Mantle of the Expert-an attempt at understanding the misunderstood.

A brief history

The invention of the term Mantle of the Expert (MoE) by Professor Dorothy Heathcote in the early 70’s has reverberated throughout the practice of drama in schools and elsewhere ever since. (1)

The approach has moved from a simple ‘drama convention’ (Neelands) to a fully developed ‘system for learning’ (Heathcote) through the deployment of the 33 conventions of dramatic action (Signs and Portents 1983) into teaching and learning episodes. These teaching and learning episodes are created through INDUCTIVE teaching methods which challenge, wholesale, the notions of learning set up in the orthodox ‘crisp and pacey’(2), teacher led, instructive modes of learning experiences associated with military obedience so prevalent currently.

Many people in the drama field in the past have found ‘drama as a system’ very perplexing. They notice that those using the system will insist on challenging just about every sacred cow in the ‘schooling’ and ‘drama’ fields. For secondary people who have been steeped in a ‘subject subjugated’ factory style delivery model of schooling, cross curricular processes have been alien in extremis. The 11-19 curriculum has always, up until now, been a set piece of singularities. Isn’t it time to adopt best primary practice, where mantle of the expert is taking a real stronghold in an ever increasing number, within KS3 at least?

But all is changing....
Drama practitioners alongside all teachers have had to survive the debilitating onslaughts of the curriculum 'status quo'. The current urgent questions in secondary schools are: what are we going to do in May (and before) now that the SATS have gone………………and what ways are there to teach a less prescriptive NC? (3)

The schooling models of the past are beginning to waver in the face of the need for humanity to pervade the system and we see a new horizon for secondary settings opening up in the guise of a 'liberated' curriculum. (As an old codger, I look back and wonder whatever happened to the radical curriculum constructs of the likes of the experimental centres of the 70’s and 80’s, such as the Leicestershire school Countesthorpe College and in Buckingham Stantonbury Campus both famous for experimenting with curriculum structures and innovations………..)

MoE-The system explained

Perhaps the following paragraphs capture some of the complexities?

‘The big idea is that the class do all their curriculum work as if they are a imagined group of responsible people with an imagined set of expertise. This shifts the paradigm of teacher transmitter to teacher as enabler.

For example, students might be running a library. They might be scientists in a laboratory. They might be running a factory a shop, a space station or a French resistance group. Because they behave responsibly as if they are expert, participants are permitted to have a specific point of view as they enter the work, and this brings special responsibilities as well as language needs and social behaviours.

In MoE-participants are not putting on a "play but simply being asked to agree that we behave as if we represent a group of librarians or scientists etc. Through the tasks set by the teacher, learners are gradually burdoned with’ responsibilities’ encountering problems and challenges, as librarians or scientists might do –as if in real life.
What is it for?

The idea is to create a fictional context that makes sense to learners. Through the Mantle of the Expert, learners can encounter many aspects of the school curriculum: science, mathematics, geography etc.

1. A class of students studying the Tudor period are "framed" as experts in charge of running a Tudor mansion. They have been approached by the BBC to be a venue for the Antiques Road Show later in the year. However—security and public safety are matters of urgency requiring a great deal of thought—should the commission be accepted.

2. A group of students are taking responsibility as if they are people running a hotel. Not only have they been commissioned to take ex-convicts as new staff they also have to consider the needs of international visitors. Investigations are possible across the curriculum in MFL; food; finance; advertising, politics, security, religious beliefs. (In the hands of people who know how process drama works (4)—there are also many opportunities for creating the conditions to use presentations and performances within each structure.)

How does it work? (5)

Mantle of the Expert, always has:

1. An imagined and therefore fictional responsible team or "enterprise" to be run whereby learners take responsibility for the goals of the imagined circumstances….

2. and by inference, an imagined client who needs a job to be done. The emphasis, in the early stages, is on the tasks students need to ‘do’, both in the fiction and out of the fiction—
3. to serve the needs of the client(s).

