

***Mantle of the Expert: The Versatility of Dorothy Heathcote's Dramatic-inquiry
Approach to Teaching and Learning***

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Abstract

In the 1980s, Prof. Dorothy Heathcote MBE (1926-2011) developed the 'Mantle of the Expert' approach (MoE) during her work at the University of Newcastle. The basic concept of MoE is that children study the school curriculum as if they were a group of experts: they can be scientists in a laboratory, archaeologists digging out a tomb, a rescue team during a natural disaster, and so on. Together with the teacher they create a fictional world in which they are cast as a team of experts working for an (imaginary) client who gives them a commission. In addition to a strong sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation, Bob Selderslaghs proved during research at the Royal Conservatoire (AP University College) in Antwerp, that MoE also develops artistic competencies in children. During a PhD project, he is currently investigating how MoE can be used not only as a drama in education-tool, but also as an education in drama-method, in order to create a healthier balance between process and product in arts education. Selderslaghs also participates in the research project *ART4DEM* in which MoE is used in primary and secondary schools to educate citizenship. Because of the different points of view, and because of Heathcote's ingenious system in which every action can be brought back to the value system of the person involved, there are strong indications that MoE can not only develop knowledge and skills, but also important attitudes children so desperately need now in order to be able to reclaim their future.

Keywords: education, drama, children

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Introduction

This paper is a written version of the oral presentation that Bob Selderslaghs gave on Saturday, July 13th in Brighton, during The European Conference on Arts & Humanities, (ECAH2019) on the subject of 'Reclaiming the future':

Recent study has shown that children approximately 63% of class time per school day have to sit still at their desks¹. In addition, education still often focuses on knowledge transfer that is not immediately of use to the students. Dorothy Heathcote therefore called schools waiting rooms: you sit and wait until – one day perhaps – you can use what you are learning, but never today. What you learn is for later: today you just need to study the subject matter.

Dorothy Heathcote said this in the 1980s, but I fear that this is still often the case today. It strikes me how often children in classrooms are given a low status: they can make few decisions themselves and are given few responsibilities and powers. Their most important responsibility is to carry out what the teacher tells them to do. This doesn't sound like a position that encourages you to take control of your future, does it? Rather, it sounds like a position that encourages conformation: acceptance of the situation as it is.

To really take control of your future, you need imagination. You have to be able to imagine what it could be like: a 'vision of the possible' is what you need – another expression of Dorothy Heathcote. In the 1980's, at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, she developed an approach to education that is based on this vision of the possible: Mantle of the Expert – a dramatic inquiry approach to teaching and learning.

In this paper, I would like to introduce the reader to Mantle of the Expert and its different possibilities and strengths. I will discuss three points:

- What is Mantle of the Expert?
- How can you use it?
- Why does it enable children to reclaim their future?

Conclusion

In order to get a proper insight into what Mantle of the Expert is, I will start with the nine elements² of the approach (Figure 1).

TEACHING & LEARNING THROUGH 9 ELEMENTS

Foundation elements	Core elements	Drama elements
Fictional context	Team of experts	Tension
Narrative	Client	Points of view
Inquiry	Commission	Drama strategies and conventions



Figure 1: The nine elements of Mantle of the Expert.

The foundation elements include:

- A fictional context that the teacher creates together with the students: the collaborative approach is very important.
- The context contains a narrative: it is as if the children are playwrights of the story in which they participate themselves.
- There is an important inquiry aspect: in the story there are possibilities to investigate.

The core elements:

- In the story the students are cast as a team of experts;
- working for a client;
- who gives them a certain assignment or commission. All kinds of learning activities can be linked to this.

And, finally, there are the drama elements:

- Tension;
- Different points of view;
- Drama strategies and conventions: these are a kind of toolbox of drama techniques that the teacher and the students can use to shape their story.

I'll present you with a clear example (a lesson plan that is discussed in detail by Tim Taylor in his book 'A beginner's guide to Mantle of the Expert') (Taylor 2016):

When I put the image of a lifebelt on a big poster on the floor, and I stand around it with a class of eight year old children, I can quickly talk about it as if it were a real lifebelt (and not just a picture of one). That is an example of a dramatic convention. Suppose I tell you that it is a lifebelt from the shipwreck of the Titanic that was fished up by a group of marine archaeologists, and that they are now speaking to a group of reporters. What would you ask if you were one of those reporters?

In no time, the children are cast in the role of news reporters, and later on in the role of marine archaeologists themselves. Maybe they were hired by the British Museum to pick up artefacts from the shipwreck so that an exhibition could be built around

them? But how are they going to do that: isn't it dangerous to swim around in such an old shipwreck? Maybe we should first send an unmanned camera for reconnaissance?

I bet this already sounds more exciting than sitting behind a desk, doesn't it?

In this way, countless curriculum activities can be linked to the dramatic inquiry: where is the shipwreck? How far are we from the mainland? What objects can we find in the shipwreck? What were they for? How are we going to report our findings to the client? And are we allowed to remove the artefacts just like that?

