

Mantle of the Expert

“A dramatic-inquiry approach to teaching and learning”

What is Mantle of the Expert?

Mantle of the Expert (MOTE) has been described as ‘[a dramatic inquiry based approach to teaching and learning](#)’. Developed by Prof. Dorothy Heathcote during the 1980s, she described it as “*an active, urgent, purposeful view of learning, in which knowledge is to be operated on, not merely taken in*”. It uses classroom drama to harness our ability to ‘play’ together for curriculum purposes. We know that ‘play’ is vital to learning ‘as it is imagination in action and is where caring is born as we imagine from the perspectives of other people’ ([Edmiston, n.d.](#)).

MOTE is an integrated classroom approach where children learn across all curriculum areas and use language appropriate to their enterprise by taking on the roles of experts engaged in a commission for an authentic, yet fictional client. MOTE is based on the principle that children learn best when their relationship with learning and teaching is more like that of experts than that of students – it empowers children because it matters to them.



Each Mantle (a complete MOTE experience), is sustained for a long period, often an entire term, and the teacher will move in and out of role along with the children. The expert roles are positioned within a fictional enterprise facilitated by the teacher. As experts, the children encounter authentic tasks and solve realistic problems (ie Curriculum tasks) related to the commission. This is not quite open-ended inquiry; the teacher carefully plans some tasks from the outset while others arise as a natural consequence of the work at hand. MOTE, therefore, exposes learners to new skills and knowledge in the way that life does and as such provides exciting, intrinsically motivated learning.

MOTE is used at both primary and secondary levels around the world and the results are impressive. A recent evaluation of the impact of MOTE on children’s learning in the UK reported measurable ‘improvement in key skills’ and ‘accelerated attainment’ amongst children across curricular areas ([Aitken, 2009](#)). Teachers using the MOTE approach have reported improved levels of student ownership and engagement with their learning, whilst significantly increasing their own job engagement and satisfaction, leading to less teacher attrition .

This is an exciting time for MOTE in New Zealand. The development of the revised New Zealand Curriculum has brought with it a sense of permission to explore new and innovative pedagogies and a search for models of integrated and authentic learning. MOTE can play an important part in the paradigm shifts that are occurring in education today.





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What are the Benefits of MOTE?

The Mantle of the expert approach benefits children's learning in a number of ways. One important benefit is the ability MOTE has to create a community of learners within the classroom. Wegner (1998) suggests that taking part in social groups is "*the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are*", which links closely to the principles of the 2007 New Zealand curriculum [NZC], where teachers are required to ensure children's learning engages with their out of school lives and communities ([MOE, 2007](#)).

Additional benefits MOTE has on teaching and learning are:

- Cross-curricular integration ([Taylor, 2006](#); Sayers, 2011)
- Promoting learning through inquiry (Sayers, 2011)
- Exposing learners to new skills and knowledge through 'lived experiences' (Wegner, 1998; [Taylor, 2006](#))
- Providing intrinsic motivation for learning through relevant and contextualised activities ([Taylor, 2006](#))
- Empowering children – the teacher is "facilitator and co-creator of knowledge" alongside the children ([Taylor, 2006](#))
- Increasing children's engagement by utilising their enthusiasm and ability to imagine themselves into other roles ([Edmiston, n.d.](#))
- Developing relationships and cognitive processes by 'adopting the viewpoint' of an experienced other ([Edmiston, n.d.](#))
- Using and building on prior knowledge (Wilhelm, 2010; ([Edmiston, n.d.](#)))
- Increasing metacognition through the use of reflection, both in and out of role ([Taylor, 2006](#); [Bunting, n.d.](#))
- Learning occurs within authentic contexts (Towler-Evans, 1997)
- Incorporating the key competencies and values of school curriculums ([Taylor, 2006](#); [Bunting, n.d.](#))
- Evidence of increased academic attainment ([Rouse & Wilde, n.d.](#))

How does MOTE link to the New Zealand Curriculum?

Fraser (2008) states that children take responsibility for their own learning when they are engaged and motivated, seeking out knowledge because they want to learn, not because a curriculum tells them to. This creates a dilemma for teachers who have an obligation to use the curriculum but also want to ensure children are willing participants on their learning journey.

MOTE gives children ownership over their learning by placing them at the centre of the learning, allowing them 'to take responsibility for the work' and teach each other (Towler-Evans, [1997](#)). MOTE also allows teachers to incorporate, in an integrated manner, a range of curriculum areas through authentic and meaningful tasks. These are highly valued actions on which the NZC is founded ([MOE, 2007](#)).

So in theory, MOTE has strong links to the NZC, but what do these links look like in practice? Authentic contexts lead children to develop a fictional enterprise, providing them with a collective interest and responsibility. As the Mantle unfolds, children engage in tasks that are both curriculum focussed and appropriate for the professional practice of their fictional enterprise. These tasks are commissions, requested by a fictional client, and integrate different areas of the curriculum, for example: An events organisation company may be asked by the Council to arrange an art exhibition for local artists. The company may research local art/artists; possible venues, security, seating, food and beverage, tickets sales, marketing and costings. These tasks require children to work in maths, visual arts, technology, social studies, and literacy. Tensions are introduced as the MOTE progresses, generating problem solving activities; perhaps one of the paintings exhibited is a copy. Students pull together, working through the possibilities to manage the situation. Tensions enable the teacher to weave the key competencies and values into the Mantle, as children are asked to solve ethical or social dilemmas.

It goes without saying that for learning to be meaningful, it is vital that tasks appear authentic, build on children's prior knowledge and provide them with a sense of authority. Making the curriculum enjoyable through imaginary and real life tasks gives children a sense of purpose and achievement as they share knowledge and become competent experts working **alongside** their peers and teacher.



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How do I get Started Using MOTE?

Using MOTE can be a daunting task and apprehensions are understandable.

Will the children agree to the imaginary context and how do I manage the whole class while in role?

The simple truth is that a successful MOTE requires extensive pre-planning to ensure that the responsibility of learning falls on the children as the MOTE progresses. Thankfully, a number of practitioners have developed a range of frameworks to help teachers implement MOTE in their classrooms. The following points are a compilation of ideas put forward by [Aitken](#) (2011), Sayer (2011) and [Taylor](#) (2006). Research, however, does suggest that the effective implementation of MOTE within classrooms depends on professional development, such as coaching, exposure to modelling and the development of [cluster groups](#) or networks that share, collaborate and encourage teachers using MOTE (Sayers, 2011). It is therefore recommended that teachers who are interested in undertaking MOTE contact our offices to enrol in a workshop or training package and **do not consider the following list as an exhaustive or definitive planning outline.**

Topic

What am I going to teach? What interests the children?

Hook

How am I going to grab/invite the children in?

Enterprise

What fictional company could we create that would deal (professionally) with the topic chosen?

Commission

What job will this company do that can help us learn about the topic?

Client

Who is going to ask us to carry out the commission – ask us for help?

It is important to remember that although the client should be believable, the name **must** be fictional to avoid tricking or misframing children eg: replacing Ministry of Education for Ministry of Learning (Sayers, 2011).

Tasks

Setting the scene.

Building children's belief in the company (Community of learners).

Developing authentic tasks that relate to our company and help complete the commission - Inquiry learning.

Tensions

The 'what ifs' that arise during the commission to extend children's learning.

Other perspectives - Reflection

Who else might get involved and what is their perspective on the topic?

Authentic learning context

Learning intentions that relate back to the NZC.

Although MOTE encourages the sharing of power within the classroom, it is important to note that the teacher can slip in and out of role as necessary to redirect, reflect and clarify issues with the children. The use of drama conventions such as Teacher in role, effigies, symbolic representations, letters and cryptic codes are other methods the teacher has to guide the direction of the mantle and the learning. What is vital is that teachers clearly **signal** to the children when they are entering and exiting the fictional world to ensure that the children are clear between the imaginary and real.



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Planning

A successful MOTE requires careful planning to ensure the inclusion of core elements, such as a company, client and commission. Sayers (2011) believes a MOTE should be undertaken over an extended period of time, from a few weeks to a whole term, but other supporters believe that mini-MOTEs of only a few hours can provide teachers with an introduction into MOTE planning and execution in a less threatening manner ([Taylor, 2006](#)). The following examples are provided **ONLY** to show how practising teachers weave the core elements into their MOTE planning. It is vital that teachers develop their own MOTE plans based on the interests, learning needs and prior experiences particular to their class.

[Search for Blackbeard's Treasure](#)

This mini-MOTE was planned for a low decile school with students who have little prior knowledge or social skills. The topic, pirates, is highly engaging for children of this age. The class was firstly required to undertake preliminary work to learn about pirates before launching into the MOTE. Most of the core elements are found in the planning, but there is a lack of activities that allow children to reflect on their learning, an important recommendation for any MOTE. Although this MOTE has been planned for only three sessions, there is the potential to expand, incorporating other curriculum areas.

[Animal Rescuers](#)

A mini-MOTE that focuses on the science and social science curriculum areas. The mantle's theme is a high interest topic, where the children plan and rescue animals. Although planned for only a few sessions, this MOTE has the potential for expansion, thus allowing for more curriculum areas to be considered. The planning includes the core elements, but once again there is little mention of student reflection. The use of 'World Wildlife Fund' as a client should be reconsidered and changed to a fictional name in order to avoid any confusion or misframing on the children's behalf.

[Island Scientists](#)

A similar theme to Animal Rescuers though this MOTE has been developed as a two term plan. It contains the core elements and creates instances for children to reflect on their learning and consider their position from a different perspective. Although this plan is based on a real island the author suggests the use of any uninhabited island.

[Mountain Rescuers](#)

A detailed mini-MOTE planned for 90 minutes; ideal for teachers who are planning MOTE for the first time. For those teachers who want to undertake a longer MOTE, this plan provides endless possibilities for extension. It contains all the elements of a MOTE although, as written for juniors, children are asked to help make a story rather than explicitly invited into a company. The children are a Mountain Rescue Team planning a mountain rescue.

