

“Theatre at the University”: Reimagining Pedagogy, and Institutional Culture in Algerian Higher Education; a Paradigm Shift or an Isolated Non Continuous Experiment?

Hadjer Seraoui*

University of Algiers 2 - Abou EL Kacem Saâdallah, Algeria
hadjer.seraoui@univ-alger2.dz

Received: 20/10/2025,

Accepted: 25/03/2026,

Published: 05/06/2026

ABSTRACT: This article examines the pedagogical, cultural, and institutional implications of “Theatre at the University” (المسرح في رحاب الجامعة), a 2024 inter-ministerial initiative jointly launched by Algeria’s Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Higher Education. Implemented as a pilot program at the University of Algiers 2, and in cooperation with the Algerian National Theater, the initiative offered intensive, week-long workshops in directing, acting, and dramatic writing, delivered by practitioners from the Higher Institute of Performing Arts in collaboration with university faculty of foreign languages. Through a qualitative case study approach, we analyzed data collected from 63 students and 4 instructors via multilingual open-ended questionnaires. The study engages four intersecting theoretical frameworks: Freire’s (1970) «Critical Pedagogy», Bourdieu’s (1986) «Theory of Cultural Capital», and «The Capabilities Approach» of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000). Findings reveal that the workshops significantly enhanced affective engagement, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging among students, particularly those outside of arts disciplines. Participants linked theatrical practices to academic growth in fields such as translation, psychology, and media studies, reporting gains in empathy, public speaking, and critical analysis. Multilingual performance was perceived as both expressive and liberatory, allowing students to explore hybrid identities and decolonize normative academic discourses. Despite overwhelmingly positive feedback, participants also pointed to structural limitations, such as short duration, lack of follow-up mechanisms, and limited institutional recognition. The article concludes that while «Theatre at the University» holds transformative pedagogical potential, its long-term impact depends on policy integration, sustainable funding, and the formal embedding of performative pedagogy within Algeria’s higher education landscape. Theatre, in this context, is not an extracurricular add-on but a critical vector of interdisciplinary learning, identity formation, and educational emancipation.

KEYWORDS: “Theatre at the University”, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Higher Education, the Algerian National Theater, affective engagement, academic growth

* Corresponding author

1- Introduction

The "Theatre at the University" initiative did not emerge in a vacuum, it rather reflected deeper aspirations within Algeria's cultural and educational policy landscape. For the Ministry of Culture, this pilot project signaled a shift toward restoring the arts as a central pillar of national identity and youth formation. As Dr. Mouloudji, Minister of Culture, affirmed during a diplomatic engagement with Qatar, "the Ministry of Culture works diligently to promote books, theater, cinema... and the artistic education of young people" (Mouloudji, 2024). Her statement underscores a broader institutional ambition; to reestablish theatre not as elitist ornamentation, but as a democratic space of expression, critical reflection, and intergenerational dialogue. In a context where artistic literacy is too often marginalized in favor of technocratic priorities, Mouloudji's vision elevates theatre as a *foundational modality of cultural transmission and nation-building*. On the other hand, the Ministry of Higher Education, under the leadership of Prof. Baddari, viewed this initiative as part of a longer arc toward pedagogical innovation. In his 2023 keynote titled «*A Creative University in the Service of a Rising Algeria*,» Baddari stated, "Creativity is an imaginative activity that leads to authentic results, [...]. It is the starting point of innovation" (Baddari, 2023, p. 3). This perspective reframes the university not as a factory of certification but as a *laboratory of transformation*, where students develop not only technical competencies but also creative agency and expressive power. The temporary introduction of theatre into academic spaces thus aligned with Baddari's call for a university ecosystem that inspires, adapts, and reimagines.

Taken together, the motives of both ministries intersect around a shared concern: the widening gap between institutional learning and the lived, affective, and expressive realities of Algerian youth. By introducing theatre as a form of public pedagogy, the initiative attempted to humanize higher education. Yet, despite this shared vision, the lack of structural follow-through raises difficult questions about political will and institutional memory. Was this project a fleeting symbol or a genuine prototype for reform? Whatever the answer, the motivations behind its launch remain a powerful case study in how policy, when rooted in cultural conviction, can open educational spaces to radically new possibilities.

