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ARTSPRAXIS

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What Sort of Schools Do We Want?

What Sort of Society Do We Want?

ARTSPRAXIS

Emphasizing critical analysis of the arts in society.

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ArtsPraxis Volume 13, Issue 1 looked to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around these ideas which were investigated at the recent 2025 Dorothy Heathcote Now Conference hosted at Manchester Metropolitan University. The call for papers was released in concert with the publication of [ArtsPraxis Volume 12, Issue 2](#). The submission deadline for Volume 13, Issue 1 was March 1, 2026.

In 1983, Dorothy Heathcote stated that, as educators, we should be asking what sort of schools we want – but also, what sort of society we want. Her words are incredibly timely today: they challenge us to consider questions of purpose, curriculum, access, and stewardship.

Potential topics included:

- Empowering learners: How can practitioners bring curriculum learning alive in ways that give children genuine voice and agency?
- Drama and integration across the curriculum: How can practitioners draw links to history, humanities, and personal, social, health, and economic education (PSHE)? In what ways does this approach humanize teaching?
- Building community through drama, in the classroom and in the school.
- Reimagining Heathcote: In what ways can we draw on Dorothy Heathcote's legacy?
- Evaluation and assessment
- Teaching political awareness through drama
- Teaching challenging and sensitive subjects
- Reinventing the curriculum, and challenging the neo-liberal educational agenda
- Teacher as artist and teacher as technician
- Using digital technology and AI in teaching

We encouraged article submissions from artists, educators, and scholars from different disciplines. Our goal was to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that would enrich the development of educational theatre in the years to come.

Call for Papers

For this special issue, we welcomed two types of submissions:

Academic articles: 6000-8000 words. Will be given two peer reviews.

Practice-based pieces, which are not expected to be so academic, and might be written by teachers or practitioners, for example: 4,000 words. Only one peer review per article.

All manuscripts were to be accompanied by a 200 word abstract and 100 word biographies for the author(s), and conform to APA style manual. Additional style and formatting guidelines are available [here](#).

Reviewing Procedures

Each article was sent to two peer reviewers. They provided advice on the following:

- Whether the article should be published with no revisions/with revisions.
- The contribution the article makes to the arts community.
- Specific recommendations to the author about improving the article.
- Other publishing outlets if the article is considered unacceptable.

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Cover image from NYU Steinhardt / Program in Educational Theatre / Percussion Studies joint-production of Carl Orff's *Astutuli*, directed by Nan Smithner in 2026.

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Editorial – “Models for Change”: Dorothy Heathcote's Radical Vision for Schools and Society

[DAVID ALLEN](#)

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Dorothy Heathcote argued that, as teachers, we should be asking not only what schools are for, but also “what sort of a society we want” (1983, p. 697). That question lay behind everything she did. Drama was never an end in itself; it was a means of reimagining education and, through education, society.

In notes for a lecture tracing the history of drama in education, she reflected on the development of different approaches, including devised theatre, process drama, Augusto Boal, etc. She also expressed a deep concern about what had happened to her own work. Mantle of the Expert, she observed, “is hijacked out of its radical form—to short projects. This disturbs me—it’s become a shadow” (Heathcote, n.d. [a]). The image is telling: a shadow preserves the outline of something while losing its substance. Heathcote's concern was not that Mantle had disappeared, but that it might become detached from the wider educational transformation that originally gave it meaning.

Mantle, together with Rolling Role and the Commission Model, was never intended as another “tool in the teacher’s toolbox,” to be used occasionally. Heathcote described these instead as “MODELS FOR CHANGE in how schools and society may become” (n.d. [a]; emphasis in original). In their radical form, they were designed to “become a fulcrum for changing *the way schooling operates*” (Heathcote, n.d. [a]; emphasis in original). Mantle positions learners within teams carrying genuine responsibility, accountability to clients (albeit fictional), and responsibility for publishing the outcomes of their work. Rolling Role reorganises teaching itself by bringing teams of teachers together across disciplines, creating dynamic encounters between the sciences, humanities, and the arts. The Commission Model extends this reorganisation beyond the school, rethinking how young and older people engage with one another’s work: “not going back, but forward into a different appreciation and demonstration of each other’s work” (Heathcote, n.d. [a]). What unites all three is a reimagining of schooling itself. They were conceived as structures capable of reconfiguring relationships between knowledge, responsibility, and community. They reposition learners as accountable agents and connect the work of the classroom to purposes beyond it. If these models have been “hijacked” into short-term activities, the challenge before us is not simply to implement them more faithfully but to recover their original ambition. They ask us to rethink not only how we teach but how we organise learning, how authority is exercised, and ultimately what kinds of communities our classrooms might become. Heathcote was clear about what such change required: “ALL THESE ARE LONG TERM—involving courage to change” (n.d. [a]; emphasis in original).

Heathcote understood the pressures on teachers. Her work was never an invitation to ignore institutional realities but to ask what possibilities nevertheless remained. The question is not whether teachers should work within existing educational systems—they must—but how they might create spaces within them where responsibility, agency, collaboration, and imagination can flourish. Alongside the daily work of teaching lies the longer work of imagining and advocating for different educational futures.

In 1979, Heathcote remarked: “I am not lobbying for drama. I have the drama label hung round my neck like a silver label round a decanter... I’m lobbying for better education, but I happen to use

drama because it's one of the most flexible tools I have" (qtd. Shallcrass 1979, p. 17). This special issue of *ArtsPraxis* has grown out of the *Dorothy Heathcote Now* conference, held at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2025—the fifth in what has become an annual gathering since 2021. The conference title deliberately insists that Heathcote's work belongs not only to the history of drama education but to the pressing educational questions of the present. Her challenge to ask what schools are for—and what sort of society they are helping to create—has arguably become all the more urgent in an era marked by prescribed curricula, high-stakes accountability, and increasingly constrained classroom practice.

Perhaps the most common response to Heathcote's work is also the most understandable: "I don't have time." Teachers work within systems where curricula must be covered, outcomes demonstrated, and progress evidenced, often at considerable speed. Heathcote recognised these pressures, but she also challenged the assumptions about learning that lay behind them. Once, preparing a three-day project on genetics, she was told by the biology teacher in the school, Julie King, that the topic would normally be covered in a double period. Heathcote's response was disarmingly simple: "And when you've done your double period of genetics... will they know genetics? And how will you know they know genetics?" (Heathcote, 1993a).

Rather than explaining genetics, Heathcote created a situation in which the knowledge had to be worked out. Participants engaged with genetics as a practical problem: they encountered a "farmer" [teacher-in-role] who was breeding a special herd of 3-foot-high cattle. As she explained, "instead of the teacher doing the instruction... I have had to provide the material which mediates the knowledge" (Heathcote, 1993a). Throughout the project, she found herself reminding the teachers, "You're going too fast" (1993a). The issue was never covering less, but creating sufficient time for understanding to emerge. If knowledge is mediated through meaningful situations rather than transmitted directly, learning cannot simply be accelerated without changing its character.

Julie King later reflected on the experience: "During those three days I was [in role as] a farmer, a breeder of Zebu cattle, a leading scientist and a genetic counsellor... We covered far more of the curriculum than I ever imagined with much deeper understanding" (2026). The point is not that every lesson should become a three-day

drama, nor that teachers should ignore the realities of curriculum and assessment. Rather, the story reminds us that the question is not simply whether we have enough time, but what kinds of learning our use of time makes possible.

Beneath questions of curriculum and time lies an even more fundamental question: what image of the child guides our teaching? Heathcote believed that schools too often assume children are vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. Her own metaphor was very different. She declared: “I am a crucible; I regard myself as one and I believe children are crucibles” (1978, p. 16). The distinction is more than rhetorical. A vessel receives; a crucible transforms. If children are understood as active makers of meaning rather than passive recipients of information, teaching itself changes. The teacher's task is no longer simply to explain, but to create the conditions in which understanding can be forged.

Heathcote once observed: “If tomorrow you walk in [to school] and say, ‘From this moment it is crucibles and not jugs’, you're changing the world” (1978, p. 16). Significantly, she did not say changing a lesson, but changing the world. For Heathcote, educational transformation begins with how we regard children. Once teachers begin treating learners as people who make meaning, assume responsibility, and transform knowledge rather than merely receive it, they have already begun to change the culture of the classroom—even if the timetable, curriculum, and assessment framework remain unchanged.

The articles collected in this special issue explore this possibility from many different perspectives. Together they demonstrate teachers, artists, and researchers working creatively within the constraints of contemporary education, while refusing to accept those constraints as the limit of what education can become. They show practitioners finding ways to reclaim time for understanding, to entrust learners with genuine responsibility, and to create classrooms in which knowledge is constructed through purposeful action rather than transmitted as information. In different ways, each contribution engages with Heathcote's continuing challenge to rethink not only how we teach, but what schools are for, and what kind of society they help to create. Collectively, they remind us that Heathcote's models are not simply part of the history of drama education, but living resources for educational practice today.

“NOW THE PRAXIS BEGINS” (Heathcote, n.d. [b])

This issue is divided into two sections. The first section brings together shorter contributions rooted in classroom practice and professional experience; the second offers longer scholarly studies, that revisit Heathcote's work through historical, philosophical, and theoretical perspectives. Together, the two sections enact Heathcote's own insistence that theory and practice exist in continual dialogue through praxis—or, as she described it, “action-reflection” (1989).

Heathcote's ideas have always lived through teachers willing to experiment, adapt, and reflect upon their own classrooms. If children are crucibles rather than vessels, then teachers cannot remain jug-fillers. Heathcote observed: "At the centre of all learning situations lies how the leader empowers students to become interested and engaged in the work" (n.d. [c]). Drama, she argued, makes it possible to reposition learners, moving them "from student/learner to working in collaboration with the leader" (n.d. [c]). Such a shift inevitably transforms the teacher's own position. Authority is not abandoned but redistributed. As Heathcote remarked, "If you can't take the power shift, get out of the kitchen" (1992a).

Cecily O'Neill's opening article shows what this redistribution of authority can look like in practice. It documents Sylvia Walton Jackson's work with Mantle, showing how dramatic inquiry can transform the organisation of classroom learning. Jackson herself recognised the transformation she had made in her teaching, which she captured in a short poem:

I have found in drama an opportunity
to be part of their world without force
I'm invited in
sharing rules
where no one loses. ...
I have found that it's when
I don't know all the answers
is when they become involved and
I am most effective because
they are in charge and it is theirs
and they know that I am like them
playing inventing enjoying

creating appreciating growing,
being me.

Before learners can be repositioned, teachers must be willing to reposition themselves. In the next two articles, Tim Taylor and Brian Edmiston explore the shift in terms of the way the teacher moves away from the power of being the “one who knows” (Heathcote, 1993b) They show that the redistribution of responsibility does not happen automatically through dramatic fiction. It is accomplished through the teacher's careful use of language, shifts of stance, and continual negotiation of relationships within and beyond the fictional world.

Throughout her career, Heathcote worked in professional development, healthcare, industry, museums, community settings, as well as schools. In every context, she sought to intervene in existing ways of working. It was never simply a matter of adapting dramatic techniques to different environments. The educational task remained remarkably consistent: what mattered was changing the relationships through which people learned, worked, and made decisions together. Explaining her work to a group of middle managers at Volkswagen, she remarked that “the only thing I know about is this business of luring, protecting, and causing people to be motivated to shift, until they didn't realise how far they came in a few hours” (1991).

In the UK and elsewhere, Mantle has become closely associated with primary education. Its use in secondary schools has been limited by institutional challenges: tightly structured timetables, subject specialisation, and examination pressures leave relatively little opportunity for the kind of sustained, interdisciplinary inquiry on which Mantle depends. Heathcote developed Rolling Role partly in response to these conditions, to overcome the fragmentation of the curriculum and the tendency for teachers to work in isolated subject “silos.” Like the Commission Model, it was conceived as a strategic intervention in the system. She recognised that schools would have to “change in fundamental ways” (2003, p. 20) if it was adopted; nevertheless, it was, in her words, a glimpse of a “Vision Possible” (2003).

The articles that follow should not be read simply as examples of Heathcote being “applied” in new settings, but as forms of intervention, in different contexts, designed to reposition both teachers and learners. Helen Bailey's contribution turns to the earliest years of education and, in doing so, reminds us of Heathcote's view that Mantle grows out of

children's capacity for imaginative play. She herself described it as "a very advanced form of play, which permits very long and deepening immersion" (n.d. [d]). Bailey's work demonstrates how this progression begins in nursery, where imaginative play is gradually extended into purposeful inquiry, shared responsibility, and collaborative problem-solving. Crucially, Bailey also illustrates another of Heathcote's enduring principles: that learning should always involve "supportive challenge" (Heathcote, 1993c). As Heathcote put it, educational work should be "within reach, but not quite" (1993c); learners require sufficient support to attempt what they could not yet accomplish independently. Bailey's article contains numerous examples of carefully structured progression—seen, for instance, in the introduction of "dramatic tension," from small moments ("The tea is too hot! How can we make it cooler?") to major problems requiring collective action ("Quick! The fire is spreading!"). In this respect, her work resonates strongly with what Vygotsky described as the zone of proximal development, where learning takes place through supported participation in increasingly demanding activity (1978, p. 84).

Manjima Chatterjee examines how process drama can transform the teaching of Economics and Political Science at secondary level. Working with privileged students in an elite Indian school during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chatterjee uses drama not simply to teach economic concepts but to enable students to inhabit the lived realities of marginalisation, inequality, and democratic life. In doing so, she returns us to Heathcote's question: *what kind of citizens are our schools helping to form?* Significantly, the project also breaks down conventional subject boundaries. Heathcote often described drama as a "universal joint" within the curriculum, capable of bringing different disciplines into productive relationship with one another. Here, economic concepts, political structures, ethical questions, and lived experience become inseparable within a single inquiry. Heathcote argued that much school learning remains in "over there" time, dealing with knowledge as though it belongs to another place, another time, or someone else's experience. Drama, by contrast, has the capacity to bring that knowledge into "now" time, "the time of the event" (Heathcote, 1983, p. 695), where it becomes immediate, consequential, and personally significant. Palampur does precisely this. Although the village is fictional, the questions it raises cease to belong only to "over there"; they become questions about the society

the participants themselves inhabit and the responsibilities they bear within it.

Chatterjee's account also returns us to the question of time. Teachers participating in the project found that students not only developed richer and deeper understandings but ultimately covered more conceptual ground than had originally been planned—a striking response to the familiar objection that drama is “too time consuming.” Yet the article also exposes the fragility of such innovations. As conventional accountability structures reasserted themselves after the pandemic, the institutional space for sustained, experiential inquiry narrowed once again.

Chatterjee's reflections invite a question that extends well beyond drama education. If approaches of this kind consistently generate deep engagement and meaningful learning, why do they so often remain peripheral to mainstream educational practice? Part of the answer may lie in the kinds of institutions schools have become. Contemporary systems increasingly privilege forms of learning that can be planned in detail, delivered consistently, and measured against predetermined outcomes. Heathcote's pedagogy asks something different. It invites teachers to create the conditions in which understanding can emerge, through inquiry, collaboration, and responsibility. Such work is necessarily more open, more contingent, and therefore less easily accommodated within cultures of performative accountability.

The question that inevitably follows is one of assessment. If learning is understood as inquiry rather than transmission, and understanding rather than coverage, how should such learning be recognised? Contemporary educational systems increasingly privilege outcomes that can be specified in advance, measured consistently, and evidenced immediately. Heathcote's work challenges this assumption. As Gavin Bolton once observed, “most of the important learning outcomes” in drama “are so difficult to identify, and are linked so clearly with a time sequence, that a teacher's often in a position of not being able to be explicit about what has been learned” (1991). The issue is not that learning has failed to occur, but that some of its most significant consequences emerge gradually and resist simple measurement.

Vaishali Chakravarty takes up the question: how do we recognise learning? Reflecting on her own journey from preparing students for Speech and Drama examinations to developing a broader conception

of assessment, she observes that conventional examinations can reliably assess technical accomplishment—memory, voice, speech, and performance—but reveal remarkably little about the wider educational significance of dramatic work. For Chakravarty, the most important questions are often the slowest to assess. Did students become more willing to take risks? Did they learn to collaborate more attentively? Did they become more curious about other people and perspectives? Did the work change how they understood themselves? Such questions cannot easily be answered through a short performance or a checklist. They require sustained observation, dialogue, and reflection over time. In doing so, Chakravarty reminds us that if education is concerned not simply with the acquisition of knowledge but with the transformation of persons, then our approaches to assessment must also be transformed. If children are crucibles, then assessment cannot simply measure how much knowledge has been poured in.

The next two contributions extend Heathcote's legacy into higher education. In different ways, both Florian Seubert and Laurie Melnik Allen transform the university classroom into a laboratory for thinking, where knowledge is not simply communicated but actively constructed. Seubert revisits one of Heathcote's own pedagogical strategies: the use of maps. Throughout her teaching, Heathcote frequently employed maps as mediating devices—or, in her own terms, *icons*—through which learners could organise experience, and build an imaginative engagement with another “world.” Seubert discusses one such map from the Dorothy Heathcote Archive, before describing his own map-work as part of a literature course for future teachers. Taking Christoph Martin Wieland's *The History of Agathon*, students translate the novel's episodic journey into visual maps, externalising their interpretations and reflecting upon the development of their own thinking. The map is not simply an illustration of learning but a medium through which new understanding is constructed.

Allen similarly invites university students to think through making. Asked to construct five key moments from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* using LEGO bricks, theatre students engage with the play by collaboratively shaping physical representations of its dramatic action. Rather than beginning with explanation or discussion, meaning emerges through the shared task itself. Students are invited to think with their hands as well as their minds, making their interpretations

visible, negotiable, and open to revision. This again embodies the “crucible” model of learning; and demonstrates the principle that thinking is social because it becomes material. This was central to Heathcote’s own praxis: she was always finding ways to direct attention away from teacher and learner, towards a shared object of inquiry (or an “Other” [Heathcote, 2009]).

The next contribution in this section carries Heathcote's work beyond formal education altogether. Bob Selderslaghs asks a deceptively simple question: if dramatic inquiry can enable children and young people to assume responsibility, authority, and meaningful roles, might it do the same for older adults living in residential care? His answer is both moving and thought-provoking. Drawing on Mantle and on Heathcote's dramatic conventions, Selderslaghs invites participants to revisit the many roles they have inhabited throughout their lives—not simply as memories to be recalled, but as identities to be re-entered through embodied, sensory, and narrative inquiry. Rather than positioning residents primarily through the lens of age, dependency, or care, his work begins from a different premise: that every person remains a bearer of experience, agency, and social identity. As Selderslaghs observes, the intention is “not to focus on reminiscence, but to create new worlds that the participants themselves could shape and direct”. Participants are invited to work with images, objects, letters, gestures, and imagined conversations, as dramatic conventions through which new understandings of a life can emerge.

Heathcote saw that, by placing experience within an imagined context, drama creates a safe space, or what she called a “no penalty zone”. At times there may be only a “thin screen” (1991) between lived experience and dramatic action. She wrote:

Mirroring life allows fictional focused social encounters to be explored, reflected on and discussed, within a no penalty zone. Hopefully then, participants can find direct parallels with their actual life experiences, perhaps even understand better the choices available in cultural encounters... The material of dramatic work is that of exploring “what it is to be human.” (2002, p. 1)

Heathcote challenged the assumption that children should leave their lives outside the classroom. She observed: "Normally, what the kids do is they take off their real-world time when they come in and hang their coats up ... and say, 'Go on then—teach me.'" Drama, she argued, offered a different possibility: "Keep your life with you when you come into the classroom. Everything you know is going to be of value" (2007).

The work of Zandile Veronicah Mqwathi in South African schools begins from a similar premise. She describes her work in schools on the Cape Flats, where poverty, violence, and institutional insecurity are part of everyday life. Mqwathi recognises that these realities "inevitably enter the classroom. Learners do not arrive as empty vessels ready to absorb information. They arrive carrying experiences, responsibilities, fears, and hopes that shape how they engage with learning." Operating within the fields of applied theatre and drama therapy, Mqwathi's work creates opportunities for young people to bring their own experiences into dialogue with movement, storytelling, play, and creative exploration.

From the outset, it is grounded in co-creation. Rather than introducing a fixed programme, learners are invited to shape the themes, activities, and forms of participation. In doing so, the project deliberately disrupts traditional classroom hierarchies, repositioning young people as active in their own learning. The use of indirect dramatic forms—such as the exploration of masks—allows questions of identity and belonging to be approached without requiring immediate personal disclosures. Like Heathcote's own concern to "protect children into experience" (1992b), the work seeks to create conditions in which difficult questions may be explored safely through dramatic mediation.

Read together, the contributions in this section suggest that drama can offer what Heathcote and Bolton called "a vision of the possible" (1995, p. 170). It cannot, by itself, remove the social or institutional constraints within which participants live and learn. What it can do is create temporary communities in which different ways of relating, thinking, and working together become imaginable—and, for a time, lived. This was always Heathcote's larger educational ambition: not simply to improve classroom practice, but to offer a glimpse, at least, of

how a more humane, responsible and participatory society might function.¹

The second section turns from contemporary practice to a series of articles that revisit Heathcote's work through archival, historical, and theoretical perspectives. Running through many of these contributions is one of the most distinctive—and perhaps least discussed—aspects of Heathcote's pedagogy: her use of mediating materials. Heathcote herself described this as "an absolute radical shift in the way the teacher prepares work that engages the children, and through that engagement, produces products that are learning product" (1993d). Rather than preparing explanations, she prepared materials—letters, reports, maps, photographs, objects, newspaper cuttings, plans, recordings—that did not simply present information but demanded to be questioned, interpreted, and connected. They did not do the learners' thinking for them; they made thinking necessary.

This was integral to Heathcote's "crucible" conception of learning. Because knowledge was embodied in signs rather than delivered through explanation, teacher and learners could investigate the materials together, continually testing interpretations, making connections, and "stirring" their understandings into new forms. The teacher no longer stood outside the inquiry as the sole source of knowledge. Instead, the materials themselves became the focus of collective attention, mediating relationships between participants, between disciplines, and between the fictional and actual worlds.

Moreover, the materials Heathcote created for dramatic inquiry often functioned as *archives*. They provided the “documentary records” to which participants continually returned as the work unfolded. The materials carried the presence of absent others into the room, preserving the traces of people who had supposedly written, handled, or left them behind. Heathcote's classrooms might therefore be understood as *archives in the making*. As the inquiry developed, new

¹ On one occasion, Heathcote stated: “Schools do not function at all like real communities function, which is a great sadness; and this is an attempt to make a community function” (1994).

materials were continually added by the participants themselves. The classroom became a living record of collective thinking: a place where knowledge was generated, revisited, and transformed through shared action.

It is fitting, therefore, that the second section begins with the Dorothy Heathcote Archive at Manchester Metropolitan University. The Archive reflects the remarkable breadth of her own collaborations—with schools, hospitals, museums, businesses, the National Trust, the police, and many others. She never envisaged it as a repository of completed knowledge hoped it would remain, in her own words, "not just another dry, dusty old archive" (qtd. Hesten, 2012, p. 11), but a resource through which teachers, researchers, artists, and practitioners might continue to interrogate, reinterpret, and extend her work.

The section opens with a conversation conducted by Stig A. Eriksson with Sandra Hesten, whose work with Heathcote in the 1990s established the archive itself. Rebecca Patterson and Alison Ramsay next describe a workshop which they led at the 2025 *Dorothy Heathcote Now* conference. Using some of Heathcote's own dramatic conventions and the strategy of teacher-in-role, the workshop transformed archival materials into the focus of collective inquiry, inviting participants into new relationships, not only with Heathcote's work, but with their own.

On one level, the article and workshop enter into a dialogue with contemporary more-than-human theory. Rather than treating the archive as a passive repository of documents, Patterson and Ramsay invite participants to imagine it as an active participant in the production of meaning, where knowledge emerges through relationships between people, objects, memories, spaces, and atmospheres. Yet this idea is not entirely foreign to Heathcote's own pedagogy. She frequently spoke of documents, images, and works of art as having the capacity to question us in return. She said: "Books read you—so do all arts" (n.d. [e]). Her concern was never simply that participants should interrogate texts and artefacts, but that they should allow themselves to be interrogated *by* them. In this sense, the materials prepared for dramatic inquiry were never passive sources of information. They acted upon participants by provoking questions, unsettling assumptions, and inviting new ways of seeing. Patterson and Ramsay extend this insight by asking what follows if we

understand this reciprocal relationship as a way of thinking about the agency of materials themselves. If Heathcote's dramatic archives brought the traces of human lives into the room, Patterson and Ramsay ask what happens when the archive itself is understood not simply as an active participant in the production of meaning. Whether approached through Heathcote's own pedagogy, or through more-than-human theory, the archive becomes something that acts upon us as we act upon it.

The next article (co-written by William Barlow and myself) reconstructs a transitions project for Year 6 pupils (11-12-year-olds), which Heathcote helped to plan. She again used documents, objects etc., to carry the presence of absent people into the room; and as the project unfolded, the children's own work gradually accumulated alongside these initial materials, covering the walls, until the classroom itself became a visible record of collective inquiry; a “living archive,” in which fragments of understanding, contributed by different participants at different moments, remained available for further reflection and revision.

Stig A. Eriksson describes a workshop he devised for the *Dorothy Heathcote Now* conference. Like several of the preceding contributions, Eriksson's project begins with carefully constructed materials—documents, objects, and fragments of text, that invite interpretation. Participants are not told what has happened; rather, they are required to piece together an imagined society, “C-12,” through traces of its past and present.

“C-12” recalls Manjima Chatterjee's fictional village of Palampur. In both cases, participants enter an invented society that functions as another world “to think in”: sufficiently distant from immediate reality to permit careful inquiry, yet close enough to illuminate questions of justice, responsibility, community, and democratic life. In this way, the fictional world does not distance participants from reality; rather, it makes the familiar strange enough to be seen anew. Eriksson has described this movement as “distancing at close range” (2009). Heathcote herself expressed the same principle more simply: “You always get nearer if you go first away”.² As one participant reflected after the workshop, “we were not discovering a future utopia (or dystopia) in the far distance, but actually speaking about our world”.

² See article by Eriksson in this issue.

If Eriksson's article demonstrates how Heathcote creates "other worlds to think in", Kate Katafiasz asks how those worlds are sustained, to enable us to "go first away" before moving closer. Drawing on semiotics and new materialist philosophy, she argues that Heathcote's conventions are not simply dramatic techniques but carefully constructed boundary-making devices. They invite participants towards "other" experiences while preserving the distinction between the imagined world and the lived reality of the classroom. Heathcote's aim was not to dissolve these boundaries but, in her own words, to keep things "always on the cusp"³—creating spaces in which participants could cross into unfamiliar perspectives without losing the security of their own.

In this reading, the mediating materials that recur throughout Heathcote's work—documents, maps, etc.—do more than establish a fictional world. They protect the participants, by continually directing attention away from the self, and towards a shared object of inquiry. It is this outward orientation that makes it possible to explore difficult ethical, political, emotional, and historical questions. In this way, distancing is not the opposite of engagement; it is the condition that makes deep engagement possible.

The final contribution in the issue opens the conversation beyond Heathcote's own pedagogical tradition. Chetna Mehrotra's study of participatory theatre draws more explicitly on the work of Augusto Boal and related traditions of applied theatre. Working with psychology students in South India, Mehrotra explores how participatory performance can create opportunities for students to examine relationships of power, inequality, and social responsibility through embodied practice. In contrast to Heathcote's characteristic use of fictional worlds, mediating materials, and what she described as "protection" into emotion, Mehrotra's work engages more directly with participants' lived experience and their rehearsal of ethical action.

Yet the relationship between these approaches is perhaps best understood through Paulo Freire, whose work profoundly influenced both Heathcote and Boal. Heathcote referred to Freire's understanding of *praxis* as "action-reflection," describing it as the very heart of drama education. She insisted: "Theatre is action-reflection. Drama is action-reflection." She recognised that drama could proceed in different ways:

³ See article by Katafiasz in this issue.

"You can create a kind of parallel to what it is you really want to look at, or you can look directly at what you want to look at. The choice is yours." What mattered was not the route taken, but "the question, and the quality of the question underneath" that made learning possible (Heathcote 1989). Heathcote and Boal, then, both understood the classroom and the theatre as places for action-reflection. Both traditions ask how education might enable people not simply to understand the world, but to participate in changing it.

In 2008, Heathcote remarked: "Bringing our school system into the twenty first century may seem a frightening prospect but not so dangerous as continuing to function in 19th century attitudes" (2010, pp.87-88). She cited education researcher David Williamson Shaffer, who observed that traditional schooling often operates like a game with fixed rules, where success depends on following instructions, producing correct answers, and demonstrating knowledge in prescribed ways (2010, p.88). Throughout her career, Heathcote challenged precisely this model of education. She questioned educational models in which knowledge is transmitted, authority remains concentrated in the teacher, and learning is valued chiefly through predetermined outcomes that can be readily measured.

The alternative she proposed was never simply "more drama." It was a different conception of education itself. In Heathcote's classrooms, young people were not prepared merely for examinations or employment, but for participation in society. Teachers were not asked simply to deliver a curriculum, but to create the conditions in which understanding, judgement, and agency might develop.

For all the changes that have taken place in education since Heathcote first articulated these ideas, the questions she posed remain remarkably current. If anything, an era characterised by performative accountability and rapid technological change makes them more urgent. New technologies alone cannot transform education if they simply reinforce nineteenth-century assumptions about learning. The deeper challenge is to rethink the relationships between teacher and learner, knowledge and responsibility, schools and society.

Heathcote's final appeal was directed not only to policymakers but to all of us: "Let us free our teachers into the same creative risks." With

characteristic directness, she asked: "Wouldn't it be nice if our schools could move into the 21st century instead of holding on to 19th century models?" (2010, p. 98)

The articles collected here are themselves invitations to those creative risks. What unites them is a common refusal to treat learners as vessels waiting to be filled. Each begins from the assumption that people become knowledgeable through participation, responsibility, inquiry, and encounter. Together, they demonstrate what Heathcote hoped her archive and her practice would become: living resources for teachers, researchers, artists and communities still asking the questions that mattered most to her—what are schools for, and what sort of society do we want?

SUGGESTED CITATION

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The Wild Things Go to School

CECILY O'NEILL

Conclusion by [DAVID ALLEN](#)

ABSTRACT

Dorothy Heathcote's approach to drama in education redefines teaching as the creation of shared learning experiences rather than the transmission of knowledge. Drama serves as a process-oriented method that engages students in meaningful, collaborative tasks, encouraging inquiry, reflection, problem-solving, and personal growth. In this article, these principles are illustrated through the work of Sylvia Walton Jackson, an elementary teacher who embraced Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach. In a literacy unit based on Where the Wild Things Are, students became "experts" responsible for teaching fictional Wild Things how to read. Through role-play, research, writing, planning, and collaboration, they developed stronger reading skills while gaining confidence, responsibility, and a deeper understanding of themselves as learners. Sylvia's use of teacher-in-role transformed traditional classroom relationships, positioning students as capable contributors rather than passive recipients of instruction. The project demonstrates how drama can reorganize authority, foster agency, and

make learning socially meaningful.

The teacher's task in any classroom is to serve the learner, and the aim of all classroom interactions is to provide conditions in which learning can take place. The drama teacher has the same purpose, although in drama the interactions which occur may be unusual in their nature, unpredictable in their development and unexpected in their learning outcomes. Drama is likely to produce changes in the existing skills, relationships and social structures of the classroom. Dorothy Heathcote has defined the teacher's function as the creation of shared learning situations. In everything she has said or written about drama and education, she stressed that it is necessary for teachers to become process-oriented so that fruitful encounters between self, students, ideas, knowledge can develop.

Process-orientation means devising programs and tasks which induct through first intriguing, then engaging and interesting our pupils. (Johnson and O'Neill, 1984)

As Jerome Bruner (1986) makes clear in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, an ideal education partakes of the spirit of a forum, with negotiation and recreation of meaning at its heart. He suggests that teachers can aim to become more than mere transmission devices. They can become Human Events.

While I was working at The Ohio State University, I encountered several gifted African-American teachers who clearly operated in their classrooms as Human Events. My colleague Anita Manley and I edited *Dreamseekers* (Manley and O'Neill, 1997) in order to capture a sense of the practice and philosophy of these teachers. The book was published in the USA by Heinemann and received the Distinguished Book Award from AATE, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education. It is now out of print.

The late Sylvia A. Walton Jackson was among the contributors. Sylvia was a Kindergarten and Grade One teacher at Indianola Alternative Elementary School in Columbus. She was a teacher of considerable sensitivity, skill and experience who encouraged her students to accept responsibility, make discoveries and see

themselves as learners. When she began to include drama in her work, she immediately realized its possibilities. Each of the following possibilities offers an intriguing starting point for a worthwhile learning experience and suggests the depth of learning that will follow.

Drama is the next best thing to being there.

Drama is not a performance,

Not closure to practiced lines.

It is a process

It is walking in the shoes of Abraham Lincoln's wife

It is being an African American child on the bus in Mississippi in the 1960's

It is a dialogue between neighbours who witnessed the crime at the house next door.

An interview with Geronimo

Diaries and journals

Letters found in pockets of soldiers from the civil war or the old lady next door

It is a detective studying the trash to collect clues to a mystery

Drama is helping the Three Bears get over the trauma of having their house broken into.

Or creating a solution to an energy crisis

Or being oil executives considering proposals for cleaning up an oil spill,

Or building a society on another planet, a new government,

And developing uses for its natural resources.

Drama is using background knowledge,

Researching new information and applying it to narrative

It is traveling through time and returning with an artifact

It is keeping a diary of your experiences

Drama allows you to go where you will never go,

See what you will never see,

Do what you have never done

It requires cooperation, communication, problem solving.

Research, creativity and reflection

Reflection that allows for making concrete the abstraction

Finding closure after the drama

Finding the life application

Making connections to life

to literature
to connect to big ideas
Life lessons

When she encountered the work of Dorothy Heathcote, Sylvia immediately realised the learning opportunities suggested by Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach, which gains commitment from the students, provides a task-oriented approach and sets up a framework where discipline is implicit and self-generated. The roles the students adopt raise their status and affirm their competence even as they work towards acquiring it. Like Heathcote, Sylvia understood that she must limit her own expertise so that the expertise of her students is increased.

She writes,

My primary instructional strategy is Mantle of the Expert. I use it as a kind of umbrella that covers a whole unit of study. It allows me not only to teach the subject externally but to get the students to internalise the ideas and concepts as well as the feelings and beliefs that are part of that learning situation. The students become 'experts' so they must deal with the same kind of issues and problems as real experts. (Walton Jackson, 1997, p. 26)

In other words, she creates shared learning situations.

Sylvia was excited by the possibility of using drama across the curriculum. She was interested in exploring ways in which drama could illuminate and enrich her broader purposes as a teacher. One of her continuing concerns was finding ways to improve her students' reading skills. *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) was one of her student's favourite books so she devised a simple but most effective drama framework to address these essential teacher concerns.

The key strategy Sylvia used was to take on a role in the drama. The willingness of the teacher to enter and build the fictional world is a powerful means of altering the balance of power in the classroom and changing student/teacher relationships. The purpose of taking on a role is to invite students to enter the fictional world and help to extend, oppose or transform what is happening. Contributions from both teacher and students are equally valid.

Sylvia created a large medallion, carrying the label 'MAX', which

she wore on a ribbon around her neck. She told her students that when she's wearing the medallion, she will be in role as 'Max', who is now an adult. She will be their teacher, Mrs. Jackson, when she is not wearing the medallion. It was remarkable to watch Sylvia moving smoothly in and out of role, as she switched from 'Max' to Mrs. Jackson, and back again, in response to her students' needs.

'Max' tells the class that he is very concerned about the Wild Things. Ever since the first time he had sailed to their island to meet the Wild Things, Max has been writing them letters, postcards and Christmas cards, but has never received a reply. So Max decided to set sail to once more. When he reached the island, he could see from a distance the Wild Things sitting dejectedly in a circle. In the middle of the circle was a huge heap of all the letters and cards he had written them. Suddenly, Max realised the truth. The Wild Things could not read. Now Max had come to the children to ask their help with this problem. Grown-ups were no use, since they couldn't see the Wild Things. Would the students help him to teach the creatures to read?

The children eagerly accepted the challenge. They spent time in finding out where the Wild Things lived, and planning how to travel there so they could transport the creatures back to the classroom. Mapping, designing, problem-solving and decision-making were all part of this phase of the work. The students took great pains to prepare the classroom to receive the Wild Things. They considered the kind of environment which would be comfortable for the creatures, so the classroom was transformed to look as much like a jungle as possible. Every item in the room was labelled by the children to assist the Wild Things as they began to acquire reading skills. Then they created large Wild Things out of construction paper and arranged them around the room. Sylvia paired the students so that they could support each other in their reading. The children were able to call upon her in the role of "Max" to resource and assist them in their teaching task.

The children made Big Books for the creatures, and prepared other reading materials which they hoped would appeal to them. They found clever ways of pretending that their Wild Things did the work which they had done themselves. The Wild Things wrote several books, and some students read their stories aloud to the class in squeaky voices. Each child kept a Project Record Book for their Wild Thing, in which the creatures wrote about what they did each day. Lessons in classroom behaviour, morality, and even appropriate

cuisine for the Wild Things were included as the work progressed. At one point, Sylvia invited the Reading Consultant for the area to come and work with the children to re-enforce their instructional strategies as they taught their Wild Things how to read.

At the beginning of this unit, Sylvia had asked the children to list the strategies they used to help themselves read. At the end of the work, she did the same, and the children's list of strategies was more extensive, much more creative and clearly demonstrated an understanding of the reading/writing connection. They had acquired a considerable number of new strategies to improve their own reading skills.

It seems clear that the children had explored their sense of themselves as Learners. The process of learning to read had been brought into explicit focus, but the activity remained one in which they possessed both status and competence. They actively promoted their own learning as well as that of the imaginary Wild Things, and both inside and outside the drama they grew in skills and confidence.

As Bloome (1983) points out, "the cognitive skills that people learn through their participation in reading events depend on the nature of the reading events themselves". Clearly the "reading event" in which Sylvia's students took part was a co-operative enterprise, a shared learning experience.

Through the drama they had achieved a perspective on the reading process from which they could reflect positively on their own learning. The tasks required of them by the drama and the roles in which they operated altered the social structure of the event, which, as Tierney and Rogers (1986) found, influences the extent to which students are involved in the processes of reading and writing and the extent to which they collaborate with others and use various cognitive strategies. In John Dewey's words, Sylvia had "secured the active co-operation of the pupils in construction of the purposes involved in their studying. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey suggests that purpose in education is above all a co-operative enterprise between teacher and students. It develops through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process, and through reciprocal give and take, "the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give".

Dewey is describing the kind of learning situation in which the quality of teachers as individuals is as important as their professional

function. This is something that Dorothy Heathcote had always known. She wanted teachers to be centred in self, so that they would truly understand their own needs, the needs of the work and the needs of the students. In *Of These Seeds Becoming*, an account of her work presented as a poetic essay, Heathcote writes:

Our work need fit no mould given it by others.
If it makes a change in people of some worthy kind—
And not all out work can be perfectly judged to bring about this
change—
then we can call it work and leave the labelling on one side.
The work of all teachers is unique. (1978, p. 20)

Sylvia, in reflecting on the first drama course she took, also chose to express herself outside the constraints of prose. She writes of the discoveries she made about herself and her students through using drama in her classroom. Sylvia and her students are engaged in a dynamic, reciprocal learning process.

I realise that through drama I know
Them as they are better
I know who I am better
And I know who we are together—better.
I resist my needs to control the direction of the drama
and find it takes shapes I could never have planned for
and will never forget
I have found in drama an opportunity
to be part of their world without force
I'm invited in
sharing rules
where no one loses.
listening to how they think
allows me to know
where to start teaching
I have found that it's when
I don't know all the answers
is when they become involved and
I am most effective because
they are in charge and it is theirs

and they know that I am like them
playing inventing enjoying
creating appreciating growing,
being me.

CONCLUSION by David Allen

Cecily O'Neill's account reminds us of what is at stake in Heathcote's work when it is understood not as technique, but as a reorganisation of the social and imaginative conditions of learning. The "Wild Things" project did not simply use drama to "engage" children in reading. Rather, it established a long-term fictional world that redistributed responsibility, reconfigures authority, and gives literacy an urgent social purpose. The children did not practise reading in preparation for some future application; they became responsible for teaching others to read. In doing so, they encountered themselves differently—not merely as pupils completing tasks, but as competent agents within a shared enterprise.

What the "Wild Things" project demonstrates particularly clearly is the way Mantle of the Expert reverses the usual relationship to knowledge. The children were not positioned as deficient learners who must improve their reading because adults have determined it necessary. Instead, they became responsible for helping others to learn. The "Wild Things" cannot read; therefore the children must develop the knowledge, strategies, and understanding needed to teach them. In the process of becoming teachers of reading, they themselves become more reflective, capable, and self-aware readers. Learning emerges through the obligation to make knowledge usable for someone else. This reversal was central to Heathcote's thinking. Rather than positioning young people primarily through lack—what they cannot yet do—she sought to place them within frames of competence, agency, and social usefulness. I was reminded of this when working with Dorothy on a transitions project. Rather than framing the students as young people anxiously "going through transitions," she positioned them as Life Coaches responsible for helping others navigate periods of change. Again, the shift was profound. Students were no longer cast as problems to be managed or recipients of guidance, but as thoughtful agents capable of supporting and advising others. In both cases, Mantle reorganised the learner's

relation to knowledge by relocating them from the position of need to the position of responsibility.

In some contemporary interpretations, Mantle of the Expert has been adopted primarily as a strategy for curriculum engagement, often compressed into short-term activities that leave the underlying structures of schooling untouched. Cecily's article returns us to a more radical understanding. Here, the dramatic fiction reorganises time itself, allowing for sustained inquiry, revisiting, reflection, and elaboration. Knowledge emerges relationally, through problem-solving, collaboration, and negotiated action, rather than through transmission alone. Authority is not abolished, but redistributed. Sylvia Walton Jackson deliberately withheld her own knowledge and expertise, so that the expertise of the children could grow.

Equally significant is the transformation of the teacher-student relationship. Sylvia's reflections reveal a teacher willing to relinquish mastery in order to enter a reciprocal process of learning. "I'm invited in," she writes. This is not the language of control, nor even of facilitation in the narrow sense. It signals openness to a new educational relation in which teacher and students become co-participants in the construction of meaning. The teacher remains responsible for shaping the conditions of the work, but no longer stands outside it as the sole owner of knowledge or direction.

What emerges through Cecily's account is therefore not simply a model for curriculum delivery, but a proposition about the kind of social world schooling might become. Heathcote's legacy lies not only in dramatic method, but in her insistence that classrooms can function as spaces where responsibility, reciprocity, attentiveness, and collective agency are practised. Drama was the medium, but the larger concern was always the organisation of learning, responsibility, and community; and how education itself might be based in more participatory and humane forms of relation. This work depends not upon technique alone, but upon teachers willing, as Sylvia was, to become participants in a common enterprise of meaning-making.

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Between Worlds: The Function of Twilight Role

[TIM TAYLOR](#)

ABSTRACT

In Mantle of the Expert, much depends on the teacher's voice. Not the dramatic voice of full role, and not the instructional voice of the classroom, but something more subtle and responsive. Dorothy Heathcote called this position 'twilight role'. It is where the fiction is held in mind while the work of curriculum continues.

Note: A version of this article was published in April 2026 in [Oracy Cambridge](#).

Heathcote defined four different modes or types of teacher-in-role:

INDICATIVE MODE: This is the smallest shift into role in which you indicate the relationship to the circumstance. Change from teacher role could be indicated by the tone of voice and small shift in language use. It is the least expressive mode.

This is sometimes called a "twilight" role.

EXPRESSIVE MODE: There is some physical shift but no change in the tools that are used, e.g. [there is no] dressing up or changing the outward appearance in some way. The role might have a sign (but it's a normal sort of sign e.g. holding a note pad)

DEFINITIVE MODE: The role is sustained longer but you still operate as the teacher helping them move forward. Permission to be longer in the role is negotiated with the class. It's more carefully set up. You might use a few more additions or positionings e.g. sitting behind a desk. It's much more definitive—I define the place as well as me.

The fourth “mode” is when someone else is in role, and the teacher facilitates:

FULL ROLE: Always uses somebody other than the ‘director’ [teacher/facilitator] of the drama. Full role is prepared carefully and fully expressive. Is unable to move in and out of role easily. Teacher or the director becomes the enabler of the drama, the negotiator to help the class have the access they need to the role (Dorothy Heathcote Archive, 1991).

Dorothy Heathcote’s description of different modes of teacher-in-role helps to place what is often called the “twilight role.” At one end, the shift into role can be very slight—perhaps just a change in tone or language (what she calls here the indicative mode). At the other, the role becomes more fully realised and sustained. Seen this way, the twilight role isn’t simply a weaker version of being “in role,” but a particular way of working. It allows the teacher to step into the fiction while still staying close to themselves and to the needs of the group.

This kind of positioning sits comfortably within process drama and Mantle of the Expert, where the teacher is not performing for the class but working with them inside the unfolding situation. Because the role is lightly held, it can shift quickly, respond to what students offer, and keep the work open rather than fixed. In that sense, twilight role supports a more collaborative way of learning, where ideas are built together rather than delivered. Twilight role thus enables shared meaning-making. The teacher remains close to their own voice, while still working within the fiction; this means there is more space for ideas

to be shaped together rather than directed from the outside. This aligns with the view of learning as something that develops through interaction and co-construction (as described by Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner). Tiina Moore suggests that, “with twilight role, both support and handover of responsibility are within arm’s reach. It is the gaps and grey areas that lend themselves to student input, self-direction and co-authorship” (Moore, 2013, p. 22).

