



Introduction

Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.

—Robert McKee¹

The teacher begins...

“Imagine you are falling through the air. All around you are clouds rushing by, and the wind whistles in your ears. Suddenly, in a blaze of light, you break through into clear blue sky and see, far below, the outline of an island. Sea laps at its shores, smoke puffs from a grumbling volcano, a forest covers everything in thick green foliage. This is your destination.

“You pull hard at the handle gripped in your hand. There is a sharp tug and you slow down. Looking up, you see the wide silk canopy of a parachute opening above you. Higher still, invisible among the clouds, is an aircraft. You can hear its engines buzz as it banks and flies off into the distance.

“You look down again. The island is growing closer now and you begin to scan the shore, looking for a tiny strip of sand that will act as a landing place. You spot one. Adjusting the cords that control your descent, you turn in a slow arc and fly towards your destination. Just before you land, as the beach rushes up to meet you, you pull hard again on the cords and the parachute contracts, allowing you to glide gently on to the beach.

“You look up again, and all around you are the descending figures of your comrades, those other members of your team, who have also come here to explore the dark interior of this strange and unknown island.”

She stops. Looking up at her are thirty young faces, their eyes wide in anticipation.

“If you were one of those people,” she asks them, “what would you make sure you had with you?”

A forest of hands shoots up.

“A map,” says one.

“A knife,” says another.

“A bottle to collect water,” says a third.

The teacher grabs her notebook and starts to write.

After a minute, she stops.

“I can’t keep up,” she says, “why don’t you grab a whiteboard and make a list of everything you think you’re going to need? It will probably be a good idea to share your ideas with each other.”

The class sets to work, writing and talking. As they work, the teacher puts up a prepared list on the board. “You might find this list helpful,” she says.

The students work separately and together, drawing on their own resources and the extra materials the teacher has provided. After a short while their whiteboards are covered with long lists of items.

They are ready for what happens next.

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This is the start of a Mantle of the Expert context. The teacher has written the text in advance and rehearsed it at home; she wants it to sound fresh and immediate, like the stories told by oral storytellers. She wants it to grab the attention of the class and bring them into the fictional world with her. She knows that once they are interested they are more likely to give her their time and energy, more likely to make a commitment to the curriculum learning she has planned, and more likely to become personally invested and engaged with the content and purpose of the work.

What she is doing is not a trick, but an act of open and explicit story-making. The children understand exactly what is going on and are invited to join in and contribute. This is a collaborative process, where the aim is to build a fictional world: an imaginary context where everyone is working and learning together. Some aspects are planned and non-negotiable, while others emerge or are created by the children. In these first, meticulously planned steps, the teacher progressively introduces her students to the fictional world she aims to develop with them. Everything she says is significant, each line providing them with another piece of the jigsaw, guiding them inch by inch into the imaginary context. In this way the students begin to find meaning in the situation, they start to unravel the signs and the clues the teacher has provided for them, and then, importantly, they are given opportunities to get involved, suggest ideas, and make decisions. Throughout this process the teacher is subtly and indirectly communicating: this is what is happening, this is where we are, this is who we are, and this is what is expected of us.

It is an inductive process because the students are given information gradually and indirectly. They have to *work* at understanding what’s going on and make meaning for themselves. The teacher is not telling

them directly – “Today children you are going to be explorers landing on a deserted island” – but is wrapping words around what’s happening, asking the students to struggle with it and make sense of it through dialogue and action. This is no easy option, but one that requires more from the students than just listening and comprehending, and one that asks more of the teacher than merely transmitting information.

This book is a guide to using this approach. It will introduce you to the fundamental elements, guide you through the planning process, and support you in learning the skills you need to make it work in your own classroom.

WHAT IS MANTLE OF THE EXPERT?

Mantle of the Expert is an educational approach that uses drama and inquiry to create imaginary contexts for learning. Teachers work in collaboration with their students to generate fictional settings that are used to study the curriculum and to develop knowledge, skills, and understanding across wide subject areas.

The aim is to make curriculum study engaging and meaningful, and to place the classroom community at the centre of the learning process. It is not child-led in the sense that the students make all the decisions; rather it is a collaborative approach, where the teacher and the students work together to build the context and to generate purposeful activities for learning.

The teacher starts by selecting and planning the imaginary context based on three interlinking factors: the curriculum to be studied, the interests of the students, and the resources available.

