

Energy and presence: A journey from theatre lab to teacher training

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This article narrates my journey through laboratory physical theatre, focusing on how actor presence emerges from physical training, imagination, intentionality and connection with the audience. It then argues for the significance of these elements in initial teacher training, exploring the concept of teacher presence and examining to create a more embodied and active engagement in the classroom, similar to the craft of an actor in performance. By integrating actor-training, I propose that presence is something developed through laboratory theatre training techniques. In my work with student teachers, I incorporate such techniques to work on their energetic presence, enabling them to create richer emotional connections with their students. Research indicates that strong teacher-student relationships significantly impact academic achievement, motivation, and engagement. These relationships flourish when teachers leverage their mental, physical, and emotional resources, suggesting that presence is not merely an innate quality but a skill that can be developed through specific actor-training exercises. Student logs of reflections on the drama module sessions will illustrate the transformative impact of this training on their confidence, teaching practices, and the relationships cultivated within the classroom. Ultimately, I posit that when educators engage their intellect, emotions, and creativity, they can create dynamic learning environments that resonate with authenticity and connection.

1 Introduction – my encounter with laboratory theatre

In the early 80's, I found myself at a crossroads when, on graduating from the Drama Academy, one of my tutors urged me to join a theatre lab group—a suggestion that, unbeknownst to me, would become one of the defining moments in my life. With an open heart and a thirst for exploration, I stepped into this world of theatre lab actors, where the philosophies of Jerzy Grotowski and the spirit of Living Theatre and Odin Teatret infused our work. This was not just an opportunity; it was a transformative journey¹.

¹ Odin Teatret, founded by Eugenio Barba, emphasizes the physicality of performance and the transformative power of theatre, often blending diverse cultural traditions to explore the actor-audience relationship. Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre" focuses on emotional authenticity by stripping away elaborate sets and costumes, prioritizing the actor's body and voice to create a direct connection with the audience. The Living Theatre, established by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, is known for its politically charged, experimental performances that encourage audience participation and address social issues, merging theatricality with activism to foster a communal experience.

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The group, Teatru tal-Bniedem (Theatre of Man), was led by John Schranz, a visionary theatre director renowned for his innovative approaches to performance. Schranz had directed numerous productions that challenged traditional narratives and explored the boundaries of theatrical expression. Under his guidance, the group met regularly to engage in training sessions and collective creations, focusing on experimental techniques and the integration of physicality and, at times, activism into our performances. Our time together was marked by rigorous physical and vocal training, techniques that transcended the confines of my formal theatre education. Yet, it was the magic of collective devising—the exhilarating act of creating theatre as a unified ensemble—that truly ignited my passion. I formed part of the group until the early 90's and in those 13 years, I learned that theatre was more than individual talent and training; it was about channeling the shared energy of the ensemble, a celebration of our collective ideas and presence. It became clear that being fully alive, connected in the moment, was the essence of our craft—a profound realization that reshaped my understanding of performance.

Not long after joining Teatru tal-Bniedem, John Schranz told us about the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA)² event that would be taking place in Italy. This would be an opportunity to meet Odin Teatret, learn more about their work and train with them in workshops. Together with John and two actors who were older and more experienced than me, I embarked on another transformative adventure, this time at ISTA. My first encounter with Odin there was a revelation, I would say a seismic shift in my understanding of performance and the craft of the actor. Odin Teatret's work had captivated me as I had studied their books and seen their videos, but witnessing their training and techniques in person was a life-changing experience. I vividly recall those early mornings, awakened by the hauntingly beautiful sounds of voices and wind instruments soaring through the air—actors in motion, training their bodies and voices with remarkable discipline, riding monocytes in the misty fog upon the hill where we were staying. The atmosphere was electric, filled with the dynamic interplay of sound, movement, and emotion. Driven by this encounter and an insatiable desire to delve deeper into the physicality of performance and the control of energy, I returned to ISTA again and again, seeking to delve deeper into the physicality and energetic precision that characterized Odin's actors.