This shift can also be understood in relation to Brian Edmiston’s idea of “positioning” in drama. When the teacher works in this way, they are not only changing their own role, but also the position of the students—inviting them into a more active and responsible relationship to the work. As Edmiston writes, “Every time I wonder what ‘we’ should do... I position the whole group... as facing problems together where everyone’s power and authority can be valued” (2003, p. 227)

Heathcote herself spoke about the different ways a twilight role can function within the classroom. In conversation with Tiina Moore, she described how it might be used to offer a hypothetical voice (“I wonder if...”), to seek out information, or to show a particular point of view without closing things down. At times, it can help to slow the action or hold it in suspension, giving the group space to think, while at others it can move the drama forward, drawing the class into a shared sense of “we.” It can even sit inside the action as a form of storytelling. Seen in this way, the twilight role is a flexible way of shaping and supporting what is happening in the room (Moore, 2013, p. 18).

This piece grows out of observing a single lesson (at Bradshaw Primary School, taught by Alison Lockwood), rather than a formal research project. I was present as an observer, and what follows is a reflection on what I saw, alongside ideas drawn from Abbott’s M.Ed. dissertation, ‘Four Projections of Role’, where he discusses “twilight” and “full” role, as well as the importance for the teacher of negotiating with the class, and moving in-and-out of role. The intention is not to present systematic findings, but to draw out and think through some of the implications of the work for classroom practice (Abbott, 1982).

Imagine a class of children in Year 2, aged six and seven. They are studying the Great Fire of London using the Mantle of the Expert

approach. Their teacher has brought them into the fiction by representing King Charles II and casting them as a team of firefighters. Their commission is to find a way to stop the fire before it gets completely out of control and destroys the city.

Their first step is to look at a map of the city's streets, prepared in advance by the teacher. It is drawn on a large sheet of paper. She asks the children to sit in a circle and rolls it out in front of them. As she does, she explains what is happening and what she wants the students to do.

This sounds simple enough. A teacher unrolls a map and explains the task. But a number of complex choices are bound up in this apparently straightforward action. What is she going to say, and how is she going to say it? Are the teacher and class inside the story or outside it? Is this act of looking at the map something the students are doing in their classroom, learning about the layout of London at the time of the fire? Or is it the firefighting team planning their next move? Or is it both? And if it is both, what language should the teacher choose: the language of the firefighters or the language of the classroom?

This is the function of twilight role. The teacher does not step entirely outside the fiction, nor does she fully disappear into it. Instead, she works across the boundary, speaking in a way that belongs to both worlds at once. She is teacher and colleague, facilitator and team member. The position is deliberately ambiguous, yet the purpose remains clear, so the class are not confused about what they are doing or why they are doing it.

To illustrate, here is an example of the kind of language she might use:

“I thought we’d start by looking at this map marking the layout of the city. You can see here the Thames flowing from west to east, and the different occupied areas north and south of the river.”

Who is speaking here? It could be the teacher or it could be a colleague within the team. The language works in both worlds, yet it is carefully chosen, drawing attention to specific areas of learning.

She continues:

“Our first job is to look at the buildings in this part of the city. As you know, most housing is made of wood with thatched straw roofs. The city has grown so quickly that there is little space between the buildings. Here’s a drawing.”

She puts a picture on the board showing typical housing at the time.

Again, her words could belong to either world. The act of showing the drawing, however, clearly belongs to the classroom. The firefighters would already be familiar with the buildings; the students are not. Her aim is to address the learning objective, but she does so in a way that remains faithful to the fiction.

She says, “I expect you can see the problem.” She pauses, waiting to see whether the students recognise it for themselves. She avoids saying, “Who can tell me why this is a problem?” That would be a teacher question, not one from inside the story, and it would pull them out of the fiction. If the students do not see it, she continues:

The houses are so close together, the fire can jump from one roof to the other. Once the straw catches fire there is nothing that can be done. And this wind doesn’t help.

Again, she conveys the teaching points while sounding like a member of the team speaking to colleagues.

She carries on:

“Before we do anything else, we need a clear idea of the buildings in the path of the fire. If you head back to your tables you’ll find small pieces of paper and pencils. Let’s start drawing the houses and other buildings and placing them on the map, one building per piece. I’ll put some pictures on the board that might help.”

The first sentence sits firmly inside the fictional world, in what Dorothy Heathcote called ‘now time’ (1980/2014), yet it still makes sense in the

classroom. The rest of the instruction moves more clearly outside the fiction, since the firefighters would not literally be doing this at that moment in their world. Nevertheless, the teacher avoids sounding didactic. Her language remains invitational and collaborative. Rather than saying, “I want you to...” or “you have to...”, she says “let’s”, implying shared responsibility.

In fact, the students’ role has shifted. By asking them to draw the buildings and add them to the map, the teacher has moved them from being firefighters within the story to being co-creators of its artefacts outside. They have become world builders, like set designers, costume designers and script writers working on a film or play. They are no longer characters caught up in the ‘now time’ of 1666, but the people co-creating the story and making the resources needed to bring it to life.

Children are used to holding more than one reality in mind at the same time. They do this constantly in imaginative play. A child can be a dragon, or a miner, or a firefighter while also knowing perfectly well they are standing in a classroom. They are not confused by these different layers of reality and they move between them without difficulty.

What holds those layers together is not their ability to explain what they are doing, but their understanding of why they are doing it. Purpose gives the experience coherence. It makes the frame secure.

In this example, the teacher has carefully established a storyline that the children understand and have helped to create. Drawing the buildings is not an arbitrary classroom task. It is directly connected to the king’s commission. When they begin sketching the houses, they are not wondering, ‘Why are we doing this?’ The reason is already embedded in the context: the firefighters need to understand why the fire is spreading, and for that they need a map that makes the problem visible.

The creation of the map, however, does not take place at the same chronological time as the fire in 1666. As they draw, the children are no longer in the immediate unfolding time of the fire, nor are they fully inhabiting the role of firefighters. They have stepped into a different temporal position, what Heathcote called ‘reflective time’ or ‘Great Time’ (Heathcote et al, 1988).

This is the twilight space between the classroom and the story. Here the children can stand back from the unfolding events in the

fiction, reflect on what is happening, investigate it more deeply, and work on materials—maps, writing, models and other artefacts—that enrich and further develop the context.

The children can occupy this space without difficulty because the teacher's choice of language provides a sense of stability and coherence. By remaining inside both worlds simultaneously, she maintains the equilibrium of the shared fiction. It is a kind of balancing act, where the careful choice of language keeps the frame secure while allowing movement between classroom and story, between action and reflection, without breaking the continuity of the work.

“As you finish one building, please add it to the map and go back and start another. We need to see more clearly what's going on so we can make sensible decisions. Up until now, everyone has been working in the dark.”

This capability to occupy the twilight area is an essential dimension of the Mantle of the Expert approach and of how drama can function as a medium for learning. Unlike more conventional drama, where participants step deliberately in and out of the fictional world, in Mantle of the Expert they spend extended periods of time in the space between. They keep the world of the story firmly in mind while standing slightly outside it, creating, reflecting, generating ideas and shaping the materials that allow the context to deepen and develop.

The students continue to work on drawing buildings and putting them on the map. As they work, the teacher goes around the class, having conversations, offering support where needed and giving feedback. She does this while holding the frame in mind, speaking in the twilight voice.

“What's this? A cat! I hadn't thought about the pets! Oh, what do you think we should do? Let's ask the others. I'm sorry everyone, can you stop working for a moment? One of the firefighters has found a cat in a building close to the fire. Should we just leave it, or try and rescue it? We have a lot to do. Perhaps we should just leave the pets – they can look after themselves, can't they?”

There's a lively discussion about what to do about the pets. You can imagine how it goes.

“Well, if you think there is time. We can only do our best. Carry on.”

The students go back to their drawings. The teacher visits another table.

“Ah, this building is going to be a problem. Is there anyone living there at the moment? Where are they? I see. Can you add them to the drawing? We’re going to need to talk to them about leaving and finding somewhere safe to go, maybe down by the river.”

The students continue for a while longer, and then the teacher brings them back round the map.

“Sorry, to stop you, everyone, but we need to get together and take a look at the map. There are reports the fire is spreading even faster than we thought, and we might need to take drastic measures. Bring your drawings with you.”

The class returns to the carpet. Some drawings are already on the map; others are still in their hands.

The teacher continues.

“So, let’s see what we’re up against. There does seem to be a cluster of houses in this part of the city. Do you think this might be where the fire started? Has anyone heard any rumours?”

One of the students says they heard it started in a bakery, when sparks from an oven jumped onto dry straw covering the floor.

The teacher builds on this.

“Oh, that would be terrible! How many times have we told people to be careful about open fires and putting them out at night! Well, it makes sense it started there, it’s spreading east to west, blown by the wind. Lets’ have a look at the buildings in its path. Those of you who have drawings can you add them to the map.”

The teacher continues to make observations.

“Oh dear. This is going to be a real problem. Look at the way the houses are jumbled together along those tiny narrow streets. Once the fire reaches this part of the city there is going to be no stopping it, and it is only a short distance to the centre and the king's palace. Is there anything we can do?”

A conversation follows in which the students draw on what they learned about the fire in previous lessons. One of them suggests pulling down buildings in the path of the flames, something the real firefighters did at the time.

The teacher picks this up.

“Yes, I think it may have come to this. I can't think of another solution that is going to work. The king did say we must do whatever is necessary. But what about the people living in those houses? What are we going to say to them?”

They discuss the options.

The teacher asks, “Who was it that drew the person in the house? Could you tell us something about them? Ah, I see. And she lives alone? Oh, not alone—she's got a cat. And you say she's quite elderly. Well, let's talk to her and see if we can persuade her to leave. I'll be the elderly lady.”

The teacher moves onto a chair, a sign the children recognise as meaning she is going into full role. She says,

“Why are you here?”

The students, speaking as the firefighters, explain the situation and try to convince her to leave.

The lady replies, “I don't want to leave. This is my home. Can't you put out the fire?”

The firefighters tell her that they cannot, and that the fire is out of control. “But I don’t want you to pull down my house. I’ve lived here all my life. I grew up here. I had my children here. What is to become of me? What about all my possessions? What about my cat?”

The students, speaking as the firefighters, do their best to explain, but they soon need help.

To help them, the teacher comes out of role.

“This is a tricky situation, isn’t it? This must have been something the firefighters at the time had to cope with. Why do you think she is so upset? Is there anything we could say to reassure her?”

The teacher and the students discuss options. The teacher talks to them about what happened at the time and how people had to be taken over the river and housed in temporary accommodation, some in tents, others in the homes of people who offered to open their doors.

She goes back into role, to give the students the opportunity to use this information.

“Where am I to go?” the elderly lady asks. “If you pull down my house, I will have nowhere to live.”

The firefighters explain that she will be housed in temporary accommodation and that her house will be rebuilt, this time in brick, with a tiled roof, so it will be safer from fire. Reluctantly, the lady agrees. The firefighters fetch her cat and load her most precious possessions onto the back of a horse-drawn cart. And this part of the story ends. Just in time for phonics.

Twilight role is not simply a position between teacher and character. It is also the place Heathcote described as ‘Great Time’, where chronological time and reflective time overlap. In that space, there is “time to savour, time to perceive and time to reflect” (Heathcote et al, 1988); events continue to unfold, but they can also be examined,

shaped and redirected. Students can act and reflect at once.

It is also the place where things are made. Maps, drawings, plans, writing. Much of what happens there might look ordinary without the frame. Children sit at tables, sketch buildings, discuss options. Yet the fiction gives those activities purpose and meaning, as well as excitement. The map matters because the fire is spreading. The drawing matters because a decision has consequences. The discussion matters because someone may lose their home. These things are both urgent and important inside the world of the story.

The teacher maintains the tension through her choice of language. She keeps the urgency of the story alive even while the work slows down. She introduces knowledge without stepping outside the frame. She shifts between action and reflection without announcing the shift. The balance is subtle and deliberate.

Twilight role asks a great deal of the teacher. It demands attention to purpose, judgement about tone, and the ability to hold more than one position at once. It is neither full immersion nor formal discussion. It is the working space where the fiction remains in focus and curriculum activities find meaning and purpose. It sits at the heart of Mantle of the Expert, working almost like an alchemy, bringing the context to life and turning ordinary classroom activity into something immediate and exciting. But it is not without its challenges. Gavin Bolton sees it as part of Heathcote's somewhat idiosyncratic terminology, that might at times seem difficult to grasp (2003, p. 142). In practice, because the shift into role is so slight, it relies on the teacher's sensitivity and judgement in the moment—knowing when to step in, when to hold back, and how to signal the frame clearly enough for students to follow. For some learners, particularly those less familiar with drama-based approaches, the ambiguity might be unsettling, and there is a risk of possible confusion about what is “in role” and what is not. It also places certain demands on classroom management, as the teacher is working within the fiction while still attending to the group. As with much of Heathcote's practice, its effectiveness depends not only on the strategy itself but on the experience of the teacher and the context in which it is used.

Although the example discussed here comes from a Year 2 class exploring the Great Fire of London, twilight role is not confined to that particular context. Heathcote herself used similar positioning with different age groups and purposes. In one drama with a Year 6 class,

for example, where the children were interviewing someone in full role, she took on the position of a “colleague,” quietly noting down what was said, her pencil tucked behind her ear and ready when needed. In another, working with older students, she adopted the role of a “recorder,” moving among the group, and capturing the questions that were beginning to emerge. In each case, the shift into role was slight, but purposeful: it allowed her to stay within the work while supporting it from alongside. The same approach can be adapted across ages and topics, with changes in tone and complexity, but always with this sense of the teacher entering the work lightly. It is less a fixed method than a way of positioning oneself in relation to the group and the unfolding drama.

SOME POINTERS ON USING TWILIGHT ROLE

Sound authentic.

The voice should feel natural. It is measured, purposeful speech that could plausibly belong to a colleague within the team. Avoid exaggerated tone or artificial language. If it would not sound credible in the situation, do not use it.

Listen and build on the students’ ideas.

Twilight role depends on responsiveness. What happens next should grow, where possible, from what the students introduce. Their drawings, suggestions and questions can open new lines of inquiry. The teacher’s task is to recognise which contributions deepen the work and to shape them carefully into the unfolding context.

Do not ask questions you already know the answer to.

A classroom checking question can pull the children out of the story. If the purpose of the question is simply to test recall, it belongs outside the fiction. In twilight role, questions should arise from genuine uncertainty within the situation.

Use collaborative language.

Speak as if you are part of a team working alongside colleagues. Use “we” and “let’s” with intention. This does not mean surrendering

authority, but it does mean framing decisions as shared responsibilities rather than instructions issued from above.

Avoid overshooting.

Do not dilute your authority in an effort to appear collaborative. Twilight role is not about pretending to hand over control or asking for permission you do not need. The authority is real, but it is exercised through consultation rather than command.

Keep the tension in mind.

The fiction carries urgency. Even when the work slows down into drawing, writing or discussion, the underlying problem remains. The teacher's language should continue to signal that something is at stake. Without that tension, the activity risks becoming procedural rather than purposeful.

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Tim Taylor is a teacher, author, and trainer. He began teaching in 1995 in a first school in Norwich. Since then, he has worked in schools across the UK and internationally, including New Zealand, Palestine, the USA, Iceland, and across Europe. His work with teachers and students focuses on developing Mantle of the Expert as a way of creating learning contexts that are engaging, meaningful, and purposeful for children. He is the author of *A Beginner's Guide to Mantle of the Expert* and, with Viv Aitken, *Try This: Unlocking Learning with Imagination*, and is web manager for www.mantleoftheexpert.com.

Teaching in Four Positions across Worlds

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ABSTRACT

*In this companion to Tim Taylor's insightful article, *Between Worlds: The Function of Twilight Role*, I turn to Positioning Theory to understand in more complexity how and why as teachers we can use twilight role alongside full role to deepen and extend teaching and learning with drama particularly when using the mantle of the expert approach. I outline four positions that a teacher can adopt when interacting with the students both in the world of the classroom and as if engaging in a fictional or story world. I analyze an example of my teaching when alongside a class of five- and six-year-old children we imagined we were a team of firefighters. I chose the example to complement Tim's so that readers could compare teaching about similar themes though in different contexts.*

For over a century dramatic approaches have been used in education to support learning and teaching in all content areas. Since the leading practitioner and scholar Dorothy Heathcote applied Role Theory to the use of drama in education (1984), we've understood that when teachers and students are talking and moving as if they are in the world of a story they can imagine from the viewpoints of people in that story world. In doing so, teachers and young people are usually referred to as being in a role. Significantly, all can have meaningful dialogue from and with perspectives beyond the typical viewpoints adopted in the roles of teacher and students in the everyday world of a classroom.

When a teacher or students are for a brief or extended time fully representing another person in a story world, they can be thought of being in **full role**. Recently, working with children in kindergarten, I was in full role whenever I represented a fire chief having put on a fire chief's ball cap to speak with the authority of a person in charge a fire station to a team of firefighters. The children were in full role as if they were the team of firefighters. As Gavin Bolton stresses, for most of the time when using drama, "The teacher is neither fully in role nor fully out of role but occupies a '**twilight**' **position** between the two" (1992). Significantly, Bolton refers to the position of the teacher in that liminal space. In this paper I turn to Positioning Theory to understand in more complexity how and why we can use **twilight role** in addition to **full role** intending to deepen and extend learning when using any of the dramatic approaches developed by Heathcote, including mantle of the expert, which collectively I have called dramatic inquiry (Edmiston & Towler-Evans, 2022).

Learning is more than acquiring knowledge and skills while over time becoming more competent and developing understanding. Central to Heathcote's pedagogy is the belief that the young people in our care are always in the process of becoming. When we engage in humanizing dialogue and inquiry as we use drama with students, they may become more humanizing in their understanding of the world as well as in their attitude toward other people, themselves, and whatever content we explore with them.

In my recent classroom teaching in the project that I led one

morning with a class of twenty-five 6- and 7-year-olds, the children gained knowledge about firefighting while practicing social skills such as collaboration. The young children all imagined they were in the role of firefighters. I took on two full roles as the fire chief and in the role of a distraught Mr. Green who had called for help because his cat at the top of a tree looked like it might fall. The full roles of a fire chief and a cat owner had different authority from my role as teacher. As a fire chief I was responsible for the safe operations of firefighters at work. As Mr. Green I cared about the life of my cat. At the same time, as a guest, though still in the role of teacher, I was responsible for organizing whatever happened in the classroom. In addition, I repeatedly used twilight role in the space between those full roles and my role as teacher. In other words, I was aware of being and interacting with the children both in the classroom world and in a fictional story world being built with the students as we collectively imagined events in the life of a team of firefighters. Under my direction, we moved back-and-forth between imagining we were interacting “inside” the story world and “outside” yet looking into the story world from the classroom world.

POSITIONING THEORY

The idea and social practice of **positioning** extend the concept of role. Applying Positioning Theory to social interactions people are always understood as positioning one another. Now we can conceptualize people not only as taking on a role but always in relation to the people they are interacting with. Rom Harré, one of the early positioning theorists, proposes the idea of a positioning triangle (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). When a person takes up a **position**, they are using the **social force** of their language to position themselves and others with rights and obligations within a **storyline**. For example, using verbal and non-verbal language as a teacher I was positioning myself with the right for over two hours to lead the students and manage activities that I was obliged to tie to the curriculum. And all the students accepted their position of being led and managed by me while interacting with one another all within the ongoing storyline of a morning in school. Though different from their usual experience of schooling the storyline was similar. We were in their classroom with their teacher who was present and supportive of what I as a visitor was doing. Over time, the

children embraced a position of having the right to move and dialogue with me and with one another to devise and make sense of events in the world of firefighting while developing some understanding of the responsibilities of a team of firefighters preparing for and carrying out rescue missions. The activities contextualized goals of literacy learning as students created and later documented stories as well as decoding some related printed texts. They also contextualized social and emotional goals of learning to collaborate in ways that included their peers. Nikki Slocum-Bradley extends the positioning triangle to a positioning diamond to include how positioning is always affecting people's **social identities** (2010). This parallels Heathcote's notion of who the students in our care are becoming as students and as people. For example, becoming more collaborative storytellers.

POSITIONING THEORY AND DRAMA

Applying Positioning Theory to drama as education makes visible a doubling in our own and our students' experiences (Edmiston, 2003). What may be happening in a person's individual imagination can become embodied for all students when we use social imagination (Edmiston, 2014). Now there are **two storylines**. A firefighter storyline created collaboratively with the children in imagination extended the ongoing classroom storyline. And there are **two positions** each with different **social forces**. As teacher, as always, I was positioning students as having agency as they interacted in the **classroom world**. Yet, at any time I could shift to position students with different agency and social force as if they were other people elsewhere in an imagined **story world**. We can think of this as fictional positioning. For example, with the authority of a fire chief positioning responsible firefighters at work. Teacher and students in effect move in imagination between these **two worlds** because at any moment as teacher I could shift back-and-forth between positioning the children as students in the classroom world and a fictionalized positioning of them framed as a team of firefighters in a story world. Further, there is a doubling of **social identities**. If the project had extended over time, the children's identities as collaborative storytellers could have deepened. Further, their imagined identities as a team of firefighters could have begun to shape their identities as students and as people who collaborate to take calculated risks in caring for others.

This doubling of positions, storylines, social forces, social identities, and worlds becomes significant for learning when the meaning created in humanizing dialogue with and among students becomes more complex as it can do when dialogue is responsive to perspectives from multiple positions.

Accepting fictional positioning means teachers and children can use language and move to interact with more (or less) **social force** than in their everyday lives within activities that are likely very different from typical school tasks. Why is this significant? Because how children learn with you and with one another as well as what they may learn is extended. In that other world we may imagine with students how life might be different if we lived in a world where the norms, rules, and expectations were very different from their everyday lives. Where the students could have more power, more responsibilities, more duties, more rights, than in everyday life. Or less. For example, some children talked with and showed their peers how to climb a ladder safely and showed what might happen if they fell off. One group of boys practiced swinging a toy axe as if it was sharp enough to cut into a door. Positioning the children as we interacted I could both extend and limit learning possibilities because of imagined rights and obligations that extended and limited their agency. For example, in role with the authority of a fire chief I could introduce professional safety guidelines that we read together. I could also use a twilight role, for example, to remind firefighters of the need to collaborate or to demonstrate how to hold an axe.

The experience and outcomes for students of learning across the classroom world and a fictional story world is made more complex when we pay attention to which world is being foregrounded for whom. Taking a position that we intend to use our authority to share power as much as possible with students can be thought of as really four positions. I have come to conceptualize this aspect of the pedagogy in terms of moving among four positions for teacher and students.

The four positions are not in a hierarchy though they can be thought of as requiring increasingly complex teaching. All four are important and provide us with four different though complementary ways of positioning ourselves in relation to students to engage in more complex humanizing dialogue and inquiry over time. As we're teaching one position is likely to be foregrounded, yet we may choose to shift back-and-forth as needed from one way of positioning the students to

another.

1st POSITION

When you are in 1st Position it's as if collectively with the students **you are looking into and beginning to project in imagination into life in a story world**. You're interacting in the classroom world of teacher and students, yet you are also beginning to imagine with the children that you're in that other imagined world. You're in the classroom world positioning students within the accepted rules, rights, duties, and responsibilities of school storylines. When your positioning is humanizing, you will have negotiated (not imposed) rules and expectations. For example, sitting on a rug and taking turns. When we begin to use drama, we intend to share responsibility with the students in story building. You introduce, manage, and reflect on activities from 1st Position. Our classroom storyline now includes embarking on a collaborative journey of inquiry in a story world that we begin to build collectively as we imagine what it might be like to enter events in that imagined world.

I began work on the Firefighters project by introducing a large toy fire truck. The children seemed instantly attracted as I passed it around so that each child could touch and talk about it in response to questions like, "What do you notice? What do you know about fire trucks and firefighters? What are you wondering about?" The children were paying close attention as they noticed the ladder, the hose, and the number of wheels. Children knew about fire stations and fire drills. One boy made the sound of a siren. Another wondered how the sound was made and why it was so loud.

The significance of twilight role in 1st Position is that as teacher you may briefly speak, gesture, and may move as if you are anyone or anywhere in that other world that you are beginning to conjure in imagination. From this position you are inviting the students to do the same and activate their dialogic imagination whenever they respond to you and/or one another as if they too are momentarily located in the imagined world. When one boy talked about climbing ladders I stood up. As I enacting climbing, I gestured for him to join in. He did so along with most of the children when I spoke to them with urgency "We need to get to that window. Can you see the person trying to open it?" After a few seconds I wondered how firefighters would learn how to use

ladders and hoses and how to drive firetrucks safely. As one boy moved his hands as if he was turning a steering wheel, I invited the children on to their feet again to imagine they were driving to a rescue. I asked the children if they'd like to imagine that we were a team of firefighters. The eagerness in their faces demonstrated that they had begun to imagine being in a world of firefighters.

2nd POSITION

You are in 2nd Position when you're positioning students from within a storyline of a story world **as if you are a person in that imagined world**. You're playing with how students could be positioned if they were to meet that person who can use power and address them in very different ways from your position in the role of teacher. Rather than largely hinting at places and people in a story world as you do when looking in on the imagined world from 1st Position, now from 2nd Position you may embody and enact some of the concerns, thoughts, feelings, and actions of a particular person in relation to other people in that fictional world intending to invite responses from the children and engage in some dialogue.

In 2nd Position you can inhabit the position of a person in a storyline without requiring the students to do the same. You can take up emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of that position. You can use different conventions to make clear that you are going to represent a person in an imagined place. You might say, "When I sit on this chair I'm going to represent a person in the story world. You can ask her anything you want to know." Or as I did, "When I put on this cap, I'm going to represent a fire chief. He needs some help." Behind me I had grouped some small toy fire trucks, blue fabric twisted and taped to represent a hose, and a foam life-like axe. I had also used masking tape to represent a ladder on the floor and had spread out some photographs of firefighters at work.

Addressing the students collectively I said, "Tomorrow we'll have a group of trainee firefighters. They need to learn how to use equipment safely and how to work together as a team. Any ideas what to work on first with them?" In a twilight role I was briefly both speaking in role and with the authority of a fire chief. I was positioning the children as people whom he believed might be able to help him. A couple of children wanted to know what a trainee was. Most were eager to use

the iconic representations on the floor. I invited the children to self-select what they wanted to focus on. As 4-5 children gathered round each icon I invited them to show us anything they felt the trainees would need to learn. I was positioning them as having the right to join me as if we were in the imagined world, but I was not “putting them in role.” Within seconds different children were imagining driving firetrucks, climbing the ladder, putting out a fire with a hose, and swinging an axe. Many of the children were clearly imagining they were firefighters. In doing so they were showing their peers the ease of stepping into the world in imagination.

Using twilight role in 2nd Position you may briefly address the students from a more generic position in that hybrid space. Talking to the children in each group I was less in the position of a fire chief and more in the position of a colleague for example, when I made a comment to a boy speeding a toy firetruck on the floor. “I wonder how you drive firetrucks so fast yet stay safe.” I picked up a toy car and as I pushed it forward, he responded, “Keep your foot on the brakes!”

Whether you use full role or twilight role, at any moment you can transition back to 1st Position to reflect on what has happened in 2nd Position as well as to consider what they’ve learned, anything they’re wondering, who they now might want to meet, or what might happen next.

A few minutes after the children had begun to play with the materials I had laid out, I gathered them together again. As well as reminding the students of the fictional and constructed nature of our interactions in the imagined space, I posed a significant what-if inquiry question. I reminded them of what the fire chief had said about the group of trainee firefighters who would be coming and added, “If we were those firefighters responsible for teaching the trainees what do you think they’d need to know about how we work together safely?”

3rd POSITION

When students position one another as they interact **as if they are people with duties and responsibilities within a storyline in a story world** then they are in role in 3rd Position. In this position you can manage and organize in your role as teacher in the classroom world. And you may shift into a twilight role as needed.

I had brought the children together in 1st Position. I asked the

children if they wanted to imagine that we were that team of firefighters. Together we read the mission statement I'd written out on computer paper: We work together safely as a team to help whoever is in need. All nodded when I asked if they thought that was what firefighters would need to do. Briefly I put on the fire chief's cap as I addressed the children. I returned to the question of what people new to firefighting might need to know about working together safely when using a ladder, a hose, an axe, or when driving a fire truck. Positioning them as the fire chief I could add social force and weight to the goal of the activity as I asked the children to focus on collaborating and being safe as they returned to using the iconic representations.

As I observed what the children were doing in 3rd Position in the story world I was in 1st Position in the classroom world. With older children, or younger children I had known longer, I could have left them to work in small groups with minimal input. With these young children, listening in to what they were doing and saying I frequently moved into a twilight role when I felt they needed help to show and talk with one another about their ideas as if I was also a person in the story world. I could promote more meaningful dialogue. For example, the children working in pairs as if they were climbing a ladder were having fun imagining that the ladder wasn't steady. So, I suggested they could show both what not to do because they might fall off as well as how to help each other stay safe when climbing. One child said you should hold on to the ladder to keep it steady. Having laid out a long sheet of computer paper and markers for each group all were eager to record their ideas and share what they had drawn with one another.

4th POSITION

When you are interacting with the students **as if you are all people in the story world** you are in 4th Position. As a teacher in full role, you can deepen and extend dialogue with students from the positions of different people in the story world. You can explore more of the implications for what it might be like to have more (or less) rights, duties, and responsibilities that those people have in relation to other people within the story world. At the same time, just as you can in 3rd Position you may shift to interact in a twilight role rather than taking up a specific fictional role. Toward the end of my time working with the children, I introduced a storyline that could have been one of the

stories used in training new recruits.

When I took up the full role of Mr. Green, I put on a green hat and sat down on a chair with my head in my hands and a despondent look. I adopted a position of needing help. By now for over an hour the children had imagined that they had acted with the duties and responsibilities of firefighters whose mission was to work together to help anyone in need. They were attentive when in role as Mr. Green I narrated what had happened to my cat who had been chased up a tree by a dog. I'd attached to the wall behind me a representation of a tree that I had drawn on chart paper. I'd placed a cat puppet on top of the door frame to look like it was at the top of the tree. Some children sat close asking me to clarify what had happened. Most began to talk among themselves about how as firefighters they might rescue the cat.

Coming out of the role of Mr. Green I left the hat on the chair as I joined the children and addressed them in a twilight role as if time had stopped. "What do you think we might do?" I didn't take on the fire chief role because then I would have had too much authority. I wanted to support the children as they came up with possible rescue plans not turn to their boss for ideas or approval. As needed, I helped each group begin to think through how they might use the equipment they had previously worked with to explore how they might rescue the cat: the ladder, the hose, and the axe. We had all imagined speeding in fire trucks to find Mr. Green. The children who had been working with the toy fire trucks now joined one of the other small groups. In that twilight role I managed children working in twos or threes helping them to try out and then agree on what ideas they wanted to show to the whole group. I asked the children which we rescue approach we might try first.

I was surprised that the boys with the axe wanted to chop down the tree! None of the children disagreed. So, I stood tall with arms raised as I took on the role of the tree. As one of the boys imagined swinging the axe I narrated what might happen. Showing a falling tree, I again took up a twilight role asking, "What might the tree feel?" Many children shook their heads. One girl said, "It would die." Another added, "So might the cat." The boys agreed that though an option, cutting down the tree was not the first approach we should use.

Before we could try out the other ideas, I switched focus to include a boy who had just arrived from tutoring. He'd noticed the wooden helicopter I had brought in. He wanted to imagine he was a police

officer. A few minutes later with me in a twilight role and him imagining he was flying the helicopter he assisted me in narrating the story of how the cat was rescued. With the other children we agreed that because of the wind from the helicopter the cat might have fallen. One child knew about rescue nets. I introduced a large piece of fabric that everyone held on to as I used the cat puppet to represent Mr. Green's pet falling but being caught.

Returning to take on the role of Mr. Green I cradled the cat that one of the girls brought to me. And switching briefly to the role of the Fire Chief I led us in a celebratory cheer.

MOVING BETWEEN THE FOUR POSITIONS

You can't use drama with students unless you are comfortable being in role. And switching between different roles as needed. Recognizing that when you are teaching with drama you can interact with the students across the four positions outlined above provides you with extensive flexibility in how you may position students as you interact and dialogue with them in and out of the different roles you may take up. In addition to using full role, using a twilight role allows you to explore more nuance in the understandings and competencies you're developing with the students.

Useful though Role Theory has been, it does not provide us with a framework for understanding the power relationships between and among teachers and students and thus how we and they may act, relate to one another, and dialogue to make sense and create meaning. Using Positioning Theory, we may conceptualize how, as we and the students interact, all are positioning one another with different social forces in terms of duties and responsibilities in relation to one another within the events of different storylines in a story world. Positioning Theory helps us understand more of the significance of how and why we might use drama in teaching and learning.

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Brian Edmiston is Professor of Drama as Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. His scholarship focuses on dramatic inquiry as a preschool-high school cross-curricular pedagogy; drama in literacy, language, and literature teaching; drama as ethical education; and dramatic playing as a mode of teaching and learning. Brian grew up in Ireland, was a secondary teacher in England, and an elementary teacher in the USA. He regularly teaches and conducts research in classrooms with teachers of all ages. Brian is the recipient of both teaching and research awards. He has authored over fifty publications, including five books. Edmiston, B. (2014). *Transforming Teaching and Learning with Active and Dramatic Approaches: Engaging Students Across the Curriculum*, Routledge,

received the CHOICE award. His 2022 book co-authored with Iona Towler-Evans also published by Routledge is *Humanizing Education with Dramatic Inquiry: In Dialogue with the Transformative Pedagogy of Dorothy Heathcote*.

Nursery and Mantle of the Expert

[HELEN BAILEY](#)

WOODROW FIRST SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

This article describes an academic year in a nursery class teaching Mantle of the Expert to children who are 2 years 10 months to 4 years old. The purpose of the article is to demonstrate how Mantle of the Expert and the approaches used by older children can be simplified and re framed in a way that allows younger children to access the same approach but at a level that meets their need developmentally.

The article describes how we develop and encourage imaginative play in the learning landscape that the children have access to and how more formal approaches of Mantle are taught during whole class carpet time. The article simplifies the first nursery classes Mantle by breaking this down into 4 weeks. Nursery focus on context, client, commission and problem solving.

This article demonstrates how a reflective, experimental approach to Mantle of the Expert in nursery can work by meeting the needs and requirements of the cohort of children as well as taking into consideration their development and learning needs.

Early Years and Mantle of the Expert. Many hear those words and wonder how the complexities of Mantle of the Expert can be taught to such young children. An approach to teaching and learning that is embedded in inquiry, tension, tasks and knowledge. This article will look at a year of Mantle of the Expert in a nursery class and how elements of Mantle develop over the course of the academic year. It will demonstrate how the English Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2025; Department for Education, 2023) and supporting document Development Matters is at the heart of planning and the curriculum and how Mantle of the Expert works within this.

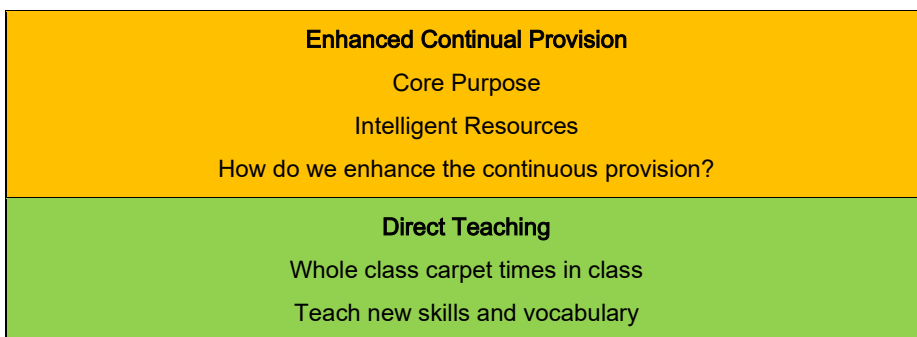
I have been teaching Mantle of the Expert for 12 years at Woodrow First School and have followed and learnt about the approach to teaching founded by Dorothy Heathcote. (Mantle of the Expert, n.d.). Training, team teaching and opportunities to study Mantle have developed my approach, allowing me to become more reflective and experimental. I have been fortunate enough to explore Mantle through a variety of year groups and learnt early on that adaptation to Mantle approaches is necessary for me to meet the needs of the children in relation to their age and cognitive skills. One approach does not fit all and over time I have developed a more open mindedness to Mantle. A confidence to try new approaches in class and hand over more control and leadership to the children.

Mantle of the Expert is a fictional context where the children take on the responsibilities of an expert team. They are commissioned by a client to work on a series of tasks that will cover areas of the curriculum. Throughout Mantle in a nursery class the learning landscape will consist of three areas:

Continuous Provision

Creates stability and security

Specific areas-outdoors, indoors-creative table, writing table, playdough, role playhouse, construction, small world, water play, sand play, reading area and quiet area.



The layout of the nursery room, outdoor area and the continuous provision which is available every day gives the children stability and familiarity in their learning environment. The children can be secure in the knowledge that these areas will always be available throughout the academic year in nursery.

The continuous provision will be developed by the planning of the enhanced continual provision which gives core purpose and learning linked to the curriculum. We enhance these areas by developing them linked to the children's ideas, interests and Mantle.

Finally direct teaching on the carpet allows for the teaching of new skills, vocabulary and develops listening, concentration and the skills of Mantle in a more whole class approach.

AUTUMN 1: DEVELOPING AND INTRODUCING IMAGINATION

The children have just begun the academic year in nursery. The characteristics of learning, active learning and playing and exploring are the focus alongside the prime areas of learning. The prime areas are:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Communication and Language
- Physical

As a nursery that is based in a socially deprived area some of the children that start their nursery journey have limited personal, social and emotional development.¹ We work closely with our families

¹ An example to demonstrate the deprivation within our local community can be found on [Local Deprivation Explorer](#) in England. Using a post code that many of our families live within the deprivation explorer states that the neighbourhood is more deprived than

throughout the academic year and encourage our families to engage in family learning sessions and daily communication with staff to support areas that they require support with. Sharing, turn taking and playing will be a focus alongside toilet training and self-care. Some children may not speak in full sentences and will require lots of modelled language through play.

As the children begin the academic year I think of the nursery class as a team already, a whole group of individuals who come together as one each day. Each one of those children will have their own identity, needs, skills and knowledge. There will be times when they are working alone, in a small group or as a whole class.

As they begin their nursery journey the children actively choose independently within the learning landscape. They begin to work in smaller groups in areas that are of interest to them. Friendships and relationships with others begin to develop and within the learning environment teams begin to form. My view of teams is simply groups of children working in different areas of the learning landscape.

For example, making choices and preparing for tasks are already apparent. This is a key skill in Mantle when the team receives a commission, and they prepare for a task. This unconsciously is happening already with our new children. Think of the continual provision in class which provides the children with stability and familiarity. Each area allows the children to develop skills, language and decision making. An example is the painting table. Preparation for the task is choosing paper, making marks with a pencil for their name, putting on an apron, making decisions about colors of paint and how to use the paintbrush. Directions the brush will take and talking about their work. Finally, placing their work on the drying rack before washing hands and tidying away their apron. A task which involves a variety of skills and decision making.

It is during this free flow independent work time that the role of the adult is crucial in beginning the first steps into Mantle. Scaffolding is key here and will support the children slowly into the more formal way of teaching Mantle which will come later in the term during direct teaching. (Department for Education, 2023, p. 6).

Development Matters which is the non-statutory curriculum guidance for Early Years states:

most neighbourhoods in England. There are 89% of neighbourhoods that are less deprived.

Children need opportunities to develop their own play and independent exploration. They need adults to scaffold their learning by giving them just enough help to achieve something they could not do independently. Helping children to think, discuss and plan is important.

In a Mantle lesson the children will be doing the same but within the imaginative context that has been developed. My view as the nursery class as a team is transferable from the real world of nursery to the imaginative world of Mantle. In the imaginative world the children will take on specific roles and will learn new skills.

As the children independently work our interactions and development of Mantle vocabulary begin to develop through the children's free play. A deeper awareness of the language we use and an action to match this vocabulary support the children in their awareness and meaning behind this. For example, during the nursery session time adults begin to use the word "imagine" when talking and exploring play ideas together. "Let's imagine we are a family" might be spoken in the role play area. A simple statement but with complexities for the children to hear and understand. Imagine and family are the key words here. As we play families the children may say "I am daddy, you be baby." An adult may ask, "Daddy what are you doing today?" The child in role as Daddy will respond with "cook dinner." This is beginning a role within play just like the children will experience when they take on roles in Mantle.

As adults we need to show children what imagine looks like so the scaffolding of how we do this supports the children in a slower process to the Mantle skills. Action linked to vocabulary is important and placing the words of a skill next to this will help. The adult modelling alongside a group of children will show how imagine can look and what imagine can sound like. Adding tension in play also allows the children to experience another element of the Mantle process.

Tension adds purpose and drives the Mantle forward on different journeys. The children will respond in different ways to a variety of tensions. These can range from stressful situations involving people to challenging environments (Taylor, 2020). The table below gives examples of this:

Imagine we are:	Words/Action	Tension
Family Role play area	Make a cup of tea	The tea is too hot! How can we make it cooler?
Animals Small world	Eating grass	The grass has gone! What shall we do now?
Firefighters Outdoor play	Putting out the fire	Quick! The fire is spreading!
Bakers Playdough Table	Making currant buns	The buns are burning in the oven!

The basics of Mantle begin in the sense of imagining a team but within the continual provision. The examples given above are all areas within nursery where the basics of Mantle can be explored through free play, interaction and modelling. This then creates a simple play version of all the areas we develop with Mantle but in a free play scenario. The following images show examples of teams:



Image 1: Imagine a family of bears



Image 2: Imagine a team of builders



Image 3: Hedgehogs in the woods



Image 4: Imagine the family making dinner

During interactions and observations of the children you will begin to hear and make links with Mantle through their own independent play, imaginations and communication and language development. The following examples were observed during play in areas of the nursery class. These types of observations will be observed at different points throughout the year from different children. Not every child will use the language but some children do and this shows how they have observed and listened to the adults modelling of Mantle and begin to use this independently themselves.

Role play	Sand play: Child places rings around wooden figures	Outdoor play: The children have used wooden bricks to create a car
Adult: Let's make a story. Child: Yes. We can use our imaginations.	Child: The crocodiles are coming! Let's hide! (Tension in play)	Child: The park is a long way we don't want to run out of petrol. (Planning in play) Adult: What are we going to do? We have a problem! Child: Lets go to the petrol station. (problem solving)

As the children settle into nursery and they become familiar with areas in the class they will begin to show more confidence in where and how they play. The children will begin to name and talk about their learning environments and stories begin to develop through play. The children will bring their own ideas to play based learning and alongside the adult or other children narratives will begin to develop.

We are now ready to develop the areas of client, team and commission in a more formal approach as we move into Autumn 2.

AUTUMN TERM 2: TEACHING AND DEVELOPING A MINI-MANTLE

The children have now been in nursery for one half term. They have built relationships with staff, become familiar with the learning landscape and the routines of nursery. Planning a Mantle begins with the curriculum. What do we want the children to learn? The prime areas and characteristics of learning are still our focus and when planning a Mantle, we observe the interests and requirements of the cohort. Each year can be different depending on the children.

A good starting point when planning Mantle in the Autumn term is seasons and people that help us. The Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum linked to understanding the world will allow the children to make sense of the physical world and their community. I have learnt that nursery age children require time and consistency in relation to new learning. For this reason, we break Mantle down into a mini-Mantle based over 4 weeks.

Week 1: Context

This is an important part of the Mantle process as week one visits and creates the place we will be visiting in our imagination. Many of our children may never have experienced these places so the way we introduce the context is important. We begin our direct teaching during carpet time sessions.

Nursery experience their first Mantle lesson with the words, “Let’s make a story together.” The children will be told that when we make stories together it is called Mantle. They will hear this word throughout their time at Woodrow First School, and this will support their understanding and links with the Mantle story as it develops.

I begin the introduction to the context by saying, “Let’s use our imaginations to visit a place.” This is where you will see the work from Autumn 1 based on using imaginations at carpet time and in class through play take place. The children have become familiar with this vocabulary and action so they will respond in the way they have seen imagination modelled to them.

In Nursery we use photographs, animation, books and stories linked to the context of the place. This is where the vocabulary and knowledge begin. For example, the woods. The children will look at a book or a photograph of this place. They will have the opportunity to talk about what they can see. They may link their own experiences to the image.

We do not overcomplicate this part of the process, and the teaching of vocabulary is essential here. The children will require vocabulary in the future when communicating with the client or completing tasks. Vocabulary may include trees, bark, branch, leaves, red, yellow, orange and Autumn. We will talk about what we wear in the Autumn woods and then using our imaginations we will prepare for the visit to this place. What do we wear when it starts to get colder? The children being guided by the adult will stand as a whole class and the adult guides this imaginative preparation for the woods. Placing on a coat, doing up buttons, boots, scarf and gloves.



Image 5: Whole class Mantle drama session

My experience at this early stage has taught me that the children can all respond differently at this stage. Some children will observe what is happening around them whereby others become enthusiastic and will follow the adult's lead, copying what they do and sharing ideas:

“I’ve got a red coat.”

“My scarf is long.”

“I can’t do buttons.”