The students are then cast as a team of experts – people with specialist knowledge and responsibility – within the fiction who work for a client, who commissions them to perform a range of tasks in pursuit of a specific aim or project. These tasks are then used across the curriculum to create meaningful and engaging activities for learning.

Here is an example. Several years ago I worked with a class of Year 3 and 4 students who had told me they would like to learn more about castles, knights, and mythical tales. I told them I would do my best to plan something that took account of these interests and included as much of the curriculum as possible. I explained it wouldn’t be everything: some bits would have to be taught separately, but I would try to fit in as much as I could.

The imaginary context I planned cast the children as a restoration team,² commissioned by British Heritage to restore an old ruined castle and open it to the public. The commission required the team to research the history of the castle, discover stories from its past, and educate people visiting the site.

Each week, I taught sixty to eighty per cent of the curriculum in this way, including most of English, history, geography, art, DT, RE, and ICT, as well as bits of science and maths.³ The rest of the curriculum I taught discretely in separate lessons.

The children's interest and commitment to the work seemed to grow as their knowledge and understanding developed. They learned about the history of castles and the role they played in medieval society and culture. They read books: stories, myths, legends, and fairy tales. They created different kinds of text, including information books, stories, leaflets, and historical artefacts (letters, decrees, and secret notes). They drew maps, plans, and diagrams. They painted pictures and wove tapestries.

Finally, they made a twenty-minute film⁴ – involving animation and live-action scenes using a blue screen – which they scripted, designed, acted in, edited, and produced. The film was shown to a packed audience of students, parents, and carers in the hall at the end of term.

While this was a long project that brought together many areas of curriculum study, not all Mantle of the Expert projects have to be so wide-ranging. Some can last as long as a year, while others might be over in a couple of hours. Mantle of the Expert is a flexible approach that can be used in many different ways.⁵

The one feature they all share, however, is the way curriculum learning is contextualised within an imaginary setting, casting the students as people with status and responsibility. This is what gives their learning purpose and meaning.

So, when my students studied castles and medieval history, they knew the purpose was to apply that knowledge inside the fictional context as the Castle Restoration Team. And when they planned, drafted, and wrote the guidebooks, they knew that it was to provide clear and concise information to people visiting the site.

This authentic sense of purpose is fundamental to Mantle of the Expert. It's what draws children in. It's what makes it exciting and interesting. It's what makes it worthwhile and worth committing their time and energy to. They make this commitment not because they have to, but because they want to.

DOROTHY HEATHCOTE

Mantle of the Expert was invented by drama teacher and academic Dorothy Heathcote, while working at Newcastle University in the 1970s. Her aim was to create a pedagogical approach that made drama techniques accessible for teachers of all kinds, whatever their background and experience.⁶

She described her way of working as a laboratory method, “where

the students know the results of what they do will *matter* to someone other than themselves”⁷

She wanted to find ways of “opening doors for children, helping them make links with the community, and to take a degree of responsibility for their own learning”⁸

Her methods were never about creating classrooms where the children are in charge, nor simulations where, once participants enter the context, they stay until the end. Still less, a big lie where the children are duped into believing that what is happening is real. Rather, like imaginary play, her way of working was to create dramatic contexts where those involved understood they were in a fiction and could stop and start the action whenever they chose.

LUKE ABBOTT

My first experience of Mantle of the Expert came as a newly qualified teacher in the early 1990s, when I saw Luke Abbott working with my class of Year 2s. Luke was a former student of Dorothy Heathcote's and had studied with her at Newcastle University for his MA in 1980–81.

I'd never heard of Mantle of the Expert, but our head teacher, Sue Eagle, recognised that it had parallels with another pedagogical approach we were developing at the school, called Philosophy for Children. And so she invited him in.

Within a few minutes of starting, Luke and my students were talking together as an emergency rescue team, discussing what equipment they were going to need to rescue people trapped in a giant sinkhole. They were talking about ropes and winches, helicopters and ambulances, night-vision goggles and remote controlled cameras, all without a hint of irony or embarrassment.

Luke soon had me involved as an accident victim, stuck in the hole, under a pile of rubble, unable to move and badly injured. The rescue team could only talk to me through their remote-controlled robot, which had discovered me using its infrared camera.

“Can you move?” they asked.

“No,” I replied, “there's something heavy across my legs. I can't see what it is in the dark. Can you help me? I'm scared.”

“Don't worry,” they replied, “we'll be with you soon. Hold on. We're going to send you some water and a torch. Are you bleeding?”