The workshops during the day with Odin actors were intense and exhilarating, each moment pulsating with a visceral energy that left me breathless. And then there were the

² The International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) continues to be active. It regularly organizes workshops, conferences, and training sessions that bring together artists, researchers, and practitioners from around the world. These events focus on the exploration of diverse performance practices and the development of physical and expressive techniques. ISTA serves as a hub for ongoing dialogue about the relationship between culture and performance, contributing to the advancement of theatre anthropology.

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performances in the evenings—one hour of unrelenting intensity, a kaleidoscope of colour, sound, and extraordinary images created before my very eyes. *Ceneri di Brecht* (The Ashes of Brecht) was one of Odin Teatret's seminal performances, created in 1980 and directed by Eugenio Barba. The play was inspired by the works of Bertolt Brecht, particularly his poetic, politically charged vision of theatre, and it was performed as part of Odin Teatret's long-standing engagement with Italy during this period. Then there was *I Milionen* (The Million) another ensemble theatre loosely based on Marco Polo, blending intense physicality, poetic imagery, and cultural diversity in performance. The piece was shaped by the group's core principles of anthropological theatre, where intercultural performance traditions meet rigorous physical and vocal training.

In *I Milionen*, inspired by the historical Venetian explorer, Odin Teatret draws on Marco Polo's famous travels to the East. In this work, the vibrant interplay of energy, presence, and collective creation shines through, inviting audiences to engage deeply with the theatrical experience. The performance uses symbolic actions, surreal imagery, and moments of pure emotional intensity. The actors' control over their physical and vocal expressions was palpable, pushing the boundaries of what theatre can evoke. This "laboratory theatre" piece focuses on the process of discovery rather than simply presenting a finished product. Each performance of *I Milionen* could vary, offering new insights and depths with every viewing, echoing each member in the audience's experience. *I Milionen* embodied the ethos of Odin Teatret—its commitment to pushing the edges of artistic expression, its deep reverence for performance as a communal and transformational act, and its continued innovation in the world of theatre. It remains one of the many productions through which Odin Teatret has profoundly influenced generations of actors, directors, and performers worldwide.

After my first time at ISTA, one of the Odin actors approached me, having noticed how deeply interested I was by their work and training, and asked if I would like to stay on and tour with them helping out with simple chores like babysitting. I still remember that moment like it were yesterday. How often does life hand you such an invitation? To journey with masters, to live alongside the very people who have opened your eyes to a new world. How could I say no? It was not just a question of staying longer—it was about embracing the unknown, stepping into a path I had never even dreamt of. Isn't that how life works sometimes? We are offered doors, and the choice to walk through them can change everything. So I said yes, knowing that this was an opportunity I could not let slip away.

2 Lessons in presence and energy from Odin Teatret

I lived with Odin Teatret, touring and watching them work, never missing a performance for one whole month. Even though I watched each piece multiple times, I would sit transfixed after every show, trying to process the layers of meaning unfolding before me. Each experience stood as a singular event, distinct in its own right; every encounter with *Ashes of Brecht* and *I Milionen* revealed yet another layer of emotion and insight, deepening my understanding of what theatre, at its fullest expression, could aspire to be.

Some of the sounds and images linger still, like the haunting image of Katrin (played by Iben Nagel Rasmussen), her scream reverberating through *Ashes of Brecht*, her despair so raw, so visceral. These moments continue to resurface, unbidden, especially in those quiet corners of my own life—those moments when I, too, feel helpless, when anger against injustice presses at the edges of my soul. Isn't it in these echoes, after all, that art shows its deepest power? To return to us unexpectedly, as a mirror to our own inner turmoil, reflecting back our struggles in ways we cannot articulate ourselves.

