Aligning pedagogy with experimental theatre practice requires adopting the same principles: designing curricula as laboratories, treating learning as an inquiry for understanding the world, and allowing students to develop knowledge through experimentation rather than reproduction. When pedagogy incorporates these methods, teaching itself becomes a form of practice research responsive to context, open to uncertainty, and generating new professional competencies through iterative, experiential work.

Experimental Theatre in Action

Despite the challenges, several university-based projects illustrate how pedagogy becomes experimental by partnering performance with other fields**.** One example of experimental theatre is created as an interdisciplinary project by University College London's Institute of Communications & Connected Systems, coproduced with Theatre of Debate company (Najib 2019). It used scripted monologues and interactive performance to explore AI's impact on society. For example, a series of AI-themed monologues *Black Box* engaged engineering students and the public in discussions about technology and ethics (University College London 2019). This model immerses theatre students in STEM contexts and brings technical staff into drama workshops exemplifying theatre as an art and science lab.

Another example is from University of Leeds / *Don't Smile* (public engagement play) (University of Leeds School of Dentistry 2016). Co-produced with Theatre of Debate alongside dentistry researchers, adolescents, and actors, this play addresses teenage oral health. It was developed from Leeds University research on tooth decay in deprived areas and staged to spark debate among at-risk youth. The project won a national public-engagement award, showing that applied theatre can translate research into community dialogue (Engasser and Saunders 2018). Here pedagogy extends into health science: theatre students collaborated with dentists and educators to create a social impact performance.

A further example practice that also includes a practice as research paradigm comes from Bayreuth/Coburg (Germany) / *Applied Theatre: Theatre as Social Work* MA program (Hochschule Coburg 2024); a unique joint master's between Bayreuth University and Coburg UAS that explicitly marries theatre and social work. The program's premise is that art:

"Is not just about depicting reality, but actively shaping it… promoting social and political change", through participatory, community-based projects (Coburg University of applied sciences and arts). Students study both social theory and performance, then

work with local organizations (schools, NGOs, care homes) to create interventions. This practice-based curriculum is a built-in laboratory, training students to facilitate inclusive, cross-sector arts projects.

Last, but not least, our attention is drawn to Stanford University / Theatre and Performance Studies (TAPS) program in the School of Humanities and Sciences (Jensen 2025). In a recent project at Stanford, theatre pedagogy is reimagined through the integration of artificial intelligence where live performance is augmented with AI-generated imagery, that incudes real-time scripts from audience prompts via large-language models, and AI-based pose-analysis to track actors' movement in three dimensions (Stanford University 2025). Such a setting transforms the rehearsal room and stage into experimental laboratories: actors and students must respond to unpredictable, AI-generated stimuli; directors and designers negotiate between human agency and algorithmic output; scholars gain new data streams on embodiment, gesture, and narrative flow. This hybrid environment forces participants to re-evaluate creative authorship, turning theatre into a site of co-construction where human intention and machine suggestion interact. As a pedagogical context, it cultivates adaptability, technical-literacy, improvisational skill, and reflexivity; it challenges traditional definitions of theatre practice and opens new horizons for what counts as theatrical knowledge, performance, and learning.

Context & Stakeholders

Experimental theatre training is marked by a tension between creative freedom and institutional constraints. Students crave transformative, practice-based learning but also face a "trade-off between unfavourable wages and the opportunity to practice their art" leading many young graduates to abandon artistic careers for stability (Coda Moscarola, Ricci and Vecco 2025). Faculty and programs, meanwhile, often struggle with limited resources and pressure to meet conventional metrics (e.g. publications and graduation rates), even as the creative potential of practice-led methods goes under-acknowledged. Institutions and policymakers tend to prioritize quantifiable outputs and prestige, sometimes instrumentalizing experimental projects for visibility rather than learning. In this climate, *practice-as-research* voices call for new paradigms: "practice researchers are discovering new ways of generating and sharing research, embracing non-traditional types of publication" and advocating that academia adopt mixed-media and digital modes to capture tacit, embodied knowledge (Bulley and Şahin 2021).