The children already are developing the skill of action and imagination in Mantle. “I can’t do buttons.” is a statement that shows someone has a problem. It will also link to the real world that the children live in. They respond with real information about themselves and will bring this into the Mantle story. Their own experiences are to be valued and celebrated on this journey of story making together.

As the adult we would respond with “Who can help with buttons?” This again further develops problem solving and imagination which the children will develop more as Mantle develops.

Once prepared we begin a short drama by saying, "Let's imagine we are in the woods. Be careful as you walk around." The whole class begins to move. I begin to use the vocabulary from earlier within the imaginative drama as a way of re-enforcing the vocabulary. "Look at those tall trees, the leaves are falling try to catch them! I've got 2 red ones how many do you have? Careful here there is a low branch!"

This first Mantle session depending on the cohort of children can last from 1 minute up to 10 minutes. Each new year is different depending on the children. We know from our carpet sessions during Autumn 1 how long the children can concentrate, sit and stay on task for during whole class teaching. This needs to be taken into consideration when starting a Mantle and when planning the delivery of the teaching. However, the children will have a continuation of what has been taught during carpet time during free flow play. The enhanced continual provision in the room will develop the Mantle further when the children are independently choosing.

When the drama comes to an end, I usually say it's time to go back to nursery. I complete a count slowly and quietly from 1 to 3 and this helps the transition back. After 3 I will say, "We are back in nursery now." This helps the children to understand the difference between the imaginative world and the real world.

The next important step is creating this context in class and having areas of continuous provision enhanced with activities linked to the context of the Mantle. This enables a point of reference and a place to refer to throughout the Mantle as the children play.

To complete this we begin to look at the specific areas of our curriculum:

- Literacy
- Mathematics
- Understanding the World
- Expressive Arts and design

The children will begin to engage with activities in class linked to this drama session. The creation of the context supports their imagination and creativity further. It is important to create the image of the place in class as a place that can be stepped into during the drama sessions as well as a visual reminder of our Mantle story.

Equally important is linking the Mantle to parts of the enhanced

continual provision which will encourage and allow the children to further develop their experience, skills, vocabulary and knowledge through play. The following photographs show examples of the development of the woodland context through the creation of drama spaces and enhanced continual provision:



Image 6: Painting Autumn Trees



Image 7: Hedgehog painting



Image 8: Woodland drama space

Direct teaching can be broken down into simple tasks when introducing a context in Mantle. This is a format that was devised by Dorothy Heathcote (Mantle of the Expert, n.d., Worksheet 7). The following example is a short description of the steps to a context within a Mantle. The task, purpose and demand allow me to think in a deeper way about what I have planned and why.

Task	Activity	Purpose	Demands	Device	Resources	Outcomes
Listen to an adult	To understand and respond	To introduce Mantle Story	To concentrate, and respond to the words	Visual good looking cards to support	Adult	Children are ready to begin Mantle and develop Mantle
Watch a short animation (a girl in a park)	To observe	For children to notice details from the animation	To use observational skills to observe emotions and change	Animation	Interactive white board and literacy shed	Children begin to connect with the girl who will be part of Mantle
Talk	Expand on what they could hear and see	To make further connection with the girl and the environment	Speak in sentences	Opportunities to share information	Class adults	Ideas generated about where the girl is and what is happening
Use imagination	Walk to the girl	Make links between imagination and the stimulus	Use imagination linked to animation	Speak the words “Let’s go to the girl”	Adult/children	The children are now in the park with the girl
Sit in a circle	Listen to a story (about the present situation of the girl)	To develop ideas based on the park animation to extend the children’s thinking with inquiry questions	To link memories of past work/own experiences to the story as the narrative develops	Adult in role (as the girl) tells a story	Paper, pens	Map of the park created. Context to our Mantle (where we have the girl) This will lead us to the woods.

Week 2: Client

The children have already started to learn about a place in the world, a context. Visuals or display work will be around the class as links with this learning. Before introducing the client, I always explain to the children at carpet time we are going back to our Mantle story. There will be the image of the context in class to refer to and again I will count quietly to number 3 and then we are there. We now introduce the client to the children.

In my experience the client at this early stage of Mantle needs to be a familiar person or name that the children will understand and relate to in the real world. If we consider the children's families or animals that they are familiar with, the children will have a better understanding from their own experiences of what this word means to them. However, before introducing the client, I develop a narrative that will lead us to this. Usually this a short statement such as "When I was in the woods I saw someone. Would you like to see who?"

I begin the introduction of the client by using one of two dramatic conventions drawn from Mantle of the Expert. Dramatic conventions are structured approaches developed by Dorothy Heathcote (Heathcote, 2007). Examples of introducing the client include:

1. Adult in role (AIR)

AIR allows the children to observe as an adult becomes someone different. Ideally two adults will be used for this approach. I will teach and begin to introduce another adult as someone within our Mantle story however I have also completed this on my own when we do not have another member of staff. To do this I step in and out of the Mantle. This means I talk to the children and then step and move to become the imaginative person in the drama.

The children enjoy watching the adult transform and at this stage resources can be added to build the client and to support the children's understanding of who they are in the imaginative world. I begin with convention 3 the adult as an effigy. They can be talked about, walked around and sculpted. It is important to complete this first as the children are encouraged to view their familiar adult as someone different.

Visually creating the client allows the children to see the

transformation and a simple introduction follows. We all say hello to the client and wave. This is our first interaction. We do not say the teacher's actual name that the children are used to calling them. However, we then move onto convention 1 and the AIR becomes present, naturalistic, gives and accepts responses. I will model and ask the question, "Who are you?" and the children will be encouraged to ask the question too. The AIR then responds.

At this stage we need a simple process and not an over-complicated approach with too many words or information.

For Nursery children the client shows an emotion and shares a problem. This is communicated to the children through the AIR and refers to an approach that Dorothy Heathcote called "signing." (Mantle Network, 2023). She stated:

... of course the main source for authentic SIGNing comes from the teacher. With the position of an actor the teacher adopts appropriate body attitude, gesture, tone of voice, style of delivery, distance, pitch, choice of vocabulary, deliberate uncertainty or confidence, deliberate vagueness or precision.

This approach works well with the children especially as they observe adults reacting in an authentic way within a piece of drama that uses elements of the signing approach as described by Dorothy Heathcote.

2. Photographs and Pictorial Images

Images and photographs drawn or shared with the children give them a visual representation to observe and talk about. I have completed this using two conventions.

Convention 8: A role depicted in picture, removed from actual life, a painting, photograph or drawing. This includes those being made by the class and drawing and creating large pictorial images of them.

Convention 9: The children see a drawing in the making of someone important to the action. For this I will sit in a circle with a

large sheet of paper in the middle. I will quietly speak the words, “This is who I have seen in the woods.” Slowly I begin to draw but will pause at different times and stop the pen from moving. Children may begin to call out ideas as I draw and I begin to add details. I will model ‘talk’ to the pictorial client to allow the children to hear my interactions with them.



Images 9-11: Park Keepers

Once the children have been introduced to the client it is important to keep the contact with the client throughout the week. We may wave and say hello to the visual display work as the children play in nursery or photographs of the AIR will be placed around the room for the children to observe and talk to. Adults will model this throughout the nursery session.

Introducing Tension:

The children have created the context and met the client. In our next Mantle lesson in week 2 we will return to the client. We repeat the process of saying hello. However, this is where there is a change in our client. I link this to emotion. I will say, “There is a problem, something is happening, watch.” To create tension here I may lower my voice almost to a whisper and slow my movements down to create suspense and anticipation.

The conventions I used to introduce the client will now be developed further with emotion and tension.

1. Adult in role (AIR)

There is a change to the face and body positioning of the AIR. The

children may notice but there have been times when they have not. I am still guiding at this stage of the Mantle and will ask the children to look closely at the changes. I may interact with the AIR as a way of modelling how we interact. Convention 2 may be needed here; the person framed as a film. People have permission to stare but the AIR can be stopped, re-started and re-run. The children may need to see the changes in the AIR again as I talk as the changes happen. This focuses their attention on changes that may not be apparent to them. For example. "The mummy started to move her mouth; she looked sad and started to.....cry" The drama would be stopped here.

2. Photographs and pictorial images

If I have introduced the client through a pictorial image or creation (convention 8 and 9) then I interact with that pictorial image. I have changed facial expressions before on pictorial images or added tears to the client's face.

This is important in the process of a more formal Mantle approach. Being a role model in Mantle allows the children to see how action and words are used. They hear my interactions and will repeat words alongside me. As a whole class we may ask are you ok? Why are you sad? But I will model first, and the children will copy. This is important as for some of our children communication and language can be a challenge. Speaking words and placing these words together to formulate a sentence will not be something that all the children can do independently. Modelling this first enables them to see and hear before they attempt themselves.

There is now an opportunity for inquiry to develop and a simple "I wonder what's wrong?" can begin to generate ideas that come from the children. This interaction with the AIR and emotion leads us easily into a reaction from the client. A simple statement spoken but with wording that is understood by the children and has an impact is way for the commission to be introduced.

"I am sad, I have lost my little girl"

"I am scared; I saw something in the forest"



Image 10: Sad Mummy by the mountain



Image 13: Park keeper in the woods

The children require time to explore the inquiry through the provision in class and activities. Play will have been enhanced to develop skills linked to the curriculum and the continuation of the Mantle story. The children are still working on the prime areas of learning within class each day and other skills as the year develops can have links with art, literacy, math's and knowledge and understanding of the world. For example:

Literacy



Images 14-15: Writing to the client

Maths



Image 16: 3D shape Giants Castle building



Image 17: Buying tickets for the Zoo

Week 3: Team

The context, client and commission have been learnt. We now know who, where and what happened. The next step is what we are going to do? The simple approach in nursery is to ask, “Who can help?” and immediately someone will say “me.” At this early stage it is as simple as that. The children very quickly begin to view themselves as an individual who can help.

The scaffolding to the actual team is important here as we need to now develop the children’s real knowledge of the team in the real world and the skills required. It is important we have standalone carpet sessions teaching the children new vocabulary and talking and learning about skills required within the real world in relation to the team they are in the Mantle. Reading nonfiction books, watching real action of teams in a video, stories and photographs related to this profession will support the children when they return to the drama in Mantle. Examples of teams:

Team	Skill	Knowledge
Firefighters	Teamwork-listening to each other. Working in an emergency. Remain calm and make decisions. Use equipment safely.	Fire How to put out a fire. Safety clothing and why it is important.
Rescue Team	To talk to each other and communicate effectively. To make a plan of action. To make decisions as situations change.	Different climates will affect the rescue. Knowledge of weather conditions. Transport and their purposes.

The continual provision and the enhancements are important to allow children to use the skills and language learnt at carpet times through play. Focus work with an adult also enables children to be supported in an area of play that they may not have thought of choosing before. There will be an expectation for all children to work with an adult on a focus task.

By encouraging and exploring new skills together you are opening

the minds of these small people to new possibilities and challenges. This can support their confidence in new situations and with the use of new equipment. The children are all different in their abilities and concentration levels. We are encouraging, supportive and mindful of the different approaches we require with different children.



Image 18: Fire in the woods



Image 19: Mountain Rescue team drawings



Image 20: Helicopter Rescue

The preparation has been completed. The client is ready, and the team has the skills and knowledge. It is time to begin the commission. I completed this as a whole class during carpet time. I will remind the children of our Mantle story so far by looking at the client, speaking aloud about the problem and what the commission is.

Then I will say “welcome team” and I always add the name of the team so the children can identify with who they are within the imaginative world. The children require an identity within the drama, and it is important to use the teams name to re-enforce this identity.

Using drama, the team will begin to prepare for the commission by using action and words alongside myself to prepare their clothing and equipment. For example, as a team of firefighters:

“Get your helmets on Firefighter team”

“Don’t forget the jackets”

“Help with buttons and zips”

“Team, where did you put the boots?”

“I hope there is petrol in the fire engine...whose job was that?”

“Great job team!”

The dialogue above begins with me completing an action as I speak the words, however you will see that towards the end I am placing more accountability on the team. Who was responsible for certain tasks and typically in nursery everyone will respond with “me.” This small step shows how the children are beginning to become invested in their own roles in the team and are taking a form of responsibility within that team. Mantle requires many responsibilities for the team and over time these will become more challenging. This simple start as a whole class drama in nursery allows the children to begin their first steps into an imaginary world.

The children will then begin to move around with myself as a lead and a role model. I have moved around the carpet space before or I have walked the children to another carpet space in the class as if we were searching for something or looking for something. The action and words together will form the beginning of the commission. As the team moves, I find that for nursery it is important in our first Mantle to have tension quite quickly within the Commission. This tension is what focuses on the team’s responsibilities and action and will keep the children gripped within the drama.

Tensions can come in a variety of forms and be used in a variety of ways. However, for the nursery children I begin with a powerful tension that creates impact. For example, finding the lost child on the mountain or a forest on fire. It is how we create the tension that impacts the children, and I find creating atmosphere and action are required in this approach to make a full impact on the team.

Week 4: Problem solving and the Commission

Problem solving while working on the commission can be very quick in nursery to begin with. After witnessing the tension, the children begin to respond with ideas of how to solve the problem. This could be putting out a forest fire and I would simply talk to the children about who puts out a fire and how? This would lead to discussions about firefighters and their role and responsibilities. The knowledge the children have learnt during carpet times and their free exploration will support this next Mantle step.

I find in the first Mantle in the Autumn term the children require a response immediately and after seeing the tension of the forest fire, we

have picked up our hoses and immediately started to solve the fire by instantly becoming the firefighters to do this.

I am always mindful that our children are in the early stages of their Mantle journeys and an immediate response to problem solving is required especially when the investment from the children is so apparent and they require immediate results. They have learnt the knowledge and skills and their voices are making it known that they need to act now! This investment needs to be celebrated as the children are taking on the team's responsibilities. Timing and observation from the adult teaching is crucial here and the flexibility within the Mantle session to meet the needs and voices of the children is required.

CONCLUSION

After we have completed our first mini-Mantle in Autumn 2 we then proceed with further Mantles throughout the academic year. The approach is the same and we continue to complete Mantle over 4 weeks. We challenge our children by exploring deeper into the Mantle stories and creating more tasks and tensions along the way. The complexity of the Mantle stories increases, and we make links with different countries in the world, and more complex teams and narratives.

As I come to the end of this article and think about the academic Mantle year in nursery, I have a sense of pride in our children and the team of staff in which I work with. By the end of the year as I look back and reflect on our cohort of children, we can see the progress they have made within Mantle and the curriculum.

Mantle of the Expert is a journey for all staff that are involved in this approach to teaching. I have learnt that to be openminded and experimental enables me to learn more about the complexities of Mantle of the Expert as an approach to teaching the curriculum.

We celebrate the journey that each child has been on individually as the year has progressed, we hope that we have given our children a foundation, a flavour of Mantle that will guide them through the rest of their years at Woodrow First School.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Helen Bailey is employed at a Mantle of the Expert training school in Redditch England. She has worked at Woodrow First School for 27 years and for the past 12 years and has used an approach to teaching called Mantle of the Expert with children ranging from 2 years 10 months to 9 years old. Bailey began her career at Woodrow First School as the Nursery Nurse in the nursery and then became a Higher-Level Teaching Assistant. Early Years teaching was an area she felt passionate and motivated about and she went onto gain a degree based in Early Years Education. The training and learning Bailey has engaged in both within Mantle and her degree has allowed her to develop a reflective approach to teaching.

Inhabiting Palampur: Teaching Economics and Political Science through Drama during the Pandemic

[MANJIMA CHATTERJEE](#)

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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews a process drama led integration of Economics and Political Science in a project called 'The Story of Palampur' through the lens of Dorothy Heathcote's 1983 call to re-evaluate both the purpose of our schools and the society we wish to build. Taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic at an elite K-12 school in India, the project utilised the process drama approach to teach the threshold concepts of choice, scarcity, and marginalisation. By stepping into the lives of vulnerable residents in the fictional village of Palampur—such as displaced migrant workers and Dalit farmers—privileged students from an urban Indian school navigated the complex intersections of caste, class, and democratic friction in rural India. This embodied learning approach challenged the traditional, data-driven frameworks of the social sciences, shifting the pedagogical focus from the rote memorisation of civic institutions to a lived experience of political awareness and social justice. While demonstrating how digital drama

pedagogy successfully fostered profound empathy and interrogated neoliberal educational paradigms, the essay also candidly reflects on the systemic challenges of sustaining experiential frameworks against standardised assessment pressures. Ultimately, the Story of Palampur case study illustrates that drama can provide a critical lens for humanising the curriculum, developing 21st century skills and cultivating genuinely engaged democratic citizens.

The present time will provide the time to wander and press,
Not the time that we must arrive.
Arrival are those moments of being able to demonstrate our
knowing,
And the wandering is the time of learning.

— ‘Of These Seeds Becoming’ Dorothy Heathcote, 1978

In 2020, during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic-induced lockdown in India, urban Indians were faced with a sight from which they could not turn away: millions of the urban poor, who seasonally migrate to the cities for work, began walking back to their homes, in villages across the country. The sight of these resilient people, struggling to traverse the thousands of kilometres on foot, shocked the affluent teenagers with whom we work at an elite K-12 institution, which also caters to a large group of economically disadvantaged children who live in the neighbourhood of the school. With students at home unable to attend school for a whole year (eventually almost two, although we did not know this then), teachers were struggling to engage them in learning processes. Cameras would be turned off, chat options would often be misused, and the 12-14 age group was the worst affected by constant distraction and online bullying, much of which was taking place during the class schedule. Events in the outer world were impossible to escape and only added to their malaise, and it was in this context that a group of teachers came together to explore a different way of learning, choosing drama as the medium instead of the regular chalk-talk or discussion methods.

Why did we choose drama? A live medium that thrives on human interaction, drama wasn't doing very well in the online mode. Our

physical forms were largely hidden from view, framed within the narrow borders of our respective screens, and voices were distorted or reached us via delay, disrupting timing and dousing the spark of enthusiasm for ‘live’-ness. Ensembles couldn’t work, neither could choruses. In the Theatre classroom, we had taken to monologuing, and much of that was anyway mediated by camera angles and visual technology. So the choice to work with drama was also a choice to engage with non-live forms such as video and online platform-based technology, as well as a range of very specific tools and conventions that could survive the vagaries of Zoom interactions. Yet, the outcome was an experience unlike any other. Student participation increased exponentially with each stage, cameras were switched on and often stayed on, and each student’s final contribution was a richly developed essay on a question formulated or chosen by them and refined during the course of the journey. The focus of the process was on changing the narrative—choosing to acknowledge our situation and enabling students to find a way to engage with agency, curiosity and empathy with the world beyond their known realities. In the process, we turned many of the accepted practices of learning in the Senior Years on their heads, and planted the question: what sort of learning do we want in our schools? And how can this learning empower students to be well-adjusted and contributing members of society at large? As one may well imagine, this project was deeply influenced by and designed along the lines of drama as a learning medium as developed by the inimitable Dorothy Heathcote.¹

THE CONTEXT AND THE OBJECTIVE

Our school is located in Uttar Pradesh, one of the largest and poorest states in India, but the city itself is a tech hub, and the school’s demographic is varied, with parents who are entrepreneurs, white collar workers and government employees, as well as landed farmers who have recently entered the ranks of the rich. In Noida, semi-urban villages lie next door to corporate townships, and provide the labour that keeps these spaces clean, safe and served. In 2014, in keeping

¹ As we begin the exploration, the author would like to share with readers that the word ‘role,’ is used in multiple ways. When it is used in lower case, it is used in the layperson sense of the performance of regular functions or duties, whereas when it is used with a capital R, as ‘Role,’ this refers to its use in drama.

with the nation's Right to Education rules, the school opened up 25% of its seats to students who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and lived within a 1 km range. These students, whose parents often work as cleaners, drivers and support staff in the school, or as daily wage labourers at construction sites nearby, study on a full scholarship and are supported by the school in the procurement of their uniforms, tech devices and all learning needs. Orientations are conducted on a regular basis for fee-paying as well as non-fee-paying parents, new and old teachers, with an intent to integrate students from all backgrounds and find ways to work together towards a joyful learning journey.

The case study I'm presenting here formed the basis of our exploration of the base concepts of Economics and Political Science through the development of 'Kahaani Palampur Ki' (The Story of Palampur) in Grade 9, an introductory chapter in the Economics textbook meant to introduce the discipline of Economics. The threshold concepts of Choice, Scarcity, Margins, Cost and Benefit which are embedded in this chapter were introduced to 72 13–14-year-old students through the Story of Palampur, using Process Drama as a pedagogical tool to address these concepts. The students came to us through four different homerooms of approximately 18 students each, and were guided by a group of six facilitators—two each from Drama, Economics and Political Science. Three students in this group were scholarship students who had come to us as referrals from the Teach for India network and were supported by a charitable foundation.² The virtual module created liminal spaces for a transformative and integrative understanding of choice and marginality, developed in three parts through seven months in 2020.

What We Did

In the first of 3 story cycles, we began by viewing video footage of 3 residents of the fictional village of Palampur (teachers in role)³ sharing

² It is to be noted that this batch did not include the students added under the RTE (Right to Education Act, 2009) rules, who were added as 3-4 year olds in the batch entering school in 2014, and therefore were still studying in Primary Years at this time.

³ While the Roles were presented by drama teachers, the stories themselves were taken from [People's Archive of Rural India \(PARI\)](https://people.sas.upenn.edu/~paulr/pari/). Evidence from the drama process may be [viewed on genially.com](https://genially.com)

how they were affected by COVID-19—a migrant worker walking back to Palampur from Delhi, who was also on the verge of selling his land, a landless female farm labourer, and a low caste male *havaladar*, or police constable. The story was discovered to be set in the village of Palampur, which by deduction was placed in a valley somewhere in Northern India. Contrary to most popular beliefs, most of the farmers there were women, as the men were mostly away on seasonal migrations (reflecting the data on the ground in most of India).

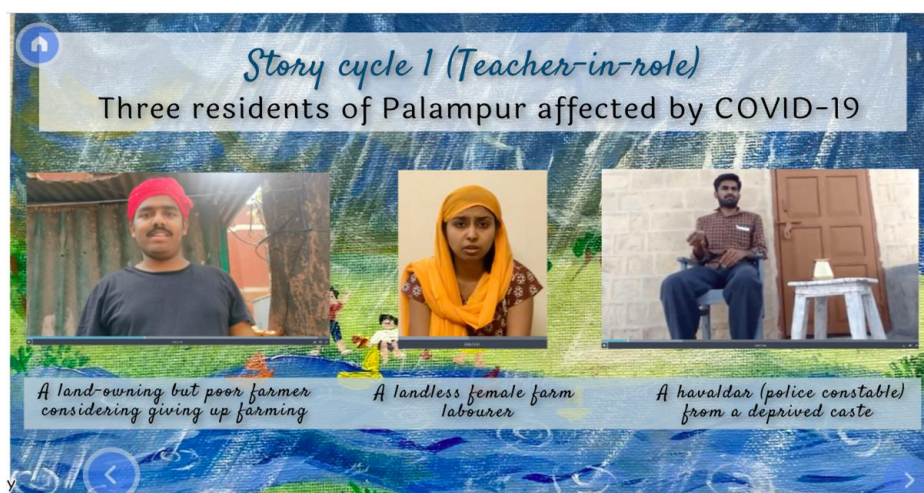


Image 16: Screenshots from the video testimonies that launched the first cycle.

Through these video interactions, students were made cognizant of the fact that caste factors drive many aspects of life and livelihoods in rural India, including the choice of professions, and even apparently caste-agnostic professions like that of the police are not, in fact, free of this form of bias. Their stories were drawn from real life incidents reported on the People's Archive of Rural India, or PARI, a site which we urged students to explore as a part of their research. After watching the videos, each student was asked to frame questions, which they were able to ask the 'residents' in person during a panel discussion. The 'residents', of course, were Teachers in Role, and their task was to introduce the concepts of poverty and marginality as lived experiences.

In the second cycle, we explored margins and marginality and their impact on choice-making. This time, students stepped 'in Role' through a 3-step process. In the first step, they imagined a map of the village, applying their prior knowledge and understanding to propose the same. To review the appropriateness of this map, they studied the

maps of some villages in the region, village demographics from Northern India via the most recent Census, and, based on the same, created their own imaginary demographics for Palampur. After this, they co-created a final map of 'their' village, with some basic common features in place, such as a state road, a river and a bridge across it, using their new-found understanding of factors such as socio-economic power and how it governs village landscapes to design the map. Once again, they were invited to debrief their experience in the drama, both through reflecting on their own concerns and their questions in Role, and through the formulation of theoretical responses and questions pertaining to the economic and political concepts under study.

At the third step, they were allocated their caste and religious identities via lottery, and chose their name, profession and area of residence on this basis. Once they had become comfortable with the Role, they were invited to contribute to an ongoing discussion on the setting up of a paper mill near the village in a village Meeting.

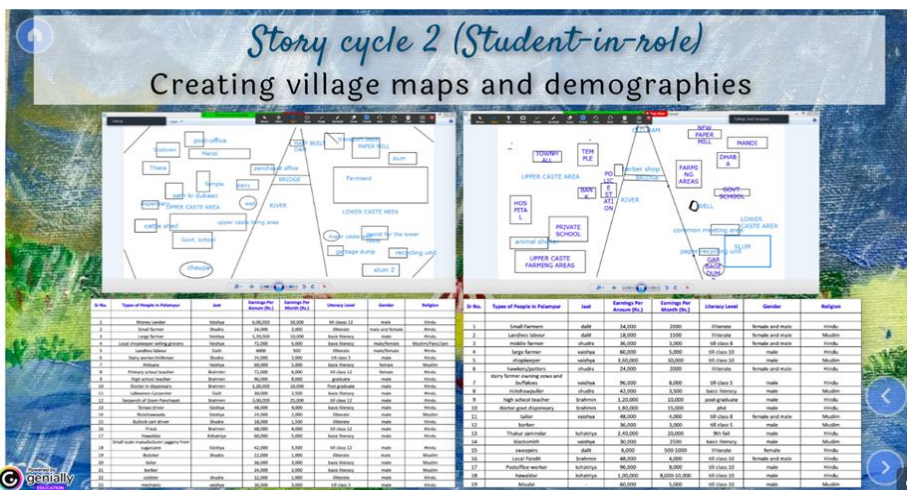


Image 17: Sample maps created by the students on the basis of their research.

The paper mill promised economic prosperity and employment (appealing to the immediate, material survival of the landless and displaced villagers), yet its impacts included environmental degradation, water pollution, and the systematic encroachment of a powerful clique onto communal village resources. In Role, this created an acute ethical and economic conflict within the village community, and this discussion became the major talking point of an election,

wherein 3 Teachers-in-Role stepped in as potential candidates for election to the local government with campaigns that took different positions on the paper mill.

Without going into too many details, it should suffice to say that the Roles and their standpoints were layered and complex:

1. A middle-aged male Dalit contractor who supported the paper mill, which would be set up and run by the local landlords
2. A young male Muslim schoolteacher speaking against the paper mill for environmental reasons
3. A middle-aged upper caste female politician whose husband was the previous Councillor, removed from his position on the grounds of corruption

The tension grew with the understanding that a vote for one's caste-supported candidate did not necessarily mean a favoured outcome for the community as a whole, whereas the candidate who seemed to be speaking in favour of equitable development did not have the favoured background, leading us into the third and final cycle of the process.

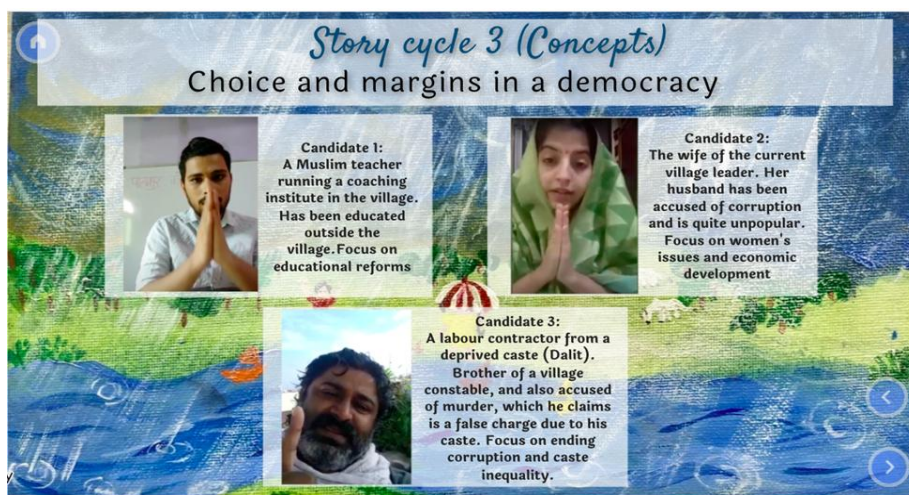


Image 18: Each candidate standing for election represented different interests.

In the final cycle, the three Teachers in Role as candidates for the aforementioned leadership position, who had adopted different caste and religious identities and had different manifestos, shared campaign videos with the villagers. A televised panel discussion and debate between the candidates, and an article on the election written in a local

newspaper were also shared. Our students who had ‘become’ the inhabitants of Palampur engaged with the issues raised by the candidates, and, through the use of drama, this engagement transcended their lived experiences of urban privileged children. This was supported by, at different points in the drama, charting daily travel routes on a digital map, choosing specific physical postures appropriate to their role, and, as a part of their final deliverables, delivering a monologue explaining their choice of vote while dressed in Role. As a culmination, each student was invited to write an essay on a question formulated by them or chosen by them from the accumulated pool, and also, in Role, share an endorsement for a candidate of their choice, demonstrating their understanding of their Roles’ interests and priorities. Through these engagements over the course of three months, students, as voters in Palampur, dealt with the pandemic, with caste and class issues as well as migration patterns, and, through the conflicts and narratives introduced, began to grasp how theories of Economics and Political Science play out in real life situations and impact real people’s lives.

THE PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS OF INTEGRATION

It is therefore, dear [researcher], my task as I see it
To arm myself well for this struggle,
So as to lead my class well into this forest of ideas,
Where light, dark, soft, hard, shallow, deep elements wait so that
we
Can carry well-guarded
The questions to which we have as yet no answers.
— “Of These Seeds Becoming”. Dorothy Heathcote, 1978 (p. 4-5)

As you can see detailed above, the tools and drama conventions which we used through this process were primarily Role, with Teachers and Students in Role; and Conference, or Meeting. While playing ‘in Role’, the teacher or student engages with the situation from a particular person’s perspective, and invites others into the world of the drama. It creates scope for empathy, as we step into the shoes of a villager and view a situation through their lens. In Role, the teachers were told that their ‘performance’ was meant to be minimalistic; more a matter of

helping students engage with the situation or story, and not about getting the delivery or body right. Similarly, the Student-in-Role was told to bank on their understanding of the Role through research, and to express their understanding of a situation from that viewpoint. We primarily used this tool on 3 occasions—while introducing the village of Palampur and the impact of poverty through its residents, while getting the students to understand the relationship between choice and marginality by ‘becoming’ residents of Palampur, and to intensify the conflicts through the candidates who stood for election.

Meeting, or Conference, is a drama convention in which students gather together to confer, in Role, about a fictional situation. While this was our overarching drama convention, used at multiple moments of crisis within ‘the Big Lie,’⁴ the panel discussion or debate was a pedagogical strategy deployed within that convention to spark dialogue, such as when students gathered to ask questions of the Palampur residents in the first phase. When the critical question of a paper mill being set up in the village was raised in the second phase, the children in Role as villagers had to formulate their stance both individually and as a collective. In the third phase, we met in Role at a Gram Sabha, a Village Conference equivalent of a Town Hall, to listen to and ask questions of the candidates standing for election.

By way of these conventions, we were able to considerably raise the bar of classroom discourse, as could be seen from the reflections of teachers on the essays written by the students, and the questions the students raised in Role and out of Role during classroom interactions as well as meetings and discussions. The liminal space provided by Drama helped students negotiate social exclusion and vulnerability and understand the neglected story of ‘expectations’. One student reflected that her main learning was best expressed through this quote from *Animal Farm*: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, 1945).

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The objective of this endeavour was to make all the students appreciate and more than superficially engage with the complexity of

⁴ The ‘Big Lie’ is an agreement between teacher and students to enter a fictional premise *as if* it is true, while being fully aware that it is a fabrication.

economic and political transactions between individuals, each of whom have their own private goals and rights in a Political-Economic system which is often in complete contrast to their own realities and identities. While the hidden agenda was to help students confront their own prejudices and misconceptions with sensitivity and develop empathy and consideration for others and for themselves, the conversations between teachers regularly reminded all of us to keep the inquiry open to multiple perspectives and allow students to arrive at their own independent conclusions and take their own paths to reach the same. We were all too aware of the ways in which the conversation could become didactic, as well as the risks we were taking with a topic such as this one, and in our planning and debriefing sessions with each other we followed a set of inquiry questions that allowed us to reflect on the sessions and our own roles within the process. Some of these are shared below.

1. What is 'the Big Lie'—the practical, fictional situation the group must enter at this stage? What is the task they must perform?
2. What is the universal or underlying human tension (caste friction, scarcity, structural bias) that they might discover through that task?
3. What is the dramatic frame, constraint, or disruption we will introduce to nudge children into the driving seat?
4. Which conventions might we use effectively at this stage?
5. What registers am I looking at taking on for this purpose? How does this chosen register grant agency to the students?
6. What can we share, and what we must absolutely not share with the children at this stage? If and when the children discover what we are withholding, how will that alter the stakes of 'the Big Lie'?
7. What are some possible questions that may arise? What should our stance be on these? How can we ensure that our stance on their questions protects multiple perspectives, rather than guiding them towards our predetermined assumptions?
8. How will we respond to difficult questions without breaking the open-ended nature of the inquiry?
9. How are we helping children keep the distance between their realities and that of their roles? How will we safely bridge the transition between operating inside the fiction and reflecting out

of Role?

Through this iterative, nine-point planning and debriefing framework, we aimed to systematically navigate teacher bias, maintain open-ended inquiry, ensure effective deployment of drama conventions, and protect the emotional safety of all participants—children as well as teachers—while dealing with sensitive socio-political themes such as caste. Following Heathcote’s use of tension as the ‘pressure’ created by the facilitator by deliberately narrowing the options for action, forcing the group to work within tight boundaries of time, space, or social constraint—‘the suspense of not knowing, or ...the desperation of sensing a crucial limitation which one has to fight to overcome’ (Wagner, 1976, p. 149)—we intentionally designed structural bottlenecks. For instance, withholding critical economic information regarding the mill’s ownership structure as well as potential negative impacts forced students to operate with incomplete data, mimicking real-world bureaucratic opacity. The candidates’ loyalties were hidden by design, with some facts revealed during the Gram Sabha discussion and others remaining ambiguous up till the end. These constraints ensured that students had to deepen their engagement through discussion and investigation—one student even proposed a raid on a Councillor’s home to get to the truth!—which helped us to ensure that we were able to fulfil our learning outcomes.

ECONOMICS AND POLITICS AS LIVED REALITY

Economics is often represented as a ‘hard’ science made up of abstract, rational actors, graphs, and numbers, and the higher the academic level, the more this tends to be true. We believe that humans act as per their self-interest and that the definition of self-interest is one that is universally understood. On the ground, however, this approach simply doesn’t fit. As Kate Raworth, the founder of Doughnut Economics (to which both this plan and this paper owes a great deal) famously said, the notion of *Homo Economicus* as a purely self-interested being is a monocultural myth, and in order to truly understand how human socio-economic behaviour occurs, we must shift our view of humanity to “social, interdependent, approximating, fluid in values and dependent upon the living world” (Raworth, 2017, p. 85). The economist and ethicist Paul Heyne, reflecting on his own

practice, wrote:

I started out wondering why economists arrived at so many immoral conclusions and gradually discovered both that social systems were far more complex than I had supposed and that my notions of morality were much too simple. (2008, p. 7)

The intersection of human reality and economic theory is too often obfuscated in the search for perfect solutions—and more often than not to serve the purposes of individual prosperity at the cost of people and the planet. Educational processes serve these purposes through the factory model that is designed to teach subjects as bearing abstract and general ‘truths’, rather than as compilations of findings from real life, based on real experiences, much of which is variable over time and space, and can neither be sublimated, nor generalised to any great extent.

Like economics, political science at the secondary level has been traditionally taught as the study of sterile institutions, constitutional clauses, and mechanical processes. The ‘democratic state’ is presented as a neutral entity, and the ‘democratic citizen’ is presented as a universal, rational actor exercising free will at the ballot box. Educators have actively sought to query this approach, as mentioned by the authors of the introductory letter to teachers and parents in the Grade 9 NCERT textbook on *Democratic Politics-I*.

Syllabi of Civics in our country tend to focus on formal institutions of government. The textbooks are full of constitutional, legal and procedural details, presented in a dry and abstract manner. No wonder children experience disconnect between the theory they read in the textbook and what they see in real life around them. (2012, p. v)

The chapter on Kahaani Palampur Ki in the textbook was thus introduced with the clear intent to humanise the learning of Political Science. However, presumably owing to a lack of understanding of alternative approaches, teachers of Political Science tend to skip the story and abstract the findings of this chapter into generalised, sanitised concepts which they can easily teach in class. Our drama project sought to actively challenge this sanitised reality and to offer an

alternate approach by framing Political Science and Economics through the lens of deeply human, messy, and socially constructed lived experiences.

We did this in four major ways:

1. **By shifting the baseline reality:** We intentionally moved the students out of their lived reality of urban privilege into a village in the foothills of Northern India which was unfamiliar both geographically and sociologically, challenging them to construct a reality of which they had very little prior knowledge, and which was therefore subject to lesser bias.
2. **By humanising abstract concepts:** Instead of treating Choice, Scarcity, Margins, Cost and Benefit as mere vocabulary words, we framed these deliberately and iteratively as ‘threshold concepts’—foundational, transformative ideas within the discipline that act as a gateway to deeper understanding of the domain—that had to be experienced to be understood.
3. **By introducing intersectionality:** We redefined economic reality by showing that it cannot be separated from sociology and politics, emphasising that caste and class factors drive professional choices and that economic survival is often impacted by real-world crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. **By defining the Economic Actor/ Agent:** The objective was to make students appreciate the complexity of economic transactions between individuals, recognising that each person has private goals and rights within a larger political-economic system, and that human agency is impacted by multiple considerations and not just profit.

Safeguarding in Role & the Drama Contract

First and foremost, our process sought to challenge the notion of the generic, equal citizen. While in theory, every student in India recognises the existence of marginalisation, it is often difficult for them, particularly those operating from positions of great privilege such as most of ours, to understand how it operates in the everyday. When we conceptualised the different Roles, we were aware that there would be certain Roles which no one would want to step into. These are typically Roles associated with being especially disadvantaged, including the performance of menial and dangerous tasks such as sanitation work or

butchery. At the time of the map-making activity, we had itemised the professions of villagers as per the national demographic data, and students were aware that we would be stepping into these Roles. In order to democratise the process, we had students draw lots for their Roles, but not publicly share the Roles they had been allocated. We then invited students who were unsure or uncomfortable with their Roles to share their discomforts privately (through one-on-one messaging) and set up individual conversations with them. Most of the findings were as per our anticipation.

- In most cases, students knew that they did not want to take on certain caste (and therefore professional) identities, but couldn't articulate why.
- In a couple of cases, parents got involved, once again with mostly inarticulated discomfort.
- Some students said that they were not uncomfortable per se with their allocated Role, but anticipated teasing by peers.
- Only a couple were straightforward about sharing their prejudice, saying they did not want to play people whom they thought of as 'dirty'.

The conversations with students began with being reminded that this was a drama-led project where everyone was 'only pretending,' and then moved into a deeper probing of the discomfort, with clear reminders that they would not be judged on their stances, nor persuaded to do something they did not want to do. The results were mixed.

- Some children took on their Roles after due reassurances that the teachers would ensure that 'what happened in the drama stayed within the drama.'
- A couple said the conversations helped, but they did not feel confident enough to take on their Roles within their peer groups. Their feedback was respected, and their Roles quietly changed after discussion with them.
- Some parents, it turned out, were uncomfortable with the 'risky' topic of caste being broached at all, and, after being shown that it was a subject of academic study in the 9th Grade, were persuaded that children should be allowed to explore the topic

through a non-biased lens and arrive at their own conclusions. The only reassurance they sought from us was that if the subsequent questions from the children were too complex for them to answer, the teachers would step in to help!

Subsequently, the teachers went back to the group and reiterated that the drama was meant to be a safe space and that if anything from within it was used to hurt anyone outside of the drama, we would suspend the effort immediately and return to a regular lecture-based study. Each participant—student and teacher—took an oath to keep the promise: ‘What happens in the drama stays within the drama.’ Many students were already familiar with this idea, having experienced it multiple times in our regular drama classes. We brought out the ‘Drama Contract’—essential agreements with which we approach any drama class—and all students and participating teachers agreed to honour it. The Contract is shared below for reference.

1. All participants agree to adhere to the reality described in the drama and will only step out of the same by way of an established signal.
2. When the established signal is used, all participants will step out of Role immediately.
3. The group agrees that whatever a student says or does while in Role belongs entirely to the fictional Role, not to the student's reality, and therefore the student will not be penalised or teased on account of it in real life.
4. When the teacher adopts a specific register (such as a helpless bystander or a bureaucratic officer), the students will respond to that Role's status rather than treating the teacher as the One Who Knows. Where the Teacher-in-Role does not have all the answers, the Students-in-Role will try to figure out answers for themselves, as per the demands of the situation.
5. This is a space to ‘be’ not ‘act’. The aim is not to entertain our peers. None of the participants will exaggerate or parody their assigned Roles, but will try to step into their shoes with authenticity and respect.

The sharing of the Contract, and the reiteration of drama essentials went a long way towards building confidence in the group as

well as setting the boundaries of what was permissible.

Understanding Intersectionality

The overall effort sought to establish that political reality in India is fundamentally intersectional. A Dalit (casteless) female farm labourer does not experience the State in the same way an upper-caste landowner, or even a lower-caste male police constable does. The reality of citizenship is often fractured by identity, and even the state apparatus (the police, the law) that is meant to be inherently objective is in fact embedded with the same social prejudices as the society it governs. In an important move, rather than teaching about the local government system (the Panchayati Raj system) as a dry flow-chart of processes, the drama presented the Gram Sabha (Village Council) as a highly charged space riddled with personal and socio-economic biases and contested authority. Inside the Sabha, the poorer, lower-caste and female farm-labourer Roles had to voice their demands against the institutional dominance of upper-caste landowning Roles and uncooperative, corrupt bureaucratic authorities played by the teachers. This asymmetry of status created a palpable, lived conflict. The tension lay in the sheer impossibility of making one's voice heard, if one were, at worst, a poor, landless, low caste woman, within the high-stakes arena of social contestation that is an administrative apparatus. Politics, therefore, came to be understood not as a set of rules, but as a live negotiation of power, survival, and resource allocation.

Much of this learning came through when we reflected with the students on the day's events after stepping out of Role. On some days, we did not have the time to have out-of-Role reflections during the drama session, and therefore this took place during the Economics or Political Science class. The drama teachers learned about many of these reflections through conversations with the academic teachers as well as the students' written reflections and their final essays.

HUMANISING EDUCATION THROUGH EMPATHY

Schools take pride, as we discussed above, in teaching us 'the scientific approach', which, with its "fiction of academic orderliness" (Wagner, 1976, p. 166), is perhaps the very opposite of Dorothy

Heathcote's method. Heathcote was interested in "leading an expedition into the wilderness of the left hand" (ibid.), towards "*knowing*—understanding emotionally as well as intellectually" (ibid.). Wagner (1976) mentions that Heathcote "uses drama to expand [children's] awareness, to enable them to look at reality through fantasy, to see below the surface of actions to their meaning. She is interested... in, as she terms it, burnishing children through the play." (Wagner, 1976, p. 15) Integral to this process of 'burnishing' is the unstated demand for the teacher to step away from their position of power, from the position of the 'one-who-always-knows' (to extend a Heathcotian teaching register) to become a part of the process, and discover and learn with the children. The most important aspect of Heathcote's process was the asking of the right question at the right time. She mentioned elsewhere her sense of identification with the work of Jerome Bruner (Heathcote, 2002, p. 4-14), who proposed a *spiral curriculum* which would allow children to learn at their own pace and not be held back by adults' notions of what is appropriate for them. One can appreciate this identification, given that the heart of Heathcote's project lay in empowering people, bringing dignity to those who feel helpless, and raising the level of a person's consciousness to make sense of their world in a new and deeper way.

Armed with the intent to take forward the learning process in a Heathcotian way, we were able to thoroughly interrogate traditional, passive learning heuristics (like reading a textbook or listening to a lecture) by replacing them with immersive, experiential frameworks. The use of Role created scope for active empathy, as we stepped into the shoes of a villager and viewed a situation through their lens. Students had to formulate political arguments not from their own privileged and biased perspectives, but through the lens of the specific political-economic needs, biases and vulnerabilities of their assigned Roles. Learners conducted research by way of reading news items as well as their textbook, and then acted as experts to offer solutions to the given contexts, thereby delving deeper into more purposeful learning. In a typical Political Science class, they might have been asked to write an essay on 'The Importance of Voting.' Instead, by the use of the convention of Meeting, or Conference, students created slogans on the pressing issues in their village, and asked questions to the candidates at the Gram Sabha, culminating with them casting a vote. This heuristic method provoked students to discover the

mechanics of democracy by actually doing the work of democratic deliberation—debating, challenging authority, and making electoral choices based on on-the-ground exigencies.