The system permits the normal school context of class responsibility to change. Instead of learners relying on the teacher's energy to drive the work and evaluate achievement, teacher and class share the responsibility for maintaining quality. Running the enterprise is, like an enterprise in real-life, based in action and processes; thus it generates a range of different tasks: imagining, listening, writing, speaking, making, designing, planning, measuring, weighing and so on. These tasks are channelled by the teacher towards the requirements of the given curriculum EITHER IN THE FICTIONAL SETTING OR AS PART OF THE CLASS WORK OUTSIDE OF THE FICTIONAL SETTING.

What are the advantages of working this way?

For students their perceptions and voices are heard. For teachers sharing the power to influence- and worrying less about the power to control.(6)

"I really felt I had a job to do, like I was really doing this job."

"It wasn't, here's a play, let's enjoy it - it felt like real life."

"I don't usually like working much, do I Miss? But I could have worked on that forever."(7)

What does MoE have to do with drama?

As a rookie drama teacher in London in 1973 I witnessed a lesson at an INSET day taught by Mrs Heathcote in the Havering drama centre with a group of year 6 students. After selecting their 'drama' the class became obsessed with imagining the responsibilities in a company of engineers. In the fictional world they soon embarked on sorting out huge 'company-type' challenges. For example like taking on a job that had just come in to do with the building of a water reservoir and all the issues associated with such a herculean task. Except that in this particular lesson we witnessed the creation of the company's holiday rota! Surely, this woman was deranged? What on earth was this to do with drama? This bemused many observers who expected the great drama sage to create stunning dramatic moments
of great significance and, when she didn’t, felt robbed………… On reflection at the time observers felt that the experience did ‘look a bit like drama’ but it couldn't really be drama. It was so NOT LIKE what it usually looked like and SHOULD look like!

Now, we know what she was doing. She was taking a step into one of the 3 circles of experience needed for MoE to emerge—that of creating the ‘company’ circumstances………………it has also become apparent that the entry point can be in any of the 3 circles, challenging the notions of a set piece entry through dramatic conventions allowing the teacher to be free to choose, taking the needs of the class into account and not the time table! This one construct creates the conditions for a ‘post modern’ approach to schooling, as well as learning and teaching- leaving current ‘modernist’ curriculum orthodoxy speechless and no doubt resistant in the extreme.

Observing the water reservoir drama experience catapulted me into wanting to know more. I had had a glimpse of something that was in the ‘about to come along later’ category and somehow I knew it would be important later…………almost 41 years later as it turned out!

Now in the context of a highly volatile world the secondary NC under scrutiny, the demise of centralised testing regimes. Drama people are some of the best professional pedagogues to take their place as change agents in future schooling because of their ways of working with multi layered curriculum contexts and I firmly believe our time has come. (8)

**Challenging the 'great divides'-curriculum, drama for learning, integration or otherwise.**

In many ways I should have stopped in 1973 as it may have saved me a great deal of work and stress trying to fully understand what actually went on. What we were witnessing was an early example of a brilliant invention in a prototype mode by perhaps the world’s greatest teacher and inventor of learning systems mantle of the expert had we known it at the time!

Ten years later (1981-2) I managed to secure a place at the University of Newcastle upon
Tyne where I trained researched and studied for my Masters degree with Dr Heathcote. 'Mantle of the Expert' was the system under scrutiny for the year- Phil Herbert completed her giant academic treatise on the system (published on www.mantleoftheexpert.com ) whilst I pondered in my puny little way whether the system would work in a large comprehensive school in the midlands where I was managing a faculty of Expressive Arts and Learning and Teaching . I was considered a renegade by many of my drama peers as I seemed bent on travelling down a weird path as opposed to constructing highly performable 'pieces' for performance as my main role! Not that we didn't believe in 'performance' as success. An average of 80-85% of all our year 11 students gained A*-C’s in Drama each year over a period of 10 years. (i.e. 80-85% of each cohort of 300 since all students underwent ‘examination drama’.) It meant training all members of the teaching team in drama methods and MoE in particular. One of our great successes across the faculties was an integrated investigation into Lord of the Flies (Golding) which did the trick for so many GCSE courses we ran. Humanities, English Language, English Literature, Drama, Dance and Music were all able to be taught through frames of Mantle of the Expert approaches. In one frame we worked from the viewpoint of a team of solicitors who had been contacted by Jack’s family to assess the significance of a death bed confession by ‘Mr Jack Merridew’ who had pleaded with the hospital authorities before his death, to arrange for a priest to write his ‘confession’- in the circumstances of the killing of children on an island when Jack was a youth………………….the book of course was the ‘record of events’ which all students needed access to. (9)

Examples of what people are trialling in the UK secondary schools?

