The Mantle of Macbeth

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Abstract
This article is an account of a ‘Mantle of the Expert’ enquiry in a school in the North of England. Combining GCSE Shakespeare coursework with Speaking and Listening assessments (25% of the total GCSE grade), the English department in the school improved achievement while remaining committed to developing a creative approach to teaching and learning. The article is most concerned, however, with the ‘incidental’ outcomes of the process: the insights offered into the ‘real life’ contexts of the participants, the place of role in research, and the presentation of data in playscript form. It seeks to explore how the researcher can sit within a dramatic process and present its outcomes as authentically as possible, while recognising that narrative accounts, however they are framed, are subjectively presented.

Keywords
Mantle of the Expert, national challenge, Shakespeare, ethnodrama

Context
The school involved in the project had been working with Creative Partnerships1 for two years, but previously only KS3 classes had been involved. In 2009, a last minute decision was made by the headteacher to redirect the funding to support two GCSE English classes. This decision was made without consulting either the artist or the English department.

Within one hour, two groups were selected for this pilot project and in the same short space of time, the artist decided to present to the department an idea to use ‘Mantle of the Expert’ (Heathcote and Bolton 1995) in the hope that it would provide a framework within which pupils could both achieve and engage. The pedagogy would place them in a professional role in which they would have to step away from their own preconceptions in order to explore how adults might attempt to engage the very audiences that they themselves would be – a sort of dramatic double bluff. She suggested that each class

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become a ‘production company’, named ‘Spotlight’ and ‘Staged Right’, with a specific specialism in targeting and engaging youth audiences. As such, the classes would work separately in competition with the other, heightening the tension and raising the stakes. The client was the National Theatre, in particular a demanding commissioning director, Martha Jackson.

Although the school only used three scenes to focus on, the pupils found very quickly that they were floundering in production meetings if they did not have a grasp of the whole play. We found during the course of the sessions, that pupils were beginning to read independently beyond the scenes set in order to be able to justify their artistic decisions – for example in identifying other scenes in which Lady Macbeth’s clothing would gradually change from pink to red to a ‘grubby, stained white’ or referring to the beginning of the play in order to explain why Macbeth’s murder of Duncan is so disturbing.

In the two groups selected, many of the pupils were considered by the teaching staff to be ‘challenging’ and although the groups were nominally of mixed ability, there were high numbers of vocational students in both classes. This meant that there were higher numbers of boys and of pupils in danger of achieving a grade D or below in the GCSE examination. This leads to a disproportionate presentation of data from boys, not simply because there were more of them, but because the impact in terms of results was most dramatic for the boys than for the girls. In addition, the way the boys interacted with and responded to the text was interesting; they were more likely to expose their own lives in their explanations of their ideas, bringing their own experiences to bear on the text. The girls, on the other hand, were more likely to speak of the characters and events as separate from themselves. As such, the title of the article suggests how the play itself, and in particular the character of Macbeth, allowed pupils to use the text as a mantle that served to protect them from accusation or blame and which thereby provoked open insights into the resonances they found between their own lives and that of Macbeth.

The school employed not only an ‘artist’, to work alongside staff in developing the skills required to deliver Mantle of the Expert, but also myself, as a researcher to evaluate and observe its impact. The following is a selection of data, which I have presented throughout in the form of a playscript. This, I feel, is a natural extension to ethnodramas, which Denzin claims offer the potential to become ‘simulacrum, a perfectly miniature and coherent world in its own right’ (Denzin 2001: 25). To do this faithfully, there would be no redress to other academic texts – nothing outside the narrative itself, which stands forward independently to tell its tale. For the benefit of the reader, however, I have added these and other notes in addition to the ‘text’ in which I attempt to interpret the methodology employed. I hope it is an appropriate compromise.
As the work we were doing in the school was so firmly rooted in the belief that Drama would offer a way for young adults to find success within a restrictive curriculum, it seemed appropriate to choose a Dramatic form of interpreting the data. Like Butler and Smith, I believe that all speech is ‘performative’ and therefore that the researcher ought to make the performativity explicit. Giving young adults a choice as to the role they will play and allowing them to explore how a role can shift their perception of self and the perception by others of self is an act of empowerment. As such, the work was constructed in the belief that the roles employed give rights to those participating – through them the young adults raise themselves above their current status, inventing promotions and recognising the lovely, if sad, phenomenon, that their in-role selves are more powerful and able than they feel they can be in ‘real life’. In writing up the work in this form, I hope to apply play to practice; to find ways of telling the story of a group of young people and the adults attempting to help them; to grapple with the data not in order to be clever or intellectual but in order to explore which is the best way to allow their voices to privilege that of the researcher’s.

