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## Mantle of the Expert

TIM TAYLOR & NICOLE WINTER

**ABSTRACT** In this article, Tim Taylor, a teacher and tutor for Mantle of the Expert, and Nicole Winter, a primary school teacher and course participant, discuss a long-form Mantle of the Expert course run by the National Education Union in 2018-2019. They conclude that, whilst the approach demands a lot from teachers in terms of professional judgement and investment, it has the potential to create a classroom ethos in which children are recognised as capable learners, invested in their own learning.

### Tim Taylor

In July 2019, 15 primary school teachers finished an 18-month course funded and organised by the National Education Union (NEU). The course, the first of its kind, involved them attending three training weekends and engaging in action research in their classrooms – first trialling and then integrating the approach across planned areas of the curriculum. Along the way, they worked in triads of three participants from different schools across the country and visited each other's classrooms to see the approach demonstrated by the course tutors. In between, they worked their way through the course reading list and kept a journal of their experiences and reflections, getting feedback and support from a designated mentor. For many of those who participated, the course had a transformative effect on their teaching. Here is a sample of their thoughts:

Exploring and developing the use of Mantle of the Expert, over the last four terms, has been a wonderful experience. It has been the most challenging thing I have done as a practitioner, as well as being the thing I am proudest of. I have felt excited, amazed, moved, frustrated, determined and concerned. I have had my habits challenged, particularly in relation to teacher control and student choice. I have also found an approach to learning which gives weight to and supports so much of what my instincts have always told me about truly effective learning communities. (Megan Quinn, Gospel Oak Primary School, London)

I started to investigate Mantle of the Expert [MoE] while teaching a class of Year 1 children who did not see the point in writing; any time I asked them to write, it was hard work for them and for me. My original aim in introducing MoE was to give them a purpose and context for their writing. As soon as I introduced their first client, King Brannagan, the children wanted to write and there was a marked improvement. Suddenly, they weren't writing because I had asked them to; they were writing because they had important tasks to perform for the King. From here, I began to see wider benefits that (having no previous experience of MoE) I did not anticipate. Children who previously didn't get that involved in learning began to speak up; one very underconfident boy became the most talkative during our *Gruffalo*-based mantle – he was an expert and therefore had a lot of useful things to say. Other children similarly benefitted; the quieter, less confident and less academically able were on a par with everyone else in class. Mantle of the Expert is improving the children's ability to solve problems, speak up about issues they care about, grow in confidence and become deeply engaged in their learning. (Helen Nash, Whaddon First School, Buckinghamshire)

Working through Mantle has engaged every single child in my class. Even those who usually stay on the fringes, struggling to focus, have shown interest and understanding of the purpose and context of our work. They have been able to verbalise this and explain their feelings and ideas in a way that demonstrates their real engagement and understanding. The focus that Mantle places on humanity and positive human values has transformed the learning within my class, with children showing a real empathy for others' points of view. Mantle of the Expert does not assume children aren't capable individuals. Instead, it treats them with respect and challenges them to care about others and the world they live in, and in doing so engages them in a profound way. (Nicole Winter, St Nicholas Primary School, Wantage)

Working through Mantle has helped one child with autism to bridge the divide between schoolwork and home life. He has chosen to bring home ideas ignited within the classroom. For the first time, he has talked about his learning, asking to undertake activities directly linked to themes being explored within the Mantle context with other members of his family. (Nicole Winter, St Nicholas Primary School, Wantage)

And this from parents at the Dale Hall Community Primary School, Suffolk:

Bloody wolves! She's obsessed with bloody wolves. It's all she talks about. She spends all of her time on the Internet or getting books from the library researching them.

Everyone who comes into the house has to hear about the park and the bears and the wolves and the willows and all of the problems he's having to deal with. What on earth have you been doing? He's obsessed!

And finally, some comments from children at Thorndown Primary School, Cambridgeshire:

I like that we actually experience the events. We can develop our understanding and I am starting to understand how people might actually have felt.

We can now work together and are ready for any challenge.

I love our story sessions. I love using my imagination and I love being able to talk to people from the past, like Julius Caesar, and solve problems for them and others too!