It wasn't until much later, after years of living and breathing theatre, that I began to understand the true depth of what I had absorbed. Those lessons in presence and the mastery of energy became foundational not only to my identity as a performer but, eventually, to my evolution as a teacher trainer. Looking back, I realise that their significance extends far beyond technical mastery. They form the bedrock of how I understand human interaction itself. In theatre, presence is not just about being seen—it's about being felt, about inhabiting the moment with such authenticity that the air between performer and audience vibrates with unspoken connection.

3 From performer to educator: Embodying energy in the classroom

Theatre was my universe. My journey lay in the unconventional realm of theatre, which served as a crucible for experimentation and transformation. From there, I ventured into the world of television production and cinema and eventually, as if drawn by an invisible thread, I found myself studying pedagogy, theatre and drama education and ended up teaching in schools and eventually in academia.

As an academic, I have dedicated myself to sharing the power of creativity and the transformative potential of drama both as a subject as well as a medium for learning. My teaching spans adult education, youth studies, and initial teacher training (ITT). My theatre background has profoundly influenced my approach, allowing me to weave creativity into educational practices in ways intended to inspire and engage my students. Theatre informs

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not only the content I deliver but also the methods I use, fostering an environment where creativity can flourish.

The skills we cultivated in the realm of theatre—an acute awareness of energy, the cultivation of presence, and the art of channeling that energy—are as vital in the classroom as they are on the stage. I have come to believe these qualities are essential for any teacher striving to make a meaningful impact. Teaching, like performing, requires a keen sense of presence and an ability to harness energy to foster connection. A teacher must learn to inhabit the classroom with a sense of here-ness, an ability to draw in their students, not through authority alone, but through a kind of energetic exchange. The classroom, much like the theatre, becomes a shared space where knowledge is not merely transferred but performed—a dance between intellect, emotion, and presence.

Through ISTA, I was introduced to rich performance traditions, especially those rooted in Asian theatre, where the mastery of breath, posture, and concentration creates a compelling presence on stage. These techniques seamlessly translate into the educational setting, where teachers must not only command attention but also foster focus amidst the myriad challenges of the classroom environment. By integrating breath control exercises and energy-centering techniques, aspiring teachers can cultivate their own well-being while simultaneously inspiring and engaging their students.

4 Presence, energy, and authenticity

The journey from theatre to teaching has taught me the profound connection between energy, presence, and the transformative power of human connection. It's a dance of souls, a reminder that whether in the theatre space or in the classroom, we are all part of something greater—an ensemble, a community, a vibrant tapestry of shared experiences, hopes, aspirations, desires, and dreams.

Presence and energy are not just tools of the craft; they are essential elements of human connection. They prompt us to ask: How do we bring our full selves into the spaces we inhabit, whether in the theatre, the classroom, or in life? How can we tap into the latent energy within us to transform not only ourselves but also those around us?

Jerzy Grotowski's emphasis on the actor's presence as a direct, embodied experience deeply informs his views on the actor-audience relationship. In Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968), the notion of "being" rather than "playing" aligns with his belief that true theatre occurs in the exchange of energy between the actor and the audience. He views this connection as essential to the actor's craft.

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When an actor's presence is free from mimicry and false gestures, it becomes a channel through which the audience can experience something genuine. Grotowski (1968) removes the trappings of traditional theatre—elaborate sets, costumes, and artificiality—to focus on the raw, dynamic connection between actor and spectator. This exchange of energy is mutual; as the actor draws from deep impulse and rhythm, they invite the audience into an intimate and transformative experience.

In theatre, mastering energy involves more than managing one's breath (Barba, 1995; Grotowski, 1980) or voice; it requires aligning one's inner self with the external world to communicate authentically and effectively. This principle is just as relevant in education, where teaching becomes a performance in its own right—an exchange of presence and energy between teachers and students.

Today, I find that the insights gained from ISTA and my own theatrical training resonate deeply within me and continue to shape my practice when it comes to ITT. The lessons of energy, presence, and the art of connection extend far beyond technical mastery. They form the foundation of artistic and educational mastery, reflecting the deepest truths about what it means to be fully present in the world and in relation to others.

