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Reimagining Theatre in Education for Transformative Learning in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: A Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework Aligned with NEP 2020 for Future-Ready Education

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Abstract: ***The rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) into classrooms has intensified debate over what forms of learning genuinely prepare students for an uncertain future. This conceptual paper argues that Theatre in Education (TIE), long valued for cultivating empathy, embodied cognition, and critical reflection, offers a necessary human-centred counterweight to the efficiency-oriented logic of AI-driven instruction. Drawing on transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1997), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Boal, 1979), and constructivist learning traditions (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), the paper synthesises recent empirical and policy literature on drama pedagogy and generative AI in education, following a narrative-synthesis methodology, to propose an integrated Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework. The framework positions embodied theatrical practice, critical-reflective dialogue, and AI-augmented scaffolding as complementary rather than competing pedagogical resources. Three tables and three figures a comparative synthesis of pedagogical postures, a summary of key empirical studies, a policy-alignment matrix, a framework diagram, a competency-comparison visualisation, and a process model for teaching AI ethics through applied theatre -illustrate how the framework addresses gaps left by purely technological or purely traditional approaches. The paper concludes with practical implications for curriculum design, teacher preparation, and future research, arguing that future-ready education must deliberately safeguard embodied, relational, and reflective learning as AI becomes ubiquitous.***

Keywords: Theatre in Education; transformative learning; artificial intelligence in education; human-centred pedagogy; critical pedagogy; AI ethics education; NEP 2020; 21st-century skills

I. INTRODUCTION

Education systems worldwide are undergoing a dual disruption. On one hand, generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools have moved from novelty to infrastructure within a few years, reshaping how students research, write, and receive feedback (Krause et al., 2025; Bobula, 2024). On the other hand, longstanding concerns persist that schooling remains overly transmissive, prioritising content coverage and standardised assessment over the embodied, relational, and reflective capacities that learners need to navigate ambiguity, collaborate across difference, and act ethically (Robinson & Aronica, 2016). International labour-market forecasting reinforces the urgency of this concern: analytical thinking, creative thinking, and socio-emotional competencies such as empathy and leadership are repeatedly identified among the skills employers expect to matter most over the coming decade, alongside AI and big-data literacy (World Economic Forum, 2023). These two disruptions are not separate; they converge on a single question that this paper addresses: what pedagogical architecture allows learners to benefit from AI's computational power without surrendering the distinctly human capacities that AI cannot replicate?

Theatre in Education (TIE) is proposed here as a central, rather than peripheral, answer to this question. TIE encompasses a family of practices, including process drama, forum theatre, role-play, and Dorothy Heathcote's mantle-of-the-expert approach, in which

learners actively embody roles, negotiate perspectives, and improvise responses to open-ended dramatic situations (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O'Toole & Dunn, 2002; Neelands & Goode, 2015). Because it is inherently social, embodied, and improvisational, TIE cultivates precisely the competencies that automation struggles to replicate: empathy, ethical judgement, creative risk-taking, and collaborative meaning-making (Datoo & Hussain, 2025; Fernandez & Kullu, 2019).

This paper makes four contributions. First, it situates TIE within transformative and critical learning theory to clarify why embodied dramatic practice produces deep, perspective-changing learning rather than superficial engagement. Second, it reviews recent literature on generative AI in education to identify both its genuine affordances and its risks to critical thinking, equity, and learner agency (Kasneci et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Third, it proposes and illustrates a Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework that deliberately integrates theatrical, reflective, and AI-augmented elements, supported by a summary of key empirical studies, a comparative synthesis table, a policy-alignment matrix, and three conceptual figures, including an applied process model for teaching AI ethics through theatre. Fourth, it maps the framework explicitly onto India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020), translating the argument into curriculum, teacher-training, and assessment recommendations. The paper closes by outlining implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and future research.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow's (1991, 1997) transformative learning theory holds that deep learning occurs when individuals critically examine and revise the taken-for-granted assumptions, or "frames of reference," through which they interpret experience. Transformation is triggered by a disorienting dilemma, followed by critical reflection, rational discourse with others, and, ultimately, a revised and more inclusive perspective. This process rarely occurs through passive information transfer; it requires learners to be emotionally and cognitively unsettled and then supported through structured reflection. Theatre is unusually well suited to producing disorienting dilemmas in a safe, fictional frame: stepping into a role that is not one's own, or witnessing a peer's improvised response to an ethical dilemma, can destabilise assumptions in ways that lecture-based instruction rarely achieves. The intense, focused absorption that skilled improvisation and role enactment can generate is consistent with what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as a flow state, a condition of deep engagement that is difficult to sustain in passively received instruction but recurs naturally in embodied dramatic practice.