Although it is frequently assumed that students enrolled in performing arts programmes aspire to creative and interdisciplinary learning experiences and actively seek opportunities for innovation and community engagement, empirical evidence directly substantiating these motivations remains limited, particularly within the Romanian context. Existing scholarship has predominantly concentrated on institutional structures and faculty perspectives, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to systematically examining students' aspirations, expectations, and motivational drivers.

By contrast, the precarious conditions characterising the professional trajectories of many young performing artists are well documented in the literature. Recent studies consistently highlight the instability of cultural labour markets, noting high levels of professional insecurity, low remuneration, and significant rates of attrition from the field. These structural challenges shape both educational expectations and career planning, underscoring the necessity of preparing students for increasingly uncertain professional environments.

Within this context, higher education institutions and their faculties are compelled to develop emergent pedagogical approaches despite often operating with limited resources and institutional support. The literature increasingly emphasises the importance of bridging theory and practice in performing arts education. In this regard, Bulley and Şahin argue that academic cultures require "better tools for hosting and communicating practice research" that correspond more closely to the modes through which artists generate and disseminate knowledge.

At the same time, universities are subject to mounting neoliberal pressures to demonstrate measurable impact and productivity. The growing emphasis on sustainability metrics, rankings, and quantifiable outputs can contribute to a narrowing of curricula by privileging forms of research that are readily assessable, such as audience studies and historical analyses, at the expense of more complex, iterative, longitudinal and/or long-term studio-based practices. Consequently, performing arts education is increasingly situated at the intersection of competing imperatives: responding to student aspirations, addressing labour market precarity, developing pedagogical innovation, and negotiating institutional demands for accountability and measurable outcomes.

Pedagogical Shifts & Benefits

Combined, such projects prove that one can transform pedagogy itself from a lecture-based learning enterprise into an active, interdisciplinary approach. Educational theory supports this shift: drama and role play are classic forms of *experiential learning*. Studies show that experiential learning engages students and enhances their learning proficiency as well as their capacity to apply newly acquired skills to real-life situations. The formal mechanisms of drama: embodiment, narrative, and collaboration create rich, multi-sensory learning environments. Theatre is a powerful tool for experiential learning, enabling students to explore ideas collaboratively and creatively (Boggs 2007).

Key pedagogical implications include:

Experimental theatre pedagogy positions students as active producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients, thereby reconfiguring the traditional hierarchy between instructor, text, and learner. Within this framework, learning is enacted through embodied participation in devised performance, collaborative scene construction, and facilitated public discourse. Such practices have been shown to intensify student motivation and deepen cognitive investment by situating abstract content within lived, socially embed-

ded scenarios. A pertinent illustration is the *Don't Smile* project, in which students developed communicative competence through direct collaboration with dental practitioners and adolescent participants, thereby integrating disciplinary knowledge with real-world health communication contexts.

A defining feature of this pedagogical model is its deliberate interdisciplinarity. Experimental theatre projects frequently traverse institutional and epistemic boundaries, requiring students to engage substantively with fields such as public health, artificial intelligence, and urban policy. This transdisciplinary orientation expands both skill repertoires and professional networks, aligning educational outcomes with the demands of a contemporary creative economy characterised by cross-sectoral literacy. Comparable structures can be observed in integrated programmes such as the Bayreuth/Coburg MA, which combines theatre studies with social pedagogy, thereby institutionalising interdisciplinarity as a core curricular principle.

Technological innovation further extends the methodological scope of experimental theatre pedagogy. Emerging tools are not treated as external supplements but are instead integrated into the creative and epistemic processes of performance-making. In research contexts such as Stanford University's theatre-and-AI initiatives, led by Michael Rau, artificial intelligence systems, including generative language models and image synthesis tools, are incorporated directly into live performance environments. Experimental configurations include AI-generated visual sequences staged as dream imagery and improvisational dialogue systems in which audience input is mediated through large language models in real time (Stanford University 2025). These practices reposition technology as a dramaturgical partner, enabling students to critically engage with computational systems as instruments of narrative construction rather than perceiving them as antagonistic to theatrical authenticity.