Traditional classrooms usually avoid genuine political friction, but drama thrives on tension! As Heathcote frequently emphasised, dramatic tension—distinct from conflict, which causes outright opposition—is the fuel that drives curiosity and the drive to resolution, the catalyst that transforms passive spectators into active, critical investigators. It is not the tension of melodrama, but the one designed through an assigned task, limited time, and responsibility. The tensions evoked by our drama created a cognitive dissonance within our privileged urban cohort: they could no longer view rural poverty as an abstract statistic to be solved by simple philanthropy or simply ignored as a fact of life. Instead, the dramatic tension compelled them, by stepping into the lives of contemporary Indian villagers, to interrogate their own unearned privileges from within the safety of the dramatic frame. In their exit ticket reflections, several students actively pointed to this, as indicated in just a few of their statements shared below:

- “I shouldn't take my privileges for granted.”
- “How the villagers have compromised in their life so much and here we are provided with all the luxury and we can't compromise at all.”
- “One important thing I learnt today was that a majority of people faced extremely critical problems for which there is no immediate solution. It reminded me that there was a lot more to the world than the life that I was living and encouraged me to try and become part of that world.”

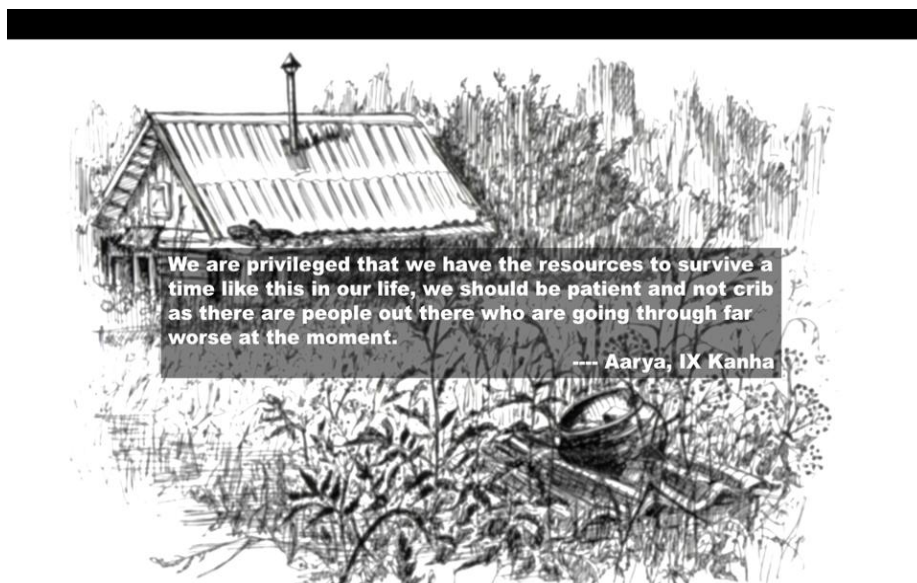


Image 19: Comment from a participant.

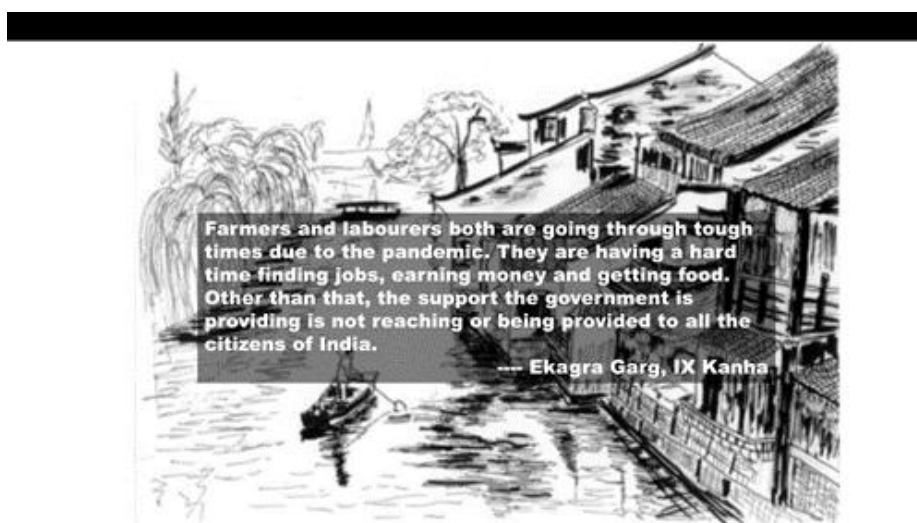


Image 20: Comment from another participant.

By using the liminality of drama, teachers were able to create a safe environment for students to explore political conflict, social exclusion, and inequality. Drama thus became a laboratory where political theories were tested against human behaviour, transcending students' lived experiences of being urban privileged children to become voters in Palampur, dealing with the trials and tribulations of a

known, yet unfamiliar social group. The heuristic shifts from memorisation of abstract concepts to empathy in a lived situation, requiring students to step into a villager's shoes to view socio-economic situations through their specific lens, developed empathy into an active learning strategy and provided a liminal space which allowed 14-year-old students to negotiate the universal concepts of vulnerability and social exclusion through 'the left hand of knowing'.

The most important consideration for us through the planning stage was that students had to *arrive at* these learning outcomes on their own, so that the theories would (or would not) stand up to scrutiny over the course of their learning journey. We aimed to present the theories for their consideration, as up for discussion, and not as *ipso facto*, closed and final truths. Towards this end, the method of learning was critically important.

THE IMPACT OF THE APPROACH

Development does not start with goods; it starts with people and their education, organization, and discipline. Without these three, all resources remain latent, untapped, potential.

— E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (1973, p. 168)

The German Sociologist Max Weber offered a three-part model of social stratification—including Class (which he defined as economic position), Status (which he defined as social honor/ prestige, and which in the Indian context maps almost perfectly onto the caste system), and Party/ Power (political influence), to help one arrive at *Verstehen*, or a comprehensive understanding, of human society (Weber, 1946). This framework clearly outlines that human choices have to be understood in terms of social experiences that are mediated by multiple variables. When our students took on their Roles as villagers, they added another layer of complexity to the decision-making—individual idiosyncrasies! The drama exercises further pushed our privileged students out of their comfort zones to experience the crushing weight of social facts in the Durkheimian sense. They realised that in Palampur, the freedom of economic decision-making, proffered

at the outset by their teachers, was an illusion, heavily constrained by the social facts of their assigned caste, gender, and religion, revealing the structural inequalities of which they were until then unaware. Furthermore, the sub-text of the pandemic demonstrated how macroeconomic shocks destroy the fragile stability of marginalised individuals. It showed them that economic scarcity isn't just a graph shifting left or right; it can devolve into profound social trauma (*anomie*) that tears at the fabric of a community.

The outcome of the process was a rich outpouring of thinking in the form of questions, followed by question elaborations, evolving into essays on which the academic part of their learning was assessed. Some of the questions, as well as a glimpse of essays produced, are shared here.

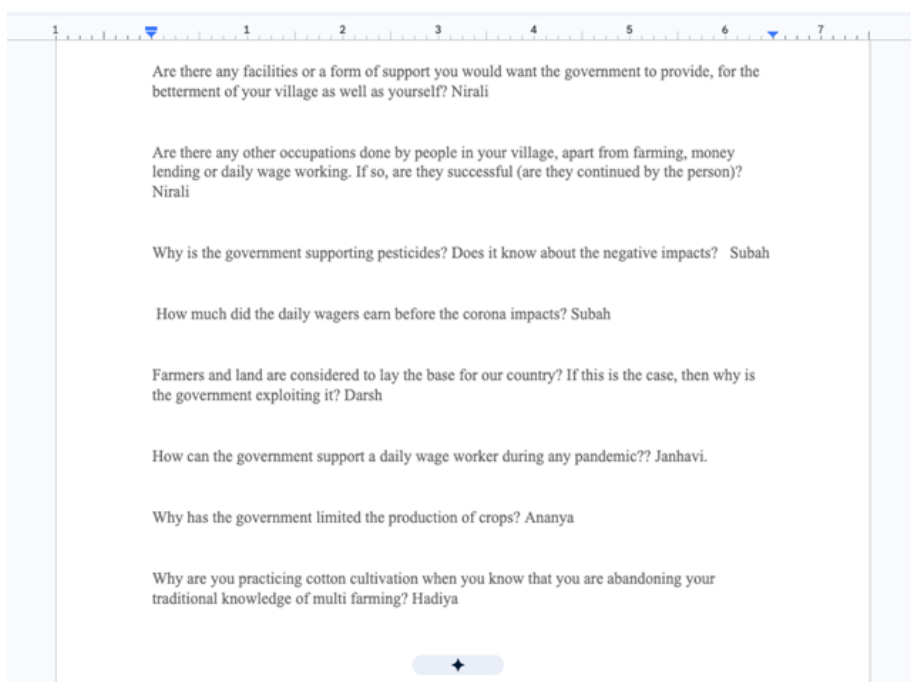


Image 21: Some questions shared by students during the first and second cycles.

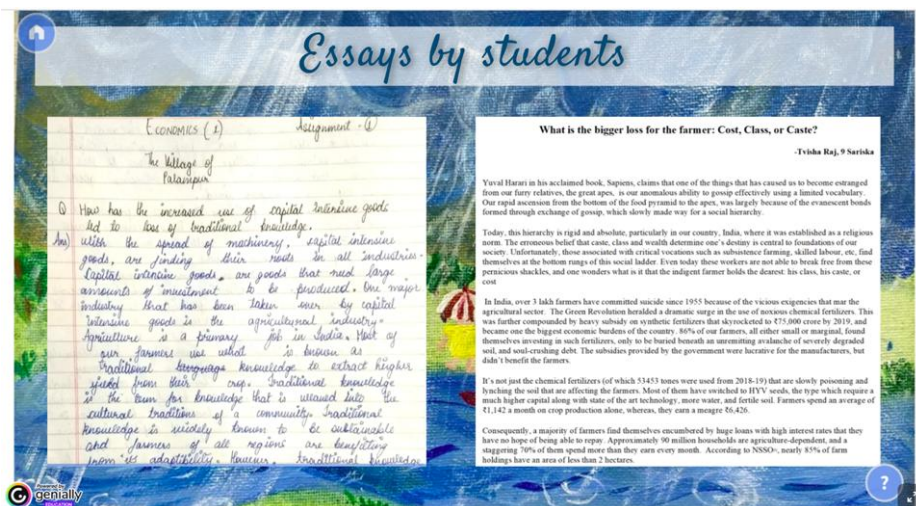


Image 22: Screenshot from a presentation sharing findings: questions chosen by students and explored through essays.

Through the process, emphasis was on the three Rs—rigour, realisation and responsibility (Heathcote, 2002). Teachers shifted registers depending on the different Roles they were playing, whether outright or in the shadowy sense.⁵ We pressed the group when they were facetious (as a group of 13/14-year-olds is sometimes wont to be) until they started correcting each other and themselves. We stepped out of Role and probed when they were too quick to jump to conclusions in Role. Sometimes, as district officials or media persons, we were decidedly unfriendly and often openly scheming, corrupt or uncompromising in Role, which caused a fair bit of shock in students hoping to be heard fairly or get across their demands easily. By way of these conventions, we were able to considerably raise the bar of classroom discourse, as can be seen from the questions raised in Role and out of Role during classroom interactions as well as the content of the meetings and discussions.

Similarly, most of the final essays depicted a depth of understanding far beyond what the teachers had expected from this batch of students, particularly given the loss of learning during the pandemic. While the conversations in the four different homerooms where this process was conducted varied to an extent depending on the different teachers and students who were a part of the process, the

⁵ To learn more about the 'shadowy' or 'twilight' Role, please take a look at Tim Taylor's article in this issue.

level of analysis and quality of text approached by all students across the homerooms was far higher than before or indeed, in other classes attended by the same group. Many of the final reflections in Role, expressing each villager's final choice of candidate (or NOTA—none of the above, in some cases), carried a deep understanding of their own challenges and struggles in Role. By the end of the process, on the basis of teacher assessments and their own feedback, it can be said that at least 80% of the students had developed a depth of understanding of the Roles they inhabited, and an ability to see the world through their eyes, standing not in their shoes, perhaps, but at least shoulder to shoulder in the same reality.

To that extent, the experiment can be said to have been successful. The area of improvement, as shared by students, was in tightening the timeline of the drama. The gaps between the cycles—the process overall took place over a period of three months, with 15–20 days between each cycle—were not helpful in holding up the tensions of the drama process. These gaps were caused by multiple factors, including the planners' unavailability for meetings while we were all online, multiple shifting decisions in the external world, changing assessment timelines and the general unpredictability of matters at the time. But the most important one, which I want to discuss here, was a general lack of belief in the efficacy of the process on the part of the teaching staff.

BUILDING BELIEF IN A BETTER APPROACH

Approaching Palampur through drama had been attempted before at our school. In the initial years of the school, the project-based learning approach (PBL) was used with all grades, though not throughout the year. Since the traditional schooling requirements did not permit PBL as a regular approach, the school had a designated week in its annual calendar, called 'Fun'kaar Week,⁶ during which this could be done. During one of the 'Fun'kaar Weeks, we had conducted a week-long drama immersion into the Palampur story, and it was a great success in terms of student and staff response. Students had expressed their desire to delve deeper into some of the situations and storylines which

⁶ 'Fun'kaar is a portmanteau of the English word 'fun' and the Hindi term 'kaar', which means 'one who does'. The word *funkaar* in Hindi literally means artist.

we had to skip on account of the paucity of time, but participating teachers had also expressed great enthusiasm for the process and asked for it to be repeated. However, in subsequent years, for various reasons, this could not be done, and eventually 'Fun'kaar, primarily an arts-led learning week, came to be suspended for Senior Years classes, where teachers cited a lack of time for such processes.

Over the years, a few teachers who were enthusiastic about trying different approaches reached out to the drama team and several ideas were discussed, until, in early 2020, Palampur was picked up as a potential arts-integrated learning process. Teachers began explorations and training in drama conventions to try and develop a constructivist⁷ and experiential⁸ approach to the lesson. And then, one fine evening, a nation-wide lockdown was announced. For a while, schools were simply suspended pending the next government announcement. When it became obvious that no such announcement was forthcoming, and the status quo was to remain for an undefined future, we were told to take school online. As we know, teachers worldwide took several weeks to understand the operations of online learning platforms; children were much faster on the uptake. In the chaos that followed, many teachers made a strong attempt to stabilise their classes using their tried and tested methods, even though all the evidence seemed to point towards the need to evolve new approaches to suit contemporary needs. As shared earlier in this essay, it was in the light of such a situation that, in desperation, some teachers sought to return to the process drama planning for the lesson on Palampur.

By the time we took up the lesson, much time had been lost in figuring out how to deliver the annual curriculum, as well as the basics of how teaching and learning were even going to work. Assessment conversations, normally a big part of Senior Years, took up the majority of time, and considerations of wellbeing, also equally a big part of Grades 9 and 10, particularly, took up another big chunk. Academic time was reduced overall, and some big decisions had to be made to accommodate any kind of change in teaching and learning processes.

⁷ The constructivist approach to education posits that learners do not passively absorb information; instead, they actively build knowledge and meaning through their own personal experiences, interactions, and mental frameworks, and that this is a lifelong process rather than one occurring at specific junctures of life only.

⁸ Experiential Learning Theory defines learning as the continuous process of creating knowledge through hands-on experience.

Under these circumstances, we planned the first cycle from mid-April to mid-May.

At the end of the first cycle, the summer break had begun, and we were sure that, come July, when school reopened for the Monsoon session, we would be back in the real world. Soon, however, it became clear that we would perhaps continue under lockdown for another month or so, and so we planned the second cycle. But the second cycle ended too, and the end of the first assessment cycle approached, and teachers requested that we close the learning process using the same methods, as traditional assessment methods would be difficult to run under the circumstances.

One can see, thus, that this was a process run by desperation, and not belief. One point of feedback shared by teachers at the end of the project was that they did not feel sufficiently prepared for the process. The drama-led approach sought a degree of empowerment from the facilitator, an ability to handle unpredictability as well as resilience in the face of difficult questions, which most traditional Senior Years teachers simply did not have, and the training that could have helped them could not be completed on account of the lockdown call. This was made tougher on the days when out-of-Role debriefing could not be done during the designated drama time, and had to be taken into the academic lessons, as the academic teachers felt ill-equipped to lead these discussions in an appropriate manner. As a result, only two of the four academic teachers—one of whom was the Head of the Humanities Department and another a seasoned Economics teacher—felt comfortable to actively lead the learning, whereas the other two felt quite overwhelmed by the entire design and the floodgates of questioning that we had opened up. This was a clear failure of the process—unintentional though it was—and an unfortunate outcome of this failure was that an otherwise successful student-empowering process was not taken up again by the department after regular school resumed.

A SINCERE CALL

When your student asks a question that you find difficult to answer, when she seeks information that is not easy to find or expresses an opinion that you don't approve of, this may actually

be a sign of your success as a teacher or a parent.

— Y. Yadav and S. Palshikar, "A Letter for You," *Democratic Politics-I* (2012, p. v)

It was John Dewey who famously advocated that classrooms should function as "miniature democratic societies" where pupils learn cooperation, critical discourse, and shared responsibility through collaborative projects and decision-making (Dewey, 1916). When we began planning the Palampur project, we were deeply conscious of the need to begin where the children were, and that it was critically important that the process should at no point of time shame the children or make them feel inadequate for their lack of knowledge or understanding. At all times during the drama, teachers were reminded to be non-judgemental and allow children to construct their own conception of the world of Palampur through research, common sense, and their own felt experiences, intervening only to correct logical fallacies or fill in gaps in information. A significant learning from the experience for the teachers was that the three children who came from urban underprivileged backgrounds were as clueless about many of the realities and challenges faced on the ground by their Roles from the village, as the rest of their urban peers, even as they related more closely to the facts of scarcity and marginalisation. It helped the group as a whole to understand that there were multiple ways to 'have and have not', and they realised the importance of asking the right questions and listening closely to their peers before arriving at conclusions. An unstated (though very much intended) consequence of the overall experience was a sense of appreciation for each other and a deeper level of trust, made visible through the sharing of reflections that demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable.

The aim of the project was to arrive at a learning experience that 'burnished' the learners in the Heathcotean sense, and I do think that the evidence shows that this was achieved. Drama (as Rosalind Flynn shared in a previous article in *ArtsPraxis*) is possibly one of the most impactful forms promoting embodied learning (Flynn, 2025). I cannot ignore the irony of my assertion at this point—sharing a purely digital process to illuminate the visceral impacts of embodied learning. However, I would assert, having seen this process in the physical space in an earlier version (as mentioned above), that the quibbling

over this point is moot. At a basic level, students had to engage through their imaginations in both cases. In the online space, as they ‘inhabited’ their Roles, we also invited them to dress in Role, and their final monologues required them to do so. At the beginning of the journey, in order to engage their bodies beyond the basic visual/cognitive level, we invited them to create a set of actions demonstrating their daily routines, asking them to think about the ways in which they held their bodies, the kind of clothes they wore, and the kind of tools and implements that they used on a regular basis. As the map came to be built, we also invited them to chart out, in Role, the villagers’ usual routes from their homes to their workplaces, and beyond. These prompts and nudges helped students to locate their bodies in the imaginary space, even though they were unable to do so in the physical one. The visualisation of the village space through the map also helped them to imagine how marginalisation limits human beings within their lived realities. In the physical space, this would have been more impactful, and we know from shorter, drama-led lessons across different age groups, that this works beautifully. But even as we were online, the psychological impacts of the move towards ‘embodiment’ cannot be denied.



Image 23: A student delivering her testimonial in Role as a female Dalit farmer.

One important finding, which was acknowledged by the participating teachers, was that the students' learning through the process was not only richer and deeper, but they had, in fact, covered more conceptual ground through the process than was planned and expected. This was paradoxical in the face of the regular fear expressed by teachers stating that drama is "too time consuming" for Senior Years. In recent years, when we sought to revive the Palampur process in real life, the feedback from teachers was interesting. While the lack of expertise and need for training of the facilitators was clearly cited, another reason given was that, while the process did cover what was required and more of the syllabus, it did not account for the assessment plan as per the national board (CBSE)! This shows a certain reluctance on the part of academic teachers to change their approach, even as student feedback, particularly post-pandemic, has consistently shown that students need and appreciate tools and methods of exploration that are empowering and build confidence in their learning abilities and capacity for risk-taking.

Having said this, we must candidly acknowledge the structural insularity of this intervention. 'The Story of Palampur' was, in many respects, an elite luxury made possible only by the convergence of a black-swan event—the pandemic lockdown—and the extensive material resources of a privileged K-12 private institution. The collapse of the framework upon the resumption of traditional schooling exposes a sobering systemic truth: under neoliberal educational paradigms, experiential and critical pedagogies are frequently relegated to temporary 'states of exception.' When standard accountability structures and high-stakes assessments reassert themselves, the institutional appetite for radical, time-intensive inquiry rapidly diminishes. This project should not be looked at as a seamless blueprint for widespread curricular use, but rather as an experiment that highlights alternative pedagogies and how fiercely the traditional systems resist these.

Furthermore, a critical evaluation of this work demands that we confront the risk of pedagogical voyeurism. We come from a city where 'Slum Tourism' is actually offered as info-tainment, and were very aware, going into the project, of how stepping into the roles of marginalised Dalit labourers or displaced migrant workers through a lottery risks reducing generational, systemic, and physical trauma into a temporary playground for privileged urban youth. To claim that a

digital simulation can grant authentic *Verstehen* or replicate the lived reality of historical oppression would be both naive and ethically fraught. Seen through a Heathcoteian lens, however, the value of this intervention lay not in a superficial consumption of poverty, but in the deliberate construction of a structural mirror, which aimed, through the maintenance of aesthetic distance, to expose to the students the mechanics of their own unearned systemic advantages. The intention was not to alleviate upper-class guilt through performance, but to complicate it through a glimpse of how the world operates depending on the standpoint from which one is looking at it.

What, then, does this say to us about the kind of schools we should have? The National Education Policy 2020 promotes alternative forms of assessment, calling for a holistic report card that goes beyond standardised testing practices, yet formal teacher training processes do not yet account for this change, leaving teachers ill-equipped to practice these alternatives. As long as assessment demands remain stagnant, particularly at the Senior Years level, learning-by-doing practices will continue to be neglected. Over several years, the call to education has been to promote practices that enable students to be risk-takers, to have faith in themselves and their own problem-solving abilities. There are very few strategies currently at play that actually do this, and drama is perhaps foremost in its ability to deliver all these outcomes and more. The ability to play ‘as if’ the world of the imagination were real allows the participating student to try out ways of being, as they might in a laboratory (see Heathcote, 1991). In fact, one may go so far as to argue that this transforms the school space into a laboratory of the self. In other words, the student does not only try out other realities as a means of developing empathy, but that they, through this process, try out the many different versions of their own selves, exploring as one may call it, a ‘multiverse’ of personas, figuring out what matters to them and why, and how they would wish to present themselves to the world in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman, 1956).⁹ In the changing world order, especially with the advent of AI, the role of schools can no longer be (if it ever truly was) delivery of information-

⁹ Erving Goffman’s seminal sociological concept, the ‘presentation of self,’ posits that social interaction is like a theatrical performance (a framework called dramaturgy). In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman argues that individuals act as ‘performers’ on a social stage, using expressions, clothes, and behaviours to engage in ‘impression management’: consciously or unconsciously controlling how others perceive them.

based learning. Instead, schools need to become communities and shared spaces where students can work out the ethical, logical, humane choices they would need to make in order to live happy, fruitful lives. They would need to learn to define for themselves what success means to them, what a purposeful life might look like, and how they could make a meaningful contribution to the planet during their lifetimes. Drama provides the perfect opportunity for this. Not only does it change learners' relationship with knowledge, giving them greater ownership of it by shifting the framework from, as Sir Ken Robinson puts it, static bodies of knowledge to multiple ways of knowing (Robinson, 2009), it helps them understand that actions have responses, choices have consequences, and every Role has its own set of limitations. By playing 'as if', it helps them imagine 'what if' and so imagine a better world. While a general push towards learning-by-doing is the critical need of the hour, I, as a drama-in-education practitioner, would strongly push for the need to integrate more drama into the daily curriculum.

I would argue that, ultimately, the contradictions of the Palampur project do not invalidate its utility; rather, they map out the exact frontier where critical education must continually fight to humanise the classroom. In a world that is changing more rapidly in more ways than ever before, it is imperative that we push these boundaries and promote non-traditional learning methods that embrace the messiness of real life and enable students to figure out the nuances of who they are and what matters to them under different circumstances and constraints.

In an ideal world, we would have loved to finish the Palampur journey with the following exercise: ask the students who have gone through the entire drama process to create, per their understanding of the journey, an ideal map of Palampur. What were the aspects that bothered them within the drama? What might the village look like if things could change? What, therefore, would they seek to change? Augusto Boal famously claimed that drama was a "rehearsal for revolution" (1979). While I wouldn't go so far as that, I would certainly say that drama has immense capacity for bringing about change organically, and the potential to help us construct in our imaginations—where everything begins—something of an ideal world.

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Assessing Drama: Beyond Performance

Empathy, intuition, and the three-way evaluation in drama education

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ABSTRACT

In India, speech and drama exams form the basis of assessment for drama, often devoid of empathy. While these methods are familiar to children and parents from other content areas, the focus on measurement comes at the cost of creativity and human growth. This author advocates for an intuitive approach to assessment that considers student, teacher, and parent voice.

Indian teachers love assessments. Indian parents may love them even more. I am an Indian teacher too. The only difference is that I teach drama and I teach drama outside of a school setting. So I thought I could get away with it.

Wait! Can I? Should I?

How will I know how my students are progressing? And how will I know how I myself am progressing?

15 years ago when I began my journey as a private drama teacher, these were some of the questions that kept returning to me, especially once I started teaching more than two students at a time. The reason I chose not to teach at a school was precisely because schools either have assessments or make drama teachers put up skits and plays with little or no contribution by the students.

In my second year of teaching, I found myself at a crossroads. I knew that both my students and I had grown, but I couldn't quite put my finger on *how*. That's when I began exploring the drama assessments that were readily available in India at the time: Speech & Drama exams. The syllabus was easy to navigate and quite interesting to teach, mainly because it didn't dictate how you should teach. And here was an international qualification readily available in my country. My students and I leapt at the opportunity.

Once the first set of exams were over, I came to three conclusions:

- One can only mark the technical aspects of performance (memory, comprehension, staging, voice, speech, etc.)
- The student is able to share barely twenty percent of the process work and almost nothing about how drama has contributed to their life
- It's a certificate parents and competitive children love

A child who could not look a stranger in the eye managed to complete

a solo exam. But she was marked down with the comment: "Some engagement with the audience." Another child who had just come out of the closet created a devised piece about his experience. But he was marked down with the comment: "A bit over the allotted time." The examiner had no choice but to do so because that's what the marking scheme suggested. Empathy had left the examination room. Empathy doesn't like examination rooms.

WHAT SCHOOL AND INDEPENDENT DRAMA EXAMS ACTUALLY MEASURE

It is difficult for drama examiners to retain empathy during an exam. I know this because, over the years, I have become good friends with many Speech & Drama examiners. Whenever the topic of exam comes up, they speak about how hard it is not to look at the child in front of them and simply mark the technicalities.

Earlier, some brave examiners would talk to the child a little longer to better understand them before marking. But now the exchange is usually reduced to:

Hello.

Whenever you are ready...

I'll ask you some questions now.

Thank you.

And that's it. Yet the system works for the majority of children and parents in India because it is familiar. It mirrors what they are used to in schools. In a cut-throat education and job market where children grow up constantly being measured and compared, this system is quick and works best for the schools.

Sir Ken Robinson often spoke about how education systems focus heavily on measurable results, sometimes at the cost of creativity and human growth (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). In such a system, subjects like drama easily become another place where marks and certificates matter more than experience. So drama becomes another commodity; another subject to pass. And if one doesn't do well, then perhaps one

simply doesn't do drama at all.

WHAT THESE EXAMS CANNOT SEE

In drama, Dorothy Heathcote says, "we are trying out life" (1993). And perhaps that is where the discomfort with assessments in drama lies.

If we are trying out life, how do we measure drama with a marking scheme?

How do we grade courage? Or vulnerability? Or the moment when a child finally finds the confidence to speak?

The child who finally makes eye contact with the audience may not have mastered voice projection yet, but she has crossed a mountain of fear. The student who goes slightly over time while sharing a deeply personal story may not have followed the rubric, but he has trusted the space enough to be honest.

Drama classrooms are messy places. Growth there is rarely neat and almost never fits into tidy boxes. It appears in unexpected moments—when a quiet student volunteers to lead a scene; when a group works through disagreement while devising a piece; when a child suddenly realises that another person's story could also be their own. No examiner sees those moments, yet those are the moments where the real learning happens.

Drama educator Cecily O'Neill reminds us that in process drama, the real value lies in the experience of exploring a situation together rather than simply presenting a final performance (O'Neill, 1995, p. xiii). In this kind of work, students are not just performers being judged. They are people trying to understand ideas, relationships, and different points of view. Heathcote's approach shifts the teacher's attention away from polished performance and towards the learning generated through the dramatic experience. She was dissatisfied when students were merely "doing theatrics" or "acting" artificially; instead, she sought the dramatic pressure that would enable learners to approach a problem in a new way (Wagner, 1976, p. 13).

These thoughts changed how I began to look at assessment. Perhaps assessment in drama should not only ask, "Did the student perform well?" but also:

- Did the student take risks?
- Did the student collaborate and listen?
- Did the student show curiosity about the character or situation?
- Did drama help them understand themselves or others a little better?

These are slower questions. They need observation over time, reflection, and conversation rather than a five-minute performance and a checklist.

Here comes what drama teachers bank on the most: *intuition*.

THE INTUITIVE ASSESSMENT

Many of us arrive at teaching drama almost by instinct. Perhaps the urge to share what we know and to grow through that sharing lives close to the surface in every drama teacher. Reflective observation, self-assessment, and formative assessment are already familiar practices to many drama educators. Jones mentions Diagnostic Assessment, where based on one's student population, a teacher needs to pay particular attention to one's evaluation of what the students need at the outset of a learning experience (2024, p. 82). Yet there remains another dimension of assessment that is harder to describe. It emerges from long-term relationships with students, from careful observation, and from accumulated experience. Often, we experience it first as intuition.

We can read faces. We can hold a child's hand and sense what happened in the morning. We can feel what a child experiences during a session. Sometimes we are almost like alchemists, adjusting the lesson plan in the moment to include a child who might be feeling lost. Because we listen. And listening strengthens our intuition.

As teachers we use our intuition to assess, and then confirm our observations by noticing changes that are sometimes visible only to the teacher. This can make the teacher feel helpless when it comes to writing an assessment report. Thankfully authors Cecily O'Neill and Alan Lambert offer an interesting perspective on evaluation in their book *Drama Structures*. They write, "In evaluating drama, it is the quality of the experience which is important" (1982, p. 145). They also suggest that teachers might begin assessment by reflecting on their own contribution to the work.

For teachers who are actively engaged in the process, this is quite natural. The teacher knows whether she took a bigger creative risk than the previous class. She knows if she showed greater patience or created more space for students' ideas. She knows if the material explored in the session was deeper or more complex. If the teacher's objectives for the class were met, the students' learning has likely progressed as well. Perhaps an examiner should work with students across several sessions before assessing them. Otherwise the one-time, 20–30 minute performance task will do what many exams do: pass a judgement.

ASSESSMENT BEYOND THE EXAM

When discussing assessment in drama, it is important to acknowledge that examinations are only one part of a much larger conversation. Drama educators have long recognised that many of the most significant outcomes of drama learning are difficult to capture through a final performance alone. While examinations and performance assessments can provide evidence of technical achievement, they often reveal only a small part of what students experience and learn over time.

Assessment in drama has therefore evolved in many different directions. Diagnostic assessment seeks to understand where students begin: their prior experiences, interests, strengths, confidence levels, social dynamics, and readiness for learning. Formative assessment follows students throughout the process, documenting their growth through observation, discussion, reflection, feedback, and self-assessment. In both cases, the purpose is not merely to judge achievement but to understand learning. In *Assessment in the Drama Classroom*, Jones argues that assessment begins by identifying students' entry points and understanding what they bring into the learning experience. Questions such as: How willing are students to take risks? How well do they collaborate? What are the social dynamics of the group? are all forms of assessment. These questions move beyond performance outcomes and focus instead on the conditions that make meaningful drama learning possible.

This distinction is important because assessment is not the same thing as grading. Examinations, marks, certificates, and rankings are all forms of grading. Assessment, however, can also mean identifying

where students begin, observing how they develop, documenting their progress, and helping them understand their own learning. Much of the most meaningful assessment in drama may happen long before a final performance is presented.

Self-assessment and goal setting have also become important parts of drama education. Students are often invited to reflect on their own learning, identify areas for growth, and gather evidence of their development over time. Rather than being passive recipients of evaluation, they become active participants in understanding their own progress. The approach described in this article grows from this broader tradition. What interests me is not whether formative, diagnostic, and reflective assessment practices are valuable—they clearly are—but what role intuition might play within them?

Drama teachers often recognise growth before they can easily explain it. We notice a student who takes a creative risk they would once have avoided. We sense a growing confidence in a child who speaks more freely than before. We observe a group listening to one another with greater patience and generosity. These observations may later be documented through reports, reflections, or conversations, but they are often first encountered intuitively. It is from this perspective that I began to think about assessment not simply as measurement, but as an ongoing practice of attention.

THE PARENT'S VIEW

Parents often evaluate drama very differently. The quintessential Indian parent checks whether drama is helping their child succeed in two important social spaces: school and family gatherings. If after a year of drama their child is invited to present something at the school assembly, then drama is working. If not, they may withdraw the child. Some parents continue sending their children for exams simply to collect certificates for future college applications. But most parents judge drama through everyday interactions:

Does my child speak more confidently?

Does she greet relatives comfortably?

Does he participate in school activities?

This can be a difficult space for drama teachers. Yet there are also

parents who continue sending their children simply because their child comes home happy and looks forward to the next class. These parents trust that if the child is enjoying the process, learning is happening—and we are fortunate to have many such parents at Joy of Drama, where I teach.

What Parents Notice

Over the years, some parents have shared observations that stayed with me. One parent once said, “My son can now sit and chat with anybody on anything!” Another parent told me, “My child is growing here. She is gaining some power that I don’t understand but now she talks more deeply about the same topics which she discussed very little about earlier.” A quieter student’s mother once shared something simple but powerful: “She has started to ask questions at school.” These changes rarely appear in exam reports, but they often reveal the deeper impact of drama education.

THE THREE-WAY EVALUATION

Student – Teacher – Parent

Perhaps the most meaningful way to understand progress in drama is when three voices come together: parent, student, and teacher. The student voice is especially important. Drama educators have used self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting to help students recognise their own learning. “Self-assessment must be a consistent approach to teaching and learning in the drama classroom in order to foster meaningful engagement” (Jones, 2024, p. 20). So considering self-assessment is crucial in this case.

The teacher observes the process.

The parent notices changes outside the classroom.

And the student slowly begins to recognise their own growth in and outside the classroom.

The teacher sees small shifts—a student speaking a little louder, listening more carefully, or sharing the stage with others. Jones

explores this when describing *Noticing* as a habit of mind for good teachers (2024, p. 113). The parent notices different things—a child greeting relatives confidently, volunteering in school, or telling stories at home.

And then there is the student. Students are often the last to realise how much they have changed. But sometimes, if we ask the right questions, they begin to see it. *Were you nervous when you first came to class? What was the hardest thing you tried this month? What did you do this week that you couldn't do last year?* Slowly the answers appear.

"I spoke louder."

"I worked with someone new."

"I wasn't scared on stage."

These may seem like small answers, but in drama education they represent very big journeys.

At Joy of Drama, we try to follow this three-way evaluation system—parent, student, and teacher. To provide students with a formal framework as well, we connect this process with a LAMDA Group Devising qualification. Group devising allows students to collaborate over time to create their own performance rather than presenting a single prepared piece. The qualification offers a recognised certificate, which many parents appreciate, while still allowing the process of exploration, collaboration, and growth to remain central.

When these perspectives come together, assessment becomes less about judgement and more about understanding. It becomes a conversation rather than a verdict. A student who had been with us since 2016, is now an engineering student and says that his power of imagination catapulted post drama and he fell in love with Physics!

Of course there will still be exams. There will still be certificates. And perhaps they will continue to serve their purpose. But maybe the real assessment of drama lies somewhere else.

- It lies in the quiet confidence of a child who once refused to speak.

- It lies in a group of students learning how to listen to each other.
- It lies in the moment when a student realises that another person's story might not be so different from their own.

Rabindranath Tagore once wrote, "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence" (1969, pp. 109). Perhaps drama education is simply trying to do that.

One classroom.

One rehearsal.

One brave child at a time.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Maps for Learning: How Dorothy Heathcote's Use of Maps Facilitates Reflecting upon Arts Praxis as Thinking Praxis

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ABSTRACT

Arts praxis as thinking praxis connects to Paolo Freire's transformational social pedagogy and Heathcote's drama for learning. Against this background, this practice-based piece explores different examples of how maps can be used for reflecting and communicating knowledge in learning and educational contexts. It argues that maps can visualise processes of meta-learning and thereby empower learners to understand in which way their thought processes unfold. Featuring my own experience of using map making for reflection in a higher education literature course, the essay follows the guiding argument that the form a map takes on, its aesthetic quality, marks a relevant contribution to the learning experience. The emerging concept of knowledge empowers the learner through giving them awareness and thereby agency of their own learning journey. To contextualise this 'thinking of maps' further, the essay references a material map from

the archive of Dorothy Heathcote, which was presented during the Heathcote Now Conference in 2025, and a mental metaphor from her Fight for Drama speech (1989). The essay elucidates how maps can help to reflect upon and support the plurality of thinking praxis possible in our schools and societies today. As a practice-based piece, it emphasises the core argument with its playful, interactive form.

HOW TO READ THIS ESSAY (GUIDELINES)

Following Heathcote's idea of the interconnected, simultaneous and non-hierarchical presence of different pieces of learning at any time, you can read the parts of this essay in any order you prefer. To be able to represent this free form in the linear structure of a published essay, the three parts (experience—concept—practice) are presented in mixed-up order. All parts are linked by the shared conceptual core that map-making can be used to make visible a *dense* and emergent quality of thinking, resulting in a processual aesthetic of knowledge. Thus, the 'animated pedagogies' presented in this text (as interactive essay structure, map-making practice, pedagogy and metaphor) anchor in an understanding of *learning-as-transformation* as, for example, championed by revolutionary educator Paolo Freire. Heathcote likewise grasps the concept of knowledge production and communication as *(a)live process* with her metaphor of an octopus. My practice of *map-making for reflection* recognises the learning journey, i.e. knowledge, as a dynamic, ultimately unfinishable process as a result of observing the sometimes 'messy' path the creation of a map takes. These various forms of meta-cognition can empower a learner to take agency over knowledge production and the shape of learning environments.

Your reading journey can take on six different routes altogether:

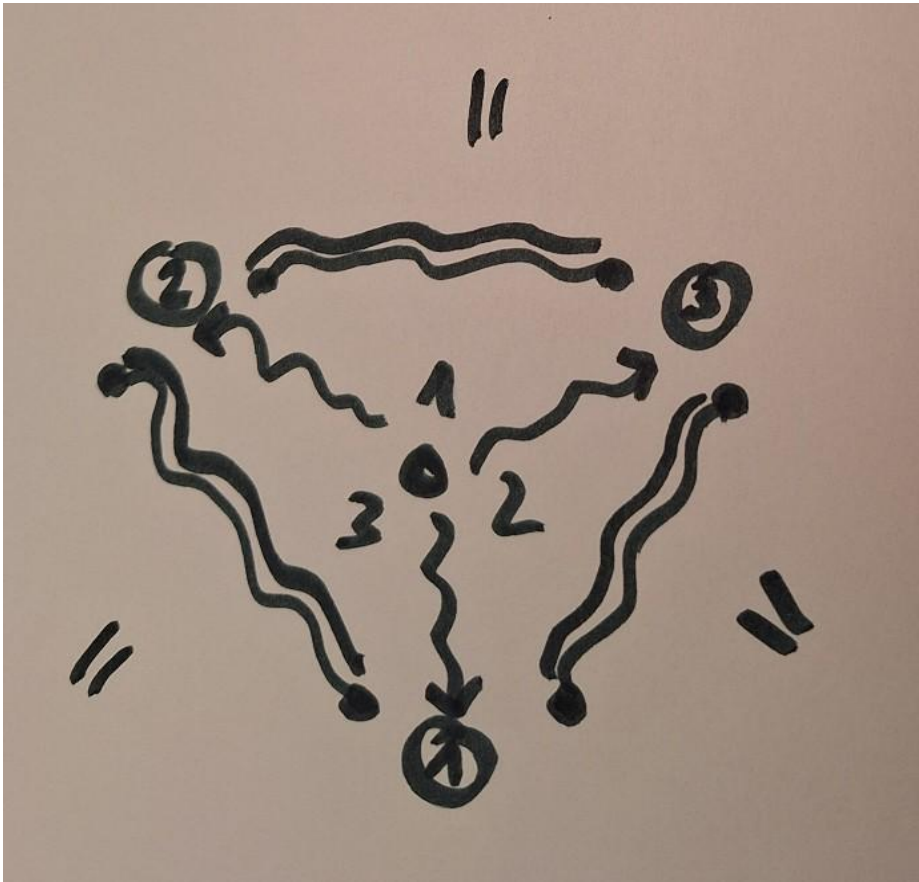


Figure 1. The structure of this essay as interactive map.

ALTERNATIVE: You can cut out the different parts of this essay and glue them together in tripod-shape. See what happens!

PRACTICE (3)

A sense-ible thing! Map-making in higher education

The practice section supports the empowering pedagogy of map-making as a translation of *dense*, emergent thinking into a visual-material analogue with a concrete teaching example. During summer term 2025, I was using *map-making for reflection* in a literary history class at university level in Germany. I thought this way of visualising

would help the students to grasp the episodic, at times meandering structure of an early German novel from the 18th century, *The History of Agathon* by Christoph Martin Wieland (1773). The sprawling text of significant length, with its alien tone to the modern ear and complex philosophical argument could benefit from an exercise for which the students would have to break down the text's essential stages into a drawn map of the protagonist's outer journey. However, my aim behind using map-making for text reflection in higher education was also to introduce the cohort of students, all of whom wanting to become teachers, to creative thinking and learning methods in literature teaching.¹ For the map exercise, I invited the students to bring in old magazines, newspapers, and other arts and crafts materials to fashion their maps. They could use an example from a teacher's training book for inspiration or come up with their own ideas. The practice exercise emphasises that map-making can be especially beneficial when the content of a work seems dense and initially remote from areas of creative learning techniques (e.g. because of the erudite aloofness still often associated with 'older literature').

What I found particularly striking was how the resulting map of the analogue group expressed in its multi-sensory aesthetic the argumentative dualism of the 18th century novel. As an early example of a *bildungsroman*, *Agathon* traces the growing-up experience of its protagonist. The eponymous hero discovers that a strictly idealised, morally-clean approach to acting in life, whether in his understanding of love or political leadership, needed to be counter-balanced with the realism of human emotions, how crowds act, and the physical make-up of various environments.

Throughout, the narrative voice showed a protagonist torn between following pure ideals and accepting that pleasures of all kinds are also a force in life. Taciturnly, through the multi-sensory aesthetic of their creative thinking, the students had chosen to 'draw their map' with three-dimensional, sensory materials: a piece of red string was used to connect the different stages of the journey, which led to a relief-like final stage adorned with artificial rose petals. Within the parameters of the exercise, it seemed, the 'thinking of the map'

¹ I deployed the map-drawing as an analogue counter-part to a digital 'bookTok' exercise, for which the students had to create a short trailer about the novel, to highlight alternative ways of using visual arts and performance strategies to communicate the content of an older medium.

developed a life of its own (comparable to the animated pedagogy grasped with the octopus metaphor in section 2 or my poem about the map from the Heathcote archive described in section 1). In visualising the story as an abstract conceptual blueprint and a concrete material piece of thinking that could be 'felt', the map, in content and particularly in its form, brought together the two argumentative strands of the novel.

In discussing the map with the class after the creative session, I exemplified with this aspect of the map that its aesthetics (the way how the map was designed and with which materials) could help to find a way into an interpretation or reveal profound insights into a text (or given field of study). The thinking encapsulated in the shape the creative expression took on helped to clarify the content of the novel. In a process of endless semiosis, therefore, the potentially three-dimensional qualities of *map-making for reflection* ushered in another process of meaning-making: that of reading the style of creative action symbolically; or, to paraphrase Heathcote, in the particular of creative expression universals patterns. *Map-making for reflection* illustrates an argumentative point about arts praxis as humanising thinking praxis. It is about finding out about a subject through the form the creative process takes on during the making, thus recognising that knowledge processes are transformational processes or in terminology from *Mantle of the Expert*: to learn through the shape of an *emergent inquiry* (Aitken, 2013). Comparable to the mantle of confidence that playfully grows while a person is learning *in role*, the students grew more confident in their understanding of the novel while creating their map and reflected this in their statements about the text afterwards. From my point of view, the map-making had made visible what they had understood about the novel. Reading back the path their map of learning had taken encouraged them to recognise, and ultimately, evolve their knowledge.