The work of Eileen Pennington, Red Earth Theatre Company, Midlands Actors Theatre (MATT) Claire Armstrong Mills and Iona Towler Evans are testimony to the successes of the system in schools in the 1980’s to the present time. Hexham High School in Northumberland under Kathy White Webster constantly pioneered the system as a cross curricular teaching
tool for innovations throughout the school. There are of course many others. Currently Saddleworth Moor High School under the guidance of Matthew Milburn their HT, also Maggie Hulson at Gladesmore HS in Hackney and Charlie McCarthy DHT at Burnt Mill HS Harlow are working on a new curriculum constructs using MoE to transform KS3.

For them, the testimony of students is too persuasive to 'change back'.

**A lesson outline - making it work.........**

A group of students are behaving as if they are a team of French Resistance workers responsible for making the Nazi occupation as difficult as possible for the occupying forces. Working with the English (Literature and Language) French and Humanities (Geography, History, RE, Citizenship) departments, as well as the Citizenship coordinator in the school. The classes are driven to the work as they have expressed an interest in the Holocaust. Furthermore the teachers have planned a circumstance where the students as French Resistance Workers are to rescue a group of displaced Jewish refugees crossing Europe to 'safety'. The English curricula along with the History Geography and Citizenship ones are harnessed by the context. Letters, secret files, reports of exploits, examining the occupation of France from the point of view of the German command etc. are all possible as are researches into the Simon Wiesenthal Foundation now and in the past and the International Archives of the Holocaust.

The final decision regarding the point of view of the students, by teachers, was 'Resistance Workers'. Several other viewpoints were discussed as possibilities and might give the reader an idea of the thinking processes involved. The enterprise in each case is seen as one which will engage students in year 9 and has to have a client implied. (As a planning exercise, readers might like to construct in their own minds the sorts of imagined 'clients' that would commission the tasks.)
List of possibilities

1. Secret Service personnel receiving a commission to remove the crown jewels to an even safer haven........ (Client: the Royal Family brokered by a senior police official.)

2. A Disaster Team for bombed areas of London-desperate to find people after the bombings under buildings etc. are asked to find a cellar where rare wine is stored.................(Client: a hotelier who prides himself with the honour of serving Winston Churchill in his restaurant ‘The Four Quartets’.)

3. A Demolition Team are commissioned to make safe a destroyed building site-with the added problem of rat infestations. (Client: The War Office through the Home Guard.)

4. Animal Conservers Ltd are called into a War Office emergency planning team to take account of the bombing raids over Regents Park and London Zoo. The commission is to safe guard any animals in the vicinity.......... (Client: the Governing Board of the London Zoo.)

5. ‘Shelter’ i.e. People who specialise in counselling/finding temporary accommodation/first aid/locating lost people/helping children take care of any pets in the new surroundings. They have been commissioned by the War Office to find lost children after the bombings. (Client: the’ Church of England‘ through the offices of the Bishop of London at Lambeth Palace.)

These were all possible points of view-but the teaching team felt that something more was needed, especially for the boys, who were very demanding and had variety of barriers to their learning! Whilst all five of the frames would have worked—we needed more for the classes concerned. Something secret, something dangerous, something clandestine, something to grip the imagination was needed. Perhaps Resistance Workers in contact with
London through secret codes… would this give us more to grip the class especially boys? We thought so, and we therefore had a plan for the students’ point of view:

- Resistance workers in WW2 with wireless transmitters, worked every day in ordinary jobs, often meeting up in secret, had their own codes and of course HELPED PEOPLE ESCAPE the Nazi occupation.
- Our classes were to be offered the chance to run a ‘resistance cell’ in France in 1940—we therefore needed a big map of a locality in France and materials for the class to make their own small figures and objects to represent their thinking.
- Our clients were planned, British Secret Intelligence, the US Humanitarian Support group, a Jewish organisation needing people hidden and taken out of danger as well as Christian organisations who had similar goals.