While the immediate outcomes of the "Theatre at the University" initiative were widely celebrated, understanding its deeper pedagogical and sociopolitical implications requires more than descriptive reporting. The resonance of students' experiences; ranging from heightened self-awareness to the articulation of hybrid identities, signals the presence of underlying educational logics that surpass conventional disciplinary boundaries. To situate this initiative within a broader epistemic terrain, the following literature review engages four intersecting theoretical frameworks that help illuminate the transformative potential of theatre in higher education: "Critical Pedagogy", "Cultural Capital", "the Capabilities Approach", and "Postcolonial Performance Studies".

2- Theoretical Framework

To begin unpacking the pedagogical foundations of this initiative, we turn first to Freire's (1970) "Theory of Critical Pedagogy", which conceptualizes education as a dialogical and emancipatory process, a vision that finds deep resonance in theatrical practice.

2-1 Freire's Critical Pedagogy: Theatre as Dialogical Praxis

Freire's seminal critique of the "Banking Model" of education, in which students are treated as passive receptacles of knowledge, has profoundly influenced alternative pedagogical paradigms across the Global South. In "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" (1970), Freire proposes a dialogical model rooted in co-creation, critical reflection, and praxis; the continuous interplay between action and reflection that enables learners to read and transform their world. At its core, Freirean pedagogy is a **political act**: it seeks not only to educate, but to liberate.

Theatre, particularly when framed as participatory and reflexive, aligns seamlessly with this ethos. As Boal (1979) -deeply influenced by Freire- noted in *"Theatre of the Oppressed"*, performance is not merely a spectacle for consumption but a rehearsal for revolution. It allows participants to experiment with alternative ways of being, speaking, and relating within a collectively imagined world. In this context, theatre becomes a site of «praxis par excellence»: students reflect upon their realities through improvisation and enactment, and in doing so, begin to reshape them.

This was clearly evident in the Algerian pilot. One student, from a non-arts background, wrote in their post-workshop feedback: *"It helped me analyze everything I encounter. Even walking in the street feels different now."*

This is not simply an emotive response, it is evidence of what Freire calls *conscientização* (conscientization): the awakening of a critical awareness that allows individuals to interrogate and act upon the social structures that shape their lives.

Similar outcomes have been documented in other Arab-world theatre-education intersections. In Palestine, for example, the Ashtar Theatre's work with university aged participants employs Forum Theatre methods to address issues such as gender, power, and occupation. These performances are not didactic; they are dialogical. Audience members are invited to intervene, replay scenes, and test solutions mirroring Freire's belief that education must be a "dialogue of knowers" rather than a one-way transmission of information (Freire, 1970, p. 72).

Scholars such as Nicholson (2005) and Gallagher (2011) have similarly emphasized the affinity between critical pedagogy and applied theatre. Nicholson, in particular, argues that theatre in educational contexts can "disrupt dominant pedagogies by foregrounding empathy, embodiment, and affect as sites of knowing" (2005, p. 45). This disruption was clear in the Algerian context, where traditional lecture halls were temporarily transformed into stages of affective inquiry, co-creation, and political imagination.

Moreover, theatre's capacity to challenge traditional teacher-student hierarchies reflects Freire's vision of horizontal pedagogy. In the Algerian initiative, facilitators often described themselves not as instructors, but as "guides" or "co-participants", flattening the authority gradient and promoting collective exploration. This pedagogical stance not only democratized knowledge production but also repositioned students as agents of meaning, capable of generating insights from their lived experiences.

It is this horizontality, this dialogical turn, that reconfigures the classroom into what Freire might have called a "cultural circle" which is a space of mutual learning, where knowledge is not deposited but *co-authored*. When students say, *"I learned to see,"* they are not merely describing cognitive gain but epistemological transformation.

In sum, theatre -when implemented as dialogical and experiential- can serve as a powerful Freirean instrument of liberation. It equips students not only to articulate their inner worlds but to question the outer ones that shape them. As educational systems in Algeria and beyond grapple with relevance, engagement, and justice, the lessons of Freire remain strikingly urgent: pedagogy must not only inform; but rather, it must transform.

While Freire helps us understand how theatre fosters dialogical engagement and critical consciousness, Bourdieu's framework brings into focus the unequal distribution of cultural resources within academic institutions. His concept of cultural capital allows us to interrogate how theatre may reconfigure access to symbolic power in the university space.