B. Constructivist and Experiential Learning

Dewey's (1938) principle that education must be rooted in continuous, reflective experience, Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on socially mediated cognition within a zone of proximal development, and Bruner's (1996) account of narrative as a primary mode of meaning-making together establish that learning is most durable when it is active, social, and narratively organised. Drama operationalises all three: it is experiential (learners act rather than merely observe), socially scaffolded (peers and facilitators co-construct the fictional world), and narrative (learning is embedded in story rather than abstracted from it). Fleming (2017) similarly argues that the arts, and theatre in particular, cultivate communication, creativity, and aesthetic judgement in ways that purely propositional instruction does not readily achieve.

C. Critical Pedagogy

Freire's (1970) concept of education as a practice of freedom, and Boal's (1979, 2002) Theatre of the Oppressed, extend this theoretical base by framing drama as a vehicle for critical consciousness. Boal's forum theatre invites spectators to become "spect-actors" who intervene in a dramatised conflict to rehearse alternative responses, transforming the classroom into a rehearsal space for social action. Recent applications confirm that theatre-based pedagogy can foster confidence, participation, and critical engagement with issues of exclusion and injustice in formal curricula (Datoo & Hussain, 2025; Freebody & Finneran, 2013; Conrad, 2004). Taken together, these three traditions justify treating theatre not as an enrichment activity bolted onto a conventional curriculum, but as a distinct epistemological mode, one that produces transformative, embodied, and socially situated learning that complements the more procedural and content-oriented learning AI systems are best positioned to support.

III. METHODOLOGY

This is a conceptual paper, and its methodology is a narrative literature synthesis rather than a systematic review reported to PRISMA standards.

This method was chosen because the paper's purpose is integrative and theory-building - combining three literatures (transformative and critical learning theory, empirical TIE research, and generative AI in education research) into a novel pedagogical framework - a task for which structured narrative synthesis is the recognised and appropriate method in conceptual education scholarship, rather than a task of estimating a pooled effect size.

Sources were identified through targeted searches of Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, using keyword combinations such as “theatre in education,” “drama pedagogy,” “process drama,” “forum theatre,” “transformative learning,” “generative AI in education,” “AI in higher education,” and “human-centred AI.” Foundational theoretical texts (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) were included regardless of publication date given their canonical status. Empirical and policy sources on TIE and on generative AI were prioritised from 2019 onward to capture the post-ChatGPT shift in the AI-in-education literature, supplemented by earlier peer-reviewed studies where they remain the primary evidence for a specific claim (e.g., Celume et al., 2020, on drama pedagogy and theory of mind). Inclusion favoured peer-reviewed journal articles and reports from recognised international or governmental bodies (e.g., UNESCO, the World Economic Forum, the Association of Pacific Rim Universities, and India's Ministry of Human Resource Development); blogs, non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces, and promotional vendor material were excluded.

Sources were read and thematically coded around three axes: (a) the theoretical mechanism claimed to produce learning (e.g., disorienting dilemma, zone of proximal development, critical consciousness), (b) the type of evidence offered (experimental/quasi-experimental, case study, systematic review, policy analysis, or conceptual argument), and (c) the pedagogical posture implied (traditional, AI-dominant, or integrated). This coding directly informed the construction of Table 1 (empirical synthesis), Table 2 (comparative pedagogical synthesis), and the qualitative competency ratings underlying Figure 2. As a conceptual synthesis rather than a meta-analysis, the resulting framework and comparative tables should be read as a structured, literature-grounded heuristic rather than as a statistically derived finding; this limitation is revisited in Section 10.

IV. THEATRE IN EDUCATION: PEDAGOGICAL AFFORDANCES AND EVIDENCE

Contemporary empirical work continues to substantiate long-held claims about the pedagogical value of theatre. Case studies in higher education report that theatre-based instruction increases confidence, participation, and subject commitment compared with lecture-based delivery, particularly in courses involving interpersonal or organisational content (Fernandez & Kullu, 2019). Studies of theatre-based facilitation within pre-service teacher education similarly find that theatre pedagogy supports facilitator-identity development, helping trainee teachers rehearse difficult classroom scenarios and construct a more reflective professional identity in a low-stakes environment (Chinserm et al., 2025).

A growing body of work also links drama pedagogy to socio-emotional development. In a controlled experimental study of 126 French children aged 9 to 10, a six-week drama pedagogy training programme produced significantly greater gains in theory of mind and collaborative behaviour than an active control condition, with the mechanism understood to be sustained perspective-taking during role enactment (Celume et al., 2020). Related studies report gains in empathy, self-confidence, active listening, and social awareness among both school-age children and university students engaged in creative drama and role-play, alongside improved outcomes for equity and inclusion in formal curricula (Datoo & Hussain, 2025). Within pre-service teacher education more broadly, drama-based pedagogy has been found to enhance communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, consistent with broader accounts of the arts as a distinct vehicle for these competencies (Fleming, 2017); the empathic and socially attuned outcomes reported across this literature also parallel Goleman's (1995) account of emotional intelligence as a learnable competency domain in its own right.

