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The ‘Mantle Underground’ 2009-2015

*A case study in ground-up university-school partnership.*

Introduction

Since 2009 the author, a university lecturer, has worked with a number of teachers from around New Zealand (mostly from primary but some from early childhood, intermediate, secondary, tertiary and community contexts) to develop a distinct informal teaching and learning community – nicknamed by some of its own members, the ‘Mantle Underground’. The goal of this ground-up partnership has been to provide ongoing professional development and support for teachers interested in the drama-based teaching approach, Mantle-of-the-Expert (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Aitken, 2013). In the last six years the group has convened an international conference, established a website, run a series of professional development workshops and instigated informal ‘cluster group’ meetings in a number of schools. These endeavours have involved significant sponsorship from the author’s employer, the University of Waikato, as well as goodwill and support from schools. The partnership has carried risks for the University and school partners but has ultimately resulted in benefits for both, including increased enrolments in postgraduate study, new opportunities for initial teacher education and authentic research collaborations. After telling the story of the Mantle Underground, with input from some of those who participate in it, this chapter will attempt to identify the features of this partnership model and assess it against the criteria for effective University–School partnerships offered by Ruddock (1995). As well as being a chance to identify and reflect on this longstanding partnership, the chapter is also an opportunity to look forward at new possibilities. For, at the time of writing, while teachers continue to use the approach in their classrooms, and continue to meet informally in cluster meetings, there are changes afoot. The author has left her University position and in some ways the Mantle Underground in its current form has gone into recess. It is timely, therefore, to ask what future possibilities might be found to continue to support teachers to learn about Mantle-of-the-Expert in the current social and political climate.

Mantle-of-the-Expert: a brief description

Before outlining the activities of the Mantle Underground, we describe the pedagogy that inspired it: the teaching approach known as Mantle-of-the-Expert. For a fuller description refer to *Drama for Learning* (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) or *Connecting Curriculum, Connecting Curriculum* (Fraser, Aitken & Whyte, 2013). In brief, Mantle-of-the-Expert is a cross curricula teaching approach designed for teaching over sustained periods rather than in discrete curriculum areas or within traditional lessons. A full-blown Mantle-of-the-Expert experience will last days, weeks, a term or even longer. It combines the features of inquiry learning with the strategies and conventions of drama, and as such it is sometimes referred to as ‘dramatic inquiry’ (Edmiston, 2014).  In Mantle-of-the-Expert, teachers and students use their imaginations to move in and out of role to explore multiple perspectives. As part of this, they take on the position of experts in a fictional company, enterprise or responsible team. From this position, children are commissioned to undertake an important job for an important client. The company, commission and the client are fictional: selected by the teacher to lead to meaningful engagement with curriculum learning areas. Dramatic tensions, either naturally arising or planned by the teacher, lead to further opportunities for engagement with curriculum. As well as these core infrastructure elements, Mantle-of-the-Expert is sustained by key pedagogical principles including valuing process over product, an emphasis on active learning, positioning the learner as ‘competent’, valuing co-construction, seeing the learning process as messy, long term and socially constructed and a continual reflection on the ethical implications of human actions (Heathcote & Bolton 2009; Aitken, 2013).

For a teacher in New Zealand, the decision to include Mantle of the Expert pedagogy may not be an easy one. For one thing, the approach is complex and takes dedicated practice. In particular, the dramatic, creative elements may be challenging. But it has great appeal for those who value its creative, dialogic aspects and welcome the opportunity to engage learners and encourage multiple perspectives. “For me, it’s a very important thing: it’s the empathy – you don’t get that in any other form of inquiry” (JM – interview with author). Even then, it is not a straightforward choice for teachers. As Berg asserts, “the basic condition of professionalization is that it must be sanctioned by the environment in which it is carried on.” (Berg, 1989, p.81). Some teachers report a struggle to justify the use of the pedagogy, citing the pressures of an overcrowded curriculum and a perceived emphasis on reporting and raising learner achievement in the ‘core’ areas of reading, writing and mathematics as assessed in the National Standards (Ministry of Education, n.d.,a). Mantle of the Expert is celebrated as an ‘effective pedagogy’ on the Ministry of Education’s website (Ministry of Education, n.d.,b) which also emphasises that literacy and maths should not be taught in isolation but across learning areas (Ministry of Education, n.d.,c). Moreover, the approach has been shown to support learning, including in reading writing, science and maths, in a meaningful and engaging way (Fletcher, 2012; Swanson, 2015; McGregor, Anderson, Baskerville & Gain, 2014). Nonetheless, it can feel like a risk for teachers to commit the extended periods of time required to learn and implement this kind of teaching. In light of this, teachers with a commitment to using the pedagogy, such as this young beginning teacher, find a community of practice such as the ‘Mantle Underground’ provides an important support: “It's really important for me to include Mantle-of-the-Expert and its participants in my community of practice. As a beginning teacher, I wanted to be in on something good from the start in my teaching career (pedagogically speaking). Mantle is alive and kicking and I need a finger on the pulse if I want to teach with difference!”  (SS, personal communication - email to author).