Consequently, children are not only motivated to learn, they are really going to take their learning into their own hands, and their learning has an immediate goal: it is useful and meaningful. It has a reason. Moreover, they are given responsibilities and powers that they do not have in real life: you would be surprised how conscientiously they handle them.

That brings me to my second point: how can you use Mantle of the Expert? As I have just explained, it is an excellent way to teach the curriculum. And what's more: without focusing on them, children will indirectly develop artistic competencies when they learn through Mantle of the Expert. In December 2018, I completed my research project *Mantle of the Expert: the artistic value of drama as a learning medium in primary school*³. During a first case study, I asked six drama experts to attend an hour-long Mantle of the Expert workshop: a workshop with 24 eight-year old children. I asked the drama experts to assess how often they observed behavior in the children that could be linked to artistic competencies. In order to do so, I used a framework developed by Luc Bosman and Eric Schrooten⁴, called 'artfully competent'. Bosman and Schrooten developed five roles that cover the whole of artistic competencies: roles in which anyone who follows an art course can develop themselves. These roles are the craftsperson, the collaborator, the researcher, the creator and the performer. Together these roles lead to a 'unique individual artist' (Figure 2).

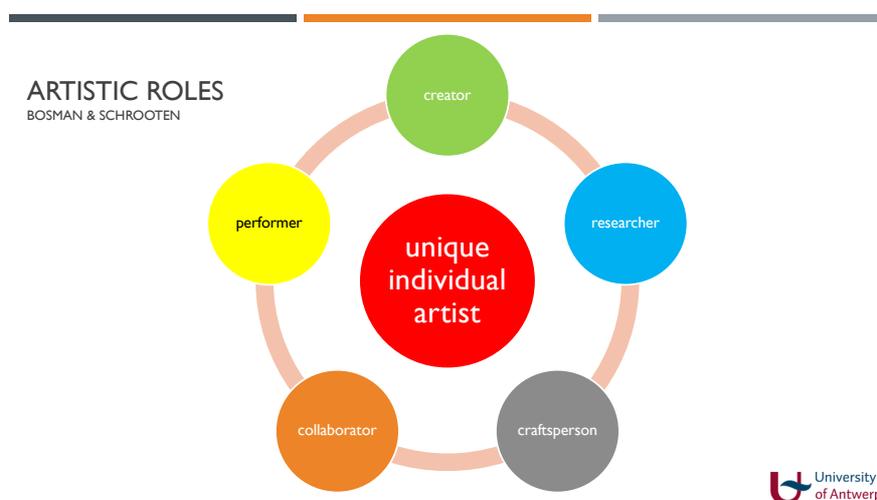


Figure 2: Artistic roles to become 'artfully competent'.

BEHAVIOUR LINKED TO ARTISTIC COMPETENCIES IN MANTLE OF THE EXPERT

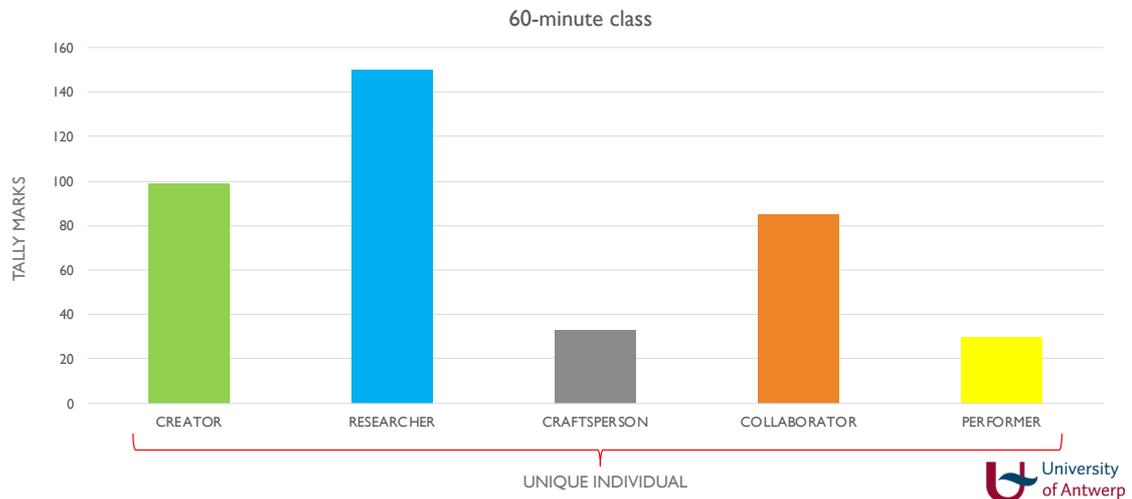


Figure 3: Results case study on artistic competencies in Mantle of the Expert

Looking at the results of the first case study (Figure 3), the roles of the researcher, the collaborator and the creator in particular strongly emerge. The craftsperson and the performer much less so.⁵ This is quite a striking result, for two reasons:

- In current art education in Flanders the opposite is often the case: there is a strong focus on the roles of the craftsperson and the performer, and the other roles are given far less attention. That quickly results in actors who rehearse their role well, but who have little contact with the material and with their fellow players;
- In primary education this means that Mantle of the Expert enables school teachers without an artistic background or education, to indirectly develop artistic competencies in children.