Equally central is a process-oriented conception of learning in which emphasis is displaced from finished artefacts toward iterative exploration. Students develop adaptive capacities through recursive cycles of rehearsal, feedback, and revision, often structured through mechanisms such as audience interrogation, peer critique, and technological prototyping. This iterative "rehearsal of ideas" fosters intellectual resilience and responsiveness to uncertainty, with pedagogical scholarship suggesting that early engagement with complexity cultivates the capacity to "navigate systemic instabilities" and develop adaptive modes of reasoning within volatile environments.

Collectively, experimental theatre pedagogy functions as a laboratory for cultivating transversal competencies including creativity, collaboration, and critical reasoning. While it shares methodological affinities with broader educational innovations such as flipped classrooms and problem-based learning, its distinctive contribution lies in its sustained attention to embodiment, affect, and collective presence. In this sense, it operationalises progressive educational principles not only at the cognitive level but also through socially and physically situated forms of knowledge production.

The Romanian Context: Gaps and Opportunities

In Romania, these European patterns intersect with local challenges. Higher-education theatre programs face resource scarcity and a historical emphasis on theoretical study, history and drama styles. Notably, there is no longitudinal research tracking students from drama schools into their careers. Existing Romanian theatre studies tend to focus on historical eras or audience reception, rather than on professional development. A striking historical example underscores what is missing today. By way of illustration, between 1960–77, Romania's UNATC (then IATC) prospective students underwent a *stage aptitude* admission exam (led by Gheorghe Neacşu) that combined physiological, creativity, and imagination measures and tracked students through all four years of study (Neacșu 1978). Their work combined psychophysiological, creativity, and imagination studies with longitudinal observation of students from pre-admission through the fourth year. Similar research today would provide critical insight into career trajectories, pedagogical impact, and the evolving requirements of the profession. This orientation reflects structural choices in knowledge production rather than a failure of students or faculty, shaping what counts as legitimate research and training in the field. Such data could reveal how early abilities and training translate into careers. Research in performing arts globally now stresses the value of longitudinal data, because careers in the arts are long and nonlinear. For instance, a new cultural-economics study notes that while most analyses of artistic careers use one-off surveys, a smaller but growing body of work leverages longitudinal administrative data to follow artists' trajectories (Coda Moscarola, Ricci and Vecco 2025). These designs are needed in Romania too, since only by tracking alumni can educators understand which pedagogical approaches lead to sustainable careers. Early-career actors in Romania encounter structural instability comparable to international patterns in the performing-arts labour market. Employment frequently takes the form of short-term contracts, project-based work, and fragmented income streams (Braniște and Popovici 2019). This produces high attrition, where many trained actors leave the profession within a few years (Popovici 2019). Research in other contexts demonstrates that professional vulnerability is not uniform across a career: risk of withdrawal is most acute in early stages, when networks, financial security, and institutional support are at their weakest (van den Eynde, Fisher and Sonn 2016). Without longitudinal tracking of graduates, training programs lack empirical feedback on career trajectories, making it difficult to calibrate curricula, mentoring structures, and transition-to-work strategies to actual labour conditions.

Romanian theatre education often balances theory, history, management courses with practice, rather than systematically marginalizing practice, even though the weight and institutional valuation of theoretical programmes remain significant. This emphasis reflects structural decisions about what counts as knowledge. Faculty aiming to innovate in practice-based pedagogy may find little official support or recognition. Addressing this gap requires a shift in policy, i.e. funding and valuing long-term studies of graduates, as well as curriculum reforms that integrate applied projects and interdisciplinary modules. Only then can Romanian theatre education align with the experi-

mental, community-engaged cultural practices seen elsewhere. Moreover, this imbalance extends beyond academia: the scarcity of experimental, practice-based methodologies is obvious in institutionalized theatres nationwide, where programming and professional training largely favour canonical repertoires and traditional production models, limiting opportunities for innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the integration of emerging pedagogical approaches into the professional stage.