### **Mantle of the Expert**

Mantle of the Expert is a teaching and learning approach that uses inquiry and drama to develop learning across curriculum subjects. The method is to create a story set in a fictional context (sometimes related to real life), where a team of experts are engaged in a field of work for a commissioning client. The work is planned by the teacher to challenge the students and create meaningful activities for learning.

Imagine a team of archaeologists, for example, opening up a recently discovered tomb for a museum in Cairo. In the fiction, the team are required to record what they find, investigate the artefacts and the person buried there, and then report back to the museum. This context, created by the teacher, is used to grab the children's interests and generate purposeful activities for curriculum development – such as historical research, note-taking, report-writing, careful measurement, calculations, map-making, project-planning, and so forth – and, in the process, make learning exciting and purposeful, as well as to create a curriculum path that will energise the children and make classroom activities meaningful.

The framework for the story is created by the teacher with the curriculum in mind, but is populated in collaboration with the children, who bring in their own ideas and contributions. Of course, the teacher has to keep a close eye on curriculum development – this is not a free-for-all – but is open and willing to take on the students' contributions as and when they move the story and the curriculum forward.

## Stories

Stories are an ancient way of communicating and remembering large amounts of information – a way that is hardwired into our minds. In fact, stories are so innate that Daniel Willingham (2004) has called them ‘psychologically privileged’, which is quite a claim when you stop to think about it. It means that stories have the capability to transcend our usual cognitive limits, creating mental pathways which allow us to recall vast amounts of information and detail. It was a method used by oral cultures (for example, Aboriginal songlines; see also Madden et al, 2005) [1] and is still used by ‘memory magicians’ [2], yet is largely underused in our modern education system. Where stories are used in schools nowadays, it is generally for the purposes of appreciating them in their own right and children’s enjoyment – both worthy aims – whereas their function as aids to memory has (ironically) been largely forgotten.

Stories become even more powerful conduits for memory with the addition of emotions, creating neural pathways between different areas of the brain and grabbing children’s attention. There is a great deal of scientific research on this subject [3], but the link has been well known for a long time – it is why cautionary tales for children, like *Little Red Riding Hood*, have scary characters in them.[4] It is also why Willingham (2004) included ‘conflict’ in his four ‘Cs’ of effective storytelling: causality, conflict, complications and character.

Mantle of the Expert incorporates these ancient features of stories into the fabric of the approach. A narrative – happening to people, in a location, at a time, experiencing events, involving tension – is created and then used by the teacher to grab the students’ interest and make the context exciting and meaningful.

## Drama

Mantle of the Expert, however, goes further by incorporating the conventions of drama and theatre (Heathcote & Whitelaw, 1985). Drama allows students to ‘step into’ the story. Unlike a book, film or play, where they are outside the fiction as spectators observing the action, in drama (at least the kind used by Mantle of the Expert) the children can be *inside* the story, as characters interacting and participating in the action as if it is happening to them now. This facility of drama can be enormously exciting for children, allowing them to be other than themselves – people with power and authority doing exciting (sometimes dangerous) things, making decisions and dealing with difficult situations.

Drama conventions can also be used by the teacher to stop, rewind and replay time, creating a ‘safe space’ to explore situations and people. In this way, a mistake in a drama classroom is a miss-take – that is, an opportunity to reflect, rethink and act differently. The safe space is, therefore, an opportunity to protect children *into* experience, not a way to protect them *from* experience. By ‘safe’, we mean that it is safe from the repercussions of normal life, not safe from scary or dangerous things – these are the lifeblood of a good story!

The use of signs and symbols from theatre is there to heighten human experience, to lift it up and generate moments of art. You might think that this is an exaggerated claim. Yet, why not? Why can't we create moments of artistic quality with our students? It is just a matter of learning the means and having the will. We use art to heighten experience, to make it memorable and meaningful. These are useful, some might say essential, techniques in the classroom, and it would be a shame to shy away from them just because they are tricky and difficult to accomplish. Mantle of the Expert is an approach that can be used to create moments of theatre in the classroom. It is not a mechanical process or a system of rules and regulations. Rather, it is organic and flowing, based on ideas and principles of play, drama, theatre and culture that are rooted deep in the past.[5] It is no accident that we use the same root for words that describe children playing and going to a play. Both are acts of creation.