5 Teacher presence as keystone of pedagogy

In the realm of education, teacher presence emerges as a keystone of effective pedagogy. As Nicholson (2014) highlights, this presence is not merely about being physically present in the classroom; it encompasses the ability to create an environment where students feel genuinely acknowledged and valued. A teacher's authentic engagement fosters a sense of belonging, encouraging students to navigate the complexities of learning with confidence and curiosity.

Dorothy Heathcote (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) emphasizes that the teacher's role as a facilitator is pivotal in enhancing presence within the classroom. She asserts that a teacher's energy, commitment, and ability to guide discussions can transform the learning space into a dynamic arena for exploration and creativity. By actively engaging with students and encouraging them to immerse themselves in the learning process, teachers cultivate an atmosphere where presence is felt—not just through words, but through the quality of interactions and the depth of connections formed. This approach not only enriches the learning experience but also empowers students to take ownership of their education. Building on this, the concept of 'presence' is essential in fostering interactions that invigorate learning. Fischer-Lichte (2008) reinforces this by asserting that true presence involves a heightened awareness of oneself and those around us, facilitating genuine connections that inspire collaboration and critical thought.

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I see the teacher as being the most vital resource in the classroom, even if this role is increasingly challenged in our contemporary context. We live in an age where distractions abound, where the allure of a scrolling social world and the complexities of ADHD often overwhelm students, diverting their attention from authentic learning. How, then, do we, as educators, navigate this tumultuous terrain to truly engage and inspire our students? It necessitates innovative approaches and a deep understanding of each child's unique needs, allowing us to not only capture their attention but also to nurture their creativity and critical thinking.

This journey calls for the cultivation of teachers who embody presence—educators whose authenticity and passion invite students into the learning process. As Freire (1998) asserts, the transformative power of teaching is rooted in connection, which he goes so far as describing as an act of love and courage. Similarly, Greene (1995) states that education fundamentally fosters imagination and connection. Teachers do more than impart knowledge; they create spaces where relationships thrive and learning becomes a collective, transformative experience. Their full engagement transforms the classroom into a vibrant community, encouraging exploration and reflection while reminding us that education is as much about the shared journey of being fully alive as it is about acquiring information. Through this lens, we can envision a classroom where every voice matters, and every learner can grow.

6 Parallels between actor-audience and student-teacher relationships

Research underscores that the relationship between teachers and students is fundamental to student achievement, motivation, and engagement, as well as their ability to trust their own knowledge (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pianta, 2017; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2019; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). The quality of these relationships is not merely an ancillary or 'feel-good' aspect of education; rather, it is a critical component of the learning process. The dynamics that enable these relationships to thrive are intricate, with emotional and psychological layers woven into these connections significantly influencing engagement and personal development, highlighting the essential resources—such as emotional intelligence, effective communication, and empathy—required of educators (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Wang & Eccles, 2011; Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015).

This also applies to theatre. Theatre is not about the actor alone; it's about the relationship between the actor and the audience. Presence is what allows this relationship to flourish. Erika Fischer-Lichte (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), who is a leading voice on performance theory, describes presence as something that is not owned by the actor, but co-created with the audience. She speaks of presence as something that emerges through interaction, an energy exchange that

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occurs when the performer is fully immersed and in tune with those watching. This aligns with Grotowski's notion that the actor's energy must invite the audience into the performance space (Grotowski, 1968). I experienced this firsthand during my work with Teatru tal-Bniedem, where presence was less about 'being seen' and more about 'creating a space' that invited collective transformation.

7 The Drama training methodology

In my work on presence and energy with teacher trainees, I implement a series of drama exercises within a module that has evolved over decades of practice. This continuous improvement ensures that the content remains relevant and effective for new cohorts, particularly as the hours for these modules have been substantially reduced.

7.1 Training for presence: Exercises

In this section, I describe two selected exercises that have consistently proven impactful across various cohorts of students throughout my years of teacher training. For the purpose of this research, a cohort of 30 students kept reflective logs about their experiences. To maintain anonymity, specific details regarding the timing have been omitted.