From Exposing Instabilities to Implementing Solutions: A Roadmap for Experimental Theatre Pedagogy

The persistent instabilities in experimental theatre pedagogy (resource scarcity, curriculum rigidity, lack of longitudinal research, and undervaluing of practice-led methods) require not only critical exposure, but also actionable, evidence-based solutions. This section proposes a roadmap for aligning pedagogy with experimental theatre practice, drawing on high-impact research and international best practices.

1. Resource Scarcity and Institutional Constraints

Interdisciplinary partnerships and external funding are proven strategies for overcoming resource limitations. University-led projects that integrate theatre with STEM, health, and social work disciplines have demonstrated success in diversifying resources and enhancing both student proficiency and institutional prestige. For example, the *Theatre of Debate* at University College London and the *Applied Theatre: Theatre as Social Work* MA at Bayreuth and Coburg exemplify how cross-sector collaboration can generate new funding streams and pedagogical innovation.

Implementation: Establish formal alliances with departments outside the arts, NGOs, and local businesses. Pilot joint modules and document outcomes for future scaling, and pitch funding opportunities.

2. Curriculum Rigidity

To address curriculum rigidity, it is essential to move beyond traditional formats and embrace innovative, process-oriented pedagogies. One powerful approach is the integration of docudrama within an applied theatre framework, implemented in societal environments such as medical schools, hospitals, and corporate settings. This method enables students to investigate core issues such as the dynamics between hospitals and patients, or narratives around workaholism in corporate culture, by engaging directly with the environments and stakeholders involved. The pedagogical process should be collaborative, involving not only theatre students and faculty but also journalists, documentarists, sociologists, psychologists, and economists. By working alongside these professionals, students learn the art and ethics of documentation, develop investigative skills, and witness in real time the impact of applied theatre as docudrama. For example, students might interview nurses, managers, and doctors about triage protocols, then translate these insights into performative narratives that foster dialogue and reflection within the institution. Similarly, docudrama projects in corporate environments can critically examine workaholism, using

interviews and field research to frame narratives that challenge prevailing norms and stimulate organisational change. This approach not only enriches students' understanding of documentation and dramaturgy but also demonstrates the transformative potential of theatre as a tool for social inquiry and intervention. Moreover, developing critical aesthetic thinking in relation to epistemic resistance becomes a central objective. By investigating real-life contexts and embedding creativity within situated inquiry, students learn to recognise and challenge dominant narratives, fostering a deeper realisation of how theatre can function as a site of resistance and innovation. This aligns with contemporary scholarship on practice-as-research and functional contextualism, which emphasise the value of iterative, embodied, and context-sensitive learning (Giorgino 2016). Furthermore, it extends contextualist logic from disciplinary understanding toward *world-understanding*, emphasising learners' navigation of complexity, systems, and social reality. Education in arts practices becomes architecture for adaptive action in uncertain environments rather than mastery of content alone (Karmon 2018). In conclusion, reframing performance training as preparation for world engagement empowers students to develop a relational, ethical, and systemic approach to their work skills that are crucial for navigating the intricacies of contemporary society and the evolving landscape of the performing arts. By prioritizing these competencies, theatre education can foster graduates who are not only adept artists but also thoughtful contributors to their communities and industries.

Implementation:

a. Integrate docudrama modules into the curriculum, partnering with external experts and institutions.

b. Facilitate fieldwork and collaborative documentation projects in hospitals, corporations, and other societal and labour settings.

c. Use reflective assessment tools to evaluate both the process and impact of applied theatre interventions.

d. Encourage critical dialogue on epistemic resistance and the role of creativity in social investigation (Bhuyan 2025).

3. Lack of Longitudinal Research

Launching alumni-tracking initiatives and longitudinal studies is essential for assessing the impact of pedagogical approaches on career trajectories. Evidence from arts education research highlights the value of such data in informing policy and curriculum reform (Catterall et. all 2012).