Activities of the Underground – bottom up partnership

The initiative for the ‘Mantle Underground’ began with the first international conference in Mantle-of-the-Expert, *Weaving our Stories* *2009*. This event, convened by the author and hosted at significant financial cost, by the University of Waikato, coincided with the first offering of a Masters paper in in Mantle-of-the-Expert at Waikato (Battye, 2010). It featured international presenters including a live link with the progenitor of Mantle-of-the-Expert, Prof Dorothy Heathcote (1926-2011). The one hundred or so New Zealand teachers who attended the conference identified a desire to stay connected with the approach and with like-minded individuals. It was at this point that the nickname of the ‘Underground’ was adopted – using a metaphor from UK practitioner Luke Abbott in his keynote address (Abbott, 2009).

Initially it was hoped that clusters of teachers would form in different centres around the country. Following the conference, meetings were held in Christchurch, Auckland, Wellington and Waikato where approximately seventy people discussed the form of support and networking that they felt would work best for them, then fed back to each other through a combined skype meeting. A decision was made to avoid committee structure or incorporated society status as teachers felt they did not need another set of obligations and accountabilities. Instead, the idea was mooted for cluster groups in each region to be headed by someone with experience of working in the approach.

Another decision made at an early stage was that the community needed a website to serve as a sister site to the UK-based site and to provide a repository for information and discussion between teachers, while reflecting the distinctiveness of the cultural setting in New Zealand. A site was opened in 2010 with design, hosting and technical support provided by the University of Waikato and continues today (Mantle of the Expert Aotearoa, n.d.). With the growth of new social media options, Facebook has been also been utilised, with a public page and a closed group for sharing information about meetings, photographs, lesson ideas, questions and planning resources. For a time Skype was used to hold meetings for secondary specialist teachers spread out across the country. However, while some good discussions were held in this format, technical issues and some difficulty getting people to commit to the meetings saw the skype network die away.

After initial interest, it became clear that the sustaining of regional cluster meetings relied on the presence of someone with expertise in Mantle-of-the-Expert and the energies to co-ordinate the event. Cluster groups in Hamilton and Tauranga have been the most long-lasting, partly for these reasons, and also because their numbers have been ‘refreshed’ by new students emerging from courses in Mantle-of-the-Expert on the University of Waikato’s two campuses.

The format and content of cluster meetings varies but generally they involve an introductory discussion in which teachers share their experiences in Mantle-of-the-Expert since the last meeting, followed by a focussed professional development opportunity such as the viewing of a video, or collaborative planning opportunity. Sometimes an experienced practitioner runs a session on some aspect of their practice, such as drama conventions, ideas for hooking students in or questioning skills. Whatever the particular focus, sessions are generally a combination of whole group discussion and practical tasks carried out in pairs or small groups. Usually there is at least one practical drama activity included.

On reflection, a feature of the cluster meetings and, perhaps, a reason for their success is that they manifest the philosophies underpinning Mantle-of-the-Expert itself. As mentioned earlier, key pedagogical values of Mantle-of-the-Expert include: valuing process over product, an emphasis on active learning, positioning the learner as ‘competent’, valuing co-construction, seeing the learning process as messy, long term and socially constructed and a continual reflection on the ethical implications of human actions (Heathcote & Bolton, 2009; Aitken, 2013) and it is possible to see all these values at work in the way cluster meetings operate. This alignment of the pedagogy within cluster groups and the overarching Mantle-of-the-Expert pedagogy was not conscious, but arose from participants enacting their beliefs about what ‘works’ and what ‘matters’  in teaching. Lakoff and Johnson have suggested that we all operate or ‘live by’ certain metaphors that inform our discourse, relationships and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The form and content of cluster groups evolved and developed as a lived expression of the metaphors of Mantle-of-the-Expert within the social, cultural and geographic context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Sustaining the Underground – funding.

