# Developing learning partnerships through Mantle of the Expert

## *at NCEA Drama Level 2*

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### KEY POINTS

- Mantle of the Expert supports the positioning of teachers and students together in a learning community, facilitating shared learning.
- The framing of teacher in role and student in role as members of a professional company helps to develop creative and collaborative skills.
- Student voice and student autonomy are empowered through collective, reflective thinking and action.

Shared learning underpins learning communities and partnerships. This article draws on case study data generated from shared perceptions of the use of inquiry pedagogy, Mantle of the Expert, applied to a drama-devising process at NCEA Level 2. Students, teacher, and researcher were positioned together as members of THEATRON, a fictional professional theatre company commissioned to develop original, devised drama for festival audiences. Reflective discourse observed while the company was working in role is seen to have had a positive effect on the development of effective collaboration between teacher and learners.

## Introduction

The purpose of the study described in this article was to explore how the use of a dramatic inquiry-based pedagogy—Mantle of the Expert (MOTE)—might support and encourage effective student collaboration in a creative devising task for NCEA Drama Level 2. MOTE is an ethical dramatic inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Fraser, Aitken & Whyte, 2013). Its structure refers to the positioning of students and teacher in role together within a fictional enterprise, or company, where developing knowledge and expertise underpins the carrying out of tasks, or commissions, accepted from a fictional client. The task, or commission, in MOTE is constructed from the learning objectives identified in the curriculum. The students are required to undertake these tasks, as if professionals, for the fictional client. Teachers can adopt a variety of roles within and outside the company, but most frequently adopt positions of equal status so that they are not perceived as the only "expert" in the room.

Findings from the study indicated that some aspects of the Mantle of the Expert frame provided rich opportunities for the development of purposeful creative collaboration and increased autonomy among student groups. The positioning of the teacher in role, however, also supported a shift away from what Souto-Manning and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010) call a "solution-oriented approach" (p. 16) towards a "paradigm that frames differences in terms of resources and strengths that can be built upon" (p. 18). This paradigm resonates with notions of dialogic pedagogy, informed by the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) where dialogue is understood as an exchange of ideas which are actually lived rather than abstracted and are "full of personal values and judgements" signifying "different sides of the same idea" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 3). Literature indicates that dialogic practice embraces and encourages diversity of voices and thinking. Freire (1998) suggested that dialogic pedagogy blurred the distinction between teacher and learner, positioning learners in a reciprocal relationship with teachers.

The article suggests that the dialogic aspects of MOTE could be useful to teachers and their students as they build capacity in consideration of "multiple paths to diverse solutions" (Souto-Manning & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010, p. 18) for culturally, technologically, and linguistically complex classrooms of the 21st century.

## Background

Some 70 years ago, John Dewey (1938) identified significant separation between teacher and student. "The gulf between the mature or adult products and the experience and abilities of the young is so wide that the very situation forbids much active participation by pupils in the development of what is taught" (p. 20). In 2007, *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) listed a range of teacher actions to promote effective student learning. A key action for teachers is to facilitate shared learning communities where "everyone, including the teacher, is a learner; learning conversations and learning partnerships are encouraged; and challenge, support and feedback are always available" (p. 34).

The study described in this article developed from my own experiences as a drama teacher and a need to explore ways to move from directing student work in drama, to facilitating and encouraging

student autonomy and collective responsibility in the completion of original creative work. I was concerned that I was becoming a kind of drama "banker" in which my teaching resembled "an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 1993, p. 72). Recent postgraduate study had included a paper on MOTE and I was interested in the ways that this pedagogy appeared to support exploration of a different student–teacher discourse, notably in the primary school context. I wondered if MOTE could help support both teacher and student in the NCEA Level 2 Drama Achievement Standard: *Devise and perform drama to realise an intention* (NZQA, 2011). I was particularly interested in identifying opportunities in which learning conversations might be structured to be *teacher inclusive* rather than *teacher driven* in the process.