2-2 Bourdieu's Redistribution of Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's sociology of education, particularly his theory of cultural capital, offers a crucial lens for understanding the symbolic stakes of integrating theatre into university curricula. In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu (1986) argues that access to certain forms of cultural competence - like language mastery, artistic literacy, and aesthetic codes- is differentially distributed across social classes and educational institutions.

Formal schooling, rather than neutralizing these inequalities, often reinforces them by privileging the habits of the dominant class.

In this framework, theatre is not just an art form; it is a socially encoded practice that reflects and reproduces specific dispositions and legitimized ways of being. When made accessible to students from non-arts, non-elite backgrounds - as was the case in the Algerian "Theatre at the University" initiative - it can operate as a mechanism for symbolic requalification. That is, it grants students access to modes of expression, self-presentation, and cultural performance typically reserved for more privileged milieus.

This redistribution of capital was evident in multiple participant testimonies. A Russian language student noted: *"I never thought I could stand on a stage. Now I feel like I can speak in front of anyone."* Another from the Faculty of Psychology remarked: *"It was not about acting, it was about becoming more confident in my ideas."*

Such feedback reveals more than personal growth; it reflects the internalization of new forms of symbolic power, linked to what Bourdieu would describe as the embodied state of cultural capital; skills and sensibilities acquired through participation and practice (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244).

In this context, theatre served as a counter-hegemonic pedagogical tool that redefines what counts as academic success, who gets to be expressive, and which modes of knowledge are valued. Rather than perpetuating the privileging of "legitimate" intellectual capital (essay-writing, argumentation, lecture-based knowledge), the initiative introduced an aesthetic and affective capital that students could carry into their broader academic and professional trajectories.

This democratizing function is echoed in similar initiatives across the Arab world. In Zoukak Theatre Company's collaborations with Lebanese universities, for instance, students from translation, media, and psychology programs engage in devised theatre projects exploring themes like war memory, migration, and belonging. As one Zoukak participant reported: *"Before this project, I did not think theatre had anything to do with my degree. Now I see it is about how I relate to people, how I speak, how I listen."*

These projects, like the Algerian pilot, operate as transformative spaces where theatre equips students not only with expressive skills but with transferrable social and intercultural competences that are the very kind of "soft skills" increasingly demanded in globalized labor markets.

In Western contexts, this function has been theorized as well. In her work *"Theatre and Education"*, Nicholson (2009) argues that drama education can "re-position marginalized students by offering them the aesthetic tools to narrate and legitimize their experiences within institutional spaces" (Nicholson, 2009, p. 89). This is consistent with the ethos of the Applied Theatre Program at Goldsmiths, University of London, where working-class, first-generation students use performance to explore - and often challenge- the social scripts they have inherited.

What emerges across these contexts is a clear pattern: when theatre is embedded in academic spaces, it can disrupt traditional circuits of capital distribution, allowing students to accrue symbolic value in forms that standard curricula often overlook. But this requires more than token inclusion; it requires that institutions recognize and legitimize theatrical participation as a serious, credit-worthy, and identity-shaping mode of learning.

In Algeria, the absence of academic credit or formal assessment for the theatre workshops remains a key limitation. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this omission risks relegating theatre to the status of an "extra-curricular luxury" which is symbolically powerful for the students who participate, but institutionally invisible. To fully realize its redistributive potential, such initiatives must be structurally supported and epistemologically integrated.

If Bourdieu foregrounds issues of symbolic inequality and legitimation, the Capabilities Approach proposed by Sen and Nussbaum shifts attention to the expansion of personal agency and human flourishing. This perspective highlights how theatre enables students not only to gain cultural capital, but also to develop the freedom to become what they value.

2-3 Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000)' s Theatre as a Space for Expanding Capabilities

The integration of theatre into higher education also finds compelling justification within the Capabilities Approach formulated by Sen (1999) and later expanded by Nussbaum (2000). This framework shifts the focus of educational evaluation from purely instrumental outcomes - such as grades, degrees, or job-readiness- toward the real freedoms individuals have to develop and exercise their capacities. Education, in this view, is not merely about acquiring skills but about expanding the range of *doings and beings* that people can meaningfully pursue.