Up to now, everyone in the Underground has contributed as a volunteer. This lends a particular quality to the partnership as it’s clear everyone is involved for the good of the profession rather than personal gain. Having said this, of course, there are always costs and overheads involved in a network and the Underground has depended on ‘in kind’ support from a number of sources. Between 2009 and 2015 the Mantle Underground community received substantial support from the University of Waikato – both directly in its significant sponsorship of the international conference and indirectly through providing space for meetings, technical support for the website and support for the author to visit and work in schools. Schools also supported the partnership by providing space for meetings and in some cases, making opportunities for teachers from other schools to visit classrooms. One particular school played a significant role in supporting student teachers to learn about the approach. This is discussed below. While this school was a ‘Normal’ school and therefore in receipt of funding, their provision of space for Mantle-of-the-Expert classes went above and beyond these requirements. In 2013 the Waikato cluster group received a small amount of network funding from the Ministry of Education and used this to offer a full-day professional development session at a local school. The funding was used to pay teachers’ release time, transport costs and food. Organisers and providers of the professional development were not remunerated.

Another form of support enjoyed by the Mantle Underground has been a close alignment with Drama New Zealand, the professional subject society for Drama Education in New Zealand. In 2013, members of the Mantle ‘Underground’ partnered with this society to host their annual teachers’ conference and provided a dedicated ‘stream’ of presentations and workshops related to dramatic inquiry, including Mantle-of-the-Expert. This allowed a number of the teachers from the Underground to present on their work.

Risks and Benefits of the partnership for school and University

The Mantle underground with its professional development workshops, website and cluster meetings has fostered reciprocal relationships between schools and the University, with risks and benefits to both.

For the University, the hosting of the 2009 conference and the ongoing costs of sponsoring the activities of the author represented a significant financial risk. The institution had to wait several years before the direct benefits of sponsoring the Mantle Underground became obvious. Over time, however, the University has benefitted from postgraduate enrolments from teachers undertaking further university study as a direct result of the conference, workshops and cluster meetings. Of the twenty eight students enrolled in the Masters summer school in 2014, the majority had either been active members of a local cluster group or had been inspired by a visit to their schools and most said they had not have considered postgraduate study before (personal communication to author). To date, two students from the 2009 Masters course have gone on to conduct their Masters and PhD research into Mantle-of-the-Expert (Swanson, 2015; Stoate, 2013), with others from other intakes intending to do the same in future. As well as providing income for the University, these studies and the resultant publications add significantly to the research base for this under-researched pedagogy (Stoate, 2014).

Schools have carried some risk in being involved in the ‘Mantle Underground’ partnership in terms of time, space and resources. The informal nature of cluster groups has sometimes meant that host schools are unsure about numbers attending meetings, so that on one or two occasions this investment may not have seemed worthwhile. Nonetheless, schools clearly derive benefit from opportunities for professional development and ongoing support for their staff, particularly those who find themselves asked to take leadership within in their schools after completing their studies in Mantle-of-the-Expert. The following comments, all from former students, illustrate how they valued the cluster groups for ongoing support, inspiration and extension:

‘An issue for me is having support myself when I’m considered “the expert” and I’m not’ (anon - workshop survey). ‘I am leading professional development in our school this year, and this term every teacher is trying their first mantle!!!  So far so good…’ (RD – personal communication - email to author). ‘The most valuable way for teachers to support each other is to visit each other – for me especially being the only teacher doing it in my school’  (anon – workshop survey).

A particular kind of partnership arose with one local school, which resulted in reciprocal benefits for both school and university. Over a three year period, the deputy principal of the school (which was very close in proximity to the university) arranged for the author to teach one of her university courses at the school. This involved spending six weeks per year working alongside a classroom teacher to plan, implement and reflect on a Mantle-of-the-Expert programme, with student teachers included in the implementation. Blog accounts of these experiences were published online (Mantle of the Expert Aotearoa (n.d.)).This opportunity provided a potent combination of professional development for the teacher, preservice education for the student teachers, engaging learning for the children and a site for research for the university lecturer. The deputy principal describes the benefits of this arrangement for her school.

Imagine blending a university paper on Mantle-of-the-Expert and actual practice in the classroom using the skills of the lecturer in drama Ed and the student teachers to explore the theory first hand! It was adventure which ignited passion in the teachers, the children and the parents and deep learning based on an issue which was engaging and exciting. It was the beginning of a school wide exploration in "Mantle", gifting kids the power and the opportunity to take control of learning in authentic way … To  
say that it was a success is an understatement. (GG – personal communication - email to author).