Our play takes the form of narrative collage (Dillard 1982). Over 200 pages of data – notes, transcripts from video and audio tapes, interviews, minutes of meetings – have been distilled into a collage of key moments. It has been crafted, the power of the researcher selecting that which is ‘most’ relevant and ‘most’ interesting, but the words were spoken, the gestures made. Names of participants have been changed and the author’s notes at the end explore the outcomes in a little more detail. For now, however, we pause. Our play begins in the city of Stoke on Trent.

**Scene One**

*An English Department office. A large square table around which sit four people – the academic, Debbie; the artist, Hannah; and two teachers, Beth and Sarah. Beth is quiet and looks worried. She has worked at the school for many years. Sarah is in her second year of teaching. The initial silence is broken by her heavy sigh.*

**Sarah:** I’ve got to go at four. Another meeting.

**Hannah:** (brightly) Right let’s crack on then. Well I’m Hannah and I’m the one who’s going to be working with you on this. You know Debbie already don’t you?

Sarah and Beth nod – they are aware that Debbie, the Academic, has been working in school on other projects with Key Stage Three.

**Beth:** To be honest, we didn’t know we were working with you until today. The Head told us this morning. We thought you were with History…
Debbie: So did we... *There is resigned laughter around the table.*

Beth: We’re in National Challenge² you know and well.... There’s a lot of work around that. We have this SIP³ – they send them in to support us – well monitor us really – he’s from an old grammar school so doesn’t really get us at all. Keeps saying ‘you need to set more homework...give them more tests.’

Sarah: Most of mine won’t do homework. Or tests.

Beth: I don’t really think he’s taught in a school like this. The kids are... A bit challenging.

Sarah: My group are a bloody nightmare.

Beth: Her group are more difficult. Mine are easier – quite pleasant for here and there are one or two – they could get an A* – but others. Well I’m not sure about Drama with them really – a couple are mute.

Sarah: I’m just worried they’ll – that we won’t hit the criteria. It’s Macbeth – they’ve got to talk about the language and that – I’m not sure how Drama – if we can assess it like – I know it’s a play, but they’ve got to study it. Pass coursework in it – at the end of the day they have to write about it.

Debbie: Well not if they do it as oral coursework. They can do that can’t they?

Beth: We’ve not done that before. I’m not sure if they can get good grades – I’d need to ask the board.

Hannah: I’m sure we can – I’ll be honest here. I’m not an English teacher, but I do know Macbeth and I know that there are ways these kids can really tap into it – think of the themes – pressure from peers/loved ones, temptation, identity – great stuff for teenagers. We were thinking of trying a Mantle of the Expert approach with them. Setting them up as a production company or maybe two rival production companies bidding for a tender to produce a regional version of the play specifically targeted at fifteen year olds who have never been to the theatre before – who might find Shakespeare difficult to access – be switched off by it.

There is a long silence.

Debbie: I do think it will work....

Hannah: .... We have worked like this lots of times and it is really effective – they find a voice because they have to pretend – they have to make it work – you’d be surprised.

Beth: You need to meet our kids – they’re...they won’t be afraid to tell it as it is. More colourfully than necessary...they think Shakespeare...

Hannah: I know the kids you mean. They think Shakespeare is a load of – *she makes a masturbatory gesture* – and that’s how they tell you.

Beth: *Bursting out laughing*. Yes that’s them exactly. That’s what they would do.

Hannah: I know. And it will work.

Sarah: But...I’m just not sure.