Implementation: Collaborate with national education agencies and research centres to (co)design and fund longitudinal studies. Use digital platforms for ongoing data collection and analysis (Coda Moscarola, Ricci and Vecco 2025).

4. Undervaluing Practice-Led Methods

Recognising and rewarding non-traditional outputs such as digital performances and community interventions as valid scholarly work is critical. Service learning and com-

munity-based projects have been shown to improve student retention and real-world problem-solving skills (Preeshl 2018).

Implementation: Revise institutional policies to include practice-led research in promotion and assessment criteria. Document and disseminate successful projects to build institutional support (Bulley and Şahin 2021).

5. Applying Actor-Network Theory and Functional Contextualism

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and functional contextualism do not merely offer robust frameworks for understanding the intricate networks of human and non-human actors (script, acting technologies, policies that shape learning and creativity) (Fenwick and Edwards 2010). They also foreground the persistent instabilities and latent potentialities within pedagogical practice itself. The willingness of educators to adapt their pedagogical content knowledge is not a given, but rather a dynamic response to the provocations and complexities that these frameworks reveal. As Ross W. Prior studies demonstrate, the articulation and evaluation of teaching practices in drama schools is deeply contingent upon institutional context, personal belief system, and the broader socio-cultural environment. Trainers' capacity to adapt is often challenged by the entrenched traditions, resource constraints, and the shifting expectations of both students and institutions. Yet it is precisely through engaging with ANT and functional contextualism that educators can begin to reconceptualize their roles not as transmitters of fixed, tacit knowledge, but as facilitators of adaptive, context-sensitive learning. Evaluating learning by its capacity to influence behaviour and outcomes in context demands that pedagogy remain not only relevant but also resilient, able to navigate and reorganize the epistemic networks of students and institutional stakeholders that constitute the educational reality (Busch, Malkin and Belisle 2025). In this light, the debate is not simply about whether teaching can adapt, but about how the willingness to do so becomes a site of negotiations, innovations, and sometimes resistance, as educators confront the challenges and opportunities of contemporary performing arts practices.

Implementation: Focus on facilitating context-sensitive and socio-culturally situated learning environments to reveal teaching practices, enabling students to guide and orient their experiential learning by analysing and practically navigating these networks. Evaluate creative acts based on their measurable effects within specific contexts.

Practical Recommendations

a. Design inclusive, challenging learning environments using differentiated instruction and safe spaces for creative risk-taking.

b. Foster interdisciplinary and community engagement through modules that merge theatre with public health, technology, and social sciences.

c. Integrate digital technologies into performance and pedagogy, training both faculty and students in digital literacy.

d. Implement longitudinal tracking of alumni using digital networks and surveys, sharing findings with stakeholders for continuous improvement.

e. Apply ANT and functional contextualism to curriculum design, assessment, and professional development.

Key conclusions

Experimental pedagogy in theatre operates through a structural alignment between artistic practice and educational design, in which students are positioned as active agents engaged in real-world problem-solving rather than passive recipients of disciplinary knowledge. Within this framework, faculty increasingly develop cross-disciplinary projects, while institutions progressively legitimise non-traditional forms of output, including digital artefacts, community-based interventions, and AI-integrated tools. These modalities collectively introduce epistemic instability into experiential learning environments, deliberately challenging assumptions of certainty and fixed disciplinary boundaries.

In this context, a set of core competencies emerges as central to the pedagogical model. These include adaptive problem-solving, interdisciplinary translation, embodied cognition, co-creative authorship, reflective practice, ethical and community literacy, and technological fluency. Creativity, accordingly, is reframed as functionally oriented rather than purely representational, acquiring value through its applicability within dynamic and socially situated conditions.

This shift can be further understood through a functional contextualist framing of learning, in which educational outcomes are evaluated according to their capacity to predict and influence behaviour within specific contexts. From this perspective, iterative assessment and longitudinal evidence become central methodological principles, enabling learning processes to be understood as continuous adaptations rather than discrete achievements.