In the Algerian theatre initiative, this theoretical lens proved particularly apt. Students were not only introduced to a new art form; they were invited to explore themselves as thinkers, feelers, creators, and collaborators; these are dimensions that are often neglected in conventional academic training. One English language participant wrote: *"It refines the soul. I felt more intelligent in a new way."* Another described the workshop as "a door to learning I did not know existed." These statements underscore a shift from passive academic absorption to active self-cultivation. This is what Nussbaum (2000) calls *"the education of the whole human being."*

Theatre, in this sense, cultivates a set of internal capabilities central to democratic life: imagination, emotional recognition, communication, aesthetic appreciation, and critical judgment. For example, Sen (1999, p. 75) emphasizes that *"the expansion of agency is itself a developmental goal"*. Participating in theatre allowed students to see themselves as agents, capable not only of interpreting reality but of reshaping it.

Such outcomes are not unique to the Algerian case. The "Theatre for Change" initiative developed jointly by the University of Leeds and the University of Ghana exemplifies this dynamic. Using participatory performance techniques, it engages university students in addressing gender violence, inequality, and stigma on campuses. Evaluations of the project revealed marked increases in students' self-confidence, public voice, and empathy which are all markers of enhanced capabilities (Bradley & Kibra, 2015).

In the Algerian workshops, students noted improvements in social adaptability, interpersonal sensitivity, and the courage to speak up. These are not incidental outcomes, but rather they are capability gains that reflect a broadening of human potential beyond the metricized logic of academic transcripts.

Importantly, these gains were particularly pronounced among students from disciplines typically perceived as rigid or "non-creative" (e.g., Arthophonia, Archives). For them, theatre offered a rare sanctioned space for vulnerability and emotional intelligence, which are increasingly recognized as critical in both professional and civic life (Nussbaum, 2010).

From a policy standpoint, this approach might call for a reframing of what counts as success in higher education. Rather than measuring performance solely through standardized outputs, institutions should consider how educational environments foster, or constrain students' capacity to function meaningfully in a complex world. Thus, theatre, with its emphasis on exploration, ambiguity, and co-presence, expands these capacities by creating space for uncertainty, empathy, and agency.

Yet, as with previous frameworks, the potential of theatre as a capabilities enabler is contingent on structural recognition. Without sustained funding, curricular integration, and institutional commitment, such programs risk becoming episodic anomalies that are powerful in their moment, but ultimately unsustainable. Therefore, if Algerian higher education is to take the Capabilities Approach seriously, it must move beyond pilotism and toward a durable politics of capability development that values the arts not as ornamental, but as foundational to human flourishing and democratic life.

Beyond individual transformation and institutional redistribution lies a deeper political function of theatre in formerly colonized societies. Postcolonial performance studies invite us to see theatre as a site of epistemic resistance where knowledge hierarchies are contested, identities are hybridized, and cultural hegemonies are unmade.

2-4 Postcolonial Performance Studies: Theatre as Epistemic Resistance

In postcolonial contexts, theatre is never just an artistic practice but it is also a political site, a medium of memory, and a mode of resistance. From Soyinka's ritual dramaturgy (1997) to Salhi's (2011) critique of francophone theatrical norms in North Africa, scholars and practitioners have long emphasized the performative space as one of cultural negotiation, where identities are not only represented but reimagined. Within this tradition, postcolonial performance studies might provide a critical framework for interpreting the Algerian university theatre initiative not merely as a pedagogical innovation, but as an epistemological intervention.

Theatre, in this reading, becomes a tool for unsettling colonial logics: linguistic hierarchies, disciplinary borders, and monocultural curricula. In a country like Algeria whose academic institutions still bear the imprint of a francophone colonial legacy, the act of multilingual, student-led performance is inherently subversive. During the pilot program at the University of Algiers 2, students performed scenes that moved fluidly between Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English. This polyglossia reflected what Bhabha (1994) terms the "third space", which is a performative site of hybridity where fixed identities are destabilized and new subjectivities can emerge.

As one Russian Language student reflected: *"I have always thought in three languages, but never knew I could perform them at once. It felt like I was finally speaking as myself."*

This expressive hybridity reflects not only identity affirmation, but a challenge to epistemic domination. In resisting the monolingual biases of the academy; particularly the privileging of French as the language of formal knowledge, students enacted what Mignolo (2009) might call "epistemic disobedience": the refusal to think, feel, or express solely within the boundaries imposed by colonial legacies.