Image-association appeared as another aspect of the learning processes in *map-making for reflection*. The aesthetic and visual content of the images chosen carried meaning and potential insight into a subject area as it connected the visual footprint of the novel to the life worlds of the learners. This highlighted their potential of being capable of making sense of what they had read in their own right, translating the original text into a different medium in the creative dialogue. In their feedback after the map-making exercise, various

students commented that they had felt the content of the novel had become clearer through the map-making process and associations with images they could relate to more directly from their own sociocultural frame of references (such as using an image of Freddie Mercury to describe the popular, yet internally torn appeal of the protagonist at the height of his 'fame'). This learning by analogy helped to intellectually grasp various argumentative facets of the novel. Of course, some of the students who were already trained in the self-reflective awareness of the humanities highlighted that this presentist approach (e.g. applying contemporary images to a text from roughly 300 years ago) can also distance from the actual text; yet, discussing telling images and materials which were seemingly haphazardly assembled in the making process, we also constructed knowledge from reading the map and its design. The material reality of the map evidenced this learning as much as the content presented with it and transformed the educational environment through its presence in the classroom (as described in more detail in section 1).

In this practice example, *map-making for reflection* emerged as a way of externalising *dense*, simultaneous thinking in arts praxis. The technique provided a window into a subject through depicting it once removed and through this very aesthetic distance allowed for productive interpretation. Seen in another way, the map in front of us helped us to cross the historical distance to a text from various centuries ago by finding haptic, three-dimensional paths into it. As we associated our current images and sensory realities, we produced insights into the text and generated knowledge. This had a mutually transformative effect. By leading us into the epistemological game of meaning-making, *map-making for reflection* made us aware of the ongoing journey of learning as dialogue between people, between media, between stages of knowledge. Heathcote's humanising pedagogy of revealing thinking as a live, organic process (as an octopus, cf. section 2) expresses the possibility of the constant evolvment of knowledge in our societies. Map learning as *actionreflection*, as a concrete creative intervention into the often static topography of our educational realities contains, in a nod to Paolo Freire (cf. my poem in section 1), the empowering possibility of change.

EXPERIENCE (1)

The look of a thought

The map shivered when David rolled it up. A small cut-out of a church, or a town, or a well, dislodged, revealing a spot of the raisin-coloured residue of glue on a ground of faded yellow, and fell, gently, like an autumn leave twirling, too early in the year, like a single flake of snow dancing in a winter gust, to the institutional ground. Grey carpets.

For a second, they were quiet.
For a second, everybody in the room saw it peel off and fall.
For a second, the story of the map had unfolded unto the educational floor, easy to clean; nevertheless, messy.

Casually, then, while being stored away, the map, back into the archive, the cut-out was picked-up, shoved under the turning cloth, the fabric of the map, re-lodged thereby, differently, at an angle, changed, closed off again; yet a living archive.

This was, we were told, a map from the archive of Dorothy Heathcote, a device to be used, a *treasure-burden*: a map to a whole continent of creative learning.

This made me understand so much about Heathcote's applied work, her use of creative methods for thinking and learning, and material tools; arts praxis *as thinking*. I love to use maps in my practice, in teaching, and in personal reflection. They help to immediately grasp the narrative of an argument, the look of a thought, the essence of a thinking process. I'd say maps lead into structures of

thinking themselves, the structure the communication of learning takes on. They are an act of meta-cognition. And understanding these structures, rendering them conscious through creative methods, is learning itself. Learning can be messy, as Heathcote often describes in her writing and talks. Creative thinking can be messy, too. Maps can embrace this messiness by tracing it intuitively and thereby perhaps reveal patterns, show the human, sprawling, imperfect, changeable, lively nature of ideas themselves. Maps are useful, maps are to be used.

Heathcote's and by extension all forms of empowering education and learning are about providing a space for this messiness in thinking: the exchange of ideas, the changing of ideas, of a status quo, of a something-that-has-always-been-like-that-but-now-looks-different, of life transformation. Learning creatively and perhaps seeing things differently after an encounter with the creative action, like a cut-out piece of a paper map falling to the ground of a high-tech educational building, bridges the gap between a mundane environment and the potential of a different world behind it; the creative past infecting the sterile carpets of the present to animate the future. In my semantisation of the material reality, the falling piece from a map becomes *creative practice-as-symbol*, a concrete 'critical intervention into reality', to use the words of transformational pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970/2017, p. 26). Learning empowered by creative practice can change the make-up of our learning environments and the maps for our institutions as well; if by happy accident.

We learn something about what we think by looking at the aesthetic structures our thoughts take on, this could be one through-line when reflecting upon arts praxis as thinking practice in maps. So, maps are not 'just' tools to reflect but they contain evolving thought processes.² Cultural theorist Walter Benjamin describes processes of literary reflection as *Denkbilder*, 'thought-images' (1974/2022). The form becomes content in literary *image*-ation as thinking. Maps are a particular version of these *thought-images* too, either as a material device in applied drama work, to spark a story or start a creative exploration, or as a reflective tool in other contexts. But maps are not just the visual footprint or initiator of a complex cognitive journey. They

² My practice in section 1 elaborates on this idea as well as the analysis of Heathcote's 'octopus thinking' in section 2.

are this very journey as much as they illustrate it. They trace our story of learning about a subject, empower us by seeing that our learning journey has a clear path, they shape a messy progression, a structure, a direction (whichever way it may take us). Though the map of Dorothy which David Allen showed us at the International Conference in Manchester in November 2025 may have been originally used to initiate a *Mantle of the Expert* classroom drama, it allowed for many learning journeys to be taken at the same time.

CONCEPT (2)

Eight arms? Reading Heathcote's metaphorical map of (dis-) organised thinking

Now, the other thing I just want to say is I wish I could do tidy, neat talks. But I can't. So I've got this dreadful sort of octopus-thing here because to me teaching is not linear; teaching is dense. So all these octopus-arms [Heathcote moves her hands and performs a gesture of locating her ideas in the space in front of her, *inserted by the author*] I sort of hurl at you to me are all there every time I open my mouth or my ears when I'm working with children. So they are all together. But you can't speak with nine [sic!] arms as you might say so you got to talk about one at a time. But they are all there as far as I'm concerned. (1989)

In her seminal speech at the teacher's conference 1989, Heathcote introduces a mental image early on, a cognitive metaphor, to describe the organisation of her thoughts visually. The octopus with its eight (or counting the head with its nine) limbs spatialises the structure Heathcote's thinking takes on comparable to a drawn map. Its sprawling layout of eight seemingly disorganised arms reaches out in space and therefore could be seen as a version of an animated map. Seeing the octopus arms as different paths or thought-excursions creates the image of a network of ideas in motion which helps to understand art praxis as thinking praxis: as interconnected, simultaneous, non-hierarchical reflections in action with the potential to mutually transform each other. 'Octopus thinking', thus, makes *learning-as-transformation* and the act of presenting changing stages

of knowledge visible in its animated map-structure.

In our conventions of thinking, maps are often associated with a clear path, or a linear journey from A to B, a GoogleMaps that shows where to start (your 'home') and where to finish (your 'destination'). That a journey may change along the way is rarely acknowledged in the initial understanding of how a map works and what it looks like (unless GoogleMaps tracks a construction site on the way). Heathcote's understanding of thinking and her communication of the shape that thinking takes on aims for 'messiness' (accepts learning as as a continuous construction site, one might say). It is not tidy, not neat. And this messiness requires a different look, an image allowing for the possibility that an emergent journey may change along the way. The position of the arms of the octopus, to stay within the image, can twist while we are tracing one limb to the end, which may influence our next step. In the dynamic cognitive processes insinuated in Heathcote's octopus map of *actionreflection*, conceptualising knowledge as unfinished thinking process, the parts can transform the appearance of the whole and vice versa (also compare my symbolic reading of a paper cut-out falling to the ground of a modern building, briefly transforming the educational environment, section 1).

Thus, Heathcote's conceptual metaphor, the *octopus map*, which proposes knowledge as unfinished process grasps a key aspect of a humanising learning experience in the tradition of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire: "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation." (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 56) The animated octopus visualises a cognitive reality in motion within its aesthetic: It embodies *actionreflection*. Ideas may gravitate around a centre (a *problem posed*, an emergent inquiry) but then can change in an animated dialogue, an inter-play between heads and arms in a shared space, rather than following top-down, neatly one from another, as academic writing courses regularly teach. In this sense, knowledge production appears as a map evolving. The octopus-learning rests on a humanised, time-based order of constant transformation. It produces insights because it is a multiverse, in which different elements co-exist and therefore can infect each other to create something new, a different order. Note that Heathcote does not introduce a conceptual binary here: she doesn't describe her thinking

as ‚non-linear‘ in opposition to the linear progression of conventional academic thinking, she describes it as *dense* (i.e. 'not linear'). Learning as a process and the knowledge resulting from this learning is changing in the very moment it is uttered; therefore the direction in a map may change its course, which renders this form of thinking closer to life; for life contains a flurry of possibilities.

Heathcote deploys the image of the octopus at the beginning of her speech to creatively express what she considers the unusual shape the communication of her thoughts takes on as a result of the *dense* approach to learning described in the previous paragraph. She uses the *octopus map* as a device to guide a listener through her talk. In analogy to the extremely agile and sometimes sudden movement of the limbs of the octopus, she claims to *hurl* pieces of information at us, unprepared. Of course, Heathcote's *en passant* image is much cleverer than her self-deprecating understatement initially suggests. With her underwater animal, she already acknowledges her teaching and learning practice as located in a different medium to the conventional air of institutions of learning. Ironically, the lack of the very same air provides her approach with more oxygen than comparable practice above water level. One might read a certain level of 'underground' movement into the deep-sea creature's location. In the fluid medium of drama education, the octopus-agent can wiggle, finds itself *in a reality in liquid process* with all its empowering implications for notions of education in the sense of Freire. Further, by no means are the arms of an octopus really unruly at all times. When some biologists talk about the octopus, they often describe how every arm contains a kind of brain and that the big brain in the middle (the inquiry, the exercise, the problem posed) cognitively controls or is in constant dialogue with the parts. It knows where they are going and, responding to its environment, is open to change at the same time. To communicate the seemingly messy structure of her thought process, thus, Heathcote uses a clever underwater animal which is very well capable of handling complex intellectual movement processes; perhaps sometimes much more apt for these than more streamlined organisational structures. In the languages of political and educational aesthetics: learning becomes transformational.

The function of the map as device to express this order of a different learning environment, therefore, solves a key problem in teaching and thinking in our schools and societies: it helps to

communicate how humans think in an accessible form of meta-learning. It takes pride in the productivity of 'messy' cognitive structures. It is one thing to embrace that there needs to be spaces of messiness in education. But it is another, while acknowledging that 'we can't speak with nine arms', to find potent ways of doing so nevertheless. Maps fill this gap, whether as literary images, intellectual concepts, or material pieces, they conveniently remind us that thinking is more than one piece of a thought and perhaps sometimes requires more than one medium, one person present at a time. In this context, the practice section emphasises how useful evolving *maps as reflective tools* can be in higher education. Maps are a material analogue to a creative-cognitive reflection that helps us to see how we think as humans and what we learn through becoming aware of the shape this thinking takes on. In Heathcote's pedagogy, thinking emerges as complex, alive and constantly in flux; sometimes unpredictable. Connected to Freire's impulse to transform life realities by seeing them as an extension of such a malleable world-view, and vice versa, this unfolds empowering potential. The octopus with its eight arms and one head is both, a non-hierarchical approach to hurling ideas at us and a productive organising principle. The pieces of learning presented in this *messay* ('messy essay') about art praxis as thinking praxis come as much from the content of the maps as from semantising the aesthetic of their form.

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Facing the Storm: Reimagining Dorothy Heathcote in the University Theatre Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based article explores how Dorothy Heathcote's work might be reclaimed in university theatre classrooms. Drawing on an example activity from a Theatre History course, I reflect on how my professional practice rooted in theatre education has shaped my pedagogical approaches. Teaching Theatre History provided me with the opportunity to support a broader population of theatre majors and minors, primarily theatre education students, before taking this course. While I often model strategies informed by Heathcote's work in preparing future theatre educators and teaching artists, I had not previously examined how those principles might function within an expanded academic theatre context. Through a play-based learning experience in which students co-constructed key moments from Twelfth Night, I revisited a 1983 interview with Dorothy Heathcote as a catalyst for my reflection. This article considers how reimagining Heathcote's work in university theatre classrooms invites an

opportunity to honor her legacy and reinforce the importance of presence, co-constructed meaning making, and embodied inquiry as an integral contribution to an ever-evolving educational landscape.

Slowly, a tornado emerged.

The task was deceptively simple: Using only LEGOs, build five key moments from William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Theatre majors and minors in my Theatre History course were exploring characteristics of Renaissance Theatre. This in-class assignment provided my students with an opportunity to make meaning of Shakespeare's play by co-constructing their ideas rather than engaging in a whole-class discussion. Grappling with how to build the inciting actions of the play, a storm at sea, a group of students began creating their first key moment from the play. However, it was not enough for them to show the aftermath of the storm, which initially consisted of fragmented pieces with a mini-figure resting on a small patch of tan bricks, representing Viola safely on shore. Instead, they were captivated by the storm itself, which Shakespeare describes with limited detail yet enough clues to convey the severity of what ensued. Unlike *The Tempest*, which describes a storm in detail, the storm in *Twelfth Night* is only implied; the students wanted to build this as a key movement because it was the action that made this story possible. Without the storm, there is no separation, no disguise, no mistaken identity. It is from this storm that the play unfolds. Returning to the text, the group searched for clues about the storm and deeply explored the following account from the Captain in Act I, Scene 2:

Assure yourself, after our ship did split,
When you and those poor numbers are saved with you
Hung on our driving boat, I saw your brother,
Most provident in peril, bind himself,
Courage and hope both teaching him the practise,
To a strong mast that lived upon the sea;
Where, like Arion on the dolphin's back,
I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves
So long as I could see (Shakespeare, n.d., p. 13).

Noting the waves had to be strong enough to split a ship, they began building. As they began building the waves, one student had a vision: "What if the storm were a typhoon?" I could hear the group asking him to show what he meant. As he angled a series of blue rectangle bricks, stacking them off-center to create a towering spiral, the group could see his vision take shape. Their excitement over what their peer had made drew the rest of them in to witness his process. We could not help but be curious, and we soon could see it too: a tornado rising from the sea. The LEGOs were no longer toys but a tool for co-constructing shared language and meaning-making.

As we unpacked the process and reflected on the discoveries we had made, several students thanked me for allowing them to play. It was the word "allowing" that continues to linger with me, and where I find myself considering how Heathcote's work might be an opportunity to reimagine what occurs in university theatre spaces. Through the LEGO exercise with *Twelfth Night*, I began to understand that building the tornado was more than fun; it was a discovery. This activity illuminated a shift in how learning unfolded in the room, reminding me that Dorothy Heathcote's work not only shaped my instructional practice more than twenty years ago but continues to guide and challenge my pedagogical approaches today. As I share examples of what emerged in my experience teaching a non-theatre education course, I offer a reexamination of how Heathcote's distinction between learning "over there" and learning "here" might reposition principles of embodied inquiry within a higher education context, reposition the university classroom as a critical space for human-centered learning experiences amid an ever-evolving educational landscape (Heathcote, 1983).

LEARNING HERE AND OVER THERE

Heathcote described much of what occurs in formal education as happening "over there," meaning students are often prompted to analyze texts, examine events, and interpret meaning after the fact. (Heathcote, 1983). The knowledge students learn has already been defined for them. Students engage in their learning by studying what has happened, what has been concluded, and what has already been established. In contrast, learning "here" invites students to enter a situation and experience it as if it were happening then and in the now

(Heathcote, 1983). Learning "here" is not an exercise in adapting what students learning in a more contemporary context, but an opportunity for them to make their own meaning (Heathcote, 1983). Rather than being distant from what they are learning, they assume responsibility for it, taking ownership of their process of meaning-making. Learning "here" is often relational, meaning that how learners shape what they learn often occurs through engaging in this process together (Heathcote, 1983).

In the university theatre classroom, the distinction between learning "over there" and "here" is particularly significant (Goldstein, 2025; Heathcote, 1983). As an art form and an academic discipline, theatre is rooted in interaction, immediacy, and embodiment (Lewandowska & Bojnarowicz, 2025). Yet, not all university theatre courses are structured to facilitate learning "here." This may be especially true in courses often perceived as learning about theatre rather than through it, such as my Theatre History course (Smith & White, 2021). When students learned I would be teaching the course, their first questions centered on how much reading and writing would be required. These questions reinforce their perception that Theatre History is a course where content is studied rather than experienced.

As I expanded my instructional practice to support a broader population of theatre majors and minors, particularly in a course often defined by written deliverables (Smith & White, 2021), I began to recognize a shift in how learning unfolded in the room. Theatre History courses in undergraduate programs are typically structured around a central textbook and a curated selection of plays tracing the historical development of theatre (Smith & White, 2021). Ironically, our primary text is *The Living Theatre*, yet there is often very little living happening in this space. As we study theatre, an art form grounded in presence, it can sometimes become archival and abstract, treated as historical, artificial, and conceptual analysis rather than lived experience. The LEGO exercise we used to actively explore *Twelfth Night* disrupted this approach.

FROM BUILDING TO EMBODYING IDEAS

The exercise I facilitated in Theatre History was inspired by an activity I developed in an elementary arts-integrated unit of study, in which I used LEGOs to explore Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles

in my instructional practice (Craig et al., 2022). The purpose of field testing this exercise was not driven by novelty but by how I might be more intentional in how students access opportunities for embodied inquiry. In teaching a university class about theatre, I wanted students to encounter the art form not only as content to be studied, but as a practice through which meaning is made. As Heathcote articulates below, I wanted students to engage theatre as a method of inquiry, expanding beyond the performance and production contexts they were accustomed to and into the academic spaces where theatre is often studied rather than practiced:

It's the pressure, or the authenticity, of that dramatic moment that creates the new knowledge, that makes different connections, and that suddenly brings connections that have been dormant in my previous knowledge into active use in making sense of new information. (Heathcote, 1983, p. 695)

Revisiting Heathcote's concept of pressure helped me understand what occurred in my Theatre History classroom as more than a playful exercise, but the emergence of dramatic action as a pathway into deeper learning. The student's decision to build a tornado did not stem solely from a creative use of LEGO bricks. The students know from the outset that selecting five key moments was not simply an exercise in recall, but an opportunity to explore what resonated most with them in *Twelfth Night* and why. By initially shaping each moment as a kind of tableau using LEGO bricks and figures, students were able to visualize their ideas before collaborating on how to represent a synthesized concept through their own tableau.

The storm at sea, represented through the tornado, became the first of five moments that the group developed. They then selected 1.) Viola's decision to disguise herself, 2.) Olivia's affection for Cesario, 3.) Malvolio and the forged letter, and 4.) the final scene where identities are revealed as the remaining four moments. From there, the group analyzed the themes that emerged from their choices, synthesizing their interpretation of *Twelfth Night* as a story about finding order within chaos. To embody this concept, the student who created the first moment with the tornado stood at the center of the tableau and embodied it. As he became the tornado in the tableau, the remaining students positioned themselves around it, each representing one of the

remaining moments. What they created was not a tableau of a particular event but a progression from chaos to order, an interpretation made possible only by allowing their learning to process what was "here" rather than "over there" (Heathcote, 1983). This learning experience generated the kind of pressure that sits at the center of Heathcote's work and what can be uniquely cultivated in academic theatre programs. When my students saw the LEGOs, they were excited about the opportunity to play with them. Still, this activity revealed to them something more deliberate, a dramatic task which required them to act within a problem rather than merely discuss it.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE ACROSS SHIFTING CONTEXTS

As a theatre education faculty member, my professional practice often shifts between K-12 classrooms, where I serve as a teaching artist and professional development provider, and university settings, where I prepare future theatre educators and teaching artists. The strategies I field-test in elementary and secondary contexts often inform the pedagogical approaches I model in my theatre education courses. Until last academic year, however, my teaching methods had primarily been experienced by students majoring in theatre with a concentration in theatre education. Adapting this UDL-inspired strategy for my Theatre History course allowed me to share this learning experience with a broader group of theatre students, many of whom had not yet had a class with me.

Similar to how I field-tested this strategy in an elementary classroom, I introduced the LEGO activity as a precursor to a frozen tableau exercise, this time scaffolded for university theatre students. Drawing from *Twelfth Night*, students identified five key moments from the play and shared their ideas through a series of constructed scenes using LEGO bricks and minifigures. This exercise required close reading and engagement of the play, as small groups of students collaborated on how to represent their key moments. From these co-constructed moments, each group developed an overarching concept to unify their choices, which was then translated into a frozen, human tableau in which they embodied their interpretation. From a UDL standpoint, this exercise offered students multiple modes of expression to represent their ideas, underscoring the principle that meaningful learning occurs when students are provided with varied ways to

engage and demonstrate their learning.

At the time I designed this learning experience, I did not explicitly consider its alignment with Heathcote's work. Nor did I intend to explore the relationship between UDL principles and Heathcote's methodology. It was not until I revisited Dorothy Heathcote's 1983 interview, *Learning Knowing, and Languaging in Drama*, that I began to recognize more clearly what had occurred in my Theatre History course. I had not returned to Heathcote's words for years. Yet reading her interview within today's higher education landscape takes on new meaning, particularly in her distinction between learning "over there" and learning "here." Her description of how learning should occur offered me language I had forgotten since I first encountered her work decades ago. Reflecting on the relevance of Heathcote's work today, I was not only reminded of how her educational philosophy has shaped my instructional practice but also of how it is deeply embedded in my work, often in ways I rarely consciously name.

Heathcote often insisted that teachers resist separating thinking from creating (Heathcote, 1983). What I have learned from Heathcote is that understanding does not necessarily precede expression. They often occur simultaneously. When students are encouraged to think while they create, and create while they think, they become more involved in the learning itself. Heathcote further explains this:

I don't think that big people ever create these daft splits between the information part of their understanding and the inspirational part of their understanding. So you have big engineers talking like poets at times. Their engines are poetry in motion. I do believe that a scientist can understand a poet. It's the small people who don't want to know the other half because they're frightened of it. I think it's a very great shame that teachers can't take a stance midway between these two ways of knowing. (Heathcote, 1983, p. 696)

Her point is simple. In real life, people do not typically separate information and imagination. Skilled individuals draw on both. However, in classrooms, educators often separate them. We are accustomed to teaching content first and creating later, as if one must perceive the other, rather than both processes informing each other. Revisiting Heathcote's words helped me realize that I understand what

happened in my Theatre History course. The student's tornado did not emerge because I prompted him to be creative. It emerged because of how the group was working through the problem. They had to revisit the text and search for evidence about the storm to justify their decisions. As they discussed the imagery, they also experimented with the form. Even when one student was primarily building the tornado, the rest of the group was still invested in the process. They were each interpreting and constructing ideas simultaneously.

As I continued reflecting on how Heathcote's work resonates with my instructional practice today, I also reconsidered how I approach the concept of drama across the curriculum. For much of my career as a teaching artist and theatre education faculty member, I have positioned theatre as a discipline that brings other content areas to life. I have experienced how drama has helped students make meaning of historical events and literary situations and has developed their social-emotional learning. While this work remains important to me, revisiting Heathcote during the current educational landscape has made me question the extent to which I may have unintentionally positioned theatre as a tool for something else. This realization is both humbling and clarifying. While I believe theatre can serve as a bridge for making other content areas more accessible to learners, I had assumed that approaching theatre from an interdisciplinary lens was sufficient, in itself, to reinforce its importance. What I may have missed about Heathcote's use of theatre in education was that its "use" was not intended to be a means to an end but rather an opportunity to reinforce the value of learning about, in, and through the process of theatre-making. The clarity I am discovering at this juncture in my instructional practice is approaching theatre not only as a catalyst for learning across other content areas but also as a discipline worthy of its own inquiry.

In a moment when higher education is increasingly pressured to support workforce development and measurable competencies, academic theatre programs often focus on developing transferable skills such as collaboration, creativity, communication, and critical thinking (Petersen Jensen, 2024; Schmidt & Charney, 2018). While these contributions matter, this framing sometimes inadvertently reduces the function of higher education theatre programs to the utility of their discipline (Zakopoulos et al., 2023). While graduates from theatre programs bring many applicable skills across a range of

professions, theatre in university contexts is often justified by what it produces rather than by the kinds of individuals it cultivates. This distinction matters and is a tension worth sitting with. While Heathcote might consider the pragmatic aspects of her work, her legacy raises a deeper question: How does learning through theatre shape not only what students can do, but who they are becoming? For Heathcote, the purpose of learning in and through theatre extended beyond curricular goals; it was about what theatre could illuminate about the people engaged in the process of meaning-making (Heathcote, 1983).

Reimagining Heathcote in university theatre spaces invites us to examine not only how we teach our discipline but also the purpose of artistic development. However, if academic theatre programs are to remain responsive to industry needs, how can we approach this purpose without overlooking critical contributions we make: preparing graduates to navigate uncertainty, inhabit complexity, and assume responsibility within shared human experience? This is where the LEGO exercise from my Theatre History course becomes more than an isolated learning experience. My students were not simply demonstrating their comprehension of *Twelfth Night*. They were negotiating meaning in real time. They were taking creative risks with peers who could challenge and reshape their ideas. They were accountable not to me but to one another. The pressure to decide, to respond, and to stand by a choice is fundamental to the process of theatre-making, as well as to navigating multiple personal and professional situations that students will face beyond the classroom.

THE PRESSURE OF PRESENCE

In the current higher education landscape, the pressure Heathcote described as central to dramatic action and embodied inquiry takes on a new meaning. Ongoing technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), are requiring many of us to reconsider what it means to be human in our teaching and learning spaces (Li, 2025; Zhou & Lee, 2024). Regardless of what technological innovations come next, the ability to create and allow what we create to shape our thinking will remain a mainstay, not only in how we, as humans, learn, but also in how we thrive (Runco, 2025). Reclaiming Heathcote's work in higher education is not about positioning it in opposition to our shifting circumstances. Rather, it is about reaffirming what is uniquely

ours as theatre makers: the capacity to engage in shared, embodied, and in-the-moment meaning making.

As I continue exploring how my instructional practice will remain responsive to the theatre majors and minors I serve at my institution, I find myself returning not to new techniques, but to new questions. Heathcote has not given me a new strategy to consider. She has given me a lens through which to examine how I approach these questions. Her work presses me to consider: Where is the pressure in my classroom? Where are students encouraged to decide, to respond, to commit? But also, where am I unintentionally relieving this pressure in moments where I feel compelled to teach "over there" instead of "here?"

Academic theatre programs are increasingly challenged by accreditation standards, program outcomes, and workforce-readiness language, which may tempt many of us to translate what we do into job-related competencies (Stoytcheva et al., 2024). We often speak of collaboration, adaptability, communication, and creative problem-solving, all of which are invaluable across a variety of professions. Yet, if the pursuit of a degree in theatre is reduced to a set of transferable skills, we may risk overlooking the deeper kind of pressure our art form cultivates within all of us. This pressure entails the ability to respond to situations in real time and to remain present in the moment (Heathcote, 1983). It's less about knowing the right answer and more about responding with intention and purpose. Heathcote's work reminds us that theatre is not only a vehicle for development but also a discipline that requires individuals to respond to one another, adjust, take responsibility, and remain accountable to the shared moment at hand. The pressure is about being present.

This is where I return to my Theatre History course and consider how to continue reshaping the university theatre classroom as an opportunity to be present in our learning. In Heathcote's interview, she also explores the purpose of the teacher. Here she describes the purpose of the teacher as not only delivering information, but also as creating the conditions for students to actively engage in their learning:

So I suppose the teacher is the journey-maker. But I think it's a journey of learning access to knowledge and responsibility for the access. It would be wonderful if today's teachers could distinguish between just giving stored knowledge to kids and helping them

take on the responsibility of tapping that stored knowledge and discover the ways to do it. (pp. 699)

Her description challenges me to think less about the content I teach and more about the kinds of journeys I am constructing. While the tornado built in my Theatre History class was small and temporary, what it revealed during its brief existence continues to shape my thinking. I am more attentive to where pressure exists and where it has been unintentionally removed. I am more intentional about asking students not only what they know, but also about their willingness to stand behind their thoughts and ideas. If we embrace the notion of the theatre faculty member as a journey maker, then perhaps our task is not to shield students from the storm. Perhaps we are charged with designing the conditions where they can face it together. In doing so, we may discover that reimagining Heathcote is less about preserving a legacy and more about reclaiming what is uniquely ours as theatre practitioners and educators—the capacity to remain present with one another as we make meaning in real time.

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Part of Me: Where Identity, Creative Ageing and Conventions of Dramatic Action Meet

[BOB SELDERSLAGHS](#)

ROYAL CONSERVATOIRE, AP UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED
SCIENCES AND ARTS, ANTWERP

ABSTRACT

This practice-based piece explores Part of Me, a creative ageing approach developed within a residential care home in Antwerp, inspired by Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert and conventions of dramatic action. Moving beyond dominant ageist narratives that reduce residents to a single identity of dependency, the practice invites older adults to (re-)engage with meaningful roles—from their past or present—through one-to-one dramatic inquiry. Using embodied, sensory, and narrative techniques, participants represent and explore a personal role and different points of view, often uncovering new perspectives on their own (hi)stories. The research to which Part of Me is linked, aims to contribute to the field of creative ageing by proposing an adaptable, arts-based methodology that bridges artistic, educational, and care practices, with potential for integration into interprofessional training and broader healthcare settings.

INTRODUCTION

What could Mantle of the Expert—Dorothy Heathcote’s approach on teaching and learning, based on dramatic inquiry—contribute to the context of elderly care? With a distant background in nursing and an ongoing practice in drama and research, that question led me to contact a residential care home for elderly people in need of care in Antwerp two years ago. Could the creation of fictional worlds in which participants have authority, make decisions and bear responsibilities, empower older people experiencing physical, cognitive and social challenges, just as I have observed with children and young people over the past decade (Selderslaghs, 2020)? What opportunities and challenges would creating stories together with this specific group of participants entail, in which we collectively operate as playwrights “caught in the present, bound by the past, and impelled toward the future” (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 190)?

Earlier this year I published an article in Drama Magazine about my artist-in-residency and the group sessions with Mantle of the Expert at Armonea Dageraad Residential Care Home, reporting on the potential of the approach to transcend institutional boundaries and promote well-being (2026). In that article, I report on a weekly practice that I started in July 2024. It involves organising storytelling sessions with a (slightly) varying group of eight to sixteen elderly people in need of care, including people with and without (early-stage) dementia and people with and without physical limitations.

In this practice-based piece however, I wish to highlight a creative ageing practice that I developed in relation to individual residents and which aims to create a broader view of their identity. In everyday life, it struck me that as a society we often tend to look at senior citizens in residential care homes solely through the lens of a single identity—that of elderly people in need of care, an issue closely linked to ageism: “stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age”:

Half the world’s population is ageist against older people (...) Ageism can change how we view ourselves, can erode solidarity between generations, can devalue or limit our ability to benefit

from what younger and older populations can contribute, and can impact our health, longevity and well-being while also having far-reaching economic consequences. For example, ageism is associated with earlier death (by 7.5 years), poorer physical and mental health, and slower recovery from disability in older age. Ageism also increases risky health behaviors, such as eating an unhealthy diet, drinking excessively or smoking, and reduces our quality of life. In the United States, one in every seven dollars spent on health care every year for the eight most expensive conditions was due to ageism (US\$ 63 billion in total). (World Health Organization, 2025)

What if we were able to adopt a flexible view of identity that embraces the child, sister, student, colleague, father, friend, neighbour, lover... in each and every one of us? Could that make a difference to how we think, feel and act towards elderly people?

JULIENNE, LOVER



Figure 2: Julie, lover (name altered)

Julie (81) is sorting CDs when I knock on her door. She lets me in and puts two more boxes on a separate pile before we sit down: Mozart can stay, but an old eurovision song contest album has to go.

"Sois humain et donne-moi une réponse!" (Be humane and give me an answer!)

With that sentence—spoken by Amir—Julienne embarked on the role of her life: that of being a lover.

Julienne met her muse one evening while out with her friends at 'De Muze', a famous Antwerp café. Amir was a handsome Algerian man, one metre ninety-four tall. After some persuasion, she began corresponding with him, travelled to Paris to meet him, and from there they travelled together to London and later to Milan and Algeria. Time and again, Julienne returned to Belgium alone. What followed was a long-distance relationship that lasted 25 years: 300 months filled with letters, phone calls, short and long journeys. It wasn't always easy, but it was worth it: "Yes, that's what I wanted in my life, to experience such a passionate love that everything normal had to give way to, and that's what I got".

When Julienne talks about her visits to Algeria, the scent of lemon comes back to her as she imagines stepping off the plane. She sees the veiled women again and hears the Arabic songs of Umm Kulthum.

Julienne would advise her younger self not to get involved—because it's not all sunshine and roses—but she lets the young Julienne answer: "I can't help it. I'm so in love!" She smiles as she says this. She looks back on that turbulent period in her life with fond memories. Even though the fire couldn't stay burning. It was too intense.

Julienne protected herself, she says. When I ask her how she did that, she surprises me once again: "By taking in sixteen Chihuahuas and three cats! Then I couldn't leave home anymore". Amused, she gets up, rummages in her cupboard and proudly shows me three photo albums filled with these other great loves of her life.

Sixteen Chihuahuas and three cats later, Julienne thanks me for highlighting the "role of her life" and returns to the order of the day:

after all, those CDs are not going to sort themselves.

From the very start of my artist-in-residency, the intention was not to focus on reminiscence, but to create new worlds that the participants themselves could shape and direct. To challenge them to engage in unfamiliar situations and solve problems they had never encountered before. To not delve into one's own past or limiting oneself to it, but to make space for a "vision of the possible" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 170). Naturally, spontaneous memories regularly surfaced among the participants during the group sessions. I noticed that the residents were often surprised by the little personal anecdotes others shared with them. Although they had often been living under the same roof for years, they seemed to know each other barely at all. I got the impression that the usual activities in the care home were often focused on "keeping busy" and "passing the time"—pleasant at best, but not always fostering a deeper connection between the residents. Not only the people around them, but also the residents themselves often seemed to reduce themselves to the role of "elderly people in need of care" and no longer made the effort to form connections with fellow residents.

"One man in his time plays many parts," wrote Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (1623/1993). But in a care home, those "many parts" often seem to have disappeared. It inspired me to apply one of the drama elements from *Mantle of the Expert* to Shakespeare's famous quote. What if I were to apply conventions of dramatic action in a one-to-one session to explore at least one role that residents love(d) to play in their lives (Heathcote, Johnson & O'Neill, 1984, pp. 166-167)?

During one of the group sessions, I asked the residents who might be interested in a one-to-one storytelling session. This would allow us to explore in more depth an aspect of their lives that they would like to talk about. Eight residents, three women and five men aged between 62 and 88, accepted the invitation. Between June and October 2025, I visited them individually for a single one-and-a-half-hour storytelling session. The residents chose the location themselves: one resident opted for a session in the garden, one in the multi-purpose room and six in their own rooms. They all resided at Armonea Dageraad in the city centre of Antwerp in Belgium, a care home specialising in psychogeriatrics—the care of people with conditions involving limitations of mental abilities (psycho) at an advanced age (geriatrics).

FONS, STUDENT



Figure 3: Fons, student (name altered)

In his imagination, Fons poses as a young political science student in front of the courtyard of the University of Antwerp: I have to picture him in dress trousers, a shirt and a tie, he says. "And much thinner", he adds with a laugh. "I always thought: I'm going to go into politics. Then you can help people". But little came of his

political ambitions: he went to work for the National Labour Council: “the highest body for consultation between employers and employees”, he states proudly. He mostly remembers a lot of meetings...

Fons likes to go back to his student days. A time when he wasn't yet struggling with manic depression. And when he didn't have to search so hard for the right words. The young student had a reputation for being a whizz kid: “People looked up to me a bit, but I didn't get a big head or anything”, he assures. What his fellow students and professors didn't see was the pressure to perform: his parents let him go on to higher education on the advice of his secondary school teachers. But failing a grade was not an option. His working-class family bent over backwards to send Fons to university. The pressure that this entailed still resonates in his advice to his fellow students: “Go to class, because they take attendance!” And also in how he addresses his younger self: “If you don't want to fail, start taking notes from the beginning!” Advice that 20-year-old Fons didn't really need: he always passed with flying colours.

After his bachelor's degree in Antwerp, Fons went to Leuven for his masters. “It was only in Leuven that we all came into our own as students”, he smiles. Attending classes became optional. There were cafés beckoning, cinemas and concerts. “And dance parties!” He's starting to remember more and more: “The smell of the Alma, the famous student restaurant!” (...) “Herman Van Veen's very first performance in Flanders, in the auditorium. That was huge... Huge!”

And then suddenly the memory of the student protests of 1968 comes back: “That was the time of the big fights with the police”. Fons sees the water cannon coming towards him again. Fortunately, he was not in the front line himself, so he was not blown over like his fellow students, but he relives the cat-and-mouse games with the policemen vividly. His friends who were less fortunate were shivering with cold—“it was winter, in January!”—arrested and locked up in the gendarmerie barracks. The student doctor argued with the district commander—“the big chief”—and won his case: the students were released.

Fons puts his hand on his head and remembers another uprising in which he was at the forefront: "I got hit on the head with a truncheon", he says with a pained grimace. The pain lingered in his head for a long time. But now he can laugh about it. "It was an exciting time", he concludes, "an exciting time".

Fons hasn't been a student for almost 60 years, but the role is still firmly anchored in him: quite conscientious, but also rebellious, smart, humorous, cautious, and above all, inspired.

As we say goodbye, he calls out just before I walk out the door: "If you see a policeman on the street, run, okay?"

Traditionally, conventions of dramatic action allow us to represent and reflect on objects, people or events that are not (or cannot be) physically present in the room. In this case, the protagonist—the subject of representation—is actually present, but depending on the choice made, it is a role that the participants either still play or no longer play. But whichever role they choose, they are experts in it regardless. In my interventions with individual participants, we explored their chosen role from different perspectives using various conventions. I invited them to represent the role “here and now”, as a statue or in a photograph that can be brought to life, or we explored it through objects, clothes, stories, documents...

To be very specific, I began each individual session by explaining my research and asking the resident involved if they would like to take part voluntarily. The care manager confirmed the participants' right to self-determination and their ability to exercise it, after which they gave their consent to the use of data and audiovisual material via a consent form. I then began a conversation with them about the many roles we (have) all play(ed) in our lives, and whether there was a particular role they would like to talk about. I deliberately chose to highlight a role they viewed positively, as a moral choice: I felt it was important—as Heathcote describes it—that the participants would have a ‘fulfilling experience’, not focusing on ‘a vision of human failing’, in order to avoid the session taking on a therapeutic character (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 170). Heathcote's list of conventions of dramatic action inspired me to ask questions that enabled the participants to

explore their chosen role through various iconic, symbolic and enactive representations. Questions such as:

- If I were to see you in the role of (...), what might I notice first? What kinds of things would you usually be doing in that role? Do you have any particular routines as (...)? Could you show me? (inspired by convention 1)
- If someone filmed a short moment from your life as (...), what do you imagine I would see? (i.b. convention 2)
- If you were to sketch an image or photograph of yourself as (...), what would it look like? (i.b. convention 5)
- What would strike me most about you as (...)? What sort of 'reputation' do/did you have in your circle as (...)? What are/were you known for in the neighbourhood? What might people say about you as (...)? (i.b. convention 6)
- If that image (or the figure in that photo) – you as (...) – could speak: what would it tell us about what's going on? (i.b. convention 7)
- If I were to ask you as (...), 'what is the most important thing in your life', what would you answer? And if I were to ask you 'who is the most important person in your life?' (i.b. convention 4)
- Has that (most important) person ever said anything that has always stayed with you? Is there a gesture that reminds you of him or her? (i.b. convention 25)
- How do you think that person would describe you as (...)? (i.b. convention 16)
- If that person could write you a letter today, what might it say? (i.b. convention 23)
- Is there an object that is/was important to you as (...), that you value(d), or that you use(d) a lot? Which object would someone recognise you by as (...)? (i.b. convention 15)
- ...

To be clear: this questionnaire is non-exhaustive and was never used as a 'tick-box list', but provides a few examples of questions that prompted a deeper conversation and further exploration of the chosen role.

It was not uncommon for participants to discover new aspects of

the role they thought they knew inside out. For instance, the highly self-critical Walter was surprised by the positive response when he portrayed his late wife answering my question as to why she had chosen him as her partner. “The fact that I’m saying this—it’s never even crossed my mind”, he remarked, pleasantly surprised by his own spontaneous representation of his wife, who described him as a caring and patient husband. Looking at memories through a different lens, from a different position, from a sensory or embodied perspective, opens up new perspectives on the past, I observed, and empowers residents. It makes them realise: this is a part of me, a part that made a difference and still does.

FREDDY, PLASTERER



Figure 4: Freddy, plasterer (name altered)

Freddy portrays his role in a still image: as a 14-year-old, he is on an apprenticeship contract with his father as a plasterer. He is dressed entirely in white, but his clothes are dirty and dusty. He

tears open a bag of plaster, cuts it out and the dust flies up in a cloud. Freddy describes it as if it were yesterday. I have never heard him talk so enthusiastically and extensively. Past and present intertwine: "I get a kick out of it. I still do it, together with my brother... Except when I'm here". Past, present and future merge into one.

He elaborates on lime, glue and hair in the mortar ("that's how it started"), on reinforcing bars, "trowels that have to be sharp", on polishing, compressors and spraying machines. He learned the trade from his grandfather to his father and from his father to him. And he is good at it! His aunts and grandmother confirm this: "You were born for it", he lets them say.

At the same time, he still remembers the playful 14-year-old plasterer he used to be: how he teased his father and grandfather by pushing holes in the plaster that had not yet hardened (with them swearing profusely). Or how he built a camp with his old school friends, after work hours, "with real roof tiles and wooden pallets, and a cement floor". His eyes sparkle with the mischief they got up to together.

We end on a musical note: "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away". He can still hear The Beatles playing on the radio in the room during the plastering. When Freddy talks about his role as a plasterer, all the big and small problems do indeed seem far away.

With the residents' consent, over the past few months I made audio recordings of our individual sessions, which I subsequently edited into an audio story that I gave back to them to thank them for letting me into their world. Listening to their "own" story—which, unlike during our one-to-one sessions, took on a coherent and logical flow—frequently moved the residents and reaffirmed them in an important role in their lives. It also enabled them to share this part of their lives with their fellow residents. Several residents were keen to share the audio stories during a group session, where they listened and responded to each other's stories attentively, thereby fostering a sense of connection. After listening to Julianne's story, Fons put it this way: "That surprised me. I had no clue about that part of Julianne's life. I feel

much closer to her now,” which brought a big smile to Julianne’s face. Julianne herself said she was amazed by the accuracy of the picture painted in the audio story: “That’s exactly how it was,” she said, “I can picture it all again.” And also: “I could listen to it over and over.” Other participants seemed to perk up when they heard their own stories and began to talk about them in more detail, much to the delight of the other residents. Like Freddy, who once again framed his working relationship with his father, or Francine, who seemed to grow a few inches in her wheelchair at the memory of her former status.

FRANCINE, TRAINING MANAGER



Figure 5: Francine, training manager (name altered)

Francine is wearing a blue two-piece suit and high heels. She walks amongst her trainees at the Marks & Spencer training centre on the Meir, the main shopping street in Antwerp. A brief respite from the piped music downstairs in the shop. She is 45 and at a

turning point in her life. Although she is a jack-of-all-trades, Francine most fondly recalls those few years when she trained shop assistants on how to place orders correctly and how to make the smooth transition from the Belgian franc to the euro. “Patient”, is how she describes herself, and her trainees agree.

What she doesn't yet know at that moment is that Marks & Spencer will be closing its doors in Belgium, that her beloved 22-year-old son will soon be leaving home, and that she will leave her husband shortly afterwards. But those worries seem a long way off in her heyday as a training manager: “I drew a lot of satisfaction from it”, she says. She looks back fondly on her classroom full of “chairs with those little clipboards for writing on”.

For Francine, there seems to be a life before and after 2001, the year in which M&S decided to cease all operations in continental Western Europe. As far as she's concerned, the 20th century could have lasted a bit longer. Even today, she's still in touch with her former colleagues via a WhatsApp group of Marks & Spencer retirees. They keep each other updated on their comings and goings since the closure of “their” British department store.

We chat a bit more about the unique products that M&S sold in Antwerp, particularly for lovers of English cuisine. “But clearly there weren't enough of them”, she sighs, before kindly asking me to hand her her hairbrush before she poses for the photo. The suit and high heels are a thing of the past, but the proud instructor is still in her blood.

In my current research at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, which I am conducting together with fellow teaching artist Lies Vandeburie, I aim to further develop and expand this practice, and delve deeper into its impact on the residents and their residential care community (Crossroad in Creative Aging, 2025-2027). I am also curious to explore how a ‘desired’ role might feature in *Part of me*, and whether this practice can be effectively applied by healthcare professionals.

In our practice-based artistic research project, Vandeburie and I take different paths using a mixed-methods approach (ethnographic research, interviews, case studies, experimentation) and find

crossroads where we can challenge, stimulate, compare and test one another as an artistic research community. But our goal is a shared one: to explore drama and theatre as a means of connection for elderly people in need of care, with and without dementia; to focus on active artistic participation as a sustainable practice (with the implementation of creative ageing in arts and care training programmes); to identify the challenges and strengths of cross-disciplinary collaboration; to explore the artistic-pedagogical value of creative ageing for teaching artists; and to examine how theatre can break down the walls of the care home and foster engagement with and from the local community.