Debbie: Shall we try to map it out and put in dates and see if we can make it work logistically first? When do you teach them?
Beth: Well OK – we see our groups three times a week – Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursdays.
Sarah: Most of mine are in college on Thursdays.
Debbie: So when do they get their third English lesson then?
Sarah: They don’t. They go to college instead.
Debbie: They have a third fewer lessons than everyone else?
Sarah: Yeah. And they’re lower ability as well so they miss so much and they can’t catch up.
Debbie: Has this been pointed out to the senior management team?
Sarah: Yeah but you think they’d know – they do the timetable don’t they?
Beth: We tell them but no-one listens to us.
Hannah: Blimey.

Scene 2
250 pupils are seated as audience around a thrust production of Macbeth by a visiting TIE company. The play has been heavily cut so that it is confusing even to those familiar with the text. Hannah and Debbie watch the audience watching the play. Dispersed among the audience are a significant number of teachers. Some are working on lap tops. Others chat in whispers by the door. One is reading a book. Occasionally, they break off from their activity to say ‘Sssh’ or issue a warning look. Two members of staff are watching the play. Pupils are largely quiet. One or two are sleeping. Several are surreptitiously texting. One boy turns round to his mates and mimes masturbation and nods towards the actors. His friends nod vigorously. They try not to laugh but one snorts loudly through his nose. The teacher sitting behind them looks up from her lap top. ‘Ssh’ she says.

Scene Three
Debbie enters as Group A are working in a studio space with two external practitioners. Both have worked as lighting and set designers professionally in theatre. As she comes into the room, there is a busy sense of focus. In comparison to the static and passive behaviours in scene 2, all students are focused and working actively to shape the lighting and set for the banquet scene. Hannah is in role as Martha Jackson – the client from the National Theatre who is commissioning this work. She is wearing a costume signifier – black jacket and glasses and she closely questions the participants as she checks on pupil progress:-

Hannah (as Martha): Gentlemen, what are you doing? She shakes their hands and they break off from their task to talk to her.
Wayne: We’re setting up the lighting for this scene – be switches his attention to a teacher sitting on the floor – you might want to move from there Miss, when we switch these on it’s going to be hot – don’t want you to get burned. The teacher laughs and moves away. He looks back to Martha – Yeah we’re setting it up – we’re trying to make it look a bit eerie.
Hannah (as Martha): Eerie – why – you’ll have to forgive me gentlemen but I don’t really know the play very well – I’m just checking on progress – Sam
our director will be coming up next week and wants to check on your concepts. Just run it by me – why eerie?

**Joe:** It’s when Macbeth’s mate turns up as a ghost – they’re having a party like – to celebrate Macbeth being king and Banquo shows up and freaks him out. We’re trying to get this shadow effect going to make the ghost look scary.

**Hannah (as Martha):** Is it fancy dress?

**Joe:** What?

**Hannah (as Martha):** Fancy Dress – is that why Macbeth’s friend is dressed up like a ghost?

**Wayne:** No he is a ghost – he’s dead – Macbeth’s had him murdered.

**Joe:** Well he might not be a real ghost – it could be the guilt like – a hallucination like – but we’ve got to show it because it’s real to Macbeth. No-one else can see him.

_The conversation continues in mime. Walking through the centre of the room is another boy. He is talking to himself and no-one else hears._

**Dave:** I am so going to university to do technology.

*Actors continue in mime, but attention shifts to three boys working again on a set of lights:*-

**Greg:** Chuck us the red.

**Craig:** Don’t make it all red – it’ll be too much.

**Greg:** Just this light – in the middle – where the ghost will be.

**Craig:** Right – what about this for the others? _Holds up a blue lighting gel._ I’ll just try it. _He places it on the light and switches it on._ Quite cold that, innit?

**Greg:** Yeah but it’s night time, so it looks right I think. What do you think Jez?

**Jez:** I think they’d have candles and stuff – it wouldn’t look so dark.

**Craig:** But we’re doing it in modern day.

**Jez:** They still have candles today, you dick.

_Jez and Craig punch each other on the arms for a few seconds._

**Greg:** What about sort of disco lights. Not that it’s a disco but if we’re setting it in a club or restaurant they’d have them lights.

