

DRAMATIC REPUTATION ECHOES IN CLASSROOMS

SUSAN BATTYE looks at some of the impact internationally respected drama advocate Dorothy Heathcote has had on New Zealand

Dr Dorothy Heathcote photographed by Susan Battye at her home in Derby last year.



Drama classes throughout New Zealand have been influenced by UK's Dr Dorothy Heathcote for decades.

In 1978 and 1984 Sunny Amey, who was then national curriculum officer for drama, invited Heathcote from the education department of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne to present a series of workshops throughout New Zealand.

The purpose of the visits was to work with an emerging group of teachers using drama not only as a subject in its own right but also as a way of working across the curriculum.

Central to the work was the use of a technique created by Heathcote known as Mantle of Expert (MOE) where the students and the teachers work together to achieve a deep learning experience. MOE has been described as 'a dramatic inquiry learning-based approach to teaching and learning'.

Fast forward to 2010 and the use of MOE drama in schools in the UK has become a mainstream activity; a way of organising an entire school programme across the curriculum.

With this in mind, in August 2009, Dr Viv Aitken from the school of education at Waikato University organised a well-attended conference called 'Weaving Our Stories: Mantle of the Expert'. Keynote speakers were Luke Abbott, a leader in the use of MOE in British schools, and Dr Heathcote by video link from Derby.

The purpose of the conference was to capitalise on the earlier work done in New Zealand, and looking back at the legacy of Heathcote's earlier visits we have to acknowledge the profound impact of her work on our drama curriculum design and content.

After the 1984 visit there was much debate about where to begin writing a curriculum. The first document, the sixth form certificate drama course, contained three main strands, including drama for learning.

When a fully fledged arts curriculum was called for, a push came from the New Zealand Association for Drama in Education (NZADIE) for drama to be included as a subject in its own right for implementation in primary and secondary schools. Drama was embedded in the arts in the New Zealand curriculum in 2000.

Heathcote's influence can also be seen in the terminology used in the 2000 New Zealand curriculum and the most recent (2008) version.

At level 1 students develop practical knowledge in drama by exploring "the elements of role, focus, action, tension, time, and space through dramatic play".

At level 2 they use techniques and relevant technologies to explore drama elements and conventions.

At level 3 they communicate and interpret drama by "presenting and responding to drama, and identifying ways in which elements, techniques, conventions, and technologies combine to create meaning in their own and others' work".

Heathcote's definition of the elements differs a little from the curriculum definition. She says the elements are about the manipulation of sound and silence, movement and stillness, light and dark and the use of space in order to produce dramatic tension. But broadly speaking her influence is felt throughout the drama curriculum document.

In the use of key competencies,

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deeply embedded in Heathcote's MOE technique, is the expectation that the method will enable the teacher to improve 'the social health' of a class.

This concept directly relates to key competencies of 'managing self', 'relating to others', and 'participating and contributing'.

MOE is also very much about key competency concepts such as reading signs and symbols and interpreting texts. Above all, it develops thinking and shared understanding that rely more on thoughts than outward physical signs like the use of big theatrical sets to provide a 'shift in the head'.

The Heathcote MOE approach to drama has sometimes been criticised as being antithetical to the theatre tradition and therefore only relevant to primary level education.

Not so. A level 1 drama achievement standard asks students to "use elements and conventions to devise, structure and perform a drama" and there are extensive notes relating to both the MOE drama tradition and to broader theatrical traditions.

We are told that: "Conventions are the established ways of working in drama that explore meaning

or deepen understanding, or established practices in theatre."

For example, conventions to help with the process of devising or creating character are said to include: role on the wall, hot seating, teacher-in-role, visualisation, and most significantly, Mantle of the Expert.

Aitken and the University of Waikato are to be congratulated for taking the initiative to develop a practical and theoretical undergraduate and a postgraduate paper in the Mantle of the Expert. In doing so they are not only acknowledging the work that has gone before but providing New Zealand schools with a developing group of enthusiasts who can continue the work of a truly remarkable practitioner.

Heathcote's legacy to New Zealand education is significant. Within Drama New Zealand her status as its patron and her frequent communication with members is highly valued.

Mantle of the Expert is for many teachers, and not just teachers of drama. It is an idea for which the time has come.

Refer to
www.mantleoftheexpert.com;
<http://mantleoftheexpert.co.nz>

In the use of key competencies, deeply embedded in Heathcote's MOE technique, is the expectation that the method will enable the teacher to improve 'the social health' of a class. This concept directly relates to key competencies of 'managing self', 'relating to others', and 'participating and contributing'.

SUSAN BATTYE

SUSAN BATTYE IS THE director of Drama Magic Ltd, a company devoted to developing educational resources. She is former head of drama at Auckland's Epsom Girls' Grammar School and programme manager for the bachelor and certificate of Māori performing arts at Te Wananga O Aotearoa. The founding president of the New Zealand Association for Drama in Education, Battye is a former student of Dorothy Heathcote from the 1978-1979 class at Newcastle upon Tyne University. In 1993 she gained an MA (education studies) from Loughborough University of Technology. ■



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