The first exercise emphasizes eye contact and physicality, inviting participants to engage with one another beyond verbal communication. This practice fosters immediate awareness of the space and facilitates authentic connections, laying the groundwork for deeper interpersonal engagement.

The second exercise shifts the focus to breath and voice. By prioritizing physical work before verbal articulation, trainees gain valuable insights into the nuances of their energy and its impact on their teaching practice. Together, these exercises exemplify key strategies within the broader process of developing a strong sense of presence, reinforcing the notion that teaching is fundamentally about connection and engagement.

7.1.1 The mirror exercise

This is a staple drama exercise. Participants pair up as A and B, finding a comfortable space where they can focus on each other. They begin by establishing eye contact, which serves as the anchor for their connection throughout the activity. Participant A starts to move slowly, initiating the sequence, while B closely observes and mirrors A's movements as if reflecting in a mirror. This mirroring requires B to maintain concentration, fostering a deeper awareness of A's body language and energy. It is important that the movement is slow with no sudden movements so that B can move in sync with A, allowing for a more organic and connected interaction that enhances the exercise's effectiveness.

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To enhance creativity, A is prompted to explore various movement levels and dynamics, introducing fluidity and imagination into their actions. This variation invites participants to break free from conventional movement patterns, allowing them to express themselves more freely.

To further enrich the experience, music can be introduced during the exercise. When music plays, A moves in rhythm to the sound, creating a more dynamic and engaging atmosphere. This addition amplifies the focus on awareness, as B must attune their mirroring to both A's movements and the musical cues.

An additional layer of complexity can be added through emotion prompts. In this variation, A is given an emotional state to embody—such as joy, sadness, or anger—and B must mirror not only the physical movements but also the emotional essence. Prompts can expand on emotion for example joy → ecstasy, sadness → misery → desperation, anger → rage, etc. etc. This encourages a profound level of empathy and connection, as B must tap into A's emotional expression and not come up with a personal expression.

Throughout the exercise, ample time is allowed for exploration, with participants encouraged to switch roles to experience both leading and mirroring. This process is aimed at honing their observational skills and peripheral vision but also establish a sense of trust and collaboration, vital for creating a supportive learning environment. By the end of the exercise, participants gain a deeper understanding of presence, energy and connection, essential components for effective teaching and engagement in the classroom.

7.1.2 The emotional breath exercise

Though the voice is an important part of presence and energy I always prefer to work on this after the physical aspect in training. The next exercise incorporates breathing modulations, emphasis, voice pitch, engaging expression, articulation, and breathing. The objective is to explore the connection between breath and emotional expression, enhancing voice modulation and articulation.

As a warm-up, participants are encouraged to yawn, stretch, and shake out their bodies to release tension. They are then instructed to inhale deeply through the nose, filling the lungs, and exhale slowly through the mouth. This process is repeated several times. A count is introduced: inhale for four counts, hold for four counts, and exhale for four counts. The count is gradually increased as participants become more comfortable.

Next, participants explore breath modulations. Standing in a circle, each participant takes a turn breathing in and out, focusing on the quality of their breath. As they exhale, they vary

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their volume, pitch, and speed, expressing different emotions—such as joy, anger, or sadness—through breath alone.

In the next part, students work on emphasis and voice pitch using the phrase “I feel alive!”. Each participant takes a turn emphasising different words. For instance, in one round, they emphasise ‘I’ (“I feel alive!”), and in the next, they emphasise ‘alive’ (“I feel alive!”). After several rounds, voice pitch variations are introduced—high, low, soft, and loud—while continuing to emphasise different words.

Participants then work in pairs, A and B. Partner A will say the phrase with emphasis and pitch modulation while partner B listens and reflects on the emotion conveyed. They then switch roles.