This phenomenon has precedents in other parts of the Global South. The "Performing Resistance" project at the University of Cape Town engages students in multilingual performances that confront apartheid-era mythologies, including the institutional silencing of African epistemologies. Similarly, in Tunisia, post-2011 civic theatre initiatives have empowered university students to stage performances in Darija, French, and classical Arabic, reasserting pluralistic narratives of identity and belonging against the backdrop of technocratic educational reforms.

In all these cases - including Algeria - theatre functions as a counter-curriculum. As Basiouny (2013) writes in her work on Egyptian feminist theatre: *"Performance opens an alternative archive, a place to re-embody what the written curriculum leaves unsaid."* In the Algerian initiative, this was especially highly evident in how students addressed themes that rarely surface in formal classrooms: regionalism, intergenerational conflict, and colonial memory. These performances constituted not only aesthetic productions but also counter-hegemonic knowledge practices that are rooted in lived experience, collective inquiry, and embodied critique.

Postcolonial performance theory thus could reframe theatre not as supplemental to the university's intellectual mission but as central to it, particularly in formerly colonized societies. As Soyinka (1997) asserted, theatre is where "the ancestral meets the emergent," a temporal fusion that enables both continuity and rupture.

Yet, institutional fragility threatens this potential. Without sustained academic valorization, theatre risks becoming a momentary escape rather than a permanent reconfiguration of how knowledge is produced, transmitted, and legitimated in the university. To harness the full power of postcolonial performance, Algerian higher education must affirm theatre not only as a practice of identity, but as an epistemic method that expands what counts as knowing, and who gets to know.

3- Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to explore the pedagogical, affective, and institutional dimensions of the *"Theatre at the University"* initiative, launched as a pilot program at the University of Algiers 2 in February 2024. The initiative is distinctive not only for its artistic content, but

also for its institutional framework: it was jointly supported by the Algerian Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Higher Education. A rare convergence that underscores the project's ambition to bridge educational reform with cultural revitalization. Given the exploratory nature of the program, qualitative inquiry was deemed most appropriate to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences.

3-1 Research Design and Rationale

The research design is based on a single-site case study approach (Yin, 2014), allowing for an in-depth, contextually embedded examination of a bounded system namely, the week-long theatre workshops conducted within a university setting. This design facilitates the investigation of multiple intersecting factors: individual learning trajectories, group dynamics, pedagogical strategies, and institutional discourses.

In line with qualitative paradigms (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the study prioritizes rich, subjective data, seeking to understand not just what occurred, but how it was experienced and interpreted by both students and facilitators. The aim is not to generalize, but to thematize and theorize the educational meanings generated through performative practice.

3-2 Researcher Positionality

A distinctive feature of this study is the researcher's dual role as both investigator and participant in the Dramatic Writing workshop. This insider perspective - often described in ethnographic terms as participant-observation (Spradley, 1980) - allowed for an immersive understanding of the learning environment and enabled more nuanced interpretation of students' reflections. The researcher maintained reflective field notes throughout the week and ensured ethical distancing during data analysis by triangulating personal impressions with participant responses and facilitator feedback.

3-3 Participants and Sampling

A total of 63 students participated across three parallel workshops: acting (25), dramatic writing (25), and theatre directing (13). Participants were enrolled in various disciplines including languages (Arabic, English, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish), Translation Studies, Theatre Criticism, Comparative Literature, Media and Communication, Education, Psychology, and Social Sciences. Their academic levels ranged from first-year undergraduate to doctoral studies.

Participation was voluntary and based on an open call disseminated by the university administration. No prior experience in theatre was required, and no academic credit was awarded. This inclusivity fostered a diverse and interdisciplinary cohort, representative of the broader university student population.

Additionally, three instructors from the Higher Institute of Performing Arts and two lecturers (English and Russian) from the university Foreign Language Department facilitated the workshops. Their reflections are included as part of the dataset to ensure a multi-voiced analysis.

3-4 Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed a multi-method qualitative approach:

- Open-ended students' questionnaires were administered to all student participants before the final day of the workshops. This timing ensured that students could reflect holistically on their experience while still in the immersive context of the initiative.