_The boys start to play with different lighting states and become absorbed._

*Continue in mime. Debbie is sitting on the floor with a note book, jotting down what is being said. Sarah comes up to her._

**Sarah:** Never seen this lot work so hard. That one there – points to Wayne – he’s a right thug. Look at him. _They look – Wayne is engrossed in the lighting control panel._ He’s trying different levels. He looks up. _The other boys in his group put their thumbs up._ He grins.
Debbie: All the lads have chosen to do the lighting and look all the girls are making the set. The girls are all dressing the set and making small models of the stage they would use for the production. Four of the six are working wholly independently of the others. Two are putting up some gauze and the boys are training the lights on it and trying out different effects. One of the boys takes out his mobile phone:-

Tom: I’m taking a picture of this to show my Mum.

One of the girls turns to Sarah:

Mariam: Can I take this home? She holds her model up. Sarab nods and Mariam grins and walks away.
Sarah: She doesn’t talk, that one.

Scene Five
The group are working with Sam, a professional theatre director. The scene begins as most have entered the room. Most of the group are in a circle. Jez, one of the students who was so engrossed in the last scene, comes in late. Instead of joining the circle, he takes a chair and places it within the eye-line of Sam. He takes out his i-pod and puts the earphones in. It is a direct challenge to authority. Debbie is observing the session, sitting in a corner with a note-book. She jots and looks up. Hannah is participating, standing in the circle with the others.

Sam: Come and join in mate.
Jez: Sighing and taking his earphones out. Eh?
Sam: Come and join in.
Jez: You’re alright.
Hannah as Martha: I know you’re not strictly part of the casting team Jez – you’re lighting, right?

Jez flinches slightly – his role is being called in – there seems to be a moment of uncertainty as how best to respond.

Hannah as Martha: We’re expecting all the Spotlight employees to take part in all the workshops, Jez.
Jez: In a minute. Sam continues the warm up game in the hope that Jez will join in time. Debbie stands up and walks over to Jez. She puts out her hand: be takes it.
Debbie: Good to see you again, Jez, we met last week – very impressive lighting concepts I remember. She uses the handshake to pull him up out of his seat. He laughs.
Jez: Clever! What’s with all the handshaking around here?
Debbie: It’s a mark of respect. I’m looking forward to seeing more of your ideas. She returns to her seat, taking Jez’s seat with her. He stands for a
moment and then walks over to his bag and puts the i-pod away in his bag. He returns to the circle and joins in.

Scene Six
Later in the same session. The bell has gone but none of the pupils move. They are watching two boys, Wayne and Craig acting out part of a scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (there are not enough girls to have a female play the part but interestingly no-one has raised an objection). All are engrossed. As the scene opens the boys stand in tableau. The group applauds.

Sam: Brilliant.
Brittany: That was better than yours.
Sam: It was – really good lads. Well done.

There is an energy in the room. Even though it is lunchtime, no-one is rushing to leave. Wayne takes a report card to the cover teacher.

Sam: Are you on report Wayne? You surprise me.
Teacher: (drily) He doesn’t do Drama every day. He signs the card.
Wayne: No the rest of the time it’s crap.

Jez walks over to Sam, his hand outstretched. They shake hands.

Jez: Thanks. That was good.

Scene Seven:
A small meeting room. Hannah, in role as Martha, is sitting at a round table opposite three of the boys – Wayne, Dean and Craig. She stands to greet them.

Hannah (as Martha): Gentlemen – good to see you. Please take a seat.

The boys mumble greetings and sit.

Hannah (as Martha): Now as you know, this meeting gives me a chance to speak to some of the individual employees of Spotlight to see how the concepts are moving forward for Macbeth. I believe you’ve been looking at one particular scene with our in house director, Sam – is that right?

They nod.