I have always felt challenged as a practitioner in the process of devising drama. It is hard for passionate, creative teachers who may be experienced directors too, to step back and refrain from imposing ideas and structures for the drama on the students. After all, we tend to think we know what "works" best. The devising standard is about creating an original drama which

> requires active participation in the creative process by all members of the group involving the capacity to discuss, experiment with, explore and reject dramatic elements and conventions, select and reject material, shape, structure and sequence through a process of refinement. (NZQA, 2011)

Critical reflection of the material and product is integral to the devising process and undertaken as a group, not as an individual member of the group. Alignment of this devising standard in 2011 resulted in a shift in assessment focus. Before alignment, the emphasis was placed on *individual* student contribution to both the devising and the performance of the drama to achieve the standard. Now it is the final performance itself—*the product*—which is the focus of achievement, assuming effective drama must emerge from effective collaboration. This shift demands reconsideration of the facilitation of collaborative work, not only for drama teachers but for any teacher inquiry exploring how to best support effective student collaboration, particularly in the "high stakes" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 41) context of achievement at NCEA.

I hoped my inquiry would provide some useful data to help me discover how best to reposition myself, as a drama teacher, in this process so that I could support students to function effectively in a creative team. I decided to base the inquiry in a school and classroom I was not familiar with to minimise any preconceptions of how students might collaborate.

## Inquiry design

The research design was predominantly qualitative with a focus on the experiences of the participants throughout the devising process and production. An important feature of this project was that the teacher and I positioned ourselves in role with the students in the same fictional company. The study was conducted in a decile 6 North Island coeducational secondary college with a roll of 1,216 students. The study involved students, their teacher, and myself in two parallel Year 12 drama classes—Class X with 23 students and Class Y with 18 students—concurrently undertaking the devising standard. The majority of the drama students were familiar with working in a MOTE frame, having explored a unit of work in Year 10 with the same teacher in role as detectives. In addition, students in the Year 12 drama classes explored Greek theatre form (previous standard) with their teacher in role as academic researchers, working for a fictional client in the health sector. I gathered data for this study through my observations of teacher planning sessions and student devising processes recorded in a field journal. I made a voice memo of my own in-role participation as researcher, and of interviews with the class teacher and the devising groups. Data were also gathered from drama intention notes and conceptual ideas for the devising documented by the student groups, and audience feedback sheets from the performances.

### The task: Create original drama which captures the essence of what it means to be human

The teacher and I needed to establish quickly some sense of history and success with the fictional company we would be creating. This process would normally take

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We designed the first lesson as an opportunity for the students and ourselves to role play the celebration of our recent successful tour as THEATRON, a professional theatre company. We chose this name as it made reference to prior learning in the study of Greek Theatre. THEATRON means "the seeing place"; several students had noticed the link between the physical space in this definition and its perceptual interpretation.

some time in a junior secondary MOTE but the NCEA programme placed time constraints on us and we wanted to focus primarily on the curriculum task of devising, so it was important for us to get into the authentic, creative task as soon as possible.

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We agreed that we were definitely up for the challenge but we would have to identify where we needed to develop skills in terms of the devising process. Melissa[1] asked us to provide urgently some ideas for short pieces based on the theme she had chosen for *playGround* 2012. This theme was "What does it mean to be human?" Melissa also "sent" the commission, which was adapted from a TKI NCEA Level 2 task sheet. After accepting the commission, we identified the learning and skill development we would need to undertake, and subsequent lessons were developed as skill-based workshops, often initiated or led by students themselves.

## What did we find?

The company THEATRON was perceived to be generally helpful in supporting the students to feel that the work was real and purposeful. Students reported that engagement with the commission provided a means for them to feel they were working collaboratively towards a drama performance which was not simply about credits but had meaning in the professional world. The dialogue used in a range of contexts referenced both the "voices" being heard in the process and the "voices" giving intention in the content of the drama to the audience and the client.

Working in a different frame—that is, THEATRON—and working on what was written as a "commission" rather than a Level 2 task document, seemed to empower some students:

> I think it helped—personally gave me a different outlook on it. It means we're not—I think it gave us more confidence because we're not stressing about NCEA we're just worrying about getting the job done.
>
> And having fun with it as well.
>
> It wasn't like how say we had to sit a test in class and it was dead silent—we could work on it, discuss it with other groups, perform it and then move into another scene, and get it more polished.