This is followed by an exercise on articulation and breath control. Participants are given tongue twisters to recite, while modulating their breath—speeding up or slowing down, altering pitch, and adding emotional expression.

The facilitator should emphasise the importance of listening to oneself and others throughout the exercise, while being mindful of how breath influences both emotional state and vocal quality. The exercises can be adjusted based on the participants’ comfort and skill levels. It is essential to allow enough time for deep exploration of the interconnectedness between breath, voice, and emotional expression.

The session concludes with a group discussion, where participants are invited to share their experiences, focusing on how modulation, emphasis, and breath impacted their expression and connection to the material.

7.2 Themes from student reflections

The reflective journals from 30 participants across two groups reveal significant themes that emerge throughout the training. These reflections provide invaluable insights into the participants’ journeys, capturing their initial doubts and the gradual realization of connection and awareness.

7.2.1 Initial doubts

Many students expressed feelings of anxiety as they entered the workshops. One participant noted, “Today’s workshop was a whirlwind! With no drama background, I felt anxious. Being shy sometimes holds me back.” This anxiety highlights a common barrier mentioned by many individuals when entering a space that demands the vulnerability and openness required by these exercises.

7.2.2 Connection

As the sessions progressed, participants reported that they began to experience profound moments of connection. One student articulated this transformation: “What started as awkward glances turned into a genuine connection as something shifted—it was like we were dancing through the space in sync.”

Initially marked by nervous giggles, which most students mentioned as an instinctive response at the start of the exercise, this evolution signifies a critical moment of growth where participants move from discomfort to genuine engagement. The laughter—often a natural reaction to awkwardness—eventually gives way to a deeper sense of connection, demonstrating that these moments of vulnerability can lead to authentic relationships.

7.2.3 Increased awareness and peripheral vision

The journey toward overcoming discomfort is intricately linked to the development of increased awareness and peripheral vision. Participants frequently noted the difficulty of maintaining eye contact, a challenge often rooted in self-consciousness. One student reflected, “I gradually managed to look into my partner's eyes as we both giggled in awkwardness.” This struggle highlights the profound impact of eye contact, which eventually transitions from a daunting task to a powerful means of connection.

Moreover, this increased awareness extends beyond direct interactions. As participants engaged in exercises that required them to tune into their surroundings and their partners, they developed a heightened sense of peripheral vision. In their reflections, one student expressed, “I felt so alive, like when I first put on my glasses and suddenly saw everything clearly. This kind of awareness is super important in the classroom.” This sentiment encapsulates the transformative nature of the experience, highlighting the critical role of awareness in fostering engagement. In the classroom setting, it enables them to notice subtle cues in body language and emotional states, which is crucial for creating an inclusive environment where every child feels seen and valued.

7.2.4 Importance of connection in the classroom

The reflections also emphasize the significance of building genuine connections within educational contexts. One student shared, “That eye contact—really looking into someone's eyes—made me feel seen.” This realization led her to understand the need for better eye contact in her own classroom practice. By recognizing the power of eye contact, she acknowledged how it contributes to creating an inclusive and connected learning environment. She said: “The ability to engage each child with genuine connection and presence can create a space where they feel valued and confident to express themselves.”

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This realization underscores the transformative potential of drama training in cultivating teachers who prioritize connection and presence in their classrooms.

7.2.5 Vocal presence

The student teachers' reflections on the breath and voice exercises offer valuable insights into the development of awareness and control over their vocal and physical expression. One student teacher noted: "The breath and voice exercises really made me conscious of the importance of my voice and the potential it has in transmitting confidence, authority, and narrating stories." This reflection underscores the significant role that breath plays in cultivating vocal presence, aligning with established research on the power of voice in conveying authority and emotion (Nicholson, 2014).

Many participants reported a marked increase in their confidence in their teaching as a result of these exercises. One student articulated, "I realize that my self-confidence has improved when I am in class; I am now able to use my voice with variation, command listening, and this helps me to engage each child with genuine connection." This enhancement in vocal skills helped to establish authority within the classroom and foster a space where students felt valued and empowered to express themselves.