Parallel to this, pedagogical content knowledge is significantly expanded. Educators are required not only to transmit disciplinary content but also to design authentic tasks, scaffold processes of transdisciplinary translation, operationalise skill transfer across domains, and integrate technological and community-based partnerships into curriculum structures. Assessment practices, in turn, extend beyond final products to include both processual development and demonstrable impact.

Actor-Network Theory provides an additional analytical lens through which these developments can be understood. Within this framework, learning is co-constituted by heterogeneous assemblages of human, material, technological, and institutional agents. Students are therefore trained to navigate, reconfigure, and mobilise these networks, transforming structural constraints into generative conditions for creative and intellectual production.

Taken together, these tendencies point toward a broader future vision in which curriculum operates as research-driven infrastructure, and performance functions as an iterative laboratory for inquiry. Interdisciplinary collaboration becomes formally embedded within

institutional design, while artificial intelligence and digital tools are integrated as structural components of knowledge production. Longitudinal tracking mechanisms inform both pedagogical refinement and institutional policy, positioning theatre not merely as an artistic discipline but as a systems-testing mechanism for broader social processes.

These convergent developments can be productively situated within the political and theoretical framework of Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe 2013). Her conception of agonistic pluralism foregrounds the constitutive role of conflict, contestation, and dissent within democratic and cultural life, rejecting the possibility of consensus as a final or stable endpoint. In this sense, the destabilising and process-oriented character of experimental pedagogy resonates with Mouffe's insistence on the productive function of tension within social systems. Theatre-as-pedagogy, understood as a site of embodied negotiation between competing epistemologies, can thus be read as an enactment of agonistic space, where knowledge is continuously rearticulated through participation, disagreement, and situated practice.

Discussion

Bringing pedagogy into alignment with experimental theatre means rethinking all the levels of the system. It means empowering students to tackle real-world problems through art, supporting faculty to develop cross-disciplinary practice, and reforming institutions to accept non-traditional outputs (digital performances, community interventions) as valid scholarly work. As the cited examples show, merging theatre education with fields like science, law, or AI yields rich learning and social impact. At the same time, we must gather the evidence on what works. As such, longitudinal research (as recommended by recent studies) is urgently needed to guide pedagogy and policy. Especially in the Romanian context, rekindling such research efforts would help secure a creative future for theatre graduates. *In summa*, aligning pedagogy with experimental practice promises a more engaged, resilient, and socially relevant theatre education, but only if systems adapt to support it.

Experimental, practice-led theatre cultivates a constellation of professional competencies, such as adaptive problem-solving under creative constraint, interdisciplinary translation, embodied and situated cognition, facilitation and co-creative authorship, iterative reflective practice, ethical and community literacy, and technological fluency that together reconfigure creativity as a functionally oriented, context-sensitive repertoire rather than a representative attribute tied to theatre's presentational outputs (Kolb 1984; Mildenberg 2018; Varela, Thompson and & Rosch 1991; Lave 1991; Nelson 2013). Contemporary empirical work in performing arts pedagogy shows these competencies emerge when students negotiate real-world problem domains, translate specialist knowledge into performable forms, and co-design interventions with non-theatrical stakeholders, thereby learning to generate and evaluate creative choices by their measurable effects in situated contexts (Bulley and Şahin 2021; Messer 2025; Fox 2006). Framed by functional contextualism, creative acts are assessed by their capacity to predict and influence subsequent behaviour

and learning trajectories, which privileges iterative assessment, self-formative feedback loops, and longitudinal evidence over single-event aesthetic appraisal (Hayes 1999; Karmon 2018). For pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), these practices demand an expanded discourse and performance from the teachers' side that fuses deep disciplinary content with adaptive pedagogical strategies: instructors must design authentic tasks, scaffold transdisciplinary translation, operationalize transfer through situated practice, create evaluative rubrics sensitive to process and impact, and integrate technological and community partners into curriculum design (Shulman 1986; Borgdorff 2012). Consequently, experimental theatre pedagogies reconceptualize curriculum as an ecologically embedded learning system where teacher knowledge includes not only subject mastery but also methods for orchestrating co-authorship, mediating ethical stakes, and using longitudinal outcome data to refine instruction, thereby turning creative competence into an empirically tractable objective that informs both classroom practice and institutional policy.