This *Part of me* practice will, from 2026-2027, be incorporated into “Interprofessional Collaboration in the Arts”, a new joint module of the Bachelor’s in Occupational Therapy and the Educational programmes in Dance, Drama and Music at AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Antwerp. In this module, students from arts and care programmes will jointly develop participatory art practices in socially challenging contexts and learn to collaborate interprofessionally. Consider it a response to Heathcote’s question “what sort of society do we want?” To use the words of Betty Jane Wagner in *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a learning medium*: one that puts our “energy on what is at the heart of not only theater experience, but all of our life as well: the process of identifying with the experience of another person.” (1976, p.147). After all, that is where connection is born, something the world desperately needs, now more than ever.

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Rest, Ritual and Reclamation: Reimagining Schools Through African Drama Therapy Practice

[ZANDILE VERONICAH MQWATHI](#)

THE ATLANTIC FELLOWS FOR HEALTH EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICA, BASED AT TEKANO AND LIFE CHOICES

ABSTRACT

This practice-based article explores how theatre and drama therapy can reimagine the role of schools in contexts shaped by apartheid legacies, inequality, poverty, violence, and securitisation. It draws on my work at Life Choices, a youth development organisation working across schools and communities in the Cape Flats area, Cape Town, South Africa. Within this broader work, the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project, funded through The Atlantic Fellows for Health Equity in South Africa AFHESA based at Tekano, is implemented at Sophumelela High School in Samora Machel.

Learners navigate under-resourced and at times vandalised school environments alongside the realities of gangsterism and community trauma. In response, schools often adopt heightened security measures that create controlled and restrictive spaces, limiting emotional expression and relational connection.

I position theatre and rest as pedagogical responses to young people's psychosocial needs. These arts-based practices support agency, empathy, and imagination, enabling learners to rehearse more humane and expansive futures.



Image 24: Students pictured during moments of reflection and expression during an Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy session.

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, education sits at the intersection of hope and historical inequality. While some schools are resourced with libraries, laboratories, and extracurricular opportunities, many schools in townships and informal settlements, particularly across the Cape Flats in the Western Cape, remain shaped by infrastructural neglect, overcrowding, and limited access to basic resources (Department of Basic Education, 2018).

Of the 23,471 public schools nationally, more than 20,000 lack laboratories and 18,000 have no library facilities (DBE, 2018). In many cases, inadequate sanitation and weak perimeter security further compromise safety and dignity. For many young people, school is one of the few structured public spaces they consistently occupy. It can, and often does, offer stability, care, and opportunity. Yet when this

space begins to mirror the instability of surrounding communities through vandalism, overcrowding, or heightened security measures such as metal gates and armed guards, it takes on a different meaning.

These conditions shaped the central concern of this article. I became increasingly interested not only in how young people learn, but also in how they experience learning spaces, how they are seen within them, and what becomes possible for them in such environments.

SITUATING MY ROLE AND ENTRY INTO THE WORK

I write from my position as both the founder of the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project and a facilitator who is, at times, directly involved in programme delivery. In the instance described in this article, I was present as a facilitator observer within the school-based work. My first visit to one of the high schools we used to implement other Life Choices community based programmes marked a turning point in how I understood the work. The name of the school is not named in order to maintain its dignity and avoid reinforcing negative narratives that can easily attach to it.

The school is in a densely populated community shaped by high levels of gangsterism, crime, unemployment, overcrowding, and limited access to youth development opportunities. Unfortunately, many schools across the Cape Flats operate within similar conditions. During this visit, I was struck by an immediate sense of constraint. Corridors were crowded, movement was tightly controlled, and the presence of armed security shaped the atmosphere. The classroom environment reflected similar realities, with vandalised surfaces and worn infrastructure competing for attention alongside the learners themselves.

What stood out most, however, was not the physical environment but the emotional tone in the room. During a session which was facilitated by one of the programme facilitators, many learners displayed disengagement through their body language, interactions, and use of disrespectful language. I experienced this not simply as behavioural resistance but as communication, perhaps signaling unmet needs, frustration, or a lack of recognition. At the time, I understood this moment as an invitation to rethink what presence, engagement, and learning might mean in such spaces. It was from this encounter

that the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project began to take shape.

THE PROBLEM: POVERTY, VIOLENCE, AND THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOLING

My observations at the school were not unique. Instead, they reflected broader realities shaping the lives of many young people across South Africa's under-resourced communities. Schools in these contexts are deeply entangled with wider social conditions. Nearly half of South African children continue to live in poverty, often without reliable access to adequate nutrition, healthcare, or safe housing (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Many are exposed to violence and chronic stress both within their communities and, at times, within their homes. On the Cape Flats, these challenges are further compounded by gangsterism, unemployment, substance abuse, and longstanding social exclusion (Gibbs et al., 2018).

These realities inevitably enter the classroom. Learners do not arrive as empty vessels ready to absorb information. They arrive carrying experiences, responsibilities, fears, and hopes that shape how they engage with learning. For some, school remains one of the few structured spaces available to them. Yet schools are increasingly expected to respond to social challenges that extend far beyond their educational mandate. In response to concerns about safety, many schools have adopted heightened security measures, including controlled access points and security personnel. While these interventions may be necessary, they also influence the emotional climate of the school. Safety becomes associated with monitoring and control rather than belonging and connection.

As someone who has worked across educational, community, and correctional settings, I have become increasingly interested in how institutions respond to vulnerability. Too often, behaviour becomes the focus of intervention while the social and emotional realities underpinning that behaviour remain unaddressed. Learners learn how to comply with expectations, yet opportunities for creativity, self-expression, relational connection, and meaning making are often limited.

This raises an important question: What might become possible if schools were understood not only as sites of academic learning, but also as spaces where young people could process experience, explore

identity, and cultivate a sense of agency? It was from this question that the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project emerged. Rather than focusing solely on behaviour or academic performance, the project sought to create a space where learners could be recognised as active participants in their own learning, wellbeing, and development.

PRACTICE-BASED EXAMPLE: UHAMBO LWAM DRAMA THERAPY PROJECT

“The future will always be shaped by the sequence of present-day events.” - Steve Biko

Biko's words remind us that transformation does not emerge from a single moment or intervention. It is shaped through the everyday experiences, relationships, and opportunities that young people encounter. If the conditions of the present are marked by poverty, violence, exclusion, and emotional distress, then these realities inevitably shape future possibilities. Equally, when young people experience care, belonging, and opportunities for self-expression, these moments become part of a different future. It is within this belief that the Uhambo Lwam¹ Drama Therapy Project was developed.

¹ Uhambo Lwam meaning my journey in IsiXhosa



Image 25: Co-designing workshop with a group of learners from a few High Schools to help design the project content and focus.

The Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project was co-designed with learners as an intentional response to the realities that many young people navigate daily. I was part of the facilitation team, and the work unfolded through collaboration between facilitators and learners. The project was grounded in the principle that young people are not passive recipients of programmes but active contributors to the spaces they inhabit.



Image 26: Two (2) learners from Sophumelela High School (implementing partner School) and Fezeka High School working together to design a project focused on addressing the youth challenges they are currently facing or witnessing in their communities.

During the co design process, learners shaped the themes, activities, and practices that would guide the programme. Across discussions, they consistently expressed a desire for spaces where they could speak freely, be heard, and engage without fear of judgement or consequence. Each session began with a check in that acknowledged learners' emotional arrival into the space. I observed that many carried multiple layers into the room, including pressures from school, challenges at home, and the broader realities of their communities. Grounding exercises helped support the transition from these external demands into a more contained and reflective environment.

From there, sessions moved into movement, play, storytelling, and creative expressions. In one of the early sessions, each learner received a journal and pen. This gesture was more than symbolic. It was an acknowledgement that their voices, experiences, and reflections mattered.

Across the programme, I witnessed gradual but significant shifts. Learners who initially appeared withdrawn or resistant began participating more openly through laughter, storytelling, movement,

and shared reflection. During an exercise exploring masks, learners reflected on the different roles they perform in their daily lives. The activity created emotional safety by allowing them to explore identity indirectly, without requiring personal disclosure.

It is important to acknowledge that many learners arrived at sessions without adequate access to food or other basic needs. In some instances, providing a nutritious meal was vital to enable meaningful participation. Within this context, meeting basic needs cannot be separated from ethical facilitation practice.

This work does not resolve structural inequality. However, it demonstrates that young people's engagement is responsive to the environments created around them. When learners are met with consistency, care, and opportunities for meaningful participation, disengagement is not fixed, but it shifts. In this way, the everyday practices within programmes such as Uhambo Lwam become part of the sequence of present-day events that shape future possibilities.



Image 27: Facilitators training, one of the sessions was facilitated by a colleague and fellow (Tendai Chisirimunhu). This session focused on decolonising mental health and why adopting this lens might be beneficial when working in our communities.

FACILITATOR TRAINING AS EMBODIED PRACTICE

Before entering the classroom, as facilitators, we all participated in facilitator training that was interactive and reflective. The training drew on drama therapy, hip hop music, and decolonial approaches to mental

health. Rather than treating mental health as purely clinical, we worked with African-centred understandings of healing as relational and embodied. Music, movement, and storytelling were used as ways of knowing, not only techniques. During the training, we were asked to reflect on identity, assumptions, and emotional presence. The aim was to prepare us not only to facilitate but to hold space and, more importantly, with an awareness of the context of why, where and how the work will unfold.



Image 28: During the facilitator training on using the arts in sessions.

In one exercise facilitated by Marelize Swanepoel from Sp(i)eel, we were invited to select scarves that resonated with us and translate them into free-flowing movement. As we entered embodiment, the energy in the room seemed to shift. People moved into role naturally. The space became animated with presence and imagination. I

understood this through Robert Landy's role theory, which suggests that identity is not fixed but expressed through multiple roles. In this moment, I observed how quickly we could access different aspects of self through embodied practice.

This reinforced my understanding that facilitation is not technical alone. It is relational and embodied.



Image 29: One of the project facilitators, Zinziswa Nogavu, leading a grounding exercise during the first session at Sophumelela High School, playing the uhadi, a traditional Xhosa musical bow.

SESSION ONE: BUILDING SAFETY THROUGH SOUND AND PRESENCE

During the first session at Sophumelela High School, we focused on building safety rather than focusing on a specific outcome. One of the facilitators, Zinziswa, played the uhadi, an indigenous instrument, to gently introduce sound into the space. She did not begin with questions or introductions. Instead, she first invited learners to listen. This slowed the room. Small shifts became visible: a learner leaning back, another making brief eye contact, quiet exchanges of smiles and relaxation. These moments were subtle but important. They showed the beginning of trust.

Theatre as a Space for Voice and Agency

Theatre offers a space where identity, story, and meaning can be explored collectively. Within African contexts, storytelling, song, and embodied practice have long functioned as knowledge systems (Odhiambo 2019).

In this work, theatre is not a performance for an outcome. It is relational space. It allows learners to rehearse different ways of being. Through co-creation, learners moved from passive participation to shaping the work itself. This shift disrupted traditional hierarchies between facilitator and participant.

Rest, Ritual, and African Ways of Knowing in the Classroom



Image 30: Grounding exercise moment.

Within African traditions, rest is not absence. It is practice. Ritual structures transition, restore balance, and create meaning (Harries 2020). During the sessions, grounding rituals became essential. As mentioned earlier, learners arrive carrying emotional and environmental weight. Ritual allows transition into presence.

Even small practices such as silence, song, repetition, or movement create shifts in regulation and attention. Over time, these practices build trust and relational awareness.

Reimagining the School

This reimagining is also connected to broader traditions of liberation and self-definition. Biko (1978) reminds us that one of the most powerful tools of oppression is the control of how people see themselves. Creating spaces where young people can tell their stories, imagine alternatives, and recognise their own value becomes an important act of reclaiming voice, dignity, and possibility. These reflections raise a core question. What kind of school are we building, and for whom? When schools prioritise performance without attending to emotional reality, they risk reinforcing inequality. Reimagining school requires expanding what counts as learning. Agency, empathy, kindness and relational connection must sit alongside academic achievement. Theatre and ritual offer entry points for this shift. They allow learners to imagine alternatives to their current realities.

CONCLUSION

In environments marked by poverty, vandalised infrastructure, gangsterism, trauma, and increasing securitisation, educational responses must engage the whole learner. Approaches that focus solely on discipline, compliance, and performance are insufficient in addressing the layered realities that many young people navigate daily. As this article has explored, theatre, drama therapy, and ritualised practices of rest are not luxuries or supplementary activities. They are essential practices that respond to the emotional, relational, and developmental needs of young people. They offer ways to restore dignity, foster agency, and create moments of connection within environments that are often characterised by fragmentation, surveillance, and control.

Through my work with the Uhambo Lwam Drama Therapy Project, I have observed that when learners are offered spaces grounded in presence, expression, care, and co-creation, their ways of engaging begin to shift. They move, even if gradually, from survival towards participation, from disconnection towards relationality, and from silence towards voice. While this work does not resolve the structural challenges facing schools or the broader inequalities that shape young people's lives, it does illuminate what becomes possible within those constraints. It suggests that even in under-resourced and complex

environments, schools can become spaces that are restorative rather than restrictive.

Ultimately, reimagining the school is not only about improving infrastructure, resources, or security, although these remain critically important. It is also about how we choose to hold space for young people, how we listen to them, and how we respond to their lived realities. As Biko (1978) reminds us, systems of oppression often work by shaping how people see themselves. Creating opportunities for young people to tell their stories, to imagine alternatives, and to recognise their own worth is therefore not simply an educational act, but a liberatory one. In this sense, theatre, ritual, and rest become practices of reclamation, enabling young people to reclaim voice, dignity, imagination, and the possibility of futures beyond the conditions that seek to define them.

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Zandile Mqwathi is a South African drama therapist and Community Programmes Director at Life Choices in Cape Town. She holds an MA in Drama Therapy from the University of the Witwatersrand and has over 16 years of experience in public health and social development across community and national contexts. Her work integrates drama therapy, public health, and African centred approaches, with a focus on HIV prevention, gender-based violence, and social and behaviour change communication. She uses arts based and embodied methodologies to support youth wellbeing, agency, and community led responses to healing. She has held senior roles across the sector, including Project Manager for Gender Based Violence Initiatives at the DG Murray Trust, where she led the Sukuthula GBV Initiative, and Social and Behaviour Change Communication Manager at Pact South Africa. She has also contributed to diversity, equity and inclusion work with the Clinton Health Access Initiative as a consultant and is currently part of a UNICEF related consultancy through Think First Hand Consultants. Her published work includes the ArtsPraxis article Addressing Mental Health in South Africa: Using the Djembe Drum and Storytelling to Open up the Dialogue of Finding, Owning, and Using Your Voice in the Home as a Christian Woman. She is also one of the contributors of the Rethinking Activism book developed through AFSEE and the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance. She is the founder of Uhambo Lwam, a drama therapy and storytelling initiative supporting youth identity, healing, and belonging through embodied practice.

The Dorothy Heathcote Archive: Origin. Location. Challenges—Interview with Sandra Hesten

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DOROTHY HEATHCOTE ARCHIVE

ABSTRACT

The interview with Dr Sandra Hesten took place during my attendance at the international conference, "Dorothy Heathcote Now," held in Manchester from 6 to 9 November 2025. This event was organised by Midland Actors Theatre in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), which houses the Dorothy Heathcote Archive. As a previous user of the archive, and deeply invested in its accessibility for students, teachers, and researchers, I viewed the conference as a unique opportunity to converse with the archive's 'founder', Dr Sandra Hesten, about its origins, history, and present situation.

BACKGROUND

The urgency of this discussion was brought to the fore in what Sandra later described as ‘the red alert’—an email I sent to her on 24/08/2020, upon discovering the archive was no longer accessible as before. Sandra responded quickly, raising the issue with Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) on 26/08/2020. Our conversation revealed that the archive is now available only by appointment and in a restricted manner. In my view, greater visibility and accessibility for the Heathcote Archive would be invaluable to the field, and MMU, with its modern facilities, has the potential to realise this through technological advancement and wider dissemination. The institution hosting the Dorothy Heathcote Archive, in effect, holds a treasure trove waiting to be shared.

The Dorothy Heathcote Archive featured prominently in the conference programme: “We are delighted that this year’s conference will be held at MMU—home of the Dorothy Heathcote Archive. There will be opportunities to view materials from the Archive.” The call for papers posed pertinent questions: “What knowledge should we preserve and how do we process it?” and addressed the theme, “Reimagining Heathcote: In what ways can we draw on Dorothy Heathcote’s legacy?” Our interview explored the challenges of accessing archive materials in Manchester, the need for funding and cataloguing, and provided guidance for ongoing and future scholarship concerning additional archival resources.

The discussion illustrates how the archive was born out of a desire to safeguard Heathcote’s pioneering approach to drama in education for future generations. The process of systematising complex academic concepts and securing a permanent repository for the material is described. Heathcote’s active involvement and her vision for the method to remain dynamic rather than fixed are highlighted. The need for digitisation and international funding is emphasised as essential for making this educational legacy accessible worldwide.

On reviewing the interview, I realised that the many references to people and studies of Heathcote’s theory and practice could usefully be compiled into a bibliography, enriching the archive further. Despite a solid background in Heathcote’s work, many of Hesten’s references

were new and valuable to me, which I hope will be the case for other readers as well. While many other names and sources could have been included, the references provided offer useful entry points for those seeking further information.

Now, in 2026, a century has passed since Dorothy Heathcote's birth. Her innovative ideas and methods in drama/theatre and education remain lively and relevant. It is vital—and fascinating—to recognise the close relationship between 'legacy' and 'archive'.

STIG A. ERIKSSON. INTERVIEW WITH SANDRA HESTEN

November 5th, 2025

SAE: Please tell me about the important steps that led to your setting up of the Dorothy Heathcote archive. You are the inventor of the archive, aren't you?

SH: Yes, but with Dorothy's and my family's help. It came about by coincidence. Mainly, because I'd done her diploma course, 1972-3, at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and then kept in contact with her. My sister Marlene also did one, 1977-8. Perceived differences between our courses inspired my MA dissertation (1983). Dorothy was delighted at this idea and invited me to stay for several weeks. I was then able to interview all students on that final diploma course, 1982-3 e.g. Pam Bowell and Brian Heap (2013). Then, my tutor Keith Sturgess at Lancaster University, 1983, said "in your MA dissertation you've studied how different her methodology appeared in 10 years. I'm sure this could develop nicely into a PhD". So, I interviewed students from her final full time MEd course, 1983-4 and her last ever course—a two-year part-time MEd for local teachers, 1984-6. All those interviews provided me with a unique set of circumstances; key 'moments' in understanding how her methodology evolved. In 1986, DH officially retired and I helped pack files, dissertations etc into 'humble' apple boxes. I wondered what was going to happen to them. I described the scene to Keith and he said "why don't we have them here—create her archive—link it to your PhD? And so I said "I'll ask her". When I did pluck up courage, DH had that glint in her eye and said, in blunt Yorkshire, "It'll gather dust. What's more, there'll be none of them references—so beloved of academics." So I said, "Well it could be a

different kind of archive, you know". She began to warm to the idea—became very enthusiastic—and then actively involved in its creation. I organised a five day international conference at Lancaster University—*The Life, Work and Influence of Dorothy Heathcote*, 1993 where we tested the validity and usefulness of the archive on delegates—most of them specially selected by DH from all corners of the globe. I think this is the only conference where Dorothy 'sat back' with her family whilst others took the lead in celebrating both her, and her huge contribution to DIE. The final step was the completion of my PhD (Hesten, 1994) and searchable Keyword Index Database—the archive's handbook.

SAE: In which way did Heathcote involve herself in the setting up of the archive?

SH: Dorothy left all that to me initially. I said to her, "I want the archive to be authentic. The process needs to reflect you and your way of working." Dorothy didn't want to store the archival material. So, I had to find a temporary home for it—in my friend Peter Hill's cellar. He lived close by which meant I could work on it constantly. Next, I said to Dorothy "could I bring a box every week so you can tell me why such a thing was put in etc? She responded, "you must come as often as it takes." And I did. In one sense, it all seemed new to her. " Oh Stig, those archival tutorials were an incredible experience—listening and watching her—re-invent, re-form, re-jiggle, re-think and re-imagine. And as Dorothy said, "I'll always be here for you—just ask." That's how she involved herself. The fruits of our working together can be seen in my PhD, the archive and Keyword Index.

SAE: To your knowledge, has the archive been useful?

SH: I think it has. There are many acknowledgements in books and PhDs on DH's methodology. In the early 2000s, Dorothy accompanied Luke Abbott (a DH MEd student) and Tim Taylor to the archive. They wanted to digitise her material for their website (www.mantleoftheexpert.com). Currently, David Allen often visits and does likewise (www.facebook.com/groups/commissionmodel). People from Australia took away ideas from the archive like Sue Davies (2016) e.g. on mantle and rolling role. PhD students like Alison Ramsay (2025) and Ruth Sayers (2013) spent many hours in the archive. My

own students were influenced by DH's work and archive, both directly and indirectly. One of them, Gail Skelly worked as a Creative Director for Ordsall Community Arts, Salford for many years. When discussing drama in the community with me, DH once said "proper academic study needs rooting in proper community work". Gail did just that, she based her PhD (2025) at MMU on one of her 'real' community projects. Dorothy often recommended people visit the archive e.g. Tai-Chiung Cheng from Taiwan, emailed: "it's like 'treasure land' and your PhD opened my eyes so much." Facebook friends contacted me e.g. Ihsan Metinnam and Zeki Özen saying, "your work is greatly respected by the drama community in Turkey". A Palestinian, a poet and educator in his one right, Wasim Al Kurdi suggested, "your PhD and contribution to the archive capture DH's profound philosophy combining life experience with learning". A drama therapist, Ulises Morena Serena, from Mexico said, "your PhD gives people who don't have the privilege of knowing Dorothy, a glimpse into the beauty of her work and her wisdom". And there are many more emails and messages from people all over the world. Possibly, people are given 'a taste' of the archive from the PhD itself—because on each page I inserted her quotes and provided footnotes e.g. archival references for key concepts. It's as if Dorothy, her methodology and the archive are woven into the PhD. But of course, it also needs the whole archive online to make it more accessible and useful.

SAE: Can you say a little bit more about the coding system? How did that come about?

SH: Well, it grew organically. Dorothy suggested people to interview—those she respected e.g. John Fines (1974)—I spent a week with him. With his historical perspective, he was a great help. And she said, "There's Stig – using my methods. He's made them into his own." She also mentioned your creative partnership with Kari Mjaaland Heggstad (2011). Then, there's your PhD comparison of her work with Brecht's (Eriksson, 2009). It's a model for her middle period which I labelled Brechtian in my M.A. When Oliver Fiala (1977) first met DH in 1972-3, I noticed, at first hand, the chemistry between them. Oliver was also the first to observe an artistic affinity between BB and DH. Both Dorothy and I agreed that the methodology evolved. However, I still think there

are three periods within it, although boundaries are blurred.¹ She also suggested her colleague at Newcastle: “Roger Barnes knows what I’m about—he’ll help”. I went to see him. And he said, “find six key concepts and go from there”. So that was one key. And then there’s John Carroll from Australia—the only student to have done three courses under her tutelage. He responded, “she’s got one concept—role. It’s like an umbrella—everything else shelters beneath”. That image of sheltering reminds me of ‘Albert the derelict’—an early example of person in role (Lawrence, 1982). And of course, there’s John’s later one—‘Dr Lister’—which includes multiple forms of role conventions within the role itself (Carroll, 1980). Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton also described role as DH’s ‘umbrella concept’ when they spoke at Lancaster in 1993, and in their book (1987), they provide useful examples of a teacher-in-role register. At the time, I imagined there would be just a few concepts. But Dorothy had other ideas—sometimes contradictory. She seemed fascinated with introducing new ones like ‘frame’. But often she’d say, “oh, that’s not a proper concept” or “it’s not a key concept.” So, it was about locating those concepts then working and coding from them. I had this idea of having a key concept like role with lots of secondary ones under it; then when crossing over to ritual, they would be slightly different and when they were put under symbol, slightly different again etc. These key concepts, acting as clues, were inspired by DH’s detective model of teaching. Following on from this, I created a thesaurus of keywords from the Keyword Index Database; plus pilot ones on role, ritual and symbol from key student dissertations. This was the sort of cross webbing we envisaged. We wanted to create a dictionary of terms; a new language for DIE which reflected her existential usage. Dorothy’s approach was often family orientated. She once suggested that archival record cards could be like Christmas cards—“who did design? Who sent it? Where was it posted? Did it have any news on it?” Eventually, there were seven ‘fields’ on the computer records starting with a reference number to the archive. We hoped funding for digitisation would follow this coding process.

SAE: So we're talking about what time now?

¹ For a discussion of DH’s “periods”, see fx. Eriksson (2023, p. 18).

SH: I knew her for forty years. But I'd say 1984-1994 were the most productive in creating the archive. In the earlier years—archival seeds were sown and during the final ones—before her death—the archive grew exponentially. It was first set up in Lancaster after the DH conference in 1993. Yet, Dorothy wanted it to be Newcastle. And I did ask, I think Prof Tony Edwards. No interest was shown. It wasn't a surprise because when I requested the raw footage of her videos from their audio visual department, I discovered they'd been put on a skip. I was horrified. When I reported back to Dorothy, she commented, with black humour, "well then, they can put me on there as well when I pop mi clogs". So I wasn't altogether taken back that my request for what seemed to be the most logical place for the archive—Newcastle—was declined. Dorothy put it like this: "I'm the thorn in the academic side". And she took her knitting to academic meetings which some interpreted as a sign of disapproval. Whether all that got up the noses of people there, I don't know.

SAE: Why was it moved from Lancaster University to Manchester Metro University?

SH: I did my MA and PhD on Dorothy at Lancaster. Keith Sturges and Margaret Eddershaw wanted the archive there. She was very interested in it because of Dorothy's work with The Learning Disabled. Margaret had started to work with them and discovered a rich and rewarding field. She was particularly interested in Jane Sallis, an occupational therapist (who founded the Portway Centre and Firebird Theatre). Her work with the learning disabled was so outstanding that Dorothy secured long term funding for her; thus, Jane's work forms part of DH's legacy. When Margaret and Keith retired, Baz Kershaw took over as HOD in 1995. Earlier, he was interested in the idea that, if we were to digitise DH's archive, there would be room for other archives such as Welfare State International's. But when we couldn't secure funding, Baz seemed to lose interest. And the archive remained in a 'cupboard'. I couldn't see it 'escaping'—a feeling of *deja vue* came over me. "Could it all be thrown onto a skip"? I went to the IDEA world conference in Brisbane, 1995, with the idea of re location. John Rainer immediately expressed an interest. I reported back to Dorothy and said "if it goes to the Didsbury campus—then part of Manchester Polytechnic—it'll be for teachers using drama in education". And her

face lit up. In one sense, she wanted it for teacher training. In another, she wanted it for everybody—policemen, hospital and social workers, artists, prisoners, National Trust visitors—because she believed ‘school is everywhere’. She reiterated, “I trust you with the archive” and therefore, agreed to write a letter to Lancaster requesting its release. Hence, in 1997, it was re housed at Didsbury and John Rainer became archive steward for over 20 years.

SAE: I used John Rainer and the archive in my research. But after John retired, it seemed like the archive became more invisible and I discovered that it wasn't accessible. So what has happened lately with the question of the archive?

SH: Just to backtrack a little, John said, “we need your PhD and the keyword index database, online”. Their IT team then made a very professional job of digitising them. I think it established some interest particularly abroad. But as you pointed out to me in that email (from August 2020, the ‘red alert’, as we call it) my PhD and the searchable keyword index database had disappeared. And it seemed like interest in the archive was waning. So after contacting John Rainer and David Allen, we established the DH archive group where we discussed re location and digitisation. On the latter, Dorothy wanted “an unadulterated” format. I once asked her “but what’s the difference between an edit and a fragment?” She replied “a fragment contains the whole”. On our 1972-3 course, we sat through hours of unedited video and were dizzy by the end of it. DH believed “editing em makes it too easy ... it ain’t ... proper education takes ages ... contains lots of chaos ... when looked at from th’outside.” (She used *Three Looms Waiting* (1971) as an example.) I said, “well, Dorothy, not everybody wants that.” After talking it through, we thought there could be different levels of users. There’d be one level for those who wanted ‘the lot’ unedited—the full meal; a mid-level, where people could be offered a more targeted approach—a snack; and for those who only wanted a tiny fraction—a taste. Currently, the archive remains open at MMU but access is limited to advanced booking.

SAE: So now we are at the end of 2025. What can we do, in your mind, to get it up and going again and make it as accessible as the dream was when it was first started?

SH: We need a team of people who can make it happen. Most of all, we need funding, a safe place for the physical archive and an archivist who can shepherd the entire process. Without all of that, we can't digitise Dorothy's 'electronic book', worldwide. I have this idea of each country having a DH group—people with enthusiasm, passion and energy, who would be able to obtain funding for digitising a small amount. Then, we need an international creative, technical and legal team to link them digitally—so we'd have John Carroll's vision of "the whole lot online, not just on my desk (in Bathurst, Australia) but also, on everybody else's—wherever they are in the world".

SAE: Most likely, there are many "DH-archives" placed in different countries, partly in universities and partly in private hands.

SH: Yes, she worked in every state in the US (Northwestern University has some of her work) and with a big following—as in other parts of the world e.g. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe e.g. Halina Machulska's work particularly with ASSITEJ ensured DH's legacy continues in Poland. Also, DH worked with TIE groups here in the UK. I was there when DH worked with Warwick Dobson and, The Lancaster Duke's TIE team at Helmsore Textile Mill museum (late 1980s). During those site-specific 'happenings'—new role conventions were invented by DH. And she worked with the Cockpit team in London. There was that interview with Tony Goode—Heathcote at the National—and what a wonderful title—*Dancing with a Whirl Wind* (1982). All the TIE material might be in the SCYPT archive at Leeds University. There's the David Davis archive in Birmingham University. DH worked with him and their partnership was very fruitful. One of his students, Carmel O' Sullivan has a collection of videos at Trinity College Dublin. Then, there'll be something on DH's final workshops e.g. that intriguing one at Spetses (2008) where Ancient Greek Theatre and Process Drama 'meet' as Dorothy declaims, "I represent the Muse of Context. It is context which carries the learning". Maria Zannetou-Papacosta (2002) was a facilitator and Anna Kalincheva, a participant.



Figure 6: Dorothy dancing with Anna Kalincheva (with permission).

Both NATD and ND have published many of Dorothy's articles in their journals. Maggie Hulson provided an overview for those in NATD (Winter 2021). When Dorothy wrote a letter requesting archival material, many didn't want to let go of their collections. But recently, Kathy White Webster sent me a box on the Commission Model. It was the very first—*The Hexham Garden Commission*—and with Dorothy leading it. Iona Towler-Evans included some of Kathy's notes in a book she co-authored—with another DH MEd student—Brian Edmiston (2022). Patrice Baldwin (2012) sent correspondence between DH and herself to the archive. A few months ago, Jennifer Fell Hayes (1994) sent her letters.

SAE: I have letters as well from her.

SH: I know. Many people do. Recently, John O'Toole (2016) from Australia sent me edited and unedited letters between John Carroll and DH. Keith Sturgess suggested that her 1993 celebratory conference should mark the end of contributions to the archive. But Dorothy had other ideas. I think John Rainer might have thought he'd been handed—a 'poisoned chalice'—with all those boxes she continued to send from 1997 to 2011.

SAE: 2026 is the centenary year of Heathcote's birth. Education policies all over the world have changed dramatically. Many of us would say not for the better. So I'm wondering, are we just reminiscing about a great name in our field having done a great service to education? Is the Dorothy Heathcote legacy really more of an historic happening, or does her philosophy, methodology, thinking still have a future?

SH: I think it's both. It is of value to see the historical context—what she was thinking at various stages of her life. Even when she couldn't speak on the day she died, Dorothy squeezed my hand twice when I mentioned our archival dream. Nevertheless, she had stressed "I don't want lots of little Dorothy's parroting on". Hence that symbolic moment at the Lancaster conference, 1993, where Dorothy gave everyone an archival seed to plant in their own country; she then said "now, grow it yourself." Some people think it was actually a seed but I read it as symbolic. Bernadette Mosala from South Africa—a keynote speaker—described the 'seeds' as "Pieces of Dorothy" (1993). After your 'red alert', her archive might have gone to John Rylands in Manchester—a beautiful library. However, they only wanted to take part of it and like Mother Courage "we haggled too long." Peter Slade's archive is there—just imagine—"Father Drama" with "Mother Drama" (as Erkki Laakso, from Finland, calls them). Nonetheless, to secure the archive's future, we need the loving care and attention of an archivist—and professional international digitisation—in an unedited form—so it remains open to interpretation. More than ever, in these daunting times we do need her legacy as a guiding light.

SAE: You know, after Brecht died, people said "The Berliner Ensemble became a little bit museum-like", didn't they? Is there a danger of Dorothy's methodology becoming like that?

SH: I agree that we should be careful not to put it within Medusa's gaze. From what I have read about your own and Kari's work, as well as that of Tor-Helge Allern (2008), it seems that Dorothy's legacy in Norway is most inspired by exploring socio-political tensions and situations involving human dilemmas, and a strengthened attention to form. Others seems more inspired by mantle, e.g. Tim Taylor and Viv Aitken (2023). I used it when I wanted to reflect the methodology in the way the archive was created. "Dorothy", I said, "I've no idea how to do all this computer stuff"—"Oh, you will—think mantle—hobnob with experts like yer own husband—and then you'll become one." Whilst we were in Germany working with Audi Volkswagen middle managers, 1991, she introduced the "Off Guard" concept—mantle for managers—another variation. Manager Norman Morrison arranged our visit (Dorothy worked with him on numerous occasions). Roger Burgess (a BBC producer) and I made a video of the three week course (1992). The title is the metaphor DH used when she said to those managers, "yer fictional Tarpaulin Company is just "a thin screen" away—from yer 'real' one". Later in Northumberland, these same managers worked alongside learning disabled people on 'real' tasks (e.g. constructing a clay tennis court). DH reflected that these projects helped inspire her transition from concept to model; from mantle to commission; from fictional to real. The earliest definition of mantle was written on a blackboard by DH for my course. It reads like a declaration where the person, adopting it promises, "to uphold its lifestyle and standards". She said, "if you want to see it as spiritual that's up to you". On another occasion, DH instructed, "you carry that mantle on yer back". In a later interpretation she said, "teachers and kids working as colleagues run a fictional business designed to solve their curriculum needs". Her BBC-series *Teacher* is a classic example (1981). However, David Davis (2014) believes in re establishing educational drama as an art form. In his book, he implies that Dorothy took "a wrong turn" by developing this 'business orientated' model. He sees it as shifting focus toward task-oriented structures rather than deep experiential engagement. Some even feared it would encourage children to become "good little minions" whereas DH insisted she wanted "good people to come out t'other end". Dorothy responded, 'business' became 'enterprise'. When the archive was finished, DH envisaged users becoming 'archival experts'.

SAE: Another of her concepts, rolling role, also became popular. How did that come about?

SH: Dorothy said “mantle’s for primary; rolling role’s for secondary”. She wanted to make sense of fractured secondary school timetables by “freeing teachers and children from tyranny of short lessons”. She said, “rolling role does that job—look for a point of change—with three aspects—involving past, present and future circumstances that’ll threaten ‘trouble’, change in’t community”. During rolling role, according to DH, each class “picks up a thread”—takes ownership—develops it—then passes it on to the next group. A further cycle is then created. Dorothy once suggested that children themselves “write message on’t blackboard for next class—but some teachers’ll pull their faces at that – it’s like giving power away”. Probably, the first example of rolling role was developed by Dorothy and three students—Norman Berwick, Ida Cochrane, and Malcolm Davidson from her final part time MEd Course (1984-6). In their theses,² they created one ‘rolling role’ based in three Newcastle secondary schools. In an associated handout for Swedish teachers (1988), they used the example of “a ‘big’ family home about to be converted into a hotel in an ‘old’ village with a rare fresco in its church”. I became accustomed to Dorothy’s re imaginings, so it was no surprise when she envisaged a rolling role archive “you could research one piece of work—see how it rolls—then leave it until next picks up thread”. By ‘rolling along’, in this way, the archive would develop its own impetus—and without DH to interpret—echoing her desire to become “shadowy quite quickly.”

SAE: Yes. But say, if we would manage to get it up and going again, do you think your original keywords and systems would need an update?

SH: Currently, the online Keyword Index Database at MMU appears lost in cyber space. And the only version left there now, is a spreadsheet. Unfortunately compared to the original, it has limited searching power. So, it definitely needs an updated database. I did the

² Sandra actually says ‘dissertations’ here. She says in an email comment that “Dorothy always used dissertation in ref. to her MEd students. Thus, that’s how they are labelled in the archive.” (29.01.2026).

best I could at the time. And DH's methods and philosophy are woven into the archival process. Dorothy considered her students as part of an extended family. So when she couldn't help; one of them stepped in. I used to pop in to see Derek Stevens on my way back from Newcastle. As a classicist, he discussed the origins of key concepts and words. His thesis on 'moment of awe' (1986) is a model for that concept. In preparation for the pilot thesaurus on ritual, I spent a weekend with Eileen Pennington discussing her insightful thesis (1986). I did an 'in depth' interview with Chris Waters about his thesis (1983); a model for working with people with learning difficulties. The title is a quote from a Marianne Moore poem (1919). I met Lance Edynbry several times about the possibility of creating a thesaurus from his thesis on internal coherence (1984). My own family helped—my husband did the computer work with me. And my daughter had to put up with Dorothy, Dorothy, Dorothy. My mother 'kept house' when I was dashing here, there and everywhere. My sister was brilliant at shorthand—transcribing tapes etc. —being a bookworm, she helped keyword Dorothy's library during an extended stay with her. But of course, were it all to be put online, it may have to be reconfigured. Yet, I think the keyword index—simple and effective—particularly if the whole archive is digitised with AI incorporated. It would then enable the user to insert a keyword, locate a full text or paragraph, or sentence, or another word. It might also trigger a combination like a montage—fragments of text, video—moving and still image, audio etc.—an immersive three dimensional experience. DH and I were both excited about such possibilities; particularly as it would "suit person using it". Liam Harris's muscular image conveys what Dorothy's approach might be now—"Let's roll up our sleeves—get stuck into the meat ... tear it apart ... put it back together again ... make sense of it for young people today" (Hesten, 2021). I could have included her images, poetic phrases and homely sayings as well as keywords. So it's bound to need updating, just as her concepts and models do. They must evolve or, in Dorothy's words, "become moribund".

SAE: And now you are brewing on a book. Can we finish by telling me a little bit about your book idea?

SH: It was such a unique experience being with her so often (Dorothy called it "Sitting-with-Nellie"). She'd link her reinvention of the archive

contents and methodology to whoever she was in contact with—whatever was on her radio—whatever she was reading—whatever was on her mind—whatever was happening in the world. Then, I'd follow her all over the place; observing lesson after lesson, tutorial after tutorial. In 1995, she suggested I write a book about it. A couple of months before her death, she said "Do it now afore it's too late". Poignantly, it was our last telephone call. Since then, I've written her obituary in the *Guardian* (17 Nov., 2011) with extended versions (2013), across continents. Then, there's that joint article for NATD and ND (2021, 2022) about our extraordinary archival journey. Recently, I've posted on Facebook—*Dorothy, the Archive and Me*. Several people, like Susan Battye (2007) from New Zealand, messaged saying the posts encapsulate both DH and her methodology. Susan presented Dorothy with the New Zealand archive at the Lancaster conference (1993). And so I thought, well, why not write that book—make it the archival journey? The book is chatty, homespun—with lots of memories, recollections and reflections—not an academic treatise like my PhD. I still have images of us in conversation whilst sitting at her dining room table, or taking scones out of the Aga, or washing up, or folding sheets, or finding inspiration from the garden etc. That's the backdrop of the book. At the same time, I want the quotes to be authentic. So I am re looking through diaries at my 'scribbles'; interviews, MA theses and PhD dissertations. I'm re reading books on her—particularly authors I knew, interviewed and listened into during tutorials e.g. Betty Wagner and that seminal book (1976). Dorothy loved it and of course, they were great friends. She referred to her as BJ. Cecily O'Neill has agreed to write an introduction for my book; although I haven't contacted a publisher yet. Cecily edited Dorothy's articles (1982 and 2014) and is a legend in her own right. Oh and of course I mustn't forget Sister Marie Paula Hardy (1972) and Jennie St Claire's (1991). Their PhDs are inspirational and, online. Before publishing *Dorothy's Story* (2003), Gavin Bolton sent me 'chapter and verse' to review—so I'm re reading those notes. Yes, it's still a passion woven into the different threads of knowing Dorothy. There's nothing like knowing somebody over a long period of time is there, Stig? And what about that magic she weaved—"such stuff as dreams are made on"?

SAE: Sandra, thank you so much. And let's keep that theme of passion

in our minds.

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Sandra Hesten is the originator of the Dorothy Heathcote Archive. Her

PhD (*Construction of an Archive and the Presentation of Philosophical, Epistemological and Methodological Issues Relating to Dorothy Heathcote's Drama in Education Approach*, Lancaster University 1994) is a handbook to the archive and the keyword index database. She was privileged to spend many years creating the archive with Dorothy and hopes to share this unique 'journey' in her book *Dorothy, the archive and me*. Sandra is long retired but continues to explore the world around her through DH's concepts of "school is everywhere" and "the drama of the mind".

Stig A. Eriksson is Professor Emeritus of Drama Education and Applied Theatre at the Institute of Arts, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway. With an extensive career as a drama teacher, educator and researcher, his scholarly interests focus on drama and theatre education. He has a particular passion for the pioneering work of Dorothy Heathcote and Bertolt Brecht, and the aesthetic-pedagogical concepts of distancing (Verfremdung/estrangement) in process drama and applied theatre. He is the author of *Distancing at Close Range: Investigating the Significance of Distancing in Drama Education* (2009). Eriksson has engaged in major collaborative research projects such as the EU-funded "DICE": Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competencies in Education (2008-2010) and the national "Drama, Teater og Demokrati", (2014-17) exploring how drama/theatre can support competencies, democracy and learning in diverse settings. His work is widely published in both national and international journals. He has been a presenter and workshop leader at all the Dorothy Heathcote Now-conferences (2021-2026).

The Archive Speaks: Exploring Heathcote's Praxis as a "More-than-Human" Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Heathcote's contributions to drama education have traditionally been explored through a predominantly humanist philosophical lens, emphasising human-centred meaning-making through shared dramatic inquiry and personal reflection. More recently, however, process philosophy and posthuman/new material feminist theory and practice have generated alternative ways of understanding the material, relational, and affective dimensions of her praxis as that which is always "more-than-human".

Accordingly, this article draws upon a workshop event entitled "The Archive Speaks" that took place during the 2025 Dorothy Heathcote Now Conference hosted at Manchester Metropolitan University. Using an imaginary framework that was facilitated by Heathcote's own pedagogical innovation, Teacher-in-Role, and one of her thirty-three drama conventions, the workshop invited participants to

explore objects borrowed from the Dorothy Heathcote Archive currently held at Manchester Metropolitan University. Inspired by Brian Massumi's notion of a relational architecture, we explore these objects as affective provocations, where assembled materials within an imaginary frame generated ideas related to Heathcote and her influence on drama education and personal drama teacher histories. We conclude by theorising what more Heathcote's praxis can offer Drama education as a conduit for affective resonance that is always "more-than-human".

INTRODUCTION

One way in which Dorothy Heathcote conceptualised her dramatic pedagogy was through the metaphor of the crucible (Mantle of the Expert Network, 2023a). In this metaphor, drama creates a circumstance in which teachers and learners stir up knowledge together, generating the conditions for new understandings to emerge. Within the field of drama education, this process is still largely theorised as human-centred; collaborative activity between humans creates the conditions for meaning-making, while the act of knowledge-making itself resides with the individual. In emphasising the importance of reflection to her dramatic endeavours, Heathcote can be said to reinforce this human-centric orientation (see Heathcote, 1977 in O'Neill, 2015, p. 53).

In Western thought, reflection has been largely shaped by a Cartesian account of the subject as the cogito; a detached mind that is distinct and separate from the world it seeks to know. While seminal thinkers on reflection since Descartes, such as Dewey (1910) and Schön (1983), have sought to close the gap between the subject and the world, the autonomous thinking human remains at the centre of the reflective process (Hébert, 2015). As Hébert (2015, p. 366) elaborates, in the reflective models of both Dewey and Schön, knowledge occurs as a consequence of a cognitive pause in the subject's direct experience of the world; however miniscule this pause may be. Reflection as an epistemological concept is therefore principally concerned with how humans cognitively process experience to reach new understandings about the world and how to act within it. This is central to Heathcote's own educational project which identifies the

“marriage” of experience and reflection as fundamental to her dramatic pedagogy:

All my teaching lures, strategies and skills seek this marriage. It is my golden key to my mind’s working and my practice. For I believe experience without reflection leaves the person hungering for more...So every teaching tool I have has been hewn to supply and feed reflection. (Mantle of the Expert Network, 2023b)

More recently, however, scholars and drama education practitioners have begun to explore what can be understood as the “more-than-human” dimensions of Heathcote’s praxis (Hatton, 2024; Hickey-Moody and Kipling, 2016; Ramsay, 2025). As a concept, more-than-human draws on process philosophy, from Alfred North Whitehead through to Deleuze and Guattari (see Manning, 2013, Manning, 2016) and is further developed within related posthuman/new material feminist theories and practices (Coole and Frost, 2010). This perspective offers a very different account of agency and knowledge-making to that posited by humanist philosophies and associated theory. In this account, the capacity to act is not the sole remit of the reflecting human subject. Instead, agency is distributed across human and non-human assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) composed of multiple things, bodies, forces and affects that are in a continual process of change. Following Deleuze and Guattari, this is what Jane Bennett (2010, p. 23) theorises as the “agentic assemblage” through which agency emerges as a consequence of energies and forces circulating within what are always “living, throbbing confederations” of vital materialities. For Erin Manning, process philosophy thus invites questions that are “ecological” and “relational” by foregrounding how humans connect to all other matter and energies making up the world (*Post Philosophies and the Doing of Inquiry*, 2021). Whereas Bennett, in a bid to counter the positioning of matter as passive substance, draws attention to the lively nature of matter within assemblages, Manning focuses on the change produced by things and forces acting together. To this end, she opts for the term “agencement” over assemblage, arguing that assemblage too often foregrounds a fixed “object or existent configuration” at the expense of “a sense of movement and connectibility, of processual agency” (Manning, 2016, p. 123).

Against this theoretical backdrop, this article re-imagines Heathcote's praxis as a more-than-human, relational, and affective pedagogy, in which meaning emerges through the dynamic interplay of people, objects, environments, and affects rather than residing solely within individual reflection. It advances this proposition in three interrelated ways: first, by offering a theoretical reframing of Heathcote's praxis through process philosophy and posthuman/new materialist perspectives; second, by developing The Archive Speaks workshop as a practical model that enacts this reframing through its aesthetic framing, use of objects, and collaborative conventions; and third, by considering the implications of this approach for drama education, particularly in relation to how reflective practice, classroom environments, and drama education might be reconceptualised as distributed, embodied, and collectively produced processes.

AN EVENTFUL WORLD

To attend more closely to agencement as the how of change in the making, Manning and her close collaborator Brian Massumi often turn to Whitehead's (1978) understanding of the event. For Whitehead, reality is constituted by what he terms actual occasions or "drops of experience" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 18). Consistent with a relational worldview, each actual occasion or drop of experience feels or grasps and is felt or grasped by other occasions in a process Whitehead terms "prehension" (Shaviri, 2009). An event is an extended set of actual occasions, or a "multiplicity of becomings", that hold together to create the things, including humans, perceived in everyday experience. However, these things are never static; they are always undergoing change. Shaviri (2009, p. 17) vividly captures this through Whitehead's own example of the famous monument Cleopatra's Needle on London's Victoria Embankment: "Cleopatra's Needle isn't just a solid, impassive object...Rather, it is eventful at every moment... the mere standing-in-place of Cleopatra's Needle is an event: a renewal, a novelty, a fresh creation". This process culminates in the event's endpoint or satisfaction (Whitehead, 1978, p. 40), after which it perishes. What remains is not a finite thing or substance but a quality of experience that is passed on as potential for occasions to come. As Massumi writes, "the coming occasion's passing will bequeath the potential-grabbing change its own activity has created to successor

experiences, for their self-creative taking” (2013, p. 9).

Whitehead expands on how potential inherited from previous actual occasions is prehended by occasions in the making through his account of the proposition. Although propositions are usually understood in terms of truth or falsehood (Shannon, 2021), for Whitehead the proposition concerns how certain past potentials are taken up as relevant to the creative unfolding of new occasions. More precisely, the proposition functions as a “lure for feeling” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 25) grounded in domains that are first and foremost aesthetic and affective rather than cognitive and rational (Shaviri, 2009, p. 65). To return to the notion of agencement as “processual agency”, it is the event in the process of its own unfolding that decides (Whitehead, 1978, pp. 42-43) what it will become, not anything external to it. Human subjects may briefly materialise out of this process, but they are never prior to events that are always “more-than-human” occurrences (Manning as cited in Massumi, 2015, p. 149).

“ALL MY TEACHING LURES...”—HEATHCOTE’S PRAXIS AS A “MORE-THAN-HUMAN” PEDAGOGY

Building on Whitehead’s theorising of the proposition as a “lure for feeling”, Manning and Massumi (2014) identify what they term “enabling constraints” as integral to their own creative research and praxis. Enabling constraints concern how collaborative activities are aesthetically primed towards a creative outcome without ever determining in advance what that outcome should be (Massumi, 2015, p. 73). Enabling constraints align with what Massumi (2013, p. 53) also describes as a “relational architecture”; an aesthetic set up that is designed to disrupt existing patterns of behaviour and ways of being by being oriented towards “the disseminating end of things, toward potential expansion”. Relational architecture is entangled with another key concept associated with Manning and Massumi, semblance. Semblance in this context is when the “virtual actually appears” (Massumi, 2013, p. 16, *italics in original*) as the more-than of the artistic encounter. In other words, it is that which without being actually present is felt as potential:

Setting up an interaction is easy. We have a number of templates for that. But how do you set it up...so that the relational potential it

tends towards appears...These are technical questions essentially about framing, about what it means to frame an event situationally...You're creating ways of making the lived relation really appear. You're operating on the qualitative level of thinking-feeling, where you are pooling styles of being and becoming, not just eliciting behaviours. (Massumi, 2013, p. 52)

Although there is no evidence to suggest Heathcote drew upon process philosophy, we propose her “teaching lures”, as principally concerned with the aesthetic framing of the drama event and what this might elicit, are consistent with the notion of the enabling constraint as theorised by Manning and Massumi (2014). That is to say, they can be approached from the perspective of the more-than-human and the virtual potential of the drama event that exceeds the individual. As Heathcote herself observed, “drama is about filling the spaces between people with meaningful experiences” (Heathcote 1977 in O'Neill, 2015, p. 53). This observation suggests her awareness that it is the aesthetic framing, and the affects it generates, that shape what later emerges as individualised, reflective engagement with what is taking place. Following Massumi (2013), we propose that this is consistent with the concept of a relational architecture that begins not with individual human subjects but with the more-than-human drama event, and the potentials it generates, to be prehended or felt by events to come.

The paper now develops this “more-than-human” account of Heathcote’s dramatic pedagogy in relation to a workshop event entitled *The Archive Speaks* that took place during the 2025 Dorothy Heathcote Now Conference hosted at Manchester Metropolitan University. This workshop evolved out of previous research bringing together Heathcote’s praxis, reflective practice with student Drama teachers, and the ecological and relational worldview opened up by process philosophy and posthuman/new material feminist theory and practices (Ramsay, 2025).

HOW THE WORKSHOP EVOLVED

Interested in how process philosophy and posthuman/new material feminist theory and practice might expand how reflective practice is enacted with postgraduate students training to be secondary school drama teachers, Alison’s doctoral research called upon Heathcote’s

dramatic pedagogy to create a drama workshop focused on becoming teacher experiences. Workshop activities were imagined not as techniques for stimulating reflection, but as propositions, or “lures for feeling”, active in the emergence of both subjectivities and novel perspectives on student teacher experiences and future aspirations.

The first proposition was to position student teachers as investigators of a mysterious happening. More specifically, the workshop used a fictional frame to imagine the Drama studio, which was the primary teaching space used by student Drama teachers enrolled on the Post Graduate Teacher Training Programme (PGCE) in question, had somehow become sentient. This fantastical circumstance resulted in the studio manifesting objects, things and video footage associated with Drama student teachers and tutors who had previously inhabited the Drama studio space. This included university tutor archives belonging to “Becky” and “Alison”, as tutors teaching on the programme. These archives contained objects, things, resources and documents associated with Alison and Becky’s personal teacher histories.



Figure 7: “Alison’s” university tutor archive (see Ramsay, 2025, p. 106).

As a device within the drama workshop, university tutor archives were

inspired by one of Heathcote's thirty-three conventions, "objects to represent a person's interests" (Heathcote 1980 in O'Neill, 2015, p. 75), and functioned as additional lures for capturing interest through the process of collaborative dramatic inquiry.

Key to the workshop's relational architecture was the fictional worldbuilding. This brought together diverse human and non-human elements that, acting together, created a very particular agentic assemblage (Bennett, 2010). Dim lighting and mysterious music operated as atmospheric players in the unfolding drama. The studio entrance was adorned with hazard warning tape and keep out signs. In addition, Teacher-in-Role was utilised to facilitate a jump into what Heathcote refers to as the "now time" of drama (Heathcote, 1980 in O'Neill, 2015, p. 71-72). This involved tutors adopting roles as university security guards called into action on learning that the studio had switched into a sentient state. Tutor roles as security guards maintained enough authority to influence the shape of the drama but were not endowed with knowledge to know why the studio was behaving the way it was, thus leaving this open to investigation. This role choice was in keeping with Heathcote's concern for adopting roles that allow the teacher flexibility when working in role within the drama (Anderson, 2012, pp. 35-36; O'Neill, 2015, p. 38). The security guards occupied what might be considered a middling status position in which the teacher/facilitator in-role holds some authority but not enough to dominate the action or foreclose inquiry. In *Mantle of Expert*, for example, this is crucial: the teacher must be able to influence the direction of the drama without becoming the sole source of knowledge or decision-making. Heathcote often described these roles as those that allow the teacher to steer without steering, enabling them to shape the frame while still leaving space for students to take responsibility, make discoveries, and generate meaning. This, we suggest, is resonant with Manning and Massumi's (2014) notion of the enabling constraint as an intervention that orients creative activity toward novel outcomes without ever determining what those outcomes might be.

In-role, tutors greeted student Drama teachers outside the studio and informed them of what was occurring before inviting them into the space to investigate the mysterious happenings further. However, a condition of this entry was that each participant shared with the studio their earliest drama memory, written down and collected by the security guards. As discussed by Ramsay (2025), this became the

spur for in-role collaborative activities focused on how the past might inform becoming teacher experiences. This included a further proposition in which student teachers were invited to create their own teacher archive and then share this with their peers. Subsequent analysis of the workshop outcomes explored the collaborative process as a mode of reflection concerned not with what student teachers do not know or need to learn, but with the potentials they carry, which are surfaced through dramatic inquiry as a relational event, rather than an individual cognitive act. This became the starting point for The Archive Speaks workshop, which in addition placed Dorothy Heathcote, her influence, and her legacy at the heart of proceedings.

THE ARCHIVE SPEAKS WORKSHOP

For the workshop The Archive Speaks, held in the same Drama studio at Manchester Metropolitan University, a similar fantastical framework was both imagined and realised through an assemblage of objects, materials, lighting, sound, and the repurposing of security guards through Teacher-in-Role. Participants were initially greeted outside the Drama studio by the security guards, who informed them of the strange events, and invited them into the studio to investigate further, on the condition they share their earliest memories or impressions of Dorothy, which were collected in a jar. In this instance, however, the archive manifested by the studio contained objects borrowed from the larger Dorothy Heathcote archive held at the university.



Figure 8: View of The Archive Speaks on entry.



Figure 9: Ariel view of the archival contents.

The objects included: typed notes on yellowing paper detailing Heathcote's thoughts on drama as pedagogy; a more recent set of notes outlining a collaborative "art project in the Derby Royal Hospital"; an audio cassette of songs; a white video cassette box entitled Making Drama Work; Curriculum Matters, featuring a black and white image of a middle-aged Dorothy; a faded mid-twentieth-century book documenting numerous theatrical set designs; and a large paper teaching resource depicting the silhouette of a large house and garden, along with a smaller paper version of the same garden. As an assemblage, these objects became a trigger for collaborative activities, sparking conversations and ideas about Heathcote, and her influence on both drama education and personal drama teacher histories and practices.

A further proposition was created in the form of The Manual for the Hidden Archive, detailed below, attached to clipboards and referred to by the security guards when guiding participants into the mysterious world of the drama. This functioned not as a set of procedural instructions, but as a deliberately playful provocation through which participants could encounter the idea of the archive as living, embodied, and collectively authored. Positioned within the drama education workshop exploring the notion of a "living archive," the manual disrupted conventional understandings of archiving as a static, curatorial act concerned with preservation and classification. Instead, it framed the archive as emergent, relational, and contingent upon the bodies and memories now present in the room. In this way the manual provided a relational architecture for semblance, as the potential of the archive, to be felt.

Manual for the hidden archive

1. To enter the studio, you must first write down a memory or an impression that you have of this person called Dorothy Heathcote and place it in this jar.
2. Place the jar of memories in the archive.
3. Scrutinise the things in the archive. Consider these questions:
 - Which object resonates with you?
 - What do you want to know about the object?
 - What impression do you get of the person's interests

- or concerns in encountering these objects?
 - What impression is created by the collection of objects?
 - What is missing?
4. Share your thoughts with others. Capture your thoughts on the clothing item provided. Hang the collected impressions on the washing line.
 5. Make an essence machine inspired by the collected impressions. An "Essence machine" is a technique where performers use repetitive sounds and movements to collectively represent an idea, object, or process, like a machine. It is also known as the "human machine" ... and is used in drama for teamwork, creativity, and focusing on physical theatre.

How it works:

Start: One person begins with a simple, repeatable movement and a corresponding sound.

Join: As others get an idea for a movement and sound that connects to the first person's part, they physically link up with another performer to join the "machine".

Build: Each person adds a new, repetitive movement and sound that connects to the parts around them until the entire group is part of a single, coordinated machine.

Develop: The group can explore different aspects, such as changing the tempo (speeding up or slowing down) or shifting the volume of the sounds.

Interpret: After a performance, the group can discuss what they think the machine represents, and an observer might be able to guess the original theme, even if it has evolved.

6. Give the essence machine a title. Write the title on the

clothing template provided and add it to washing line—for example, “misunderstood genius”.

7. Make your Drama archive from what is available to you in the space and share it with others. What would you want to include in your archive and what impressions would you want it to generate?

We now offer our impressions of the potentials that emerged through The Archive Speaks workshop. To do so, we adopt a diffractive approach to analysis (Barad, 2007, p. 25), whereby insights from different disciplines and bodies of theory are read through rather than against one another. The events generated by the workshop’s relational architecture are therefore read through both Heathcote’s praxis and posthuman new material feminist theories. Following Youngblood Jackson and Mazzei (2016, p. 105), we present these not as reflections on what occurred, but as a way of attending to the forces and materialities acting on and through the workshop assemblage.

TOWARDS THE DISSEMINATING END OF THINGS—THE MANUAL FOR THE HIDDEN ARCHIVE AS A RELATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

We propose The Manual for the Hidden Archive, and its different stages, operate more as enabling constraints than a set of procedures. In a Heathcotean sense they are carefully crafted structures that orient participants’ attention and shape the dramatic encounter. Heathcote frequently argued, drama requires “trouble” and “tension” to generate meaning (Heathcote, (1980), cited by O’Neill (2015), pp. 71–72), but it also requires form and frames that hold the work in place long enough for participants to think, feel, and act with purpose. The manual’s instructions thus echo her long-standing commitment to designing conditions in which reflection can emerge through action rather than outside it.

The opening instruction requiring entry to the studio through the inscription of a memory or impression of Dorothy Heathcote established a threshold ritual. By writing and depositing a recollection into a jar, participants enacted a performative gesture of contribution. The archive began not with authoritative documentation, but with fragmentary, subjective traces. Memories emerge of meeting Dorothy

for the first time, of being advised by her, and of even participating in one of her workshop events or “dramas”. Other contributions surface memories of learning about her through a teacher, drama association, or participation in a training event, and suggest her perceived significance and intrigue. Entangled with these memories are impressions of Dorothy; she is old, seems to know a great deal, and is a carrier of stories; at the same time, she is young and playful, even childlike. In this sense, the workshop foregrounded the instability of memory and the plurality of narrative, positioning the archive as a site of affective and interpretive negotiation rather than historical fixity. The act of entering safely through contribution also redistributed authority: access was conditional upon offering something of oneself. Participants are invited to enter this “world” of the workshop, not as a form of escapism, but as a working space, or a laboratory where ideas are tested, dilemmas may be confronted, and where ways of being are explored. Dorothy Heathcote imagined the Drama classroom as a form of “laboratory”, in which the students and teacher collaborate (Allen and Handley, 2025 p,14), and *The Manual for the Hidden Archive*, with its purposefully playful instructions, was similarly inspired.

The act of placing the jar of memories in the archive further establishes a threshold ritual that is simultaneously symbolic and material. It marks entry into the fictional world while also foregrounding the archive as a living, collective entity shaped by the contributions of those who encounter it. Following Manning and Massumi (2014, p. 98), we might say this threshold crossing ritual helps to position the unfolding event centre-stage, not individuals or individual subject positions. This gesture also resonates with contemporary critiques of reflective practice that challenge the idea of reflection as a purely cognitive, individualised act (Hébert, 2015; Linds and Vettraino, 2015). Instead, reflection becomes distributed across bodies, objects, and the environment, emerging through the material act of placing a felt memory or impression into a shared container. The jar itself becomes a participant in the event. As an object it carries and modulates affective traces as potentials, actively shaping the unfolding inquiry. This corresponds with Manning (2020, p. 23) who understands the objects that constitute any archive as “springboards” for further process, rather than as entities that capture and define what the archive is.

Instruction number three and the invitation to scrutinise the objects

in the archive deepens this relational dynamic. The questions posed, “Which object resonates with you? What do you want to know? What impression is created? What is missing? activate a mode of inquiry that is at once interpretive, affective, and material. The instruction echoes Heathcote’s own care for objects (Mantle of the Expert Network, 2023c) which she deployed to anchor dramatic inquiry in concrete materials that could provoke thought, emotion, and action. As noted above, this is exemplified by Convention 15 where objects are used to represent a person’s interests. Rather than inviting abstract reflection on the archive, the manual directs attention to the agency of objects and the impressions they generate. This aligns with Bennett’s (2010) theorisation of “vibrant matter,” where objects exert force and participate in meaning-making, and with Manning’s (2016) emphasis on agencement through which materials and movements co-produce events. In this sense, the archive is not a passive repository but an agentic assemblage whose textures, histories, and absences shape participant’s responses. For example, the worn typescript on drama in education was handled, read aloud in fragments, and treated as partial evidence of past pedagogic thinking, prompting participants to speculate about its authorial intent, its relevance, and what might be absent or obscured. Similarly, the large paper collage, illustrating a grand house, ornate garden and a possible site of a dig or some sort, alongside a smaller version of the same landscaped garden, became focal points for shared interpretation, with participants curiously clustering around them, tracing images and annotations, and offering provisional readings that were taken up, reshaped, or contested by others. In these moments, the objects oriented the inquiry, inviting particular movements, gestures, and lines of questioning, and thus acting as more-than-human participants in the unfolding event. In keeping with Heathcote’s emphasis on working “in role,” the archive was encountered not as something to be observed from a distance but as something to be worked with, where meaning emerged through an affective and relational engagement between bodies, materials, and the evolving dramatic frame.

In this way, the manual illustrates how Heathcote’s praxis can be contemporised through posthuman and new materialist perspectives. It demonstrates that reflective practice in drama education need not be confined to introspective cognition but can be understood as an emergent, relational process shaped by the interplay of humans,

objects, atmospheres, and affects. The manual's instructions choreograph this interplay, ensuring that the "living archive" is encountered not as a static collection but as a dynamic event that speaks, provokes, and participates in the making of new understandings.

OF WASHING LINES AND ESSENCE MACHINES

The next instruction in the manual, number four, asks participants to 'share your thoughts with others. Capture your thoughts on the clothing item provided. Hang the collected impressions on the washing line". This act further extends the inquiry from individual encounter to collective composition, while introducing a distinctly playful aesthetic to the proceedings. The "clothing items" were not actual garments but paper cut-outs reminiscent of the outfits found in vintage paper-doll books, evoking a familiar childhood game that Heathcote might have drawn upon to invite reflective engagement to emerge.



Figure 10: Image of the clothesline with cut out clothing attached.

As with the memory jar, the clothing cut-outs serve as lures that draw out potentials within the process of collaborative dramatic inquiry. Following Manning (2020, p. 93), we might say they momentarily become "way stations", or temporary holding points, for "compositional forces seeking a new taking-form". Through the clothing cut-outs, multiple Dorotheys emerge, briefly converging as a partial and contingent figure shaped through archival encounters. This emergent

Dorothy is a “renaissance woman” invested in the business of make-believe, casting a “dramatic eye on the world”. She is also figured as mysterious and worldly, with a concern for codes, instructions and clues. Hanging these annotated cut-outs on a washing line transformed the space into a provisional exhibition, echoing Heathcote’s use of visible, spatial arrangements to hold collective thinking in play. The washing line, with its everyday domestic associations, underscored the ordinariness and ephemerality of the archive while simultaneously elevating it as a site of communal authorship. As impressions accumulated, the line became a material record of distributed reflection—an assemblage of paper garments, handwritten traces, and shifting interpretations. In this way, the manual continued to choreograph a more-than-human pedagogy: one in which understanding emerges not solely through verbal exchange but through the interplay of bodies, objects, atmospheres, and the playful conventions that structure the event.

Instruction number five of the manual incorporates the creation of an “Essence Machine” (Heathcotean in spirit, though not exclusively hers). As a collaborative improvisational form, the machine requires each participant to add a repeatable gesture, movement, and sound, physically linking to others to construct a shared mechanism. Within the context of a living archive, this technique becomes metaphorical as well as methodological. The archive is rendered as assemblage: partial, interdependent, rhythmic. No single component carries meaning alone; significance emerges through proximity and relation. The invitation to alter tempo or volume further underscores the archive’s mutability, as well as its capacity to shift emphasis, reinterpret itself, and evolve over time.

Crucially, the subsequent instruction (number six of the manual) involved the request “to give the essence machine a title” and to write the title on another clothing cut-out that was then added to washing line. While the physical structure of the machine was shared, its meaning was not fixed, and this introduced a productive tension between collective creation and personal interpretations. Once more, the clothing templates functioned as material “way stations” where potentials within the essence machine were momentarily held, transformed, and brought into temporary form. Through these emergent titles, the archive was reconfigured as a site of “tactile recollections”, a mode of “creative enquiry”, and a means of “catching

moments in time". The washing line, displaying these titles publicly yet provisionally, evoked the everyday materiality of display and the temporality of exhibition. Meaning was neither sealed nor singular; it hung lightly, open to revision.

The final instruction—to create one's own archive from what was available in the space—completed the conceptual arc. Here, archiving became an act of composition rather than conservation. Participants curated objects, gestures, words, and spatial arrangements, acknowledging that the archive is always constructed from what is materially and socially accessible. The emphasis on "what is available" resonates with contemporary new materialist thinking, in which meaning arises through the entanglement of bodies, objects, and environments rather than through detached observation. The final instruction transforms archiving into an act of natural understanding: a reframing of what one already knows through the encounter with the more-than-human forces of the space. The archive becomes not a record of the past but a living proposition that asks others to see, feel, and think differently through the materials that have been gathered and shared.

Taken together, the manual reframed archival practice as embodied inquiry. It blurred distinctions between documentation and performance, between memory and invention, and between individual and collective authorship. In doing so, it offered drama education not merely as a pedagogical tool, but as a methodological intervention. The archive becomes more than a repository of the past, but rather it is an active, negotiated, and living process.

A PROCESS FOR CHANGE—WHAT MORE CAN HEATHCOTE'S PRAXIS BECOME

Heathcote argued that "we expect good fathers, husbands, honest citizens, fine, sensitive friends, tolerant and understanding neighbours to emerge from the classes we teach but we do very little to help these traits to come along" (Heathcote, 1974, p. 4). Our contemporary approach to Heathcote's praxis is as an always more-than-human pedagogy, and in this "event" we echo her sentiments by positioning her work within the broader provocation of the title for this special issue: "What sort of schools do we want, and what sort of society do we want?" By drawing on archival materials that are central to a

practical workshop we offer a radical re-imagining of a learning opportunity in which imagination is foundational to our social life.

As facilitators reflecting on the workshop, we note initial encounters with the archive were sometimes marked by hesitation; some participants indicated early scepticism that gradually shifted into curiosity and engagement as they worked in role. Others articulated a sense of being drawn in through the freedom of the task, describing an experience of working with a pedagogical sensibility that felt open, adaptable, and not bound by prescribed method. In responding to the artefacts, participants frequently connected their engagement to a perception of Heathcote herself as a practitioner in continual movement—someone whose work evolves, adapts, and “becomes more” over time. These moments suggest how the material presence of the archive, in conjunction with the dramatic frame, generated an affective shift: from uncertainty to investment, from observation to participation. In this way, the objects did not simply represent some of Heathcote’s past practice (merely stuff taken from the archive that might be of interest), but actively contributed to a shared sense of inquiry, inviting participants to act “as if” they were archivists (in-role) in a more-than-human process of becoming that the workshop sought to evoke.

In proposing Heathcote’s praxis as a more-than-human pedagogy, we situate drama education as a site where collective imagination is rehearsed, contested, and renewed, and drama practice becomes a crucial cultural technology. Here imagination emerges as a political force, one that enables empathy, nurtures democratic habits, and expands the boundaries of who and what counts within the learning community. By examining Heathcote’s archive alongside contemporary classroom practice, we demonstrate how drama education not only cultivates the imaginative capacities required for creative futures, it suggests that if we want our future schools to be capable of shaping humane and sustainable societies, we must attend to the imaginative work that underpins them. Drama, in this sense, is about world-making: a pedagogy through which learners practise seeing differently, acting ethically, and imagining the “more-than-human” worlds they might collectively bring into being. Heathcote’s praxis has often been described as “homespun,” elusive, or even mystical, in part because it lives only in the moment of its creation and therefore resists easy documentation. Yet this ephemerality is precisely where her

pedagogical force resides. Heathcote insists that drama must serve “a process for change” (Heathcote, Johnson, and O’Neill, 1984, p. 115) and that each time she enters a classroom she seeks to mobilise the art of drama toward new social understandings. Her continual return to the six elemental binaries of theatre—stillness and movement, silence and sound, darkness and light—underscores her belief that classroom drama and theatre share a common grammar through which meaning is made. During the workshop, one participant captured this when responding to the following Heathcote quotation as a provocation,

Now you see, the theatre resonates its signing. It doesn’t just say it in words; it says it because there’s a combination of form, matter, colour, space, light. Now I think that’s what a classroom is: if you take trouble, that’s what a classroom is...Now it seems to me that a sensible teacher says, “I’ll do the best resonance in this lesson, in the ways the signs are needed for this learning, that I possibly can. (Heathcote, 1982 in *Mantle of the Expert Network*, 2023d)

What was remarked upon was how shifts from silence to sound and from darkness into light, generate a feeling of the world rearranging itself around you. What Heathcote recognised as a new understanding of our relationships emerges when participants attend to the significance of actions and events, to the knowledge that lies beneath the surface of behaviour, and to what things ultimately amount to. Central to this is her notion of the self-spectator (*Mantle of the Expert Network*, 2023e), the participant who is simultaneously acting and observing, generating action while remaining conscious of how that action is shaped. As Muir notes, this reflective stance parallels Brecht’s “how it was” mode, foregrounding critical distance rather than immersion. Heathcote structures her work to create deliberate connections between fiction and reality so that the “product” of drama becomes society in action—thinking, knowing, living. Her articulation of drama as a process for change—easement, conclusion, a new view, a whole new beginning, or a new awareness—anticipates later understandings of drama conventions as dynamic ways of shaping time, space, and presence. Although she acknowledged that conventions remained under-theorised within *Mantle of the Expert*, their deliberate ambiguity and generative tension are what give Heathcote’s projects their vitality. As Neelands and Goode (2015)

argue, conventions enable participants to make, explore, and communicate meaning through theatre form. In Heathcote's hands, they become a means of possibility (Wagner, 1976) through which learners encounter the world anew. While Heathcote's conventions have historically been understood as tools for structuring action, reflection, and shifts in perspective, the workshop reframed them as sites where human and nonhuman forces co-produce the conditions for learning. It is in this sense that we understand them as 'speculatively pragmatic' (Manning in Massumi, 2015, p. 165), insofar as they remain open and exploratory while being grounded in events. Rather than treating conventions as primarily cognitive or representational devices, the workshop illuminated how they operate within dynamic assemblages of bodies, materials, atmospheres, and affects. This shift does not displace Heathcote's original intentions; instead, it extends them, revealing how her techniques already anticipate contemporary concerns with relationality, ecology, and the vibrancy of matter. As one participant alluded to at the conclusion of the workshop, with specific reference to *Mantle of the Expert*, the classroom environment should have an "aesthetic feel", without which a mantle can feel not only disconnected from theatre but also "static". In this light, conventions such as Teacher-in-Role, objects-of-significance, or the manipulation of light and sound become more than dramaturgical strategies. They function as what Bennett (2010) describes as vital materialities—elements that exert force, shape attention, and participate in the unfolding of the drama. Additionally, Manning's (2016) notion of agencement further helps articulate how subtle shifts in movement, tone, or spatial arrangement within these conventions open new relational possibilities. The teacher's role, the placement of an object, or the atmospheric charge of a dimly lit room all contribute to what the event becomes.

CONCLUSION

This contemporised reading aligns with the workshop's design, where objects from the Dorothy Heathcote Archive were not treated as static artefacts but as affective provocations. Their textures, histories, and material presence shaped the participants' responses as much as the fictional frame or the Teacher-in-Role. The workshop thus enacted an ecological and relational mode of inquiry—one in which learning arises

from the entanglement of bodies, materials, memories, and environmental cues. By foregrounding these entanglements, the workshop demonstrated how Heathcote's praxis can be understood as a more-than-human pedagogy which mobilises the full ecology of the classroom to generate new understandings.

Crucially, this approach does not abandon reflection, which remains central to Heathcote's work. Instead, it repositions reflection as something that emerges within events rather than after them. Reflection becomes distributed across the assemblage—felt in the atmosphere, activated by objects, and co-produced through collective action. In this way, the workshop extends Heathcote's "marriage of experience and reflection" into a broader relational field, where meaning-making is not solely the product of individual cognition but of the dynamic interplay of forces that constitute the dramatic event.

Positioned at the intersection of this reconfigured reflective field, our collaboration as two drama education specialists working at Manchester Metropolitan University attending to the broader future of drama in the curriculum, mirrors the generative interplay that characterised the intellectual partnership of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton. Just as Heathcote's embodied, affective, and situational praxis (Heathcote, Johnson and O'Neill, 1984; Wagner, 1976) intersected with Bolton's analytic, cognitively oriented framing of drama as learning (Bolton and Davis, 2010), *The Archive Speaks* workshop required us to negotiate our distinct pedagogical orientations while articulating the shared principles emerging from the event. Whilst the *Manual for the Hidden Archive* operates as a contemporary framing device akin to the conceptual tools Heathcote and Bolton developed together, we are able to observe and recall how meaning-making unfolded not only through human reflection but through the distributed agency of materials, bodies, atmospheres, and affects. In facilitating the workshop and analysing its outcomes, we have found ourselves engaged in a similar process of conceptual naming: identifying the tensions, frames, and affective provocations that shaped participants' engagements, while also acknowledging the more-than-human forces that co-produced the event.

This collaborative naming of practice aligns directly with the aims articulated in the abstract. By situating the workshop within an imaginary frame facilitated by Teacher-in-Role, we invited participants to encounter archival objects not as static artefacts but as lively,

affective agents capable of stimulating new understandings. In doing so, we are extending recent scholarly efforts to contemporise Heathcote's praxis through process philosophy and posthuman/new material feminist theory (Hatton, 2024; Hickey-Moody & Kipling, 2016; Ramsay, 2024). The workshop demonstrates how Heathcote's pedagogical innovations are being reimagined as conduits for affective resonance, and our collaboration thus becomes part of a wider project to reposition Heathcote within 21st-century educational discourse, not as a figure anchored in a humanist past, but as a practitioner whose work anticipates contemporary concerns with materiality, relationality, and the distributed nature of agency. In this sense, the workshop, as well as our analysis of it, offers a way of understanding how Heathcote's praxis can continue to inform and invigorate drama education today, providing schools and teachers with a framework for engaging with the world as a dynamic ecology of human and more-than-human forces. What emerges from this work is not simply an alternative understanding of archives, but a reorientation of how we prepare teachers for an uncertain world. If learning arises through the entanglement of bodies, materials, environments, and affects, then teacher education must move beyond models that locate knowledge within the individual. Instead, it calls for pedagogies that cultivate responsiveness, relational awareness, and an openness to emergence. In this respect, drama education offers more than a subject methodology; it becomes a crucial space in which future teachers can rehearse ways of working with complexity and ambiguity. This more-than-human framing has relevance beyond the UK, speaking to international concerns about how to prepare educators for rapidly changing contexts. By positioning imagination as collective, embodied, and material, this approach situates drama as central to developing adaptive, ecological, and future-facing teaching practices.

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Learning in the “Labyrinth”: Dorothy Heathcote’s Transitions Project

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a retrospective analysis of a Mantle of the Expert project devised by Dorothy Heathcote in 2007 to address the transitions from primary to secondary school. Drawing on planning transcripts and archival materials, it shows how the project reframes transitions, not as preparation for a single institutional change, but as entry into a condition of strangeness characterised by uncertainty, complexity and shifting relationships. While initially focused on school transfer, the project developed into an inquiry into transitions as multidimensional and ongoing processes, anticipating and resonating with Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory.

Within the drama, pupils assumed the role of “Life Coaches,” supporting others through unfamiliar situations. This repositioned

learning as response rather than self-reflection, where understanding emerges through attention to others, interpretation of situations, and the design of possible responses. The classroom functioned as a kind of laboratory, in which learning was investigated and tested in practice. The article argues that the project's enduring value lies not in the acquisition of strategies but in a shift in orientation—a capacity to read and navigate complex environments while remaining attentive to others also undergoing transitions.

In 2007, Dorothy Heathcote worked with Midland Actors Theatre (MAT) to devise a Mantle of the Expert project for young people on the threshold of moving from primary to secondary school. Its organising question was deceptively simple: *How do we learn what we know?* Rather than treating primary-secondary school transitions as a matter of preparing pupils for new rules and routines, the project approached learning indirectly through Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert (MoE) system (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). In Mantle, the class works within a fictional enterprise—an agency, company or organisation—assuming responsibility for complex tasks and real-world dilemmas. Authority is thereby subtly reconfigured: pupils are positioned not as recipients of instruction, but as a community of practitioners whose judgements matter.

In this case, the enterprise was a team of “Life Coaches,” helping fictional clients who were themselves facing moments of change and uncertainty. This shift of perspective was crucial. Instead of beginning with pupils' own anxieties about the move to secondary school, the drama directed attention outward—towards the situations of others and the question of how people learn when they encounter unfamiliar environments. In responding to these clients, pupils entered a shared inquiry into learning itself, gradually developing a language for understanding how people adapt, struggle and make sense of new circumstances. In this way, reflection did not begin with the self, but with the attempt to understand and respond to the learning needs of others.

This article draws primarily on a transcript of the initial planning meeting between Heathcote and the MAT team, supplemented by the

company’s archival records of the project’s implementation. The project toured to five inner-city primary schools in the Birmingham area, working intensively for one week in each with a Year 6 class (ages 10–11) in the final term before transition to secondary school. What follows is a retrospective analysis of the only documented MoE project planned by Heathcote herself specifically to address primary-secondary transitions, tracing how the planning conversation reveals an implicit model of learning in which reflection emerges through practice, responsibility, and attention to the situations and needs of others.¹ As we will see, a project initially concerned with primary-secondary transitions developed into an exploration of transitions as a multidimensional condition.

Heathcote was clear that the Mantle should not be set in a school context. She observed:

There's a lot to be said for making strange, in order to get close to what you want to do. I think any notion where they feel like they're dealing partly with schooling of some kind or another, whatever it might be or wherever it might be, would to me be too close, and get them in a box of thinking. Whereas you want them to get out of the box, don't you? (Heathcote, planning meeting)²

This oblique approach is in contrast to a lot of drama work on primary-secondary school transitions, which tends to be situated within the school environment. A project for the Half Moon Young People's Theatre in 2020, for example, used a “Forum Theatre” approach. The company developed a play which followed two characters, Mark and Amari, through their first few weeks of starting secondary school. A report on the project stated: “The scenes within the play created clear dilemmas and choices, where the choices made would clearly lead to different outcomes for their secondary school future” (Half Moon, 2020, p. 5). A direct approach like this feels efficient, but in its very directness, it may activate compliance-thinking (“What answer does the teacher want?”) or social anxiety (“Are we talking about me?”).

¹ The MAT team was Gillian Adamson, David Allen and Iona Towler-Evans.

² Source: transcript of planning meeting with Dorothy Heathcote and the MAT team at Heathcote’s home in Spondon, Derbyshire, 11.2.07. Audio cassette recordings, unpublished, MAT Archive. All quotes are from this source, unless otherwise specified.

Moreover, it risks exposing current peer tensions, highlighting vulnerabilities, and rehearsing actual power hierarchies in the classroom.

A Forum Theatre model such as the Half Moon example isolates moments: the first day; peer pressure; a bullying dilemma, etc. This is useful in that it rehearses scenarios. But primary-secondary transition is not a sequence of discrete dilemmas. It entails a multiplicity of factors: a loss of familiarity and status; a renegotiation of identity, and uncertainty about belonging; a dislocation in time and place; re-mapping of relationships; and physical and emotional turbulence. It is a condition of strangeness. Moreover, according to Jindal-Snape (2023), transitions are plural: for example, there are transitions of age, friendship, body, family circumstances, culture, institutional setting, and so on. A direct school-based drama often narrows transition to one site and to an individual child (as if the child is the issue, not the school). An oblique Mantle frame allows children to explore transitions in different contexts; and this widens and generalises the phenomenon.

In the move from primary to secondary school, transition is often experienced as something done to children. They do not choose the school, the timing, the institutional structures, or the process. The resulting loss of control is one source of transition anxiety. Heathcote therefore avoided addressing the move to secondary school directly. Within the frame of “Life Coaches,” the children became responsible for helping others navigate change and unfamiliar environments. They were not cast as those with a problem; they were positioned as those who must respond to it. This obliqueness is deliberate. By relocating questions of fear, exclusion, uncertainty and adaptation into a fictional context, Heathcote avoids turning any individual child, or any real personal anxiety, into the case under discussion. The difficulty belongs to the fiction. Yet the distance does more than protect; it redistributes agency. Positioned as practitioners rather than subjects of transition, pupils must listen, interpret and design responses to the situations presented by their clients. The inquiry therefore shifts from the personal, to the relational. The central question is no longer “How will I cope?” but “What does this person need, and how might we help?”

THE “LABORATORY”

Heathcote saw drama work in Mantle as a form of “laboratory” (1993),

in which reflection and review are built into the process. In this case, she observed to the project team:

You seem to want them to set up from the very beginning, to be examining their thinking as they go along. So the reflective elements have to be on: “What we now know about how we learn.”
(Heathcote, planning meeting)

This question became the project’s key “through line.” Heathcote’s insistence that reflection should operate within the unfolding work may appear to align with Donald Schön’s conception of *reflection-in-action*: the capacity to examine and adjust one’s understanding in the midst of practice (Schön, 1983, p. 49). Schön’s model of the reflective practitioner, however, has been criticised for remaining grounded in a notion of individual cognitive mastery. In the Life Coaches project, reflection emerges differently: through the practical responsibility of responding to the needs of others.

The drama therefore shifts the focus away from the pupils’ own anxieties about transition to secondary school. Instead, the work begins with the arrival of a letter from a “client”—someone struggling to navigate a complex set of transitions. In the MAT project, handwritten on the envelope of one such letter were the words: “Hope you can help.” The learner is addressed. Responsibility precedes reflection. In responding to the client’s appeal, pupils enter a shared inquiry into how people learn, adapt and cope with unfamiliar systems and multiple transitions. The reflective practitioner that emerges is therefore not a subject who masters experience through cognitive control, but a person whose understanding develops through responsiveness to others. The centre of gravity shifts from the self to the Other. Learning about learning becomes necessary not to perfect oneself, but in order to respond responsibly to those whose voices may at any moment appear with the call: “Hope you can help.”

“How Do People Learn?”

At the start of the planning meeting—before the Life Coaches frame had been defined and agreed—Heathcote discussed some of the different ways that people learn. She offered examples such as “learning to be careful,” noting that:

“Learning to take care” is quite different, because that's attending to process of doing. I suppose what I'm doing is saying: there isn't a blanket word. This [word] “learning” is too blanketed. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Other examples included learning to tolerate, learning to forgive, learning to make good, learning to listen, learning to share, learning to conserve and learning to make. In this way, Heathcote dismantled the abstract educational category of “learning” and re-situated it within human practices. In contemporary education systems, “learning” often refers to measurable attainment, knowledge recall or subject progress. Heathcote’s list, by contrast, focuses on the development of capacities for negotiating reality.

The implication is that different situations call for different modes of learning. Consider, for example, her example of “learning to discriminate.” She remarked: “If you think of your feral child, he mustn't eat the wrong berries. And that goes with learning to observe what other animals are eating”. Here the learning required is perceptual and situational: attentive observation, discrimination and judgement in relation to a specific environment. In another context—restoring a damaged relationship, for instance—the learning required might be reflective, forgiving and emotionally attuned.

Heathcote therefore expands the concept of learning beyond the accumulation of knowledge, reframing it as a repertoire of human capacities—ethical, perceptual, relational, restorative and practical—mobilised in response to particular circumstances. Learning, in this sense, is not primarily the acquisition of information but the development of ways of acting and responding in the world. The emphasis is on “doing to learn,” and on the reflexivity that arises within action itself.

Heathcote observed that,

In moving from primary to secondary school, students have come from a place where they're cop of the midden, and they know all the places where things can be found, and who to go to for the different kinds of services you need. ... And then suddenly, you're in a place where you don't know anything. You're in this wilderness, among all these giants. ... So I suppose what you might look at is: how do we learn in a new country? But it mustn't

look like school. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Her metaphor of going from “cop of the midden” to a “wilderness among giants” reflects a change from a place where the pupils are locally competent, to a place where they lose spatial orientation, relational familiarity, and status. This is not just a logistical change; it entails a loss of mastery, belonging and scale. Heathcote reframed the experience, not as “starting secondary school,” but as “entering a new country”, raising questions of how to read signs, who to trust, what is dangerous, and which customs matter. Learning is thereby reoriented—from absorbing information to navigating uncertainty, from acquisition to orientation within unfamiliar worlds, and toward a form of situated learning, or “doing to learn”.

Heathcote reviewed the “world” of the secondary school, as it might be experienced by newcomers:

So it seems to me it's a labyrinth, isn't it? A high school is a labyrinth. It's corridors and journeys and classrooms and labels. ... It is a land of giants. It's a land where everybody knows what they're doing, or seems to. ... It's a land of messages, but you can't yet interpret them, can you. ... It's a land of signals. ... It's a land of many tongues, really. Because different teachers talk differently. Each giant gives their own style of address. But it's also a land of hierarchy, which you don't yet understand. ... It's also a land where you can be interrogated at any point. “Where are you going? Are you lost? You should be there.” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Heathcote’s analysis here reframes transition to secondary school as entry into an opaque symbolic environment. Contemporary studies on school transition consistently identify as common transition anxieties, the fear of getting lost (literally and socially); doing the wrong thing; humiliation; not understanding “how it works”; and not belonging. These anxieties are not primarily academic; they are relational and procedural (Symonds, 2015).

In these early stages of planning, Heathcote briefly considered a drama that would take the form of a journey through a labyrinth, with a series of encounters presenting different challenges and foregrounding different modes of learning. For example, she returned to the idea of

“learning by listening”: “What can we find out in this labyrinth by listening?” The imagined journey would allow children to experience strangeness in a structured and manageable form. Rather than rehearsing specific school incidents, it would stage the condition of transition itself: incomplete knowledge, ambiguous signals, missteps and the need for collective sense-making. The labyrinth could thus provide a metaphorical environment in which pupils might explore the kinds of learning required to navigate uncertainty.

Yet the metaphor also carried limitations. It risked positioning pupils as “small” explorers moving through a threatening landscape, progressing only by successfully passing a series of tests. In this sense, it reproduced the very vulnerability it sought to address. It was also uncomfortably close to the children’s own situation. Most importantly, the frame retained the individual learner at the centre: the drama would focus on how / find my way through the maze. Heathcote’s later solution moved decisively away from this orientation. By introducing the Life Coaches enterprise, the work shifted the centre of gravity. The children were no longer explorers seeking their own path through the labyrinth, but practitioners responsible for helping others navigate unfamiliar environments. Attention shifted from the self’s struggle for orientation to the practical task of responding to another’s need.

Heathcote herself expressed reservations about the labyrinth idea, partly because the “expert” frame for the children remained unclear:

The big thing that isn’t resolved, as far as I’m concerned, by thinking this way, is: What would be their expertise? What are they running? What are they administering? And they’re administering it, by understanding how difficult it’s going to be for these people.
(Heathcote, planning meeting)

She was searching, in other words, for the form of responsibility the pupils would hold within the drama. In *Mantle of the Expert*, the class does not simply inhabit a situation; it administers something, serves someone and acts with authority within a defined enterprise. Heathcote’s comment already implies a shift in orientation. The children would not themselves be the people lost in the labyrinth; their task would be to understand how difficult such journeys might be for *others*.

The difference is significant: instead of experiencing disorientation directly, the pupils would be responsible for helping others face it. Their role would be to analyse situations, interpret difficulties and design ways of supporting those entering unfamiliar environments. The status of the pupils therefore changes. They are no longer travellers asking, “How do I survive this?” but practitioners confronted with a different question: “What might someone need in order to find their way?”

One possible outcome the MAT team considered was the creation of a website on which the children would publish materials explaining their understanding of “how people learn.” This suggestion led Heathcote to a clearer formulation of the expert frame: “They provide the materials for the website, so they’re a research unit. They’re a research unit about helping people deal with strangeness.” The idea brought several elements into alignment. Pupils would have expertise (as researchers), responsibility (investigating how people learn in unfamiliar situations), a form of publication (the website materials), and a purpose: to support those encountering change. The focus was therefore not on the pupils’ own transition but on the needs of others. “Strangeness” might involve entering a new country, a new institution, a new language, a new workplace, or any unfamiliar system. The children’s task would be to investigate how people learn to navigate such situations and to offer guidance drawn from their inquiry. In this way, the project redirected attention outward. The pupils were not invited to reflect on their own anxieties but to respond to the difficulties faced by others. This shift altered the nature of reflection itself, from reflexive self-awareness, to response-ability.

The drama frame also widened the concept of transitions, as a broader condition of human experience. We may understand this more clearly through the lens of Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016, 2023), which conceptualises transitions not as single, linear events (such as “primary to secondary school”) but as layered, overlapping and ongoing processes. From this perspective, a child moving school is not simply entering a new building or institution. They are simultaneously negotiating multiple forms of transition: spatial (new environments), social (peer groups and hierarchies), linguistic (new subject vocabularies), epistemic (different ways of organising knowledge), identity (“who am I here?”), and emotional (fear, anticipation, loss), often alongside biological and familial changes.

These transitions do not occur in isolation. They unfold within a wider ecology in which other people—peers, teachers, family members—are themselves undergoing change. One person’s anxieties or expectations may shape another’s experience; transitions intersect, overlap and reverberate across relationships. In this sense, the environment is not stable or singular but dynamic and discontinuous. To prepare a child simply to “fit” a new setting is therefore conceptually inadequate, since what they encounter is not one transition but a field of interacting changes.

Heathcote’s project can be read as a pedagogical response to this kind of complexity. Rather than rehearsing a single transition, it invites pupils to investigate how people learn to navigate unfamiliar systems. Within the Mantle frame, the question is widened from “our move to secondary school” to a more fundamental inquiry: how do human beings find their way in situations where expectations, meanings and relationships are not yet clear? In this sense, the project does not simplify transition; it treats strangeness itself as the object of study.

Schoon and Heckhausen have argued that the way individuals position themselves in relation to transition influences outcomes (2019). Heathcote’s frame actively restructures that positioning. By relocating the inquiry into research, publication, and helping others, the drama transforms the child from passive experiencer, into epistemic agent. The children are no longer subjects of strangeness; they are the analysts of it. This is a shift in positional identity: instead of “I am the anxious newcomer,” they become “the researcher of transitions.”

The frame was finally defined as a team of “Life Coaches”—an enterprise supporting fictional clients experiencing multidimensional transitions. The role was metaphorical rather than vocational: as in all Mantle work, the purpose was not to simulate a real profession but to structure responsibility and perspective. “Life Coach” functions here as a socially recognisable position that legitimises attention to learning processes, and careful listening and care for others.

Through the recurring question—“What do we now know about how people learn?”—the role gradually becomes internalised, giving pupils a shared language for learning and a repertoire of strategies for negotiating change. Crucially, reflection is oriented toward the needs of the Other. This orientation distinguishes the project from Schön’s model of the reflective practitioner, where reflection centres on one’s own professional action. In the Life Coaches enterprise, reflection is

triggered by another’s difficulty. The inquiry moves away from self-centred mastery, towards attentiveness to the situations of others; from reflective practitioner, to responsive practitioner. Learning becomes less a return to the self, than an orientation within a shared and shifting landscape of transitions, in which many lives are unfolding at once.

THE PROJECT STRUCTURE

As Life Coaches, the children worked in teams, and were given data files on fictional clients, all of whom had different needs and issues. The clients were not physically present at any point; they were evoked through letters, data files, and imagined encounters. Heathcote described the work explicitly in experimental terms: the classroom, she saw, would:

become a laboratory for working out how to teach somebody to learn by one of these systems. So, the children will be planning a learning scheme, on the basis of trying and never giving up, keep trying again and again and again. They would have to design the journey. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

The metaphor of the laboratory was central to Heathcote’s conception of Mantle. The classroom is viewed, not simply a stage for dramatic situations but a research environment in which ideas could be tested, revised and shared. As she explained:

In the laboratory, we care about what we do, we get the information we require, and we share it all the time. That means we process it: we process it in talk, we process it in action, just like a laboratory outside school works. (1991)

In this sense the Life Coaches project functioned as a collective inquiry into learning itself. The children were not merely helping individual clients; they were investigating how learning occurs under different conditions.

Heathcote stated that she always planned by deciding what children would be doing each day. What follows is the structure she outlined for the project. The first stages establish the frame and “expertise,” firstly through a “history” for the “team.” She observed:

In Mantle of the Expert, you really should have provided them with something they've already done [as a team/enterprise], so they will have a list of their successes, that they successfully managed to get through this system ... [and] that we can add to our "roll of honour." Somebody's passed through and has written in, and they now are doing whatever job they are doing in the world. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

She suggested a kind of staff meeting, or a "state of the firm" meeting,

to see our latest graduates: how many they've got through, that we feel we helped, we got them settled. That would allow you to say, "I only met that gentleman once, but I sensed from the very beginning he wanted to be an engineer, and I presume those were the things he learned best, if he's now doing this." (Heathcote, planning meeting)

In the meeting, the children share and read some letters from previous clients (prepared in advance by the teacher). Heathcote envisaged that the children would quickly begin to join in the fiction, and talk about the clients as if they had actually worked with them: "Well I knew him," or "I did that," or "I showed her this."

So the things that come back as letters of thanks, back to the place, always indicate that the skills they're now using are a sort of [guide]line to them, and we are the people who helped them find those lines. ... What they'd have under their belt from that meeting is: "We are already established. Each of us has had some sort of input"—because they will always do this.³ "I can't remember which of us started—do you remember?" And they'll say, "I did." "Oh, yes. I don't know whether he began with the mathematics, or whether he was taking motorbikes apart." And they tell you. So that you're establishing *doing* to learn. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

This episode has several aims. It builds the idea of the role and what

³ In other words: they will always take on the idea that the team has a "history."

they *do* as Life Coaches; and it starts to endow them with a sense of “expertise” (“we have had previous successes”). This overcomes the problem that children in Mantle cannot act like experts if they are asked to *become* experts from scratch. Instead of saying, “You are starting a new Life Coaching firm,” she gives them a “history” of an established firm, with a “roll of honour.” The children, then, do not have to prove themselves; they step into continuity, and inherit success. This produces confidence, legitimacy and responsibility. They are not pretending to be experts; they are (so to speak) “remembering” being experts. As Heathcote stated, children will usually respond to the invitation to join in the drama, and co-create the backstory (“I remember him,” etc.). The statement, “I can’t remember which of us started—do you remember?” serves as an invitation, and leaves space for them to co-author the “history.”

The episode also establishes what the team does, and how it helps clients to learn, without the teacher having to explain this. It indicates that the clients have learned in different ways; for example, a letter might state, “I really understood it, when you advised me to break it down into smaller steps.” This starts to establish a shared professional language, a collective responsibility, and commitment to evaluative reflection (“We review outcomes. We analyse what worked. We infer learning pathways”). There is also an implication, that the team has standards to uphold. Moreover, a statement such as “you told me to break it into smaller steps” indicates that the help given to clients is not based in teaching them skills or knowledge. Rather, it is process-based: understanding is constructed, strategies matter, and different people learn differently. Other statements invented by Heathcote include:

“You taught me that questions often taught me more than the answers I found out; because every question made me think of some more questions, whereas the answers tended to just say: ‘Oh, that’s the answer’.”

“It was so useful when you showed me how making a mistake is often very useful—for example, when I—(whatever it might be).”

“There were things I didn’t think I’d enjoy doing, and you said: ‘Go again and try again, and see whether you like it better now.’ And

so I now do painting, or sometimes I like to go to galleries and look at pictures, and I'll never be good at it, but I learn a lot from looking." (Heathcote, planning meeting)

The letters do not state, "Thank you for teaching me about fractions," or "You helped me understand photosynthesis." The enterprise is not defined by subjects, grades and outcomes, but by ways of learning. While framed as client reflections, the letters are in fact modelling alternative epistemic attitudes; for example, the statement "Making a mistake is often very useful" repositions error from failure to data, and encourages an experimental stance. The statements are also indirectly addressing some of the multidimensional anxieties that pupils themselves may carry into transition. They foreground, for example, valuing questions, trying again, and so on. The children are not told directly: "Don't be afraid to ask questions." Instead, they encounter a world in which successful clients attribute growth to questioning, learning from error, and persistence.

Heathcote's statement about "establishing doing to learn" shifts the epistemological ground. Learning is not framed as acquiring the correct information, receiving advice, or being told what to do. Instead, successful learning appears grounded in effort, adaptation, strategy and growth. The client's learning emerges through engagement. The Life Coach does not solve the problem directly, but helps create the conditions in which the client can discover something through action.

Within the drama, these statements position the children as enablers of learning rather than providers of answers: supporters of risk-taking, validators of questions, and witnesses to another's effort ("You taught me..."). The dynamic is therefore relational. In attending to another person's learning, the Life Coaches develop a language for recognising how learning unfolds in practice. The structure of the project quietly establishes two complementary forms of practice. In the clients' letters, reflection appears as something emerging from action: knowledge is generated within activity, insight follows engagement, and understanding becomes visible in retrospect. The Life Coaches, however, operate differently. Reflection is triggered not by their own experience, but by another person's needs. Their task is to interpret situations, infer obstacles to learning, and design responses that might help someone else move forward. In this sense, the project distinguishes between the reflective practitioner and the responsive

practitioner. The client becomes capable of reflecting on their own learning, while the Life Coaches practise the capacity to respond responsibly to another’s learning situation.

THE FIRST “CLIENT”

The letters help to establish the culture of the “team”; so when new clients are introduced, the children are already operating inside that frame. Heathcote suggested that there might be a shared focus first on just one client, introduced at the end of the “staff meeting”:

[Speaking as if in role at the meeting] “But we’ve got a very special person coming through now, because people are coming through now from very different places in the world, and some are coming through who didn’t expect to be coming to us. And I understand this morning there is one such person for us to begin on. And this person has been chosen for us as our sort of model for our system, a system we now understand seems to work. And this is why we’ve noted these things that they meet when they first come.” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Heathcote observed: “So now we’ve got our client, but we also have to know we’ve been selected particularly because of our success, because we know that learning is not always about getting little lumps of information in your head, but learning is how to use what you know to get to know more.”

Heathcote invented a client called Anita, whose ambition is to work in forestry. The children are introduced to this (and other clients) through a letter (created by the teacher). They then have to consider: “‘What are the attributes that we believe would help you become this, that you need?’ And that will really make the children think about learning.” The group together, then, look at one case, before later working in smaller groups, each with their own client/case. Working on Anita provides a model for how they can then approach planning a programme for their own clients.

Heathcote considered what the children might be able to achieve on the first day: “I divide things into the days. I say, ‘Well, come Monday night, what will they manage to have got to, in terms of their understanding?’ And one of the things you seem to need is something

like: We know where we're at with Anita up to now; that we've decided on a programme for Anita that will matter." They will be in a position to write to Anita, welcoming her to the "learning world," and explaining,

"These are the things we would like to help you [with], so that you will learn how to learn." And you see, the last thing they're going to be doing is [saying]: "You'll need to learn about trees"; but, looking closely at things, differentiating, realising there's no one colour called green—these are all aspects. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Client "Cases"

The approach to the question of "How do people learn?" was based, then, in individual "case studies." Heathcote argued that, in Mantle,

The case study is the curriculum. The man with one leg, the wounded men at Scutari [etc.]—the case study. The case study is our cats, if we run a cattery, and all the other cats in the world, that we will understand because we run a cattery. (2009a)

The "case study" approach puts human interest and concern (or in the cattery example, a zoocentric concern) at the heart of the work. Learning begins, not with a subject area, but with a person or "case," in a context, with some issue, or problem, that engages the expertise of the team. Knowledge and process emerge from interrogating the details of that situation. This is classic case-study epistemology.

Heathcote emphasised that the case-study approach involves sustained attention to sources and evidence: "Studying sources and resources over and over again. Refine, review, reassemble, rethink. Constant productive obsession" (n.d.). Case studies are widely used in professional fields such as law, medicine and social work as a means of analysing complex, situated realities and refining interpretation over time. When Heathcote anchors Mantle in the case-study method, she aligns classroom inquiry with a recognisable mode of professional investigation, shifting the children's work from "task completion" to sustained interpretation.

In this respect, the structure may appear to resemble Schön's account of professional practice, in which practitioners frame

situations, experiment in action, notice outcomes, and reframe the problem (Schön, 1983). Yet Heathcote’s use of the case differs in an important way. The focus is not primarily on the practitioner’s reflection upon their own action, but on the careful interpretation of another person’s situation. What is encountered is not simply a technical problem but a human situation requiring understanding, judgement and response. In this sense, the case-study structure cultivates a form of responsive inquiry. The pupils must attend carefully to the situation presented, infer what kinds of learning might help, and design possible responses. Interpretation and responsibility remain intertwined. The task is not simply to analyse the case but to consider what might help this person move forward within the unfamiliar terrain they are facing.

Seen in this light, the case study becomes one of the principal working units of the classroom “laboratory” which Heathcote envisaged. Each client case provides material for investigation: a situation to interpret, a set of possibilities to test, and a basis for refining understanding through repeated cycles of action, reflection and revision. The sequence she proposed—“Refine, review, reassemble, rethink”—captures the experimental rhythm of this work.

These are the main elements that Heathcote suggested should be built into the fictional client “cases.”

1. The clients are people who are going to a new place, and are somewhat bewildered about what will be required of them; but they do not begin with no knowledge. Heathcote said: “They have the knowledge they’ve got to date, to draw on; but you want them to understand how to use that knowledge, and fathom out what it is about this place that will make it worthwhile going to.”
2. The clients may have been given some information about the place they are going to, but some of it is unclear or confusing: “It seems to me one of the first things they’d have to do is discover from this person the degree of their bewilderment.”
3. Their current life may be very different indeed from their planned new life, and this is a source of anxiety and sense of “strangeness.”
4. They fear they may get some things wrong, and look stupid. This was Heathcote’s example:

So if, for example, you'd said [speaking as the "client"], "I thought if you had to keep on trying and trying, it meant you weren't very good at it. People will think I'm no good at it if I can't do it the first time." [The Life Coach answers] "No, it's not like that." [The client says] "But I am worried about that. I want to be right the first time."

5. They want to make a change, but do not know if they have the right skills or aptitude, but also, if they are ready for it.
6. The client has attributes which the children need to identify. When the client is introduced, the children have to consider: "What are the attributes that we believe would help you become this, that you need?" And that will really make the children think about learning."
7. There are things that the client recognises about themselves, that they know might hinder their capacity to adapt to new circumstances. The letter from the client contains indications of some challenges to learning, e.g.: "I have never learned to speak up in class. I am shy. My mother and father are very hard at work. We do not have much time together." Heathcote commented: "So you're not building pathetic pictures. You're building quite strong pictures."
8. There may be things about themselves that they don't recognise, that might hinder their capacity to adapt to new circumstances. The letters may contain clues to these problems; the children must read between the lines, diagnose gently, and anticipate consequences.⁴

The cases are both specific and patterned. Each client appears as an individual—with particular circumstances, anxieties and dispositions—yet across the cases recurring features begin to emerge. The children therefore engage not only with singular lives but with patterns in how people encounter and navigate change. Their task is to interpret situations: to consider what the client already knows, what obstacles may arise, and what kinds of learning might help them move forward.

Each case also contains an implied future. The client will soon enter a new workplace, university or environment and must eventually

⁴ This is our summary of the stages that Heathcote discussed in the planning meeting.

continue without the support of the Life Coaches. Accordingly, the programme is not designed to create dependence but to help the client approach unfamiliar situations with greater confidence and flexibility. Existing knowledge may remain relevant; attitudes toward difficulty may need to shift; strategies for learning may need to be adapted. The central question is not simply what the client must know, but how they might learn in circumstances that are new or uncertain.

For the children, this structure sustains attention on another person’s situation. They must consider how temperament, expectation, fear and circumstance interact in shaping the client’s ability to learn. Over time, the group develops a vocabulary for describing these conditions: the interplay between aptitude, attitude and context; the value of questions; the role of persistence; the usefulness of mistakes. Such language emerges through the work of interpretation and response.

The cases inevitably resonate with the children’s own experiences. The clients function as what might be called “thin mirrors.” Recognition may occur—“that sounds like me”—but it is never demanded. Crucially, however, the structure of the work prevents the inquiry from turning inward. Pupils are not asked to analyse themselves; the focus remains directed toward another person’s situation. In this sense, the cases do not invite introspection, but rather, exteriorisation. Feelings of uncertainty, fear of failure, difficulty adapting to unfamiliar systems, are displaced into the shared world of the drama. Within the classroom laboratory, attention is directed outward: toward the situation, toward the problem to be understood, and toward the person whose learning is at stake. This produces a shift in orientation. Instead of turning back upon the self, the work draws pupils *outside-of-themselves* into a task that demands careful attention to what lies beyond them. The difficulty belongs to the situation; the responsibility is to respond. The learner is therefore repositioned, not as the object of analysis, but as a participant in a shared effort to understand and assist another person navigating unfamiliar terrain.

BUILDING A “REFERENC SYSTEM”

One task undertaken in the early phases of the project invited the children to categorise different ways of learning. The MAT team prepared cards based on Heathcote’s earlier suggestions—for

example: “Watching others do it”; “Hearing about others’ experiences”; “Testing ideas to see what happens”; “Helping someone do it”; “Seeing other examples.” Working in teams, the pupils sorted the cards into three categories: *Most useful*, *Sometimes useful*, and *Seldom useful*. They could also add their own suggestions. One group, for example, proposed “Using your imagination,” placing it in the column *Most useful*. In this way, individual observations entered a shared pool of knowledge. Ideas could later be recalled and referenced—“One of our research groups identified imagination as central, didn’t they?”—so that children’s contributions were treated not simply as “good work” but as part of the collective inquiry.

Heathcote suggested that such material should accumulate visibly in the room, forming a growing record of the group’s investigation into how people learn. Cards, charts and notes were displayed on the walls and repeatedly revisited: “Have we got anything about learning through x?” The classroom thus became a space organised by the question, “What do we now know about how people learn?” Knowledge was externalised and thinking made visible. The displays did not represent fixed conclusions but the group’s current understanding—open to amendment as new cases and experiences prompted reconsideration.

In this way, the walls themselves became a form of epistemological architecture, holding fragments of insight contributed by different participants at different moments. As cases were analysed, ideas were added, revised and reclassified. Heathcote’s injunction to “Refine, review, reassemble, rethink” was embodied spatially. No single pupil possessed the whole understanding; it was distributed across the group and the environment. The room functioned as a kind of collective intelligence—a living archive of the laboratory inquiry in progress.

Within the structure of the project, three layers of learning therefore begin to appear. The clients’ letters model reflective learning in retrospect, while the Life Coaches practise responsive judgement in addressing another person’s situation. Surrounding both is the collective inquiry of the group itself: a shared “hive mind” in which understanding accumulates, circulates and evolves over time.

Heathcote suggested that each group, having received a letter from their client, should create a portrait of that individual as they imagined them. In the MAT project these were large-scale drawings on A0 paper, displayed around the room. The clients—though fictional

and physically absent—were thereby made continuously present as particular, situated persons. The classroom became populated with faces and names, reminders that the inquiry was always directed toward someone’s difficulty.

Placed alongside the evolving displays about different ways of learning, these portraits created a deliberate tension between the particular and the general: concrete lives beside emerging principles. The children were not simply collecting strategies; they were repeatedly asking how such strategies might apply to *this* person, in *this* situation. Moving between the research materials on the walls and the client portraits, they practised the work of interpretation and response: considering a case, selecting from the group’s shared knowledge, and adapting it to the circumstances of another.

The spatial organisation of the room therefore mattered. Around the walls accumulated the collective “bank” of ideas about learning; among them were the imagined clients whose situations called those ideas into use. Knowledge and responsibility remained visibly connected. The room itself became a working laboratory environment of inquiry in which the presence of the Other continually redirected attention from abstract theory toward the practical question: what might help this person learn and move forward?

Over time, this visible network of cases, portraits and ideas formed a shared reference system for the work of the room. When facilitators asked, “Have we anything about learning through x?”, they were not prompting recall but modelling a practice of consultation—returning to the collective record in order to reconsider a situation. The displays therefore functioned less as a storehouse of answers than as a working environment for inquiry. Rather than encouraging pupils to internalise a fixed toolkit, the process habituated them to revisiting experience, drawing on shared knowledge, and reinterpreting situations in response to the needs of others.

PUTTING THE HUMAN AT THE CENTRE

The MAT team prepared letters from the “clients” which included a range of different personalities and learning needs. They sought to give the letters a sense of an individual voice, as a first step in creating a sense of the Other. For example: one letter, from “Val,” was contained in a small turquoise envelope, with the words, “from Val

Bailey. P.S. Hope you can help!” handwritten on the cover. Inside, on two pieces of lined paper, “Val” had written:

Dear Agency,

I would be glad of the chance to get help with reaching my goal of working in a store again, as I did enjoy it before, that is, before the fire.

I suppose I just got into the habit of avoiding people, but I think it is time to put on a brave face and that is a real problem for me at the moment.

People tell me you can help. Will it be just me and one of you when I come to your centre?

Please let me know.

Val ⁵

The letter was not just a prop; it was a careful construction of presence, as a step towards putting the “human” at the centre of the work. It is an example of the way that small, concrete details can carry dramatic and ethical weight. The small turquoise envelope, with the handwritten note on it, already did something before the letter was even opened. It signalled individuality, vulnerability, and a reaching outward. “Hope you can help!” is not formal or institutional language; it is human, and slightly tentative. It positions the students, not as abstract problem-solvers, but as people who are being appealed to. Inside the letter, the voice is carefully pitched: “I would be glad of the chance...”, “I suppose I just got into the habit...”, “Will it be just me and one of you...?” There are gaps the students must interpret: What happened in the fire? What does “put on a brave face” imply? Why is she anxious about how things will work at the centre? The students have to read carefully, infer sensitively, and avoid making assumptions. In other words: they must treat Val as a person, not simply a “case.” They must consider, not simply a “learning

⁵ Copy preserved in the MAT Archive.

programme,” but issues of safety, trust, environment and consent. The drama becomes relational, not procedural. There are real human consequences, albeit within a fictional context: if the agency mishandles the situation, then Val might feel unsafe, retreat further, and not return. Because the fiction is carefully built, the stakes feel real enough to matter. The letter also resists reducing Val to a stereotype of a trauma victim. She has a past competence (“working in a store”), a goal, self-awareness, hesitation, and hope. This complexity prevents the students from flattening her into a “problem.” They must meet someone who exceeds their initial assumptions; and this—even in a fictional context—is an encounter with “Otherness.”

Read in terms of MMT theory, Val’s letter reflects rupture and transition across multiple domains: social, emotional, linguistic, and relational. The small turquoise envelope, with the handwritten “P.S.,” already performs transitions: it signals vulnerability; it positions the sender as crossing into a new relational space; it asks for entry (“Hope you can help!”). The envelope functions as a threshold object: it marks movement from private struggle to public request. This is already a relational transition, from isolation to appeal. The letter describes a biographical rupture: past identity as store worker, socially embedded; intervening event (the fire); present condition (avoidance, withdrawal); and future aspiration (return to work). This is not simply re-employment; it is identity reconstitution. MMT stresses that transitions are emotional processes as much as structural ones, and the letter foregrounds this dimension. The transitions required changes not merely behavioural but affective: from fear to courage, from concealment to participation, and from habit (“got into the habit”) to deliberate continual adaptation to change. Moreover, the letter moves across three temporal planes: before the fire, after the fire, and hoped-for future. This layering reflects the multidimensionality of transitions: it is not a clean forward move; it is an attempt to restore a broken continuity, or a constant state of discontinuity.

In this way, when the class, as Life Coaches, receives this letter, they are not merely solving a problem; they are entering a complex transitional ecology. The children are required to think multidimensionally. The letter also demonstrates why Heathcote’s preparation is not about fitting into a single system. Val’s situation is discontinuous, layered, fragile. To help her, the Life Coaches must tolerate ambiguity, recognise intersecting transitions, design graduated

entry, respect emotional pace, and analyse systems of work and social re-engagement. The children themselves are not outside this condition; they too are navigating transitions of their own, and these ongoing changes inevitably inflect how they respond to others. However, transitions are not confined to those explicitly designated as “in transition.” As MMT theory emphasises, transition is ongoing and non-linear: it unfolds relationally, such that any engagement with another’s transition also implicates one’s own. Thus, when teachers or peers respond to a child’s movement from primary to secondary school, they are not neutral observers but participants in a shifting field that includes their own reorientation—whether institutional, relational, or personal.

Yet the Life Coaches drama does not rely on shared experience or identification. Instead, it situates pupils within a shared but differentiated field of transitions, requiring—crucially—an outward orientation toward the Other rather than a return to the self.

PLANNING PROGRAMMES FOR THE “CLIENTS”

The MAT team developed a sequence of steps to guide children through the process of preparing a programme for their client, based on Heathcote’s suggestions. (As we have seen, the sequence was modelled for the children, initially, through the collective focus on one client, Anita.)

1. The letter from the client is studied, and discussed. It is presented as part of a “case file” which contains also a “data sheet” of information (age, current job, etc.).
2. Groups draw an image on A0 paper of what they think the client looks like.
3. On the paper, they write: “What we know about the client, and what we think we know.” They also note what they surmise might be difficulties or obstacles to learning and to change.
4. They begin to select (and prioritise) the ways of learning they think will help him/her most, using the “learning” cards; and then concretise these in terms of activities or tasks. These details are also added to the A0 sheet.
5. The chart is used for a “seminar presentation” which each

group does about their “client.”⁶

In the drama, a teacher or participant might at times stand in for a client, for example in testing how a particular client might respond to a task or learning style; but otherwise, they never actually appear in the drama. The client does not “exist” in any literal sense, but through careful, detailed action, they are made to seem “present,” as the “client in the head”—a presence that is cognitively sustained, and collectively held.

By keeping the client imagined, Heathcote preserves the drama as what she often called a “no penalty zone” (Egglestone, 1982). This means high stakes without harm. Students can test ideas, change direction, fail productively, without the risk of injuring a real person. The drama becomes a space of ethical rehearsal. In many classrooms, fear of being wrong shuts down thinking. Heathcote’s drama inverts this: you can get it wrong, test, revise, rethink. But the detailed documentation—letters, files, charts—creates accountability inside the fiction. The imagined client becomes a kind of ethical anchor: the work must be viable and make sense.

In selecting learning approaches, the students are comparing strategies, weighing appropriateness, prioritising, and justifying choices. The step of turning strategies into actual activities is where theory meets practice. For example: “Seeing other examples” might become visiting a workplace, watching a demonstration, analysing a model, and so on. Heathcote envisaged that the process of planning a programme for the clients would culminate in a “symposium,”

When we are meeting, before our clients arrive; and we have planned their course, and we are here debating and considering just how this course would work for these people. So we'd have to organise it in some way where every group ... must explain somehow what they've noticed about the person, that makes them attend very specifically to certain things. Like, if, in the letter [it says], “I like things done very fast. If I'm not first to finish, I'll get upset.” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

⁶ This summary has been compiled by David Allen, as one of the facilitators on the project. It is based on notes in the MAT Archive.

In the MAT project, the A0 charts were used by groups in the “symposium,” to explain their plans. Presenting to others in this way requires clarity and justification, exposes reasoning to scrutiny, and invites comparison across cases. It also allows for feedback from other participants, which may lead to further revisions to the plan.

Here is an example from the project itself. One group produced a chart for “Jasmin Bailey.” The difficulty for her, they felt, was that she was “shy and uncomfortable.” They made a list of “ways of learning” which they thought would be most useful for her: Talking things over / Listening to someone explain / Asking somebody / Comparing things / Looking at her life. Then, they began to consider the activities that might help her to do this—for example:

Drawing things in her life
 Someone talk to her. She writes notes
 Ask a professional how to sort things out
 Comparing things in a list
 Role-play good / bad things ⁷

Even if the group’s ideas were somewhat underdeveloped at this stage, they show that the pupils were beginning to follow the logic of applied thinking, moving from abstract principles to concrete processes and activity language (for example, from “Looking at her life” to “Drawing things in her life”). They were designing mediated encounters: drawing, writing, role-play, comparing lists, and so on. Implicitly, they recognised that confidence might grow through structured activity rather than through advice alone. They were considering: what kinds of experiences might help this person begin to change?

In this sense, the children were acting as designers of learning situations rather than transmitters of solutions. Their task was not to diagnose Jasmin’s difficulty from a distance, but to construct conditions in which she might act, reflect on what happened, and gradually move forward. The client, within this structure, becomes the reflective practitioner—learning through engagement with experience—while the Life Coaches operate as responsive practitioners, attending to another’s situation and designing encounters through which new

⁷ Copy preserved in the MAT Archive.

learning might become possible.

DRAMA ENCOUNTERS

Heathcote saw the potential for drama encounters arising from the planned programmes for clients. For example:

Now you see, that should enable you and them to say: if you want people to learn by copying, let's set up a trial test. And we'll design something that's best learned by copying. I'm sure Michaelangelo needed people to mix the plaster right. Otherwise, they couldn't be painted well. If it's going to fall off, it's not going to work. So, when is it useful to copy?

Somebody (i.e., one of the students, or a teacher-in-role) could stand in as the “client” for the “trial.”

But all the time, there is this echoing: “Now, wait a minute, what did we do there? What was it helped? Was it when we said this, or was it when we did that?” Or: “Can you now teach *us* that?” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

These “trials” could then lead to the production of a kind of “textbook,” emerging from the work of the research: “‘These are the kinds of information that are learned best by repetition. These skills are best [learned] by repetition ...’ And there's your trial and error, I think, of the ones that lend themselves best [to learning].” At this point the children are no longer designing learning only for Anita (or other individual clients). The drama becomes a working laboratory for exploring how different kinds of learning might be supported in practice. For example, the group could ask: when does copying help? When is repetition useful? When does someone need time to explore or experiment?

In this way the “textbook” is not a body of abstract theory but a record of discoveries made through action. The key device, Heathcote suggested, is what she called “echoing”: “Wait a minute, what did we do there?”, “Was it when we said this?” Reflection occurs as a return to the episode—revisiting what had happened and asking what seemed to help. The drama creates situations in which participants have to pause, look again, and articulate what they have learned from the

encounter. The emphasis remains on “response-ability,” and the final question—“Can you now teach us that?”—tests whether the insight could be shared and used again, not as a rule, but as a possibility that might help someone else learn.

These “tests” also create an opportunity to critique some conventional teaching methods. For example, Heathcote took the idea of “looking for information”:

And what you might need to say: this is a model of a way that doesn't help anybody learn to look for information. “Right, have you all got page 54? Right. On page 54, go down the left-hand column and blah-blah-blah. And there you are.” Or somebody who does something on the board, and the sum's finished, and you've no idea how the figure is worked out at all. So the children now have some interest in devising really poor teaching, in order to say: “Now, wait a minute, let's break this down. Where does it start to go wrong?” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Someone representing a client such as Anita in role might say: “I didn't understand any of that.”

So where did it first go wrong? What was assumed? Anita wants to know about forests. She'll learn anything at all, if she can relate it with forests. But the thing is going at a speed that makes it impossible [for her], and she dare not feel foolish. So teaching Anita not to worry about feeling foolish may be something they might design a way to do it. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

What appears playful here—“devising really poor teaching”—is in fact diagnostic. By staging examples such as “Right, have you all got page 54...”, or a board demonstration that jumps directly to the answer, Heathcote invites the group to expose patterns that usually pass unquestioned in classroom practice: speed mistaken for authority, assumed prior knowledge, or compliance mistaken for understanding. The question “Where does it start to go wrong?” shifts the discussion away from blaming the learner or judging the teacher and towards examining the conditions under which learning occurs. The difficulty becomes something to interpret rather than something to attribute to personal inadequacy.

Seen in this light, the group is not merely analysing methods but investigating the ecology of learning itself. The client’s confusion becomes the starting point for inquiry: what assumptions were made, what barriers were created, and what alternative conditions might help this person learn? In this way the drama relocates difficulty from the individual to the situation, opening a space for the Life Coaches to design more responsive ways forward.

“READING THE LABYRINTH”

A report on “Critical Self-Reflection” in the transition to university, published by QAA Scotland, has stated:

If students are encouraged from the early stages to become more critically reflective on what they learn and, in particular, how their learning habits need to be altered to fit the new academic environment, they may be able to move more easily from one learning style to another... . (Cheng et al, 2023, p. 2)

This formulation assumes that the system is given, stable and normative. Reflection is instrumental: it helps students adjust their habits so they can “fit” the new academic environment. The burden of adaptation rests with the learner; the institutional structures and pedagogical methods themselves remain largely unquestioned.

Heathcote’s position is structurally different. The Life Coaches project emerges from her own description of secondary school as a labyrinth: a landscape of subject silos, each with its own language, pace, expectations and implicit rules. Rather than training pupils to modify themselves in order to comply with these differences, the project equips them to recognise such differences as styles and systems. When Heathcote proposes “tests” of different ways of learning, she is not coaching children to become more adaptable consumers of teaching methods. She is staging inquiries into pedagogy itself.

What Heathcote offers, then, is not a set of strategies for coping with institutional complexity but a way of *reading the labyrinth*. The pupil is encouraged to attend to the conditions under which learning occurs: the pace of explanation, the assumptions made about prior knowledge, the forms of participation that are expected, and the ways

in which understanding is demonstrated. Instead of treating confusion as personal inadequacy, the learner learns to interpret the situation itself—asking what kind of learning is taking place, what obstacles are present, and what alternative routes might be possible.

This way of seeing situations is closely connected to the laboratory orientation of the project. In the classroom laboratory, cases are examined, strategies proposed, and outcomes tested through action and discussion. “Reading the labyrinth” therefore becomes part of the same investigative habit: breaking situations down, identifying patterns, and considering possible responses. In this way, complex environments are not presented as structures to submit to, but as terrains that can be interpreted, questioned and explored.

In MMT terms, the Life Coach project is not tied to a single school transfer. The pupil is situated within networks of practices, expectations, relationships and responsibilities that extend beyond any single classroom. To recognise this is not to master the system, but to understand oneself as part of a wider ecology of learning in which meaning, difficulty and possibility emerge through interaction with others. Heathcote is not equipping pupils for a single transition event, but for transitions as a complex and ongoing condition.

The “Flow” of the Project

The flow of the work with the “clients” can be summarised as follows:

1. Case data (letter)
2. Hypothesis (possible learning strategy)
3. Presentation at symposium
4. Drama episodes (trials)
5. Reflection (“echoing”)
6. Revision
7. Codification (textbook or website) ⁸

As we have seen, Heathcote insisted that the group should be “examining their thinking as they go along”; and here, reflection emerges through the shared work of “response-ability”: interpreting a case, testing ideas in action, revisiting what happened, and

⁸ This summary has been compiled by David Allen, as one of the facilitators on the project. It is based on notes in the MAT Archive.

reconsidering the next step. The production of a “textbook” or website therefore does not simply consolidate knowledge. It records what the group has discovered through their attempts to respond to particular situations. “What we now know about how people learn” remains provisional, grounded in cases and open to revision as new encounters arise.

In schools, the project culminated in an “Open Day,” where each group presented its work at a stall and explained its client to visitors. This public moment extended the same process of articulation and testing. Ideas that had emerged through action were now offered to others for scrutiny, explanation and discussion. Understanding was stabilised not through individual cognitive mastery, but through communication, accountability, and the collective responsibility of making sense of the work.

The MAT team received written feedback from a class of children at Rookery School in Handsworth.⁹ Their regular classroom teacher had provided headings for the responses (“Teachers,” “Sessions,” “Like the most?” “Unsure about?” and “Skills”). The children did not explicitly discuss “transition” or “types of learning” in their comments—though this may partly reflect the way the questions were framed. Nevertheless, their responses align closely with the deeper structure of the project.¹⁰

What they emphasised most strongly was the experience of working together: communicating with one another, preparing presentations, and explaining their thinking to visitors. One pupil wrote: “We had to think about the thing we were going to say about our person [client] who wanted to change their job. We all had communication with each other and done [sic] group work.” What stands out here is not reference to content but to the process of

⁹ Copies preserved in the MAT Archive.

¹⁰ The feedback cited here was not collected as part of a formal research design but forms part of the project’s archival record. Responses were written by pupils under teacher-provided headings, and no systematic coding or thematic analysis was undertaken at the time. In revisiting these materials, we have identified recurring features (e.g. references to collaboration, communication and presentation) that appear across responses. These are treated not as statistically representative findings but as indicative of how aspects of the project were experienced and articulated by participants. The possibility of desirability bias—particularly given the classroom context and teacher framing—should be borne in mind.

collective inquiry. The pupils recall thinking together, discussing interpretations, and preparing to articulate their ideas publicly.

This emphasis reflects the laboratory structure of the work. As Heathcote suggested, the classroom functioned as a place where information was gathered, processed through discussion and action, and continually shared. The repeated references to “communication” and “group work” suggest that pupils recognised learning as something relational and investigative rather than individually received. They were not simply completing assigned tasks; they were participating in a shared effort to make sense of situations and propose ways forward.

Moreover, the work culminated in public accountability through the “Open Day,” where groups presented their thinking about their clients. In this sense the children were not only participating in inquiry but explaining its outcomes. Several pupils commented, for example, that they felt like “real proper people that can really help other people.” Such remarks suggest a shift in how they were positioning themselves.¹¹ Rather than describing what they had done (“we did an activity”), they were articulating a sense of being people who help. Read in this way, the Mantle frame appears to have shifted their stance—however temporarily—from pupils completing school tasks to participants engaged in purposeful investigation.

One of the children talked directly about the question of “how people learn”: “I chose comparing things because if your friend does a move and you copy it, but you do it wrong, you can compare what your friend [has] done to yours.” This comment shows an emerging awareness that learning often occurs through comparison, modelling and adjustment rather than through simple instruction. The pupil is describing a process of noticing difference, testing an attempt, and

¹¹ It might be argued that such statements risk signalling a subtle form of compliance-thinking, in which pupils adopt the language of “responsibility” expected within the educational setting. However, this reading is undermined by the conditions under which the remarks emerged. Pupils were not instructed to frame themselves as “helpers,” nor was such language modelled or assessed. Rather, it arose within a fictional context, structured around responding to clients—an arrangement that displaces institutional norms and introduces an external demand. In this sense, the ethical orientation expressed here is not the internalisation of a prescribed role, but a situated response to the Other. As Heathcote suggests, the client is “Somebody to be responsible to, and for”; and this “is why you get ethics, responsibility and morality” in Mantle (2009b). The demand is relational rather than imposed, and therefore cannot be reduced to compliance with pre-existing expectations.

revising action accordingly. In the language of the project, this is laboratory thinking: observing what happens, comparing outcomes, and refining an approach considering what has been discovered.

A similar orientation appears in a statement made by one of the project participants in an interview conducted some months later, after she had already begun secondary school.¹² She observed:

It’s, like, you kept on remembering it and referring to it... If we keep on referring to that, to help us, and then we keep on referring to it through our lives, when we get our own problems, we can think around them... If the information stays with us, then it will definitely help us.

Notably, she did not say that the project had taught specific skills, nor that it had simply prepared her for secondary school. Instead, she spoke about repeatedly “remembering” and “referring to” the experience. What persists, in her account, is less a body of information than a way of approaching situations. Her phrase, “we can think around them,” evokes movement rather than confrontation: finding paths, reconsidering direction, exploring possibilities. In the language used earlier in the project, it suggests an ability to read the labyrinth.

Equally striking is her use of the word “we.” She does not speak as an isolated learner but as part of a collective: “we keep on referring to it... we can think around them.” The reference point appears to remain the shared inquiry that characterised the project itself. The “we” recalls the collaborative work of the Life Coaches and the distributed knowledge of the classroom “hive,” where understanding emerged through questioning, comparison and response.

What the project may have left behind, then, is not a set of techniques but a shift in orientation. Instead of confronting transition as an isolated individual asking “How will I cope?”, the pupil’s language suggests a sense of being situated among others who are also navigating change. One enters the labyrinth not alone but with a disposition shaped by the work of the classroom laboratory: approaching situations as things to interpret, test and reconsider, while remaining attentive to others who are negotiating their own pathways through uncertainty. Read through the lens of multiple and

¹² Audio recording preserved in the MAT Archive.

multidimensional transitions, her words extend beyond the move to secondary school. The project helped to prepare pupils, not simply for a single institutional shift, but for discontinuity itself.

At the end of the planning meeting, Heathcote expressed the hope that “learning to learn” might become “so systemic” in schools “that it would be done all the time: I mean, how are we learning what we know? Rather than [me, as teacher] telling you what I know you should know—because it’s just nonsense in this day and age, with all the knowledge that’s floating around loose.” Her comment points toward a reorientation of education itself. The question is no longer how information is transmitted, but how learners come to recognise the conditions under which learning happens and their place within them.

The legacy of the Life Coaches project therefore lies less in preparation for a single transition than in cultivating attentiveness to the processes through which people learn, change and move forward together. Education, in this sense, is not preparation for escaping the labyrinth, but learning how to move through the shifting pathways of a world characterised by continual transitions; aware, moreover, that these pathways are shared, and that the work of finding them is always done in relation to others.

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Exploring C-12: An Imagined Place with a History, a Future and Contemporary Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The article reflects on a process drama workshop from the Dorothy Heathcote Now International Conference in Manchester, UK, 2025. The workshop was designed and devised to address the conference themes: "What sort of schools do we want? What sort of society do we want?" The article considers both the planning process—the conceptional design of the workshop – and how it was devised in practice to generate discovery and reflection on materials or scenes created during the work. It draws on strategies inspired by Heathcote's legacy, extended into a critical pedagogy framework, including teacher-in-role, text work, documents and drama conventions with an intention to question, analyze, and create ideas for exploring subject matter related to the conference themes.

The story developed in the workshop explores an imagined ideal society and its collapse. Framed as an investigation, it lets participants

deduce what may have happened and possibly apply insights to their own lives, contexts, or concerns that resonate with them.

POINT OF DEPARTURE

In a pre-conference note¹ referencing Dorothy Heathcote's work (Heathcote 1983), convenor David Allen challenged contributors to reflect on the fundamental purposes of schooling—what schools are for, and stewardship—what kind of community do we want, in education and beyond. I take these questions as my point of departure. Although indebted to Heathcote, I employ a critical-pedagogy perspective that extends beyond Socratic dialogue toward an emancipatory–dialectical orientation. By exploring the folding of an idealized society, the workshop aims to function as a “pedagogy of utopia,” prompting participants to engage in praxis—critically examining how education and culture can serve as resources for resistance and catalysts for transformative social change. The intention has been to create a space in which participants can explore these issues and develop their own responses, drawing on their experiences and perspectives.

RESEARCH FOCUS

Building on that starting point, this article asks: How can a process drama—inspired by Heathcote's drama-pedagogical legacy—be designed and facilitated to prompt participants to engage critically with questions of educational purpose, knowledge priorities, cultural heritage, and community stewardship? It describes and reflects on the workshop's structure and material selection, outlines the practical design, and explains the rationale. The aim is to invite personal reflection and collective inquiry without prescribing answers or targeting a specific age group. Central to the reflection are the workshop's conceptualization and development—in line with arts-pedagogic research (Nyrrnes & Lehmann, 2008) and reflective-practitioner inquiry in arts education (Taylor, 1996)—along

¹ email May 7th 2025.

with the creative process and the intentions informing the design choices.

PRE-TEXT

Regarding my choice of pre-text (O'Neill, 1995, pp. 19–27, 33–44, 136–137; Taylor, 1995)—the catalytic material used to invite participants to imagine, question, and construct a fictional world—I began with a city plan of an imagined place I called C-12: the City of Twelve Gates (inspired by Manguel and Guadalupi, 1980, pp. 271–272). The plan served as a springboard for participants to collaboratively improvise an urban culture with its own history and traditions, then subject it to crisis and explore responses. The original plan, taken from Manguel and Guadalupi, depicts a fictional, idealized city from the 17th-century utopian romance *Nova Solyma*.² In the plan's upper right corner I added several numbered locations labelled in Norwegian, intentionally leaving the final one blank; and I introduced a “silver” gecko pin (from the IDEA World Congress, Brisbane, 1995) as a supplementary pre-text artifact (fig. 1). Both the number twelve (the duodecade³) and the gecko⁴ carry symbolic associations; during planning and facilitation I drew on those meanings as needed. The pre-texts share an ability to create tension and ambiguity, spark curiosity, and leave room for co-creation. As O'Neill (1995) notes, a good pre-text is rich enough to ignite imagination yet open-ended enough for participants to fill gaps.

² *Nova Solyma* is a fictional, utopian city from a 17th-century work often attributed to Samuel Gott (or an anonymous author). I did not intend to use it as a direct reference in the workshop, nor was it used as such; however, the city plan's capacity to suggest number symbolism was employed by the facilitator in role as Yoshi.

³ Sometimes used in historical or astronomical contexts to describe a recurring twelve-year period, not just a single span of twelve years, as well as designating 12 months. Also used in theology, astrology, musicology, or numerological systems to mean a system divided into twelve units (e.g., twelve apostles, twelve star signs, twelve tones).

⁴ Geckos are rich in symbolism across cultures, often representing adaptability, protection, regeneration, and spiritual guidance. Their unique traits and nocturnal nature have made them powerful symbols in folklore, mythology, and art.