A wide-ranging synthesis of theatre research compiled by the Arts Education Partnership corroborates these findings across a broad evidence base, linking sustained engagement in theatre to gains in academic achievement, social-emotional competence, and personal growth (Arts Education Partnership, 2023). Critically, these benefits are attributed not to theatre as entertainment but to its structural features: embodiment, improvisation, narrative framing, and the requirement to inhabit perspectives other than one's own. It is precisely these structural features that distinguish TIE from most AI-mediated learning, which, however adaptive, remains textual, disembodied, and typically dyadic (learner and system) rather than richly social.

Table 1 summarises the empirical studies reviewed in this section alongside the AI-in-education studies discussed in Section 5, to give a consolidated, at-a-glance view of the evidence base this paper draws on.

Table 1
Summary of Key Studies Reviewed on Theatre-Based Pedagogy and AI in Education

Study	Context / Sample	Method	Key Finding
Fernandez & Kullu (2019)	Higher education management course, India	Instructional case study	Theatre-based delivery increased learner confidence, participation, and subject commitment relative to lecture-based instruction.
Celume et al. (2020)	126 French children, aged 9–10	Randomised experimental design with active control	Drama pedagogy training produced significantly greater gains in theory of mind and collaborative behaviour than the control condition.
Datoo & Hussain (2025)	School and university learners	Qualitative / critical-pedagogical analysis	Theatre-based practice fostered empathy, confidence, active listening, and social awareness, and supported equity and inclusion goals.
Chinserm et al. (2025)	Pre-service teachers	Qualitative facilitator-identity study	Theatre-based pedagogy supported facilitator-identity development and transformative professional learning.
Arts Education Partnership (2023)	Multiple K–12 studies (synthesis)	Narrative research synthesis	Sustained theatre engagement is linked to gains in academic achievement, social-emotional competence, and personal growth.
Kasneci et al. (2023)	Large language models in education (conceptual)	Critical/conceptual review	LLMs can produce fluent but unreliable or biased content; unreflective reliance risks weakening learners' critical thinking.
Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019)	Higher education AI applications	Systematic review	AI applications are broadening in scope, but educator involvement in system design and evaluation remains limited.

V. THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DISRUPTION IN EDUCATION: PROMISE AND PERIL

Generative AI systems can produce personalised feedback, generate practice material, support reflective writing, and extend access to instruction for remote or under-resourced learners (Krause et al., 2025; Bobula, 2024). Systematic reviews of AI in higher education document a broadening range of applications, from adaptive content delivery to automated assessment support, alongside a persistent finding that educator involvement in the design and evaluation of these systems remains limited relative to the pace of technical development (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Framework-based analyses of institutional AI adoption further show that universities are still developing the competencies, policies, and governance structures needed to use generative AI responsibly (Burneo-Arteaga et al., 2025; Association of Pacific Rim Universities [APRU], 2025).

These affordances are accompanied by well-documented risks. Kasneci et al. (2023) caution that large language models can produce fluent but unreliable or biased content, and that unreflective reliance on such tools risks undermining the development of learners' own critical thinking and writing capacities. Institutional policy analyses report concerns among both students and staff regarding academic integrity, fairness, equity, and the uneven enforcement of ambiguous AI policies (O'Sullivan et al., 2025).

There is also a structural concern about homogenisation: because generative AI systems are trained to produce statistically likely responses, their outputs can converge learners toward similar phrasing, reasoning patterns, and even ethical framings, narrowing rather than expanding the diversity of thought that education is meant to cultivate.

In response, international bodies have begun articulating human-centred principles for AI in education. UNESCO's (2024a, 2024b) AI competency frameworks for students and teachers explicitly foreground a "human-centred mind-set," ethics, and accountability, insisting that AI should enhance rather than replace human judgement, agency, and cultural diversity in learning. These frameworks provide an important normative anchor: they establish that the central problem is not whether to use AI in education, but how to design learning environments in which AI augments, rather than displaces, the relational and reflective work that education has always required. This paper argues that theatre-based pedagogy is one of the most concrete and evidence-supported ways of operationalising that human-centred mandate.

VI. A HUMAN-CENTRED PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATING THEATRE AND AI

Building on the theoretical and empirical foundations above, this paper proposes a Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework organised around three interlocking pillars, shown in Figure 1: embodied human learning, critical-reflective capacity, and AI-augmented scaffolding. These pillars are not sequential stages but mutually reinforcing components of a single learning cycle.

The first pillar, embodied human learning, is enacted primarily through theatre-based practices such as process drama, forum theatre, and role-play, in which learners physically and emotionally inhabit perspectives, negotiate meaning with peers, and improvise responses to open dramatic situations. The second pillar, critical-reflective capacity, draws directly on Mezirow's (1991, 1997) transformative learning cycle and Freire's (1970) critical consciousness, structuring facilitated discussion, debriefing, and dialogic reflection after dramatic enactment so that emotional and embodied experience is consolidated into revised understanding. The third pillar, AI-augmented scaffolding, positions generative AI as a resource for research support, personalised feedback, rehearsal of factual or technical content, and simulation of scenarios, characters, or contexts that enrich the dramatic material learners work with, while keeping the AI in an instrumental, teacher-supervised role rather than a directive one.

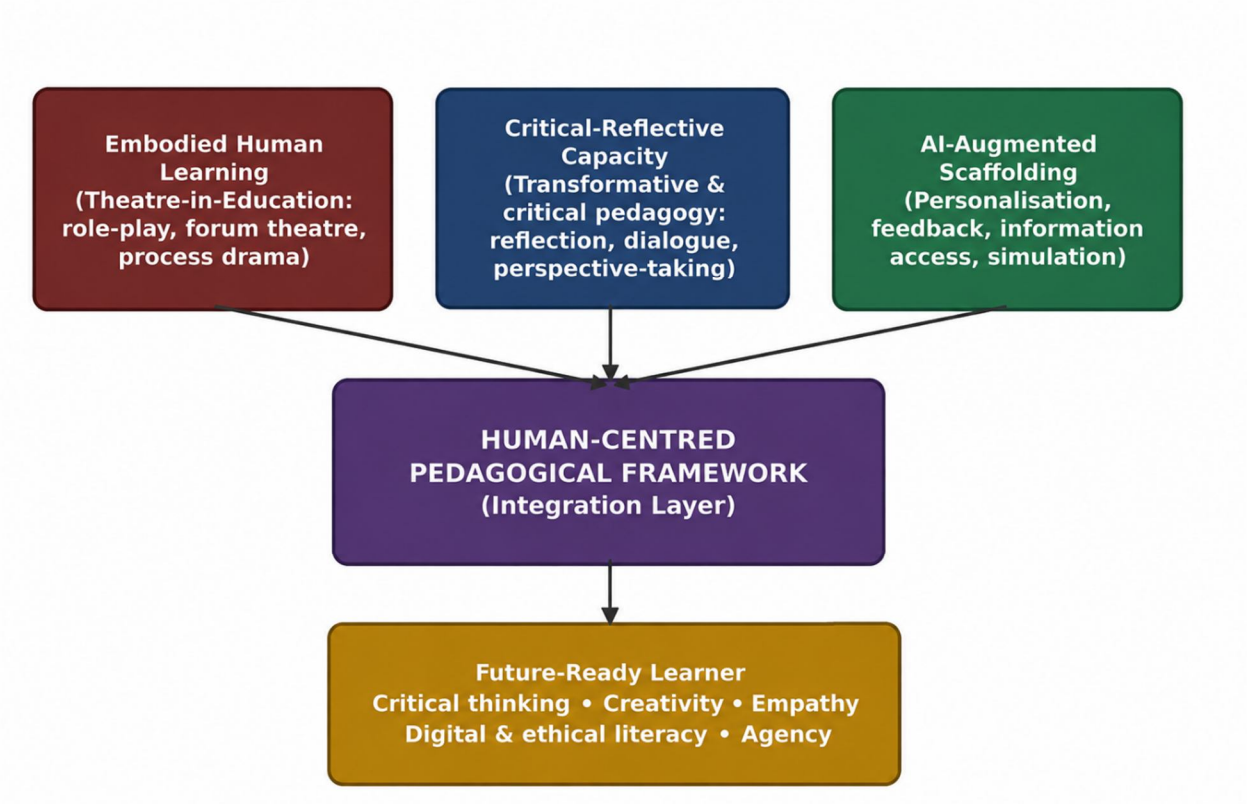

Figure 1. Proposed Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework integrating Theatre-in-Education and artificial intelligence. The three pillars converge through an integration layer of teacher-facilitated design decisions, producing future-ready learner outcomes.

The framework's integration layer is where teacher judgement operates: deciding when AI should generate background material for a role-play (for example, drafting a character's biography or historical context) versus when that material should instead be produced by students through research and negotiation; deciding when AI-generated feedback on a piece of reflective writing should be used as a prompt for further discussion rather than as a final evaluation; and deciding how much unstructured, AI-free improvisational space is preserved in each unit of study. This deliberate sequencing distinguishes the framework from approaches that treat AI integration as a simple substitution for existing tasks.

Table 2 summarises how this integrated approach compares with two contrasting pedagogical postures: purely traditional, transmission-oriented instruction, and AI-dominant instruction in which adaptive systems play a directive rather than supportive role. The comparison is conceptual and synthesises patterns identified across the literature reviewed in this paper (Section 3), rather than reporting a new empirical measurement.

Table 2
Comparative Synthesis of Traditional, AI-Dominant, and Human-Centred Integrated Pedagogy

Dimension	Traditional Instruction	AI-Dominant Instruction	Human-Centred Framework (Theatre + AI)
Locus of learning	Teacher-transmitted content	Algorithmically personalised content	Co-constructed, embodied, and reflective experience
Role of the learner	Passive recipient	Adaptive consumer of recommendations	Active meaning-maker and performer
Primary strength	Structured content coverage	Speed, scale, and personalisation	Emotional depth, critical reflection, and adaptability
Primary risk	Disengagement, rote learning	Over-reliance, homogenised thinking, reduced agency	Requires skilled facilitation and time investment
Assessment focus	Recall and reproduction	Efficiency and output accuracy	Process, perspective-taking, and transferable judgement
Role of technology	Minimal or supplementary	Central and directive	Instrumental and human-supervised
Core theoretical grounding	Behaviourist / transmission models	Adaptive-learning and data-driven models	Transformative learning, constructivism, critical pedagogy

Figure 2 offers a complementary, heuristic visualisation of how the three approaches compare across seven competencies frequently identified in the reviewed literature as central to future-ready education: critical thinking, creativity, empathy and social-emotional learning, communication, digital and AI literacy, ethical reasoning, and collaboration. The ratings are an author-constructed qualitative synthesis intended to illustrate relative patterns discussed in the literature; they are not derived from a new empirical study and should be read as a conceptual heuristic rather than a statistical finding.

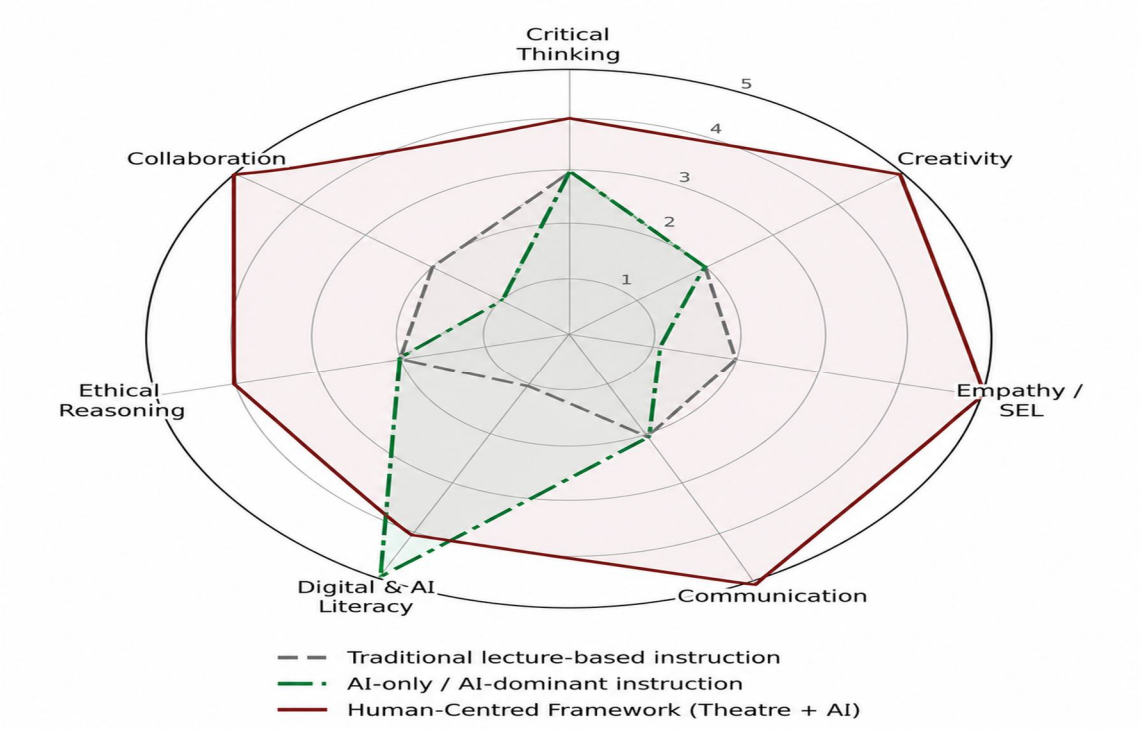

Figure 2. Illustrative synthesis of relative competency emphasis across three pedagogical approaches, based on the qualitative literature review presented in this paper.

As Figure 2 suggests, AI-dominant instruction plausibly outperforms both alternatives on digital and AI literacy, reflecting learners' direct, sustained exposure to these tools, but is comparatively weaker on empathy, ethical reasoning, and collaboration, dimensions that depend on embodied social interaction. Traditional instruction scores moderately on critical thinking but is limited across most other dimensions. The integrated Human-Centred Framework is positioned to perform comparatively well across all seven dimensions precisely because it does not treat AI literacy and human relational capacity as competing priorities, but sequences them within a single pedagogical design.

VII. AI ETHICS THROUGH THEATRE: AN APPLIED EXTENSION

The framework's integration layer can be illustrated concretely through a dedicated applied unit, AI Ethics through Theatre, which uses live role-play, improvisation, and scripted scenes to let participants embody the stakeholders in an AI-ethics dilemma, rather than only discussing it in the abstract, so that they feel the tension of competing interests before analysing it intellectually. This extension operationalises Boal's (1979, 2002) forum-theatre method for a specifically contemporary purpose: rehearsing ethical judgement about AI systems rather than social or institutional conflict alone.

As Figure 3 shows, the unit unfolds as a five-stage cycle. First, in scenario setup, a realistic case is chosen, for example a hospital deciding whether to deploy an AI diagnostic tool, a company debating whether to release a biased hiring algorithm, or a city considering predictive policing software. Second, in role assignment, participants are cast as characters with competing incentives: the engineer who built the model, the executive under budget pressure, the affected patient or citizen, the regulator, a whistle-blower, or a journalist. Third, in the improvised performance, participants act out a meeting, hearing, or confrontation in character, making real-time decisions and justifying them the way their character would, not the way the participant personally believes. Fourth, at key decision points the action freezes and the group reflects, in the manner of Boal's forum theatre: the facilitator or audience asks what just happened, what value was traded off, and whether someone could have intervened, and audience members may step in and replace a character to try a different choice. Fifth, in debrief and reframing, the group steps out of character to discuss what the exercise revealed, including how easy it was to rationalise harm from inside a role, how incentives shape behaviour, and where the seemingly obvious ethical answer became more complicated once embodied.

Figure 3. Five-stage cyclical process model for the AI Ethics through Theatre applied unit, adapting Boal's (1979, 2002) forum-theatre method to AI-ethics education.

Theatre is well suited to this purpose in ways that case-study discussion or formal debate are not. Embodying a perspective a participant personally disagrees with builds empathy more directly than analysing that perspective on paper; improvisation surfaces tacit, gut-level reactions that do not reliably appear in written case analysis; enacting a scene makes power dynamics and social pressure, such as a supervisor's scrutiny, viscerally rather than abstractly real; and the fictional frame creates a safe distance that lets participants explore taboo or high-stakes choices without real-world consequences (Boal, 1979). Used within the broader Human-Centred Framework, this unit exemplifies how AI content, in this case an AI-ethics dilemma, can itself become dramatic material without displacing the embodied, social process through which students come to understand it.

VIII. ALIGNMENT WITH INDIA'S NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020

The framework proposed here is not only theoretically grounded but also directly implementable within an existing national policy architecture. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020) explicitly calls for holistic, multidisciplinary, art-integrated, and experiential learning, and for a shift away from rote memorisation toward competency-based assessment; Table 3 maps the Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework onto these specific provisions.

Table 3
Relevance of the Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework to NEP 2020

NEP 2020 Provision	Connection with Theatre-Based Framework
Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education	Theatre naturally integrates multiple disciplines - language, history, emotion, movement, and literature - matching NEP's vision of holistic, multidisciplinary learning.
Experiential and Art-Integrated Learning	NEP explicitly promotes “art-integrated education” to make learning joyful and experience-based; theatre is one of the clearest examples of this approach in practice.
21st-Century Skills (Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication)	Theatre inherently develops the “4Cs,” which NEP identifies as essential skills for future-ready learners.
Reducing Rote Learning	NEP emphasises moving away from rote memorisation toward conceptual and experiential understanding; theatre directly supports this shift by engaging students through action and reflection rather than repetition.
Socio-Emotional Learning and Values Education	NEP places strong emphasis on emotional intelligence and values-based education; theatre builds empathy and perspective-taking by having students embody different viewpoints.
Flexibility and Choice-Based Curriculum	NEP grants students flexibility to choose subjects and activities; theatre can be positioned as an elective or integrated co-curricular pathway within this flexible structure.
Technology Integration (Digital Education)	NEP calls for responsible integration of AI and digital tools in education; this framework ethically bridges AI with theatre pedagogy, showing a practical model for such integration.
Teacher Capacity Building	NEP emphasises continuous professional development for teachers; the proposed teacher-training modules in theatre pedagogy directly support this policy goal.
Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)	India's rich folk theatre traditions (Nautanki, Yakshagana, Ramlila, Jatra) can be incorporated into the curriculum, strengthening NEP's broader agenda of reviving Indian Knowledge Systems.
Assessment Reforms (Competency-Based Evaluation)	NEP advocates for 360-degree, competency-based assessment rather than rote-memory testing; theatre-based performance assessment works in direct alignment with this reform.

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE-READY EDUCATION

Three practical implications follow from this framework. First, curriculum design should treat theatre-based units as core infrastructure for developing transferable competencies, not as an elective enrichment activity, particularly in subjects such as history, civics, health, and language learning where perspective-taking is central to understanding content. Second, teacher education must explicitly prepare educators to make the sequencing judgements the framework requires: knowing when to introduce AI-generated material into a dramatic unit, and when to withhold it so that students generate their own research, characterisation, and dialogue. This aligns with UNESCO's (2024b) emphasis on AI pedagogy as a distinct competency area for teachers rather than an assumed technical add-on. Third, assessment practices should shift toward evaluating process, reflection, and perspective-taking, for example through structured reflective journals, peer feedback on improvised performance, and portfolio-based evidence of revised understanding, rather than relying solely on written output that AI tools can now readily approximate (O'Sullivan et al., 2025).

At a systems level, the framework also responds to equity concerns raised in the AI policy literature. Because theatre requires minimal technological infrastructure, it offers a comparatively low-cost, high-impact complement to AI tools in contexts where reliable internet access or AI licensing remains unequal (APRU, 2025). Embedding theatre-based practice alongside AI tools may therefore help narrow, rather than widen, the digital divide in twenty-first-century skill development.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Develop a Hybrid Pedagogical Model. Theatre techniques (role-play, improvisation, forum theatre, mime, storytelling) should be integrated with AI-based tools (simulation software, VR/AR scenarios, AI-generated dialogue prompts) to create a hybrid model, where technology functions as a supportive tool, not a replacement for embodied human experience.
2) Teacher Training Modules. Teachers need structured training in Theatre-in-Education (TIE) techniques, as many educators are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with drama-based pedagogy. It is recommended that short-term certificate courses and hands-on workshops be introduced at the NCERT/SCERT and teacher-education college level, so that theatre becomes a practical classroom tool rather than an abstract concept.
3) Curriculum Integration. Theatre should not remain a standalone “extra-curricular” activity but should be embedded into the core curriculum, particularly for values education, life skills, communication, and language development, so that it receives the same academic seriousness as other subjects. This recommendation echoes parallel calls elsewhere to embed theatre within holistic curriculum design, for example within reform efforts in the Nigerian education system (Obadiegwu, 2025), underscoring the international relevance of curricular integration rather than marginalisation of theatre.
4) AI-Assisted Reflective Practice. AI tools, such as chatbots, sentiment analysis, and learning analytics, can be used to design a reflection and feedback loop for students' theatre-based learning experiences, helping teachers’ measure emotional and cognitive growth in ways that traditional tests cannot capture.
5) Inclusive Design. The framework must accommodate differently-abled students, rural schools, and regional-language mediums, ensuring that theatre-based transformative learning is equitable and not limited to urban, English-medium, or resource-rich institutions.
6) Assessment Reform. Instead of relying solely on traditional exam-based assessment, the framework should propose performance-based, portfolio-based, and peer-review assessment tools that can meaningfully capture theatre-based learning outcomes such as empathy, collaboration, and expression.

XI. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Several limitations qualify this proposal. This paper is conceptual rather than empirical: while it draws on a substantial body of existing research on both theatre pedagogy and AI in education, following the narrative-synthesis methodology described in Section 3, the integrated framework itself has not yet been tested through a dedicated empirical study, and Tables 1–3 and Figures 1–3 should be read as heuristic syntheses rather than measured outcomes. Practical implementation also faces real constraints, including teacher confidence and training in drama facilitation, curriculum time pressures, class size, and uneven institutional support for arts-integrated pedagogy. Additionally, generative AI tools themselves continue to evolve rapidly, and specific claims about their capabilities or limitations may date quickly; the framework is therefore deliberately articulated at the level of pedagogical principle (instrumental, teacher-supervised AI use) rather than tied to any particular tool or platform. Future empirical research should test the framework's components through classroom-based intervention studies, comparing learning outcomes, engagement, and equity effects across traditional, AI-dominant, and integrated conditions.

XII. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to answer a pressing question for contemporary education: how can learners benefit from generative AI's computational power without sacrificing the embodied, relational, and ethical capacities that remain distinctly human? The argument developed is that Theatre in Education (TIE), far from being peripheral enrichment, offers one of the most theoretically grounded and empirically supported answers to this question. The theoretical foundations examined, Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the constructivist traditions of Dewey, Vygotsky, and Bruner, and the critical pedagogy of Freire and Boal, converge on a single insight: durable, perspective-changing learning requires learners to be emotionally unsettled, socially scaffolded, and narratively engaged, not merely informed. Theatre operationalises all three conditions at once, creating the “disorienting dilemmas” that trigger reflection while embedding understanding in lived, and social narrative. The empirical literature reinforces this, linking drama-based pedagogy to measurable gains in empathy, perspective-taking, collaboration, and confidence, competencies that remain resistant to automation.

Crucially, this paper does not treat AI as an adversary to theatre pedagogy but as a tool whose value depends on how it is positioned within the learning architecture. Generative AI offers real affordances, including personalisation, accessibility, and feedback at scale, alongside serious risks, including homogenised thinking, weakened critical reasoning, and unequal institutional readiness. Emerging international human-centred AI frameworks confirm that the real challenge is not whether to adopt AI, but how to ensure it augments rather than displaces human judgement.

The Human-Centred Pedagogical Framework proposed here responds to this challenge through three interlocking pillars: embodied learning through theatre, critical-reflective capacity through structured debrief, and AI-augmented scaffolding used instrumentally under teacher supervision. This architecture treats technology and embodiment as complementary rather than competing, positioning the integrated approach to outperform both purely traditional and AI-dominant instruction across digital literacy, empathy, ethical reasoning, creativity, and collaboration alike.

The applied extension, AI Ethics through Theatre, demonstrates the framework's practical relevance. By having learners embody stakeholders in real AI dilemmas, such as engineers, executives, affected citizens, and regulators, and using forum-theatre techniques to freeze, reflect, and reframe these enactments, students gain a felt understanding of ethical complexity that a case study alone cannot replicate.