### **Agency**

Agency is the freedom to influence events.[6] It is a fundamental aspect of human life, yet children are largely denied this freedom. For often good reasons, we have built walls around childhood, protecting the young from threats and experiences that might cause them physical or psychological harm. Yet this comes at a great cost and has resulted in children being denied opportunities to be useful, make contributions and, as a consequence, feel a sense of belonging. Much of this alienation manifests itself in a disappointment and disillusionment with school, which, more than we would like, results in children disappearing from education altogether, either literally – 'the disappointed, disillusioned, and disappeared' (Barber [1997], quoted in Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011, p. 430) – or psychologically – RHINO or Really Here in Name Only (see Oakley et al, 2002). Mantle of the Expert provides a solution to this lack of agency with a fictional context where children can have a voice, make a contribution and experience a sense of belonging. In Mantle of the Expert, although the story is started by the teacher with the curriculum in mind, it is largely continued in consultation with the students and co-constructed in the classroom through dialogue, questioning and authentic listening.

### **A Bit of History**

Dorothy Heathcote developed Mantle of the Expert at Newcastle University in the 1980s, but it is only recently that the approach has become used in any more than a handful of schools in the United Kingdom. The reasons for this are manifold, but the main one is the complexity of the approach, which Heathcote had trouble unpacking and explaining to others.

In *Drama for Learning*, her 1995 book with Gavin Bolton, Heathcote tried her best to diagnose her methods and create a language to explain her approach, but although she was brilliant at identifying the elements and

demonstrating them to others, she was less good at writing it down and finding the words that made sense to those who yearned to do it for themselves.[7]

Consequently, the approach went into a kind of hibernation – barely used, other than as a drama strategy in secondary drama classes, and almost unknown in primary education – and so it would have stayed if it wasn't for one of Heathcote's students, Luke Abbott, who picked up the approach from her Master of Arts programme in 1980 and was determined to make it into something accessible and mainstream.[8]

Abbott spent much of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s working in schools, first as a secondary drama teacher and then as a local authority advisor in Essex, developing Mantle of the Expert and working with others (including Tim Taylor) to make it a workable pedagogy.

By the mid 2000s, much of the work was done and a series of planning and teaching tools was developed that opened up Heathcote's layers of complex thinking. Along with this was a growing understanding of the importance of inquiry as a foundational element of the approach [9] – in particular, how Mantle of the Expert will always involve a kind of investigation (questioning, research, hypothesis, testing, reflecting and analysis) at the heart of what the children (in collaboration with the teacher) are doing.

The synthesis of this work was summarised in Tim Taylor's book *A Beginner's Guide to Mantle of the Expert* in 2016 and taught during the long course run by the NEU in 2018-2019. Nicole Winter was one of the 15 teachers who participated in the course.

### **Nicole Winter, St Nicholas Primary School, Wantage**

I couldn't quite believe it when, in late 2017, I heard about the NEU offering a funded 14-month Mantle of the Expert course. Six years earlier, I'd heard some murmurings about Mantle from another teacher and had instantly loved the sound of it. With only the original Mantle of the Expert website as guidance, I decided to give it a go in my classroom. Undeterred by my glaring ignorance of many of its aspects, I grasped the main idea of a responsible team and a meaningful commission and, with the aid of these two pieces of information, struck out on my first Mantle journey. Despite my many shortcomings, even in my early efforts I could already see what a powerful approach it could be, as the children were more engaged and invested. I doggedly kept at it, although I was painfully aware that what I was doing was probably not true Mantle at all.

So, I continued my little solo Mantle journey within the classes I taught and fell in love with teaching through my version of the approach. I could see how it made the children's learning so much more meaningful, which I felt was so important. Then, Tim published his *A Beginner's Guide to Mantle of the Expert* and suddenly I had more to go on. It was so helpful, as it helped me to be able to attempt to create my own Mantle contexts. However, the book also exposed how much I really did not understand and I realised that, without some proper face-to-face training, I was destined to remain paddling in the shallows.

Eventually, I moved to a new school with a head who had heard about Mantle of the Expert. I saw the NEU-funded course advertised on Twitter and, with my head's support, I applied. I couldn't believe it when I got one of the 15 funded places.