Hannah (as Martha): And could you remind me of your roles in the company?
Craig: I’m in lighting – and I’m doing some of the sound too.
Wayne: Yeah me too.
Dean: I was in that team – I’ve just been promoted – executive producer now. *He almost giggles but holds his control.*

**Hannah (as Martha):** Congratulations. That’s quite a promotion – well done. OK so can we proceed – we have a little mock up of the set here and some blocks and figures – they’re a bit rough and ready but you can use them to explain your ideas if you like.

*Immediately the boys pick up the pipe cleaner figures and the wooden boxes.*

I thought you might want to start by explaining to me what the scene is and what your concept has been. To be honest gentlemen it seems a bit of a tough one this – making Macbeth accessible to 15 year olds. Not really their thing is it?

**The boys nod sagely.**

Dean: I think they’ll like our idea though – we’ve set it in modern day and we thought that maybe the play takes place in a gang – the fighting at the beginning could be a battle with another gang.

**Wayne:** It’s something that’ll appeal to 15 year olds we think – it’s their world, drugs and violence and then they’ll see that it’s a good play really. That Macbeth – it’s like it has a lesson in it. He does something really bad and thinks he can get away with it, but it teaches you – like it teaches you that the consequences – the guilt – it’s in his head. He’s haunting himself. He can’t get away from his own conscience. I think that’s something that 15 year olds might need to hear.

**Hannah (as Martha):** That’s really powerful. I think I can see how it might work. So let’s focus in on this scene then – what’s going on?

Dean: Macbeth has just killed Duncan – stabbed him when he was asleep – and now he’s come back with the daggers and blood all over his hands and Lady Macbeth goes schitz with him.

**Hannah/Martha:** Schitz?

Dean: She’s really angry with him, has a go at him – what have you brought these daggers here for? You should have left them. She gives him a hard time.

**Hannah (as Martha):** How is he feeling, do you think?

Wayne: He’s sick – it’s one thing being in battle, being a hero – like at the beginning of the play, he’s a real warrior, but here, he’s betrayed his King – the person he should be most, I don’t know, like loyal to – you know? And he’s done it while he’s asleep, stabbed him when he couldn’t do anything about it. Macbeth knows that’s wrong – cowardly – and I think he feels sick about it – even now.

**Hannah (as Martha):** Ok – so how are we staging this – what is Macbeth wearing?

Craig: Black.

**Hannah (as Martha):** Can you expand on that?

Craig: He’s in black and he’s walking in the shadows. He doesn’t want to be seen – he’s just killed someone and like, when you’re out robbing, you wear
black so you’re less noticeable. *There is a pause as everyone takes in what Craig has said.*

**Hannah (as Martha):** Anything else?

**Dean:** It’s dark – it’s late - we were talking about it earlier – at dinner time - and we thought we’d have it lit in like a low blue light – cold and dark and lots of shadow.

**Hannah (as Martha):** Why – what time is it?

**Wayne:** About 3 in the morning. You know that time when everyone’s drunk so much they’ve passed out – been sick and no-one’s likely to notice Macbeth skulking about.

*They all nod in agreement.*

**Hannah (as Martha):** And how tense is this scene do you think?

**Craig:** What does tense mean?

**Wayne:** Like stress – an atmosphere – I don’t know how to describe it. Like this would be low tension – *be leans back in his chair, relaxed and sighs contentedly.* And this would be high tension – *be sits up bolt upright, fists clenched, ready to punch.*

**Craig:** Oh right, yeah – pretty tense then. He don’t seem that happy with what he’s done does he and his missus is giving him a well hard time now.

**Scene Eight**

*Small interview room. Three girls, Jess, Anya and Holly sit with Hannah.*

*They have just completed a similar interview and all have now come out of role.*

**Hannah:** Well done girls – what did you think?

**Jess:** I felt quite proud of myself.

**Hannah:** Did you? Why?

**Jess:** Cos normally I wouldn’t say much but I did because I had loads of ideas.

**Hannah:** Why do you think that was?

**Jess:** I dunno.

**Holly:** I think I know – I feel the same like. And I keep thinking well it’s not me – I’m a woman in this – in my twenties and I think because of that well I have to talk – it’s my job. I can’t explain it – it’s like I have to be different.