Another ongoing benefit to both university and schools was the opening up of spaces for research within schools by university academics. At the time of the 2009 conference, academics from the University of Waikato including the author were formulating a TLRI funded research project exploring arts-based integration in local schools (TLRI –Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, 2012) . All seven participating teachers attended the conference and five decided they would experiment with Mantle-of-the-Expert for the research. Thus Mantle-of-the-Expert became a key focus for this project. This in turn led to publication of a book presenting case studies of Mantle-of-the-Expert and other approaches used in the project (Fraser et. al, 2013). This reciprocal relationship between university and schools has continued, with teachers from the project continuing to work together on research projects, co-authoring written work and co-presenting at conferences.

Overall, while the partners, particularly the University, encountered some risks in this partnership the long term reciprocal benefits have been most worthwhile.

The partnership model.

The Mantle Underground is about strong partnerships based on authentic relationships and sustained interaction to foster meaningful outcomes. This chapter concludes with a series of lists, proposed as a model. The first shows the features of the partnership as manifested in the Mantle Underground. The second gives the outcomes of this partnership and the third identifies the attributes of professional development activities. While the Mantle Underground was a specific response to a particular set of circumstances, some if not all of these features might be replicated in another situation.

Features of this partnership

* Genuine relationships based on a shared passion
* Authentic purposeful opportunities for academics to visit schools and for teachers to visit universities
* Teachers becoming postgraduate researchers - contributing to research in the field
* University becoming associated with the approach – offering courses as a point of distinctiveness
* University and school sponsorship of professional development opportunities – both direct (e.g. conference) and indirect (e.g. providing spaces for meetings)
* Long term payoff for investment

Outcomes of this partnership for schools and University

* Increased enrolments from teachers enrolling in study
* Teacher resources published online
* Increased use of blogging
* Sites for research opened up in schools
* Research outputs including co-authored papers, books and conference presentations
* New sites for practice-based initial teacher education

Attributes of Professional development activities within this partnership

* Responsive approach – accepting invitations rather than pushing for opportunities
* Walking the talk – matching the values of the thing being espoused with practices in the professional development groups
* Authentic, genuine relationships between very committed people working in a volunteer capacity
* Culturally familiar principles – (‘give it a go’ mentality, manaakitanga, bring a plate, korero).
* Low key structure: No formal structure, no committee, no meetings, no RSVPs – just setting the next date and focus.
* Rotations of meetings between schools - sharing hosting, sharing costs
* Mix of informal and formal professional development / research dissemination including alignment with subject society conferences as appropriate.
* Promotion of university courses as opportunities to gain formal qualifications in the approach (but no requirement to attend these).
* Use of website and social media to disseminate information, provide central information hub, collection for teacher blogs, Active subscription rather than email lists.
* No hierarchy of experience – all contributions treated as equally valid - with regular links back to literature and theory to ensure rigour
* Encouraging teachers to celebrate the struggles and mistakes rather than striving for excellence.
* Fostering naturally arising opportunities for synergies between schools and universities - opening spaces for research, PD and Initial Teacher Education.

It is important to note that this approach to partnership and community has developed from the ground up, rather than being conceived as a model and then implemented. Nevertheless, it does comprise a model and as such it may be worth considering how it compares with other models of professional development and partnership in the field.

The Mantle Underground would seem to have some similarities in function to a subject society or professional association, in that it provides a space for development of existing practices and a space for “theorizing change”, through “endorsing local innovations and shaping their diffusion” (Greenwood, 2002. p.58). The voluntary nature of the group and its reliance on a few committed volunteers does make the Mantle Underground similar to a subject society such as Drama New Zealand (with whom the Underground has worked closely). However, rather than being organised around a specific curriculum area such as Maths, Drama or Sciences – a structure that works well for secondary teachers – the Mantle Underground is trans-disciplinary. It was formed by a shared interest in a particular pedagogy and its philosophical underpinnings. In this way it meets the needs of primary generalist teachers in particular. Another crucial difference is the conscious decision to avoid institutional status or accountability structures. As such the model is closer to that of an informal interest group, similar to the Tauranga Curriculum Integration group mentioned earlier, or the various principals’ groups that meet informally around the regions of New Zealand. Such groups depend entirely on the energies of the people who run them, with the risk that once the dedicated people move on the model may be hard to sustain. This is something that the Mantle Underground is currently grappling with.