The steps needed to be swift and take the class along with the plan—there were several boys who needed to be brought in very rapidly. Our plan was to construct a message as if in chalk on a tree of significance—very hard to decipher without access to a code book aimed at members of the local Resistance organisation to gather secretly to take a commission against Nazis idealology.

The message was simple (if you had the code book):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4.00am- church of St Simeon:</th>
<th>Authenticated by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task:</strong> derail mid-day train-free Jewish POW.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transport to port.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All cell to be involved.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Code name:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We decided to leave the code name and the authentication issues to be discussed-out of the fiction- at the secret get-together. The teacher took 2 points of view (11).

1. A Catholic priest VERY WORRIED about what the Vatican would say.

2. The coordinator of the resistance cell who had serious concerns about keeping the whole project secret.

As a class-we would try to work out the secret writing on trees as used by resistance people to call a secret gathering in the church crypt of St Simeon..........and then take the drama for learning step using our drama minds to ‘be there’ in the now of time. We also used an exploration of ‘key moments of significance’ using drama conventions.

This lesson worked better than we expected and carried the curriculum we needed and more. One memorable event was an investigation into how to stop the train in the fiction without killing those we wanted to save. There was much discussion about the need for very high explosives to blow off the train’s wheels. After several trials, we decided the best solution was to risk the lives of two of the resistance people, a man and his young daughter, who were to walk down the track as the train approached that would of course stop…………….or perhaps not?

By using several of the Conventions to explore the moment further- it transpired that the driver was a French national forced to do the job of driving the train for the Nazi occupiers, who would in these circumstances stop the train before killing his own people and a child especially.

Could drama teachers in secondary schools support mantle of the expert and transform experiences for students across the curriculum as well as in studios?

In a nutshell-if drama teachers in the UK could accept that the strategy of Mantle of the Expert has ‘grown up’ into a bigger innovatory curriculum concept, then the struggle to
ensure drama in the experiences of young people would be assured. Drama for learning will still be alive and kicking as long as drama people teach other teacher colleagues how it works. This in turn, will stop the worry about the ‘watering’ down of drama practice in the hands of the currently unskilled.

Drama people have some of the most advanced pedagogy in the profession and in my view need to be proud of its possible new role in curriculum transformation as it has been hard won by past and present giants in the field such as Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Edward Bond, Cecily O’Neil, Liz Johnson, Dr John Fines, Dr Ken Robinson, Warwick Dobson, Jonathon Neelands, Eileen Pennington Stig Ericson, Dr Brian Edmiston, John Carroll, Ken Byron, Chris Lawrence, Ian Yeoman to name but a few.

_Luke Abbott December 2013_

References:

1. See Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote’s book Drama as a Learning Medium.

2. Where teachers use MoE, Ofsted have judged EVERY experience so far recorded by the MoE community, as either “very good” or “outstanding”.

3. MoE.com is working with the QCA currently to co-develop the Primary and Secondary NC with a team of sample schools from all phases reported at a conference in London November 2008.

4. There is a myth that in MoE ‘presentations’ are somehow to be avoided—however many MoE structures have often been created as a major event to audiences other than the class itself.

5. Dorothy Heathcote and Eileen Pennington have made a DVD with Newcastle University called ‘Unlocking the Curriculum Cage’ which goes a long way to explain the 7 dimensions of the system.

6. The 3 circles is a concept of a Venn diagram with Drama for Learning methods, Mantle of the Expert as a System and Enquiry based learning teaching methods interlinked.

7. Dr Brian Edmiston explores the ‘Power to Influence’ concept see [www.mantleoftheexpert.com](http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com) for the full article.

8. This section is an edited version of ‘Harlow What’s in Store?’ available through [www.mantleoftheexpert.com](http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com)

9. It is no secret that young people ‘lost to the system’ are often highly successful with drama practitioners.

10. See ‘Signs and Portents’ Convention 17
11. These 2 ‘points of view’ provided aspects of Dramatic Tension essential in any drama based context. A fuller version for ‘Providing Dramatic Tensions’ can be found on www.mantleoftheexpert.com