Further in-depth research during two following case studies confirmed these results.

My conclusions lead to two recommendations:

- For art education: further research might show whether Mantle of the Expert could be strengthened as a drama teaching tool by adding art technical and performance-oriented aspects to the methodology;
- For primary education: Mantle of the Expert should be integrated into primary school teacher training programs so that future teachers can develop artistic competencies in children without having to focus directly on them, as this is not their field of study.

I'll return to the artistic value of Mantle of the Expert later, but in the context of the theme of the conference – reclaiming the future – I'd first like to highlight another use

of the approach: Mantle of the Expert is also an excellent method for working on ethical issues and citizenship.

For example: think back to the Titanic context I mentioned earlier. If the children, at the instigation of the teacher, run into a table of survival rates of the Titanic, they will find that people in first class had a much higher chance of survival than passengers in third class. How do they feel about that? Are people who pay more entitled to more safety? In addition to the many possible entry points that the method offers to reflect, Dorothy Heathcote developed a simple diagram to find out what a person's values are, based on the actions he or she takes (Taylor 2016):

- Action: what does the person do? For example: the musicians on the Titanic continue to play music while the ship decays.
- Motivation: why do they do that? Maybe they want to try to keep the peace among the passengers? Or do they want to counterbalance the tragedy that is taking place? Or are they trying to distract themselves from the tragedy? There could be multiple possibilities.
- Investment: suppose we go for the first option – ‘they try to keep the peace’. Why would they do that? Is it to provide a spark of hope or comfort in the situation? And what does it cost them? They are not trying to get on a lifeboat while playing their music, so what do they get out of it?
- Models: from whom did they learn this? Is it work ethics? The conviction that many artists have: ‘the show must go on’? Or has their life experience taught them that music can offer hope and comfort?
- Value: do they believe musicians have a social responsibility to put music at the service of the people?

There might be different outcomes: there is no right or wrong. What is important is to reflect with the students. This simple structure digs deeper and deeper and can offer students an insight into people's actions. It's a powerful tool for reflecting and to learn to understand behavior. If you combine this with the different points of view that are part of Mantle of the Expert, I believe the methodology allows children to stop and think about our society and what it involves, at a deeper level. In order to convert these ‘beliefs’ into knowledge, a new multidisciplinary practice-based scientific research project at AP University College Antwerp, called *ART4DEM* – art for democracy – will explore and develop new ways of working on civic education by means of artistic methods. In this respect, from September onwards, Mantle of the Expert will be investigated in Flanders (northern part of Belgium) both in primary and secondary schools.

Allow me to return to the artistic aspect of Mantle of the Expert. In addition to curriculum learning and the development of civic competencies, the approach has much to offer in the field of arts education with young children. The OECD – the worldwide organization of economic cooperation and development – states that arts education makes an important contribution to an innovative society⁶, because it creates – to put it in the words of Dorothy Heathcote– a ‘vision of the possible’: it allows people to look beyond the situation ‘as is’, and teaches students to think out of the box. I am currently working on a PhD in the arts that investigates this aspect of Mantle of the Expert. I have already proved during previous research that MoE indirectly develops artistic competencies in children when it is applied to curriculum learning (Selderslaghs 2018). Currently I’m trying to further develop the methodology

into a tool for arts education, taking both the art process and the art product to a higher level. Often in arts education with younger children the focus is either on the process, and the product is absent, of minor importance or of a dubious quality. Or, on the other hand, there is too much focus on the product, which quickly leads to a superficial or artificial result because it lacks content and depth. During a first case study earlier this year, I have determined through participatory action research and semi-structured interviews, that Mantle of the Expert enables children (aged eight to ten years old) to make a non-scripted theatre performance.⁷ A performance in which they engage as powerful actors, thanks to the collective role element, the strong research component, the non-scripted element, and the individual drive Mantle of the Expert generates. In the future I'd like to incorporate more artistic craftsmanship into the methodology, so that a significant artistic result can be achieved, from which both the audience and the children themselves will benefit.

Finally, why does Mantle of the Expert enable children to reclaim their future? I hope that I have already been able to answer most of that question in this paper. To sum up:

- Mantle of the Expert gives children a voice, a status, decision-making powers and responsibility;
- It gives children an influence on situations: they don't just have to undergo events, but they themselves play an active role in the development or evolution of the events;
- It teaches them to work together and to develop an understanding of different points of view and values;
- And it encourages them to use their imagination and develop a 'vision of the possible'.

And that's how education can contribute to a generation that develops the skills to take control of its own future. A generation that learns to take responsibility, even where we did not. A generation that does not allow itself to be conformed and remains seated behind their school desks, but one that stands up and takes action.

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