Questionnaires were designed in Arabic, the most widely accessible language among the cohort, but responses were also accepted in French and English, reflecting the initiative's multilingual environment.

- A separate instructors' questionnaire was distributed to instructors, focusing on pedagogical observations, student engagement, and perceived impacts of the initiative.

In addition, the researcher collected informal field notes, facilitator debriefs, and observational insights drawn from in-session activities and final performances.

3.5 Data Analysis

All qualitative data (questionnaires, notes, and instructor reflections) were subjected to a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data, and then organized according to the four theoretical axes guiding the study: dialogical learning (Freire), symbolic capital (Bourdieu), capability development (Sen and Nussbaum), and postcolonial identity negotiation (Soyinka, Salhi, Bhabha).

Responses were first read in the original Arabic and then carefully translated into English by the researcher, ensuring semantic fidelity while adapting for idiomatic clarity. Translation was not only linguistic but also cultural, with attention paid to metaphors, emotional registers, and rhetorical devices used by students.

The analysis also incorporated cross-workshop comparisons to identify shared patterns and unique contributions across the three modalities (acting, directing, writing), as well as triangulation with instructor perspectives.

3-6 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the University of Algiers 2's ethical research guidelines. All participants were informed of the study's objectives and assured that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and would not impact their academic standing. Written consent was obtained for the use of questionnaire responses and for any direct quotations included in the final analysis.

Special care was taken to anonymize all identifying details in participant citations. The researcher's own involvement in the workshop was transparently disclosed to all participants, and reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to mitigate potential bias.

3-7 Limitations

As an exploratory case study of a short-term intervention, this research does not claim generalizability. Its insights are bound to the temporal, cultural, and institutional specificities of the 2024 pilot program at Algiers 2. Limitations include the brief duration of the workshops, the absence of a control group, and the lack of longitudinal follow-up. Nonetheless, the diversity of participants and the richness of the qualitative data offer a compelling foundation for further inquiry into performative pedagogy and institutional innovation in Algeria and beyond.

4 Analytical Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative data collected from students and instructors participating in the "Theatre at the University" initiative reveals a complex constellation of pedagogical effects, affective transformations, and institutional tensions. These results will be interpreted through the four theoretical frameworks previously outlined: Freire's critical pedagogy, Bourdieu's cultural capital, Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach, and postcolonial performance studies. At the heart of this reflection lies the uniqueness of the initiative itself: a rare collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Higher Education. A symbolic and strategic convergence that positions theatre not as peripheral, but as central to educational reform.

To understand how theatre reshaped student learning experiences from within, we begin with Freire's framework of critical pedagogy. His concept of dialogical education offers a useful lens through which to interpret the reflexive, participatory nature of the workshops.

4-1 Theatre as Dialogical Praxis (Freire)

The responses across all three workshops resonate powerfully with Freirean pedagogy. Students consistently emphasized how theatre enabled them to "analyze everything [they] encounter" and to "see the world differently." These statements reflect the awakening of *conscientização*; the emergence of critical awareness through embodied engagement.

Rather than merely consuming content, participants became co-creators of meaning. One student in the writing workshop noted: *"I study psychology, and I now see how theatre helps me deal with emotions and expression, on stage and in life."*

Such insights illustrate how theatre facilitated a process of praxis: reflection-in-action, where theory and experience meet. Students did not simply perform, but rather they interrogated, challenged, and transformed themselves through performance. This aligns with Freire's (1970) vision of education as a political act, grounded in dialogue and collective inquiry.

While Freire explains how students engaged critically and dialogically with the theatrical process, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital helps us grasp a different dimension: how theatre redistributed symbolic resources and challenged institutional hierarchies of legitimacy.

4-2 Cultural Capital and the Redistribution of Expression (Bourdieu)

Theatre also served as a **redistributive force** which is a way of extending access to symbolic and aesthetic competences traditionally restricted to elite circles. Many students came from disciplines where creativity is not part of the formal curriculum (Arthophonia, translation, psychology..., etc), yet they reported newfound confidence in public speaking, teamwork, and cultural fluency.

One Arthophonia student reflected: *"I never imagined I could speak freely in public. Now I feel I can perform, convince, and lead."*

This process, in Bourdieu's terms, reflects an accumulation of embodied cultural capital, not through textbooks, but through gesture, voice, improvisation, and collaboration (Bourdieu, 1986). Theatre reconfigured what it meant to be "competent" in the academic space, thus democratizing expression and valorizing marginalized voices.