7.2.6 Breath as a tool for relaxation and physical awareness

A number of students mentioned the importance of the breathing exercises in helping them relax and focus, leaving the world outside the classroom outside. One student teacher observed: "I breathe, I never think about breath. It is automatic, but the exercises made me conscious of my breath, its power to relax my body, my face." This statement illustrates the transformative potential of intentional breathing in regulating physical tension and fostering relaxation, which is crucial for both actors and educators. Grotowski's emphasis on breath as a tool for physical awareness is reflected in this student teacher's newfound recognition of its ability to affect both internal states and outward expression (Fischer-Lichte, 2008).

7.2.7 Emotional expression through breath modulation

Furthermore, the exploration of breath in relation to specific emotions deepened the student teachers' understanding of the connection between physiological patterns and emotional expression. As one student teacher reflected, "Quick, light, and sometimes higher-pitched breaths transmit joy; slow, deep, and heavier breaths convey sadness; shallow and quick for fear, and rapid, forceful for rage." This reflection and consciousness of breath patterns to evoke specific emotional states demonstrates a heightened awareness of how breath functions as a bridge between the internal emotional experience and its external manifestation. Such findings align with Grotowski's principles, wherein breath is considered a fundamental element of presence and authenticity in performance (Schechner, 1997).

7.2.8 Integrating breath, voice, and emotional awareness

In analysing these reflections, it is evident that the breath and voice exercises had a profound impact on the student teachers' awareness of both their physical and emotional states. By drawing attention to unconscious processes, such as breathing, and linking them to emotional expression, these exercises fostered a deeper connection between the student teachers' bodies and their communicative capacities. This aligns with existing research that highlights the importance of breath in both theatrical training and pedagogy, reinforcing its role as a critical tool for enhancing both personal presence and expressive clarity (Neelands, 2009).

8 Conclusion

In synthesising my journey from the theatre to the classroom, it becomes evident that the principles of actor presence—anchored in physical training, intentionality, and a deep connection with the audience—are not merely theatrical constructs but vital pedagogical tools for educators. Just as actors cultivate their energetic presence to forge connections with their audience, teachers must similarly master these elements to foster meaningful relationships with their students.

The argument highlighted throughout this article underscores the critical impact of teacher presence on student engagement, motivation, and academic success. By integrating actor-training techniques, I advocate for a transformative approach to ITT that emphasises the development of presence as a dynamic skill. This skill is cultivated through intentional practice, enabling educators to create rich emotional connections within the classroom—a space where learning is not merely a transaction but a shared journey of discovery.

The reflections of student teachers illustrate how these principles manifest in their practice, revealing that when educators engage their intellect, emotions, and creativity, they cultivate a learning environment resonating with authenticity and connection. This aligns with Freire's vision of education as an act of love and courage, where relationships thrive and the classroom transforms into a vibrant community.

Since 1995, my tenure teaching these courses at the University of Malta I have observed remarkable transformations in my students by the end of this module, despite the substantial reduction in the time allotted for these modules. This shift arises from the restructuring of the B.Ed programme which transitioned from a comprehensive four-year degree to a condensed two-year Master in Teaching and Learning. It is with a sense of urgency that I advocate for an extended drama training duration in ITT. Sadly, the arts, and drama in particular, continue to be treated as non-core subjects in schools and in the ITT modules at University, which

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ultimately limits the rich experiences our students deserve. This stark limitation highlights the urgent need to advocate for the inclusion and expansion of arts education in ITT programmes.

Ultimately, the parallels drawn between actor-audience dynamics and student-teacher relationships serve to remind us that presence and energy are essential not only for performance but for the very act of teaching itself. As educators, we are called to embrace our roles as facilitators of connection, fostering environments where every voice matters and every learner can flourish. By doing so, we honour the profound legacy of theatrical practice while paving the way for a more engaged and inspired generation of learners.

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