The course was made up of several residential training weekends, together with several school visits with Tim or Luke, where we could see them using Mantle in the classroom. I remember feeling equally excited and terrified when I turned up on the first weekend residential. Armed only with a shedload of enthusiasm, I was convinced that everyone would be way ahead of me. However, by the end of the weekend, I realised that it didn't matter what training anyone else had or hadn't had. I've never been on a course like it. It was practical and wonderful from the off, as we were immersed in story after story, slowly learning the theory that lay behind the approach. By the end of the first weekend, we were like a bunch of excited children, desperate to get back to school to try out some of the contexts we had been immersed in. As a lone Mantle apprentice, one of the best things for me was – and still is – the connection with the others on the course. From day one, we have supported each other, keen to help with ideas and encouragement.

As part of the course, we were asked to do a gradually increasing amount of Mantle work in our classrooms. I honestly didn't need telling twice, as the feeling of now being much more certain about some things (whilst still being, evidently, very unclear about others) made all the difference in the world. By the end of the course, a large amount of my teaching was being undertaken through Mantle of the Expert, which is still the case today, as the joy of teaching through Mantle, together with the difference it makes to the children, makes it highly addictive.

Just this week, as part of a *Little Red Riding Hood* Mantle centred around mapping skills and different kinds of animals, a teaching assistant came into my Year 1/2 class first thing in the morning and said:

As soon as I opened the door to J this morning, he's been telling me about the blooming wolves. He says it's crunch day, because if it's a pack of wolves, not a lone wolf, it's going to be a lot harder to help them. He won't stop talking about it.

That's the crux of it for me – children who come into school still talking about what they learned yesterday, last week or last month. They are invested and concerned, and what they are doing matters to them. Mantle is different because they feel and experience what they are learning. They are not looking at it from the outside.

Over the course of the 14 months, I have gone from barely knowing anything about Mantle of the Expert to feeling confident in teaching much of the curriculum through it. However, I also know that I will never know it all, and that's OK. You don't need to know everything to use it or to share it. One of the particular joys of the course has been gaining the confidence not only to use Mantle of the Expert in my own classroom, but also to share some of what I

have learned with others. It feels like quite an epic journey, but there are some things that have really struck me along the way.

### **Mantle Is the Co-creation of Stories**

I know it probably sounds odd, but I didn't really consider Mantle simply in terms of the co-creation of a story with a group of children. I think this was because, at the beginning, I had a very detailed idea of the story, with little elements of choice within this for the children to explore. To be honest, it has been a challenge to step back from this and accept that I shouldn't know everything that is going to happen, to allow the children more agency and choice and create the story with them.

I now see my Mantle planning a bit like a winding canal. It meanders around, but now and again passes through locks that already exist (the bits that I know I want them to learn and activities I know I want them to do). There is a final destination, which is why we started out in the first place, but the journey to the destination is the thing, not the race to get there, as the journey is where the learning is happening. I might have sketched my thoughts about where this canal might meander between the locks, but there is still some space for the children to discover and create some of their own journey there.

### **Be Authentic and Authentically You**

This is absolutely key. I want the children to feel and experience the story, rather than just pretend within it. When planning, it is so tempting to lay out a whole host of tasks to be undertaken as part of the commission and have grand plans for the final outcomes. In reality, all this does is have you rushing from one activity to the next with a load of anxiety that you are not going to get to that final piece of writing which you had planned. Giving children time is the most difficult but most important thing you can do.

Over the course, I have noticed how different Tim's and Luke's styles are when teaching through Mantle of the Expert, and I have realised that my Mantle journey was not about copying everything I saw with the final aim of becoming another Luke or Tim, but about being authentic to Mantle whilst being authentic to myself. There are little things that I do which might not be strictly Mantle, such as acquiring a delicious West Country accent when representing a dragon expert, but I think that's OK. Mantle doesn't need teaching clones; it needs teachers who believe in children's quite amazing abilities, are invested and love teaching through Mantle.

### **Tone and Approach Really Matter**

Teaching through Mantle of the Expert is about respect and authenticity. Of course, you need a teacher voice in the classroom, but in Mantle, the tone and approach you use really matter. I am getting better at this and I find it helps to



take a moment before I talk, to refocus and get my head in the right space. The children and I take the work seriously, and they know I take their ideas seriously, and this makes all the difference.

### **Give Children Real, Not Contrived, Choices**

I now understand that if you want something to be a fixed point, you need to make it a fixed point and present it as such through a client demand or other authentic route. A choice is not authentic or real if you have effectively cut off all other possibilities, either by leading the children so obviously to your intended solution or because the commission is such that the children do not have the knowledge, time or skills to find an alternative. It can be difficult to balance the fixed points with giving children opportunities for real choice, but for it to be authentic, just as in life, there must be some tension and the children must struggle a little to weigh up the different points of view and concerns.

### **Tension, Tension, Tension!**

The element that I think I still have the most to learn about is how to bring tension effectively into the fiction. It is something I notice Tim does in an apparently effortless way. I am slowly learning to think about the different levels of tension and to recognise when tension is needed. I now begin by thinking 'Who in the story would have an opposing view to this?' or 'What would demonstrate the real need to complete this commission?'

When adding tension, it can be really tempting to introduce the outraged or angry person who opposes what is going on, but it is so important to remember that there are no comic-book villains in Mantle. Just as in life, the characters in Mantle need to have depth and authenticity, and an element of grace that allows children to empathise with them and learn that people are driven by a whole host of factors. We want the children to understand that they need to probe to find out what might be going on behind that behaviour, and what the reasons and motivations are. They will then begin to learn not to assume and to understand that a whole host of different things in life might lead a character to present or act in a certain way, and it is their job to dig deeper to find out more.

### **Keep It Simple**

Something I learned from watching Tim with children is his down-to-earth approach. I have a tendency to overthink and try not to break the spell of the fiction when attempting to deal with issues, meaning that I overcomplicate things, whilst Tim would be direct and honest. I am learning to be much less afraid to pause the fiction, deal with the issue in a simple, down-to-earth way and dive back in, just as children do when they move in and out of the fiction in their own play.

## Don't Panic!

Because Mantle demands a lot from the teacher, in terms of knowing when to intervene and lead, when to listen and reflect, and how to take a story forward from a serious meander, it can sometimes feel alarming. This is particularly true when the class has taken an unexpected detour. You start out in one general direction, believing you have anticipated the likely possibilities and meanderings, but suddenly the children head off in an entirely unexpected direction. This requires the teacher to observe and consider whilst mentally reconfiguring. Can this new path lead in an alternative way to the desired final outcome? Is this meaningful to them? Shall we continue this alternative line of travel? I have learned that it is important not to panic, even if it appears a little chaotic. If the children are engaged and invested, and there is a buzz in the room, breathe and take a little time to observe and probe. What they are interested in may be something more meaningful than what you planned.

## Notes

- [1] In the animist belief system of indigenous Australians, a songline, also called dreaming track, is one of the paths across the land (or sometimes the sky) which mark the route followed by localised 'creator-beings' during the Dreaming. The paths of the songlines are recorded in traditional songs, stories, dance and painting. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Songline>
- [2] Memory techniques are methods for recalling large amounts of data. Memory techniques in magic and mentalism are used both openly, as in a memory demonstration, and secretly, as in the case of a memorised deck of cards. See: [http://geniimagazine.com/wiki/index.php/Memory\\_Techniques](http://geniimagazine.com/wiki/index.php/Memory_Techniques)
- [3] If you Google scholarly articles on 'emotions+memory+recall', you will find a long list. See: [https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?q=emotions+and+memory+recall&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0&as\\_vis=1&oi=scholar](https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?q=emotions+and+memory+recall&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar)
- [4] See the entry on the British Library website for *Little Red Riding Hood* (1810): <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/1810-edition-of-little-red-riding-hood>
- [5] See the Wikipedia page on Johan Huizinga's (1938) *Homo Ludens* at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo\\_Ludens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_Ludens)
- [6] See the Wikipedia page on 'Agency (philosophy)' at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agency\\_\(philosophy\)#Human\\_agency](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agency_(philosophy)#Human_agency)
- [7] To see Heathcote teaching, view the BBC documentary *Three Looms Waiting* (1974) on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5jBNIEQrZs&list=PLB1E6842FAF6BB A6B>
- [8] For more on Luke Abbott, see: <https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/about/contributors/>
- [9] This understanding was largely the work of Dr Brian Edmiston, who worked with Abbott and was also a student of Heathcote in the 1980s.

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