In this context, Actor-Network Theory introduces a non-hierarchical analytic frame in which human agents, discourses, technologies, assessment protocols, funding structures, institutional norms, and artistic materials function as co-constitutive agents that collectively shape learning and creative production (Latour 2005; Callon 1986). Positioned within the existing argument, ANT reframes experimental theatre pedagogy not as a unidirectional transmission of skills but as the continual negotiation of relations across heterogeneous networks. Creative competence, in this view, emerges through the student's capacity to navigate and reorganize networks of constraints: scripts, spaces, digital tools, collaborators, bureaucratic procedures, audience expectations, and their derivative creative constraints, transforming them into generative resources rather than fixed limitations and rigid aesthetic tacit knowledge often practiced under master-disciple frame. Integrating ANT into the pedagogical model strengthens the case for process-driven, context-responsive instruction: curriculum design becomes the orchestration of productive frictions between actants, while assessment attends to how students mobilize networks to produce effects in the world. For pedagogical content knowledge, ANT implies that pedagogues must teach not only technique and critical, aesthetic dramaturgical styles literacy but also network literacy: the ability to trace relations, redistribute agency, and engineer conditions under which new creative pathways become possible, were the dramaturgy of meaning is embedded in its use. In functional contextualist terms, ANT supplies the structural map through which behaviour-in-context can be evaluated, allowing empirical tracking of how infrastructural, material, and sociocultural configurations influence artistic decision-making, persistence, and innovation.

Future experimental theatre could become grounded in experimental pedagogy, so that it becomes a research-driven infrastructure rather than an extracurricular practice. Education shifts from repertoire transmission toward iterative inquiry frameworks. Performance modules operate as laboratories where students test aesthetic hypotheses and dramaturgical styles, generate data on audience response, and refine work through evidence-based cycles. Interdisciplinary collaboration is formalized into curriculum architecture, merging theatre with technology, social sciences, cognitive studies, machine learning, and material

design. Assessment relocates from product evaluation to longitudinal tracking of professional behaviour, transfer of creative strategies, and capacity to operate across volatile cultural systems. Actor-Network Theory and functional contextualism together design pedagogies that train students to read and rewire networks-policies, funding structures, communities, media ecologies-treating constraints as variables for influencing the sociocultural affordances within their culture or transculturally. Furthermore, Artificial Intelligence is already reshaping experimental theatre education. As machine co-authors, AI systems prompt creators to refine their work, while simulation engines enable performers to test ideas against audience reactions in real time. Adaptive scenography powered by digital technology offers new possibilities for responsive staging and narrative design. Together, these innovations turn the creative process into an ongoing cycle of inquiry, highlighting how and why artistic choices are made.

Institutions are now compiling extensive longitudinal archives tracking graduate outcomes. But the goal is no longer just to record the evolution of theatre, it also has the inherent purpose to build robust models that demonstrate how theatre education drives learning, civic engagement, and innovation, especially in the face of social and economic upheaval. The discipline is transforming: theatre practice is positioned as a dynamic systems-testing mechanism, probing and reflecting the complexities of society. Meanwhile, the pedagogy itself is undergoing a renaissance, becoming radically experimental to nurture the spirit of ongoing experimentation.

This approach is reshaping the very foundations of theatre education. Research is valued not only for its ability to chronicle performances, but also for its capacity to generate actionable insights that help educators, policymakers, and artists understand and influence real-world outcomes. The message is clear: if theatre is to remain relevant, its educational practices must be as innovative and adaptable as the art form itself. As these archives grow, they are not merely repositories of past achievements but living resources guiding curricular redesign. Effective communication and effective teaching means understanding what matters to both students and communities. Theatre education, reimagined through this lens, is becoming a laboratory for societal change, where the measure of success is its tangible impact on the world beyond the stage.

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