**Hannah:** Well I know you girls didn’t really want to do Drama when this started did you? And you don’t have to do the exam in role if you don’t want – we can do it out of role if you want to be yourselves.

**Holly/Jess/Anya:** No.

**Anya:** It’s better in role.

**Hannah:** Why?

**Holly:** Cos we feel more confident when we’re not us.

**Jess:** And we do better. Like when you’re Hannah you’re nice but when you’re Martha you challenge us more. You make it harder – you ask why all the time and you make us explain. We don’t really like Martha but she’s good for us.
They all laugh.

Hannah: Would you like your teachers to treat you like Martha does?
Anya: No we’d tell them to get lost. Unless they were pretending. It’s different then. She’s the client isn’t she – we have to do what she says. You don’t with teachers.

Scene Nine
Six pupils – Carly, Wayne, Dan, Tom, Jez, Saira – are sitting around a table talking to an external evaluator from Creative Partnerships. They are concluding an interview. Debbie sits in the corner making notes and recording the interview.

Evaluator: So on the whole then you think it’s been a success?

All nod.

Evaluator: You’ve given me some good moments and examples, but can you tell me a bit about why you think you’ve enjoyed it so much?
Wayne: It’s felt like the first time really that we, well I for definite have been trusted. And respected. It makes you feel good.
Carly: Yeah we’ve been like ‘Whoa – look at us – bet you didn’t know we could do this did ya?’
Dan: We’ve been appreciated and people, like Hannah but even the teachers too, have been interested in what we’ve had to say. Even my Mum she’s noticed that I’m talking about it at home.
Jez: Gayboy.

They all laugh

Jez: I know what you mean though – yeah I’ve felt respected and it’s been good doing something – like for real. I know it wasn’t really real but it felt like it. It felt like we were out of school and grown up and respected. That felt good.
Evaluator: And the GCSE? Did that seem important?
Tom: You sort of forgot about it in a way. I mean we knew why we were doing it – we knew we were being assessed but it was like it wasn’t happening – it felt more important to do a good job for the company and the client – we knew we were doing well in the GCSE – well better than normal, but that wasn’t the thing we were working for.
Evaluator: So what now?
Wayne: Dunno. Maybe now they’ve seen what we can do… Maybe our teachers will trust us more and we can do more fun stuff. I hope so cos like I went from a C to a B.
Evaluator: Oh (looks at a sheet of paper) – no you went from a C to an A*
Wayne: What?
**Evaluator:** An A* it says here.

**Wayne:** Christ Almighty. *He reddens.* Well there you go then.

**Comments**

The play above is a piece of documentary theatre. The words are all the real words of the participants but as with all documentary theatre, the material has been ‘arranged’ – ‘we do not ask if the representation is true. We ask instead, is it probable, workable, fruitful, does it allow us to see things differently, and to think differently?’ (Denzin 2001: 32). Perhaps – that is for the reader to decide.

It is easy to satirise the school; nothing in this data has been exaggerated; the seemingly absurd reality of timetabling – not only in the reduction of hours for those who most need them, but elsewhere we noted that the same children were removed from classes to attend talks on future options which ironically will be denied them if they fail to achieve GCSE passes. Nevertheless, this is a school attempting at least to address Hargreaves’ question: ‘If you are on the National Challenge list (or in danger of being placed on it), have you set all your short-term, quick-fix tactics within a longer-term strategy with moral purpose and deep happiness at its heart? What do you think might be the consequences of doing so, or not doing so?’ (Hargreaves 2008: 25)

In the first instance we were asked to protect ‘creativity’ in the face of the SIP advice; to find ways of supporting deep learning. Whether this was more than a quick fix is questionable. The teachers rarely attended the sessions, choosing to use Hannah’s presence to catch up on other areas of their work, in spite of our insistence that this should not be so. Their ability to repeat the process next year without external help is limited, although the school has now recognised this problem and has agreed some training for the team in the Summer term.