The model of partnership represented by the Mantle Underground can be assessed against the outcomes for effective school-university partnerships in professional development as offered by Rudduck and Hargreaves (1995). They claim that ‘the coherence and usefulness of such partnerships’ depend on the following:

1. the readiness of the partners to give up their traditional mythologies about each other, and learn survival.
2. building a shared commitment to well-judged change, to exploring alternatives and to pushing back the limits of possibility in learning.
3. building a shared commitment to clarifying principles and purposes, and to understanding the social and political contexts in which those purposes and principles are set to work.
4. accepting a shared perception of teaching as one of the ‘impossible professions’ – impossible because it has ideas which admit no easy realisation.
5. recognising that the pace of worthwhile change – change that achieves new cultural coherence and significance – is slow and that ways have to be found of keeping up the momentum.

(Ruddick, 1995. p.207)

These criteria provide a lens to examine the ‘coherence and usefulness’ of the Mantle Underground. On point 1, The Mantle Underground certainly encourages genuine, respectful relationships and collaborations between school teachers and academics, so that any ‘traditional mythologies’ have been reduced, if indeed they ever existed. The shared commitment to change and exploration identified in point 2 is evidenced by the relative longevity of the learning community. Point 3 throws up an interesting challenge: Given the shifting social and political context, the Mantle Underground Community needs to clarify its principles and purposes and perhaps completely change its structure if the long term goal of sustaining professional development in Mantle-of-the-Expert is to be achieved. Point 4 is something embedded in the pedagogic principles of the Mantle-of-the-Expert approach, which sees teaching as complex and never to be ‘perfected’. As for point 5, the slow pace of worthwhile change and the need to sustain momentum is a reality of which the group is very much aware. Ruddick’s five criteria provide both a useful tool for review and a possible starting point for negotiations on possible ways forward.

Where to next: Changes and possibilities

At the time of writing, the Mantle Underground is going through a time of transition. Several years on, the website (now taken over as a private concern by the author) is due for an overhaul. The author has left the University and moved to another part of New Zealand, though she continues to hold an honorary position as Research Associate at the University. The University itself is moving into restructuring, with associated uncertainty about ongoing staffing and courses. And, after an initial effort to sustain them, the cluster groups have subsided somewhat. Teachers are still engaging in Mantle of the Expert teaching in their classes and courses are still being provided at Waikato University but the particular interplay of circumstances that allowed for the Mantle Underground to thrive are no longer present. So it is time to consider new opportunities. Teachers are realistic about the risks:

Few teachers are aware of Mantle and even fewer have the time to attend cluster meetings let alone commit to learning how to Mantle - this in turn means that there are few 'experts' around who can drive successful and meaningful cluster meetings - unless coverage can be increased and expertise is proliferated, Cluster meetings will die out. (JJ personal communication – email to author).

In the Bay of Plenty, cluster group members are considering aligning with another informal interest group, the Curriculum Integration group which meets regularly at the University of Waikato’s Tauranga campus. Another proposal is to consider technological solutions. The Underground has tools available today that were not imagined six years ago: “An option could be for the ‘experts’ (who cannot physically cover the whole country) to hold termly webinars or similar where attendees can log in and contribute to the discussion - or even have all cluster groups meet on the same day with webinar access for each group - have a 45 min session with the expert and then let each group do their own thing” (JJ personal communication – email to author). There are many possibilities. In the short term, plans are underway for a Mantle-of-the-Expert symposium, sponsored by a local school to be held in Hamilton in 2016. This will be an opportunity for members of the ‘Underground’ to re-gather, reassess and discuss how their ongoing goals can be realised.

Another key question for the community is how to align with the Ministry of Education’s current *Investing in Educational* Success (IES) initiative. In this model, ‘expert’ teachers are identified and paid to provide formal and targeted support and professional development for colleagues in other schools (Ministry of Education, 2014). On the face of it, the IES initiative may seem to eliminate the need for informal, self-selecting groupings of teachers like the Mantle Underground. However, it is difficult to imagine how workshops offered under the IES initiative could effectively convey the complexity and, artistry of teaching in Mantle-of-the-Expert and it is uncertain whether networks would be funded for the extended timeframes that the Mantle Underground has sustained. It also remains to be seen to what extent members of the Mantle Underground who entered into the sanctioned networks of the IES initiative would be able to retain the beneficial features of their previous partnership experience: Would the IES allow for the features identified in the model above: informal, non-accountable, non-hierarchical, trans-sector professional development opportunities based on authentic relationships with a culture of celebrating struggle and failure as much as success? There are many unanswered questions and perhaps the most important of all is this: whether the current educational climate makes networks like the Mantle Underground redundant or more important than ever.

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