The framework is also directly implementable within India's policy landscape. Its alignment with NEP 2020, across holistic learning, art integration, twenty-first-century skills, reduced rote learning, socio-emotional education, curricular flexibility, teacher capacity-building, Indian Knowledge Systems, and competency-based assessment, shows that it offers a concrete mechanism for realising commitments NEP 2020 has already articulated, translated into actionable recommendations around hybrid models, teacher training, inclusive design, and assessment reform.

Certain limitations remain: the framework is conceptual rather than empirically tested, and real-world implementation will face constraints of teacher confidence, curriculum time, and institutional support that pedagogical design alone cannot resolve. Ultimately, this paper argues that the future of education lies not in choosing between AI and embodied pedagogy, but in deliberately sequencing them so each compensates for what the other cannot provide. As AI reshapes classrooms and civic life, reimagining theatre as core educational infrastructure, rather than peripheral activity, may prove one of the most important pedagogical decisions education systems make this decade, warranting urgent empirical validation.

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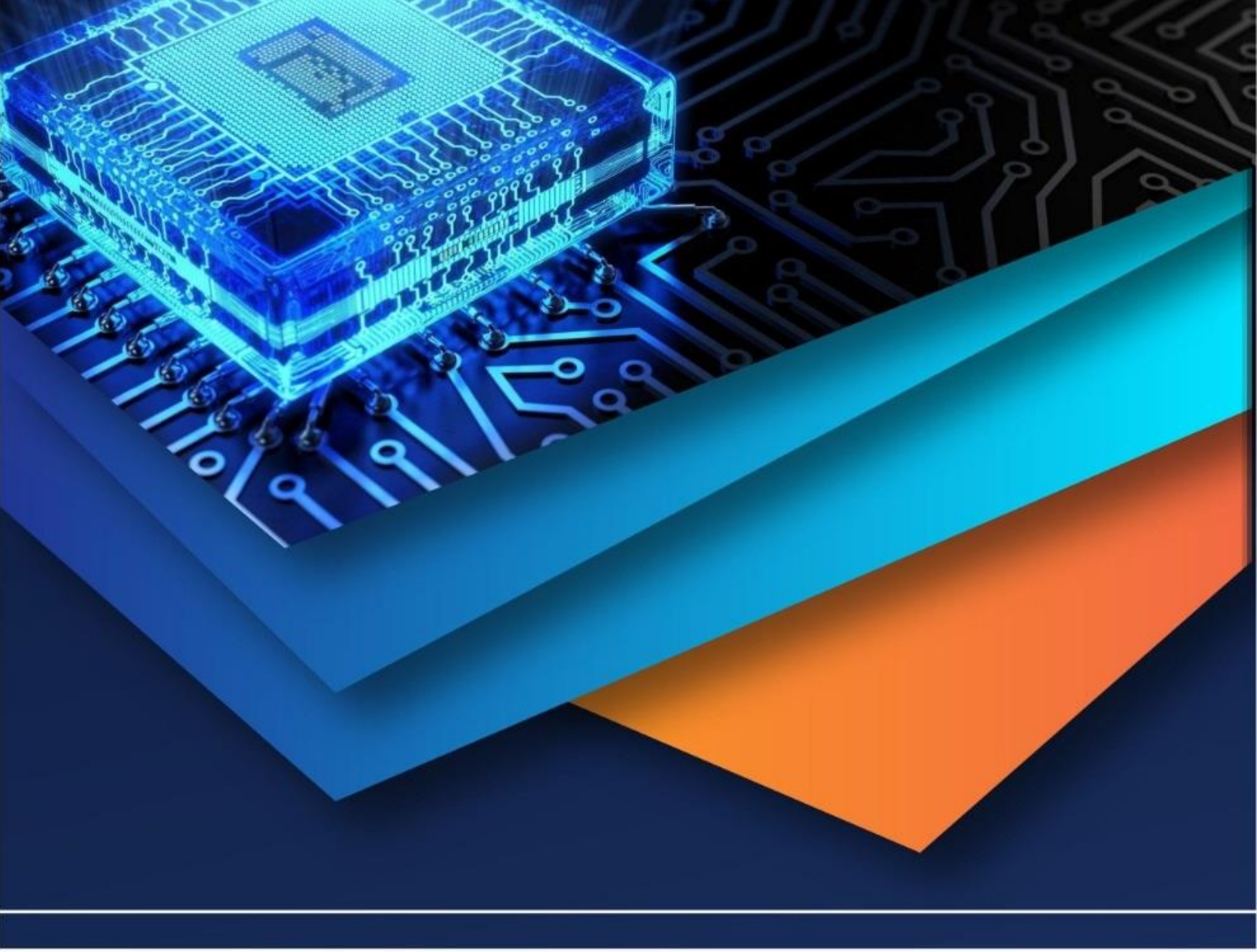

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