There were over 60 children in this project – the play focuses in on a few, predominantly boys, who drew my eye and ear again and again. Whose words and actions I kept returning to. They were those who had bad reputations, who struggled to perform executive functions such as impulse control, and so I gave ‘special attention to those performances, spaces and sites where stories criss-cross the borders’ (Denzin 2001: 30); borders of behaviour, perception, absurdity, identity.

Witnessing how the role itself began to both control behaviour (see Jez) and to expose realities of life outside of the classroom (see Craig and Wayne) was fascinating and it was for this reason that these moments were selected above others. Hearing children described as ‘cancers’ and ‘thugs’ and then seeing how the role changed not only their actions, but the teacher’s interpretations of their actions was also powerful. The role shifted power; the oppressed (Shor and Friere 1987; Boal 1992) were able to reclaim power without redress to violence – their usual mode of survival – and to win acceptance in the process. It is not enough. One pupil took huge leaps...
forward. He gained marks two grades above his target for 25% of the GCSE. Then he set fire to a girl’s hair in Science and was expelled. There are no exclusion unit places for him. He will not sit GCSEs. I imagine him skulking, wearing black, in the streets of Stoke on Trent, ‘robbing’ and wish we could have done more.

Nevertheless, the observations I did showed children in ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2002), key conditions of which are absorption and reluctance for the task to end. On more than one occasion during this work, I witnessed this and it is shown in Scene 5. Hargreaves is clear that project work provides the best conditions educationally for this ‘flow’ to take place and I would argue the same is true of the researcher’s role; where there is common purpose for the common good; where there is playfulness in approaching the methodology and the presentation of outcomes and where this playfulness is met with affirmation and approbation (Offer 2006).

It was an experiment, but the outcomes of this work left a long lasting impression – the words ‘we feel more confident when we’re not us’ are the ones that resonate for me. Again and again we saw confidence grow when focus and attention was switched away from self, whether through a role or through the ability to ‘speak’ through a prop, a lighting state, blocks of wood representing scenery. In these moments, the participants, including the researcher, is ‘other’, and similarly, the data seems more valid – more confident – when it is re-presented as something other, as interrogated and interpreted text. The simplicity of these words capture a world of complexity about self and identity which have formed the basis for many years of philosophical thought. I have tried to remove this ‘not us’ from the methodological process; to expose as rawly as possible, with all the crudities, moments of lapse, of laughter, of exposure as close a representation to what happened as possible and I contend that it is in moments in which we can pretend to be ‘other’ that we most often expose what lies beneath.

What lay beneath these challenging, awkward and difficult veneers, was a capacity to understand, to connect, to make meaning, to imagine, to share. Their images of Macbeth were framed by their own experiences – their inhabited worlds in which people rob, drink until they are sick, take drugs, fight, but also have a deep sense of honour, a belief that there are lines one shouldn’t cross, an understanding of how it feels to grapple with conscience, with guilt and what it is like to struggle to maintain image while secretly worrying about consequences. What struck me most was not how the drama allowed them to access an insight into Shakespeare, but how the drama allowed us to access an insight into them. The question that remains is what now? Is it enough to gain a grade – or do we as professionals, have a responsibility to respond further and with whom does that responsibility lie? This is our real National Challenge. Who will meet it?
Notes

1 Creative Partnerships is a programme co-funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education in the UK and has been running for seven years, due to end in 2011. The funding aims to improve partnerships between schools and artist practitioners, creating opportunities for teachers and artists to work together to develop new pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning which impact on pupil experience and achievement. There are three levels of involvement – Enquiry Schools which receive funding for small scale one year projects, Change Schools who develop larger curriculum changes over two years and Schools of Creativity who, over a period of three years, work in partnership to make large scale, whole school changes to curriculum and learning.

2 In June 2008 education ministers announced the National Challenge. This sets a new ‘floor target’ (benchmark) by which all secondary schools must ensure that by 2011 at least 30% of students achieve five or more GCSE grades A*-C, including English and Maths. No fewer than 638 (about one in five) secondary schools fall into this category. Schools that fail to reach the benchmark are threatened with potential closure.

3 School Improvement Partner – external advisor appointed by the Local Authority to ‘support’ a school in improving its performance.

References