When I asked students during the group interviews if the NCEA task felt purposeful and real when presented in the form of a commission, students commented:

> It did. It felt like well we can do this. And we have the time and skill to do this but—we can do it even better. We recorded it the first time so we knew where we had to change things.
>
> Melissa asks us for updates all the time and we talk about them—that helps keep us going.

> I really understood what she (the client, Melissa) wanted—it was like I knew how it was to try to get someone to do a good professional job for you.
>
> Really helped yeah to make it seem professional.

Student group interviews provided further evidence of enjoyment working as a class together. Their positioning as professional performers (THEATRON) over several sessions is described as follows:

> A great opportunity to work together as a whole group—a class. We don't always get that chance.
>
> As a class we have bonded so much more by all being together in the beginning in the company
>
> It kinda brought us together more.
>
> Helped me focus—the company meetings.
>
> Doing all the planning in the beginning as a company—that helped

Multiple data sources revealed that the teacher's, the students' and my own perceptions of working together as a fictional professional company were seen as a positive way of enhancing collaboration, or relating to others "interacting effectively" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12).

Teacher comments indicate a shift in perception regarding student engagement with, and management of, the creative process without teacher direction.

> I do feel like they are taking a really mature attitude towards it—like I don't have one group that isn't fully on task now—every member of the group including students (X) and (XX), and I'm sure some of it is because of the nature of the class in the first place but I'm also sure that some of it is, even though they're not actually[2] doing it in role, they have assumed the mantle of that role and they're taking a more adult attitude towards it.
>
> I have come late to both classes, one yesterday and one today with school matters to attend to—and they had already done the warm up—bang—in their groups, done, gone. So even if it's not in role, per se, having that role has given them the um "oh shall we start"—instead of "shall we ask Miss before we start?" attitude.

Data gathered at the end of the process, during the final interview with the teacher, reveals that the teacher was aware of the importance being ascribed to the content chosen by the students for their devised pieces. The teacher noted that many of the groups were tackling content which made a connection with their own lives:

> The really good work comes out of what they [the students] believe to be a connection—are interested in.

An entry in my field journal indicated that one student engaged personally with the essence of the devised work beyond the classroom and into the world of complex domestic issues.

> There is growing evidence of students questioning the depth of their devised pieces. They do so by engaging peers in feedback and feed forward. (X) sees the emotional content and empathises with scene mother's situation which is that she cannot speak to defend her daughter for fear of reprisal from the father. Peer (X) from another group watches the scene and says "It looks like you are trying to get some strength from somewhere to say something to your dad but you are very afraid. It's really powerful what you are showing as we'd normally rely on the other parent to save us—but it's like (X—scene daughter's sister) is trying to protect you". Scene mother (X) replies, out of role, to the peer, "I was talking about this to my mum yesterday. Trying to back her up. Back our mum up". There is a kind of knowing moment—it's not questioned. I can see some of these students really feel what their peers might be experiencing.

The teacher had shared with me some of the personal challenges individual students were facing. From concerns about body image, difficult domestic situations, bullying, and dealing with the effects of reckless driving, students highlighted their world views through the content and artistic decision making of their devised work. The work ultimately had a powerful effect on peer audiences when performed. Comments were made which suggested the work depicted an authentic representation of what it means to be human. This student-driven content reflected a key dialogic aspect of the work.

## Student-driven content

Conscious of her students' developing interest in their own identity and the human condition, the teacher felt it was important to plan for the NCEA devising task to allow for student-driven selection of content. In this context, the teacher facilitates through the Mantle of the Expert a capacity to incorporate issues which are real and have resonance with their life experiences. Students reported that they did not feel they were limited to exploration of material which reflected the teacher's chosen fiction or perception of reality.

Several instances of students expressing a desire to share their work with audiences outside the drama groups were identified.

> I think our drama needs to be shown to our year level. A lot of them would recognise it and get it as it really happens. It still is happening to some people.
>
> I think we should really go and do our plays to another audience—I think we have some ideas that connect.

Some students expressed disappointment that the MOTE framing of *playGround 2012* was fictional. Several students said that they would have liked to really take their pieces on tour to an arts festival.

Table 1 below provides a snapshot of the content chosen.

TABLE 1. STUDENTS' CHOICES OF MATERIAL FOR DEVISED DRAMA

| Class | Content /exploration of essence of what it means to be human. |
|---|---|
| **Class X** | |
| Group 1 | Family relationships. A fatal accident in which the family consider how they are responsible for one another and how they might have been able to prevent the accident. There is expression of deep grief and regret. |
| Group 2 | Body image. Learning to love the image in the mirror. The piece is structured in a highly stylised and symbolic way but deals with real experiences and emotions. |
| Group 3 | A fatal accident. Negligence and social responsibility are explored through a piece which uses symbolism and space to communicate narrative. |
| Group 4 | A wedding. Jealousy gets the better of the jilted girlfriend and the bride is murdered along with the wedding party. The piece is melodramatic but well crafted. |
| **Class Y** | |
| Group 1 | Body image. Success and inclusion dependent on the way you look. An exploration of how far we go to alter ourselves to fit in. Highly stylised. |
| Group 2 | Teenage pregnancy. The lack of communication between the teenaged father and the teenaged mother. |
| Group 3 | Patriarchal violence—a mother unable to defend her daughter's need to express her sexual identity. |
| Group 4 | The exploration of bullying based on hair colour. This piece was not completed. |

Group 4 in Class X and Group 4 in Class Y did not base their devised pieces on their own experiences. In both cases, these pieces were reproductions or adaptations of other material from film or television. Both of these groups required more support to sustain their commitment to the task than the Groups 1–3. Life issues, which in some cases were experienced by students themselves, were explored in Groups 1–3, and the levels of engagement and autonomy in these groups were significantly higher. The work of Groups 1–3 in both classes was structured and framed using dramatic metaphor and symbol, clearly evidencing critical thinking. These dramatic pieces achieved at the level of Merit and Excellence.

The study provided opportunities for a range of voices to be heard, to be used and to be included. This included the digital and electronic "word" as well as authentic voice in emails, voice mails, social media, and video captioning. Many of these voices were vocalised within a dramatic role but were also used in real conversations between teachers and students. Some of the more inspiring conversations we had with the students were those where robust critical thinking had informed their opinions and reflections. Student ownership and autonomy could be clearly seen in the following example. One student group declined to perform their work in an assembly to their peers after actively asking senior leadership for time to share it. Senior leadership had watched a rehearsal of the piece to check its appropriacy and asked the students to change the way one of the characters was depicted. This character was depicted as a successful student, popular with peers—and a bully. The role was symbolically represented as a doll. Senior leadership asked that the bullying behaviour be removed. The group respectfully pulled out of performance. The collective feeling was that the work they had created was real, purposeful, and critically challenging but necessary as a commentary on social justice and inclusion. If a key aspect had to be changed to meet the perceptions and preconceptions of an adult audience with different experiences, then it would lose its artistic integrity. The piece ultimately was moderated at excellence at Level 2.

The teacher and I knew nothing of this situation. The teacher ackowledged the students' autonomy, depth of thinking, and their principled and responsible management of this situation in our final interview.

> I don't think it's about credits anymore. No one has asked me what their piece will achieve. What it's about now is the power in their collective voice—that's become important—really important—really saying something.

As Aitken (in Fraser, Aitken, & Whyte, 2013) notes from recent research carried out in New Zealand, Mantle of the Expert is a complex system which seems "to encourage shifts within the traditional classroom attitudes to teaching, learning and the curriculum" (p. 54). Deeper understandings of this complexity and its signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) could be gained by further research into the use of Mantle of the Expert where engagement through authentic experiential learning is acknowledged to be an important aspect of effective pedagogy. Current research into the Commission Model, based on the MOTE approach but actually following process through to an actual product, is proving to have relevant application in senior secondary programmes (see the "Three Days in Ankara" project in Coventon, 2011).

The dialogic teacher–student relationship in Mantle of the Expert could provide a fertile rehearsal context for real-life collaborative approaches in a range of learning areas by situating curriculum tasks in authentic commissions to be carried out by those in role as professionals with ethical and moral accountability to fictional clients.

## Notes

1 These requests were designed by the teacher and myself and were consistent with the nature of the tasks in the standard. We made use of blended e-learning strategies to communicate with Melissa.
2 The students would perform as Level 2 students for the final performance.

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## Websites: Mantle of the Expert

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