I remember sitting in the corner of my classroom, talking to my hard-to-engage class, everyone one of whom was crouching with Luke in rapt concentration: totally focused on this gripping scenario, totally immersed in their roles as the rescue team. It gripped me, too. For the first time I was enjoying drama.

I wasn't being asked to pretend to be injured, screaming in agony and writhing on the carpet, nor was I embarrassed by trying to act my part. All Luke asked me to do was *represent* someone who was trapped, injured, and unable to move: someone who needed rescuing. Any acting on my part would have distracted the children and taken away the mantle of expertise Luke was so carefully building with them.

This was an important moment for me. I realised that drama, if done well, could be an incredibly effective way to teach. All my previous experiences of drama had been dire, including an excruciatingly embarrassing session on my PGCE course, where we were asked to run around the hall pretending to be snowflakes, to the accompaniment of Aled Jones singing 'Walking in the Air'. I realise now that these other experiences weren't real drama, in the sense of authentic experiences, but silly, frivolous, play-acting activities. No one, before this session with Luke, had ever bothered to *protect* me into the drama. Previously, it had always been a jarring experience, an awkward jump, from sitting on a chair to 'warming up' with a game, pretending to be a bereaved father, or some such thing. Luke worked in a different way. He built a context first and then *inducted* us into the experience, a little at a time, going at our own pace. I don't remember any feelings of embarrassment or any sense that we were pretending or acting, just a gentle, seamless series of small, coherent activities that ended with me on the carpet, holding my leg, and the children at the other end of the room, talking to me through imaginary walkie-talkies.

This wasn't daft pretence, it was authentic drama, and it changed my view of teaching forever.

I worked with Luke as often as I could over the next ten years. And, gradually, through a process of further demo lessons, joint planning sessions, and hours and hours of discussion and feedback, he patiently taught me how to use the approach.

In 2005, the school had a successful Ofsted inspection, where Mantle of the Expert was lauded. This led to funding from the government's Innovation Unit, which we used for a project designed to teach Mantle of the Expert to a group of classroom teachers with no background in drama. Our aim was to see if the approach could be learned relatively quickly and then used in everyday classroom situations.

The project took two years and was structured around four weekend training sessions, led by Luke, and a series of half-termly meetings where the teachers got together with me to discuss their progress. In the intervening times they experimented with Mantle of the Expert in their classrooms.

Although there was a high initial drop-out rate, those teachers who completed the project found that Mantle of the Expert profoundly affected their practice and have since gone on to become extremely successful teachers, working in some of the most innovative schools in the country.⁹

The work we did in this initial project further developed over the next five years into a series of other projects and training modules. The weekends – held at Ringsfield Hall, a Victorian house in Suffolk – were opened up to other teachers and have subsequently been used to train hundreds of teachers from all over the world.

This book is in large part the result of the work done at Ringsfield Hall, both on the Innovation Unit project and over the intervening ten years. Through teaching other teachers how to use the approach, the use of experimental teaching sessions, and many hundreds of hours of discussion and analysis, we have developed a far greater understanding of how Mantle of the Expert works and how the approach can be best taught to others.

Back in the early 1990s there was very little information on Mantle of the Expert, and next to nothing in the way of resources and training materials. Much of how it worked was locked up inside the brilliant mind of Dorothy Heathcote, who, as she admitted herself, never found it easy to explain her ideas.¹⁰ Thus, during those early days, learning how to use Mantle of the Expert was largely a matter of trial and error, and of watching expert practitioners, such as Dorothy and Luke, in the hope of picking it up through osmosis. For someone like me, a teacher with no background in drama, it was a slow and painful experience.

So, although I'm the one putting the words on the page, this book draws hugely on my long collaboration with Luke and his own, even longer, collaboration with Dorothy, as well as to the many other teachers we have worked with at Ringsfield Hall, and elsewhere, over the years.

Mantle of the Expert is not an easy thing to explain in everyday language. It is wrapped in a code, borrowed in large part from the theatre, which can alienate the uninitiated, and give people the impression it is convoluted or arcane. My aim is to dispel this impression and open up Mantle of the Expert to the ordinary teacher. I can't make it easy, and I'm not interested in oversimplifying it, but I want to make Mantle of the Expert accessible and possible to use.

In a sense I'm writing this for my NQT (newly qualified teacher) self, who, after watching Luke work, went back to his classroom and thought, "How can I do that?"

This is the book I would like to have had on my desk, ready to help me make a start.

PART ONE

Explaining Mantle of the Expert