However, this redistribution remains symbolic but not institutionalized. As the initiative lacked formal academic recognition (no grades, no credits), its impact - while deeply felt - remained structurally fragile. This reflects the broader challenge of integrating non-canonical forms of learning within rigid academic architectures.

Beyond symbolic empowerment lies the question of human flourishing. The Capabilities Approach allows us to consider theatre as a medium for expanding students' freedoms, agency, and sense of educational possibility particularly in relation to affective and cognitive development.

4-3 Expanding Capabilities through Artistic Practice (Sen and Nussbaum)

The workshops also contributed meaningfully to the expansion of students' capabilities; which are their real freedoms to pursue valued forms of life and learning. Responses reflected growth in empathy, imagination, linguistic competence, and confidence, which are key to Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities (2000).

One Russian Language student summarized: *"This workshop opened a door. I can now write plays in Russian and translate them into English. I never saw the connection before."*

Here, we see an integration of cognitive, linguistic, and affective capabilities, nurtured by an educational environment that encourages exploration rather than standardization. Another Psychology Specialism participant wrote: *"It refines the soul."*

A poetic yet profound way of expressing the emotional and intellectual flourishing that formal curricula rarely accommodate.

Yet, as Sen reminds us, capabilities require conversion factors: institutional support, time, material conditions. Many students lamented the short duration of the initiative and called for longer, recurring programs with more tools, space, and mentorship.

These individual and institutional transformations gain further meaning when placed within Algeria's postcolonial context. Postcolonial performance studies reveal how multilingual expression and theatrical hybridity disrupt colonial knowledge structures and assert cultural agency.

4- 4 Postcolonial Performance and Epistemic Resistance

Perhaps most striking was the initiative's role as a site of identity negotiation and epistemic resistance. The multilingual nature of the performances - Arabic, French, Tamazight, English, Russian - became not only a mode of expression but a rejection of monolingual colonial legacies.

As one Translation specialism participant put it: *"I have always spoken in three languages. But this was the first time I performed myself in those languages."*

This performative hybridity created a third space (Bhabha, 1994), where students no longer had to conform to academic French or literary Arabic. They could instead construct plural, situated identities on stage, through gesture, tone, and polyglossic dialogue. Such experiences contest epistemic authority and propose theatre as a valid form of academic inquiry and cultural memory.

In this sense, the Algerian initiative echoes projects like "Performing Resistance" at the University of Cape Town or Zoukak's trauma-informed theatre in Beirut: all demonstrate that in postcolonial societies, performance is not supplemental but foundational to knowledge-making.

Yet, for these transformations to be more than ephemeral, they must be structurally sustained. The final layer of our analysis turns toward the institutional conditions of possibility, specifically, the paradox of a visionary, double-ministerial initiative constrained by its pilot status.

4-5 The Institutional Paradox: Between Vision and Structure

While the initiative embodies transformative potential, its impact is undermined by structural precarity. The double ministerial origin; a collaboration between culture and higher education, is historic and symbolically powerful. Yet, without follow-up structures, budget lines, or policy integration, the project risks becoming a one-off experiment rather than a replicable model.

Students and teachers alike called for longer workshops, dedicated performance spaces, integration of theatre into curricula, and expansion across universities. One instructor stated: *"This should not be a pilot, it should be permanent. A real pedagogical revolution."*

Here lies the heart of the challenge: how to move from symbolic legitimacy to structural embedding. Without institutional anchoring, theatre remains an ephemeral intervention; yes it was felt, remembered, and celebrated but ultimately excluded from the educational apparatus.

Having unpacked the educational, cultural, and political implications of the initiative through multiple theoretical lenses, one must turn to a broader reflection on its legacy, its structural fragility, and the critical questions it leaves unanswered. Especially in light of its sudden disappearance from the academic calendar.

5- Conclusion

The *"Theatre at the University"* initiative represented a rare moment of convergence between cultural ambition and educational reform in Algeria. By bringing together the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Higher Education, this project disrupted conventional academic routines and invited students into a space of creative experimentation, self-inquiry, and collective imagination. It allowed for a rethinking of pedagogy not as a one directional transmission of information, but as a shared, embodied, multilingual, and dialogical process.

Empirical data from student and instructor testimonies demonstrated how deeply impactful the initiative was. Students from across disciplines reported gains in self-confidence, emotional articulation, critical reflection, and intercultural communication. Theatre, in this context, emerged not as an extracurricular diversion but as a legitimate mode of inquiry, a catalyst for personal growth, and a vehicle for epistemic liberation. These findings were theorized through Freire's concept of dialogical praxis, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach, and postcolonial performance studies. Together, these frameworks helped illuminate how theatre enabled a redistribution of symbolic power, expansion of human agency, and resistance to colonial linguistic hierarchies.

However, as much as the project generated hope, transformation, and pedagogical possibility, it also exposed a deeper fragility at the institutional core. Despite overwhelmingly positive feedback and a pilot that symbolized inter-ministerial alignment, the initiative did not return the following academic year. No formal policy followed. No structural framework was developed to sustain or expand it. The stage was dismantled; the momentum faded.

This abrupt silence raises urgent and difficult questions:

- Was this initiative meant to signal a paradigm shift, or was it a performative gesture; an isolated experiment staged for visibility but not for continuity?
- What mechanisms, if any, exist within Algeria's higher education system to translate experimental success into long-term policy?
- How is institutional memory constructed or erased when it comes to cultural initiatives in academia?
- And more broadly: What happens to students' hopes and pedagogical horizons when such initiatives are introduced, celebrated, and then allowed to vanish without explanation or follow-up?

These are not rhetorical questions, rather they are structural, political, and profoundly educational.

If this initiative is to serve as more than a historical footnote, it must be revived, rethought, and scaled. There must be serious reflection on how to institutionalize performative pedagogy. Not as a boutique offering for the few, but as a foundational practice that supports interdisciplinary, decolonial, and human-centered learning. This means not only securing funding and curricular space, but also training faculty, reforming assessment systems, and embracing aesthetic literacy as integral to national development.

In conclusion, *"Theatre at the University"* was not merely about acting, directing, or writing. It was a prototype for what higher education might become: affective, multilingual, inclusive, and alive. Whether it remains a fading memory or becomes the basis for a more just and imaginative university system depends not on applause, but on policy, will, and vision.

References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed* (C. A. & M.-O. L. McBride, Trans.). Theatre Communications Group.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Bradley, C., & Kibra, M. (2015). *Theatre for Change: Impact report*. University of Leeds / Theatre for a Change.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Herder and Herder.
- Gallagher, K. (2011). *Why theatre matters: Urban youth, engagement, and a pedagogy of the real*. University of Toronto Press.
- Goldsmiths, University of London. (2022). *Applied Theatre MA programme*. Retrieved from <https://www.gold.ac.uk/pg/ma-applied-theatre/>
- Mignolo, W. D. (2009). Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7–8), 159–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>
- Ministry of Culture of Algeria. (2024). *Official statement during cultural diplomacy meeting in Qatar* [Press release].
- Ministry of Higher Education of Algeria. (2023). *A Creative University in the Service of a Rising Algeria* [Keynote speech by Prof. Kamel Baddari].

- Nicholson, H. (2005). *Applied drama: The gift of theatre*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nicholson, H. (2009). *Theatre and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.
- Salhi, Z. S. (2011). Theatre in Algeria: Between official discourse and cultural resistance. *Theatre Research International*, 36(3), 234–246. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883311000477>
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Soyinka, W. (1997). *The open sore of a continent: A personal narrative of the Nigerian crisis*. Oxford University Press.
- Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- University of Cape Town. (2022). *Performing Resistance project*. Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.ctps.uct.ac.za>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Zoukak Theatre Company. (2021). *Applied theatre and youth education in Lebanon* [Project archive]. Retrieved from <https://www.zoukak.org>
- Ashtar Theatre. (2022). *Theatre of the Oppressed programs in Palestine*. Retrieved from <https://www.ashtar-theatre.org>
- Tashkeelat. (2019). *Citizen theatre and youth mobilization in Tunisia*. [NGO Publication].
- Studio Emad Eddin Foundation. (2023). *Performance, pedagogy, and the city: Cairo's independent theatre scene*. Retrieved from <https://www.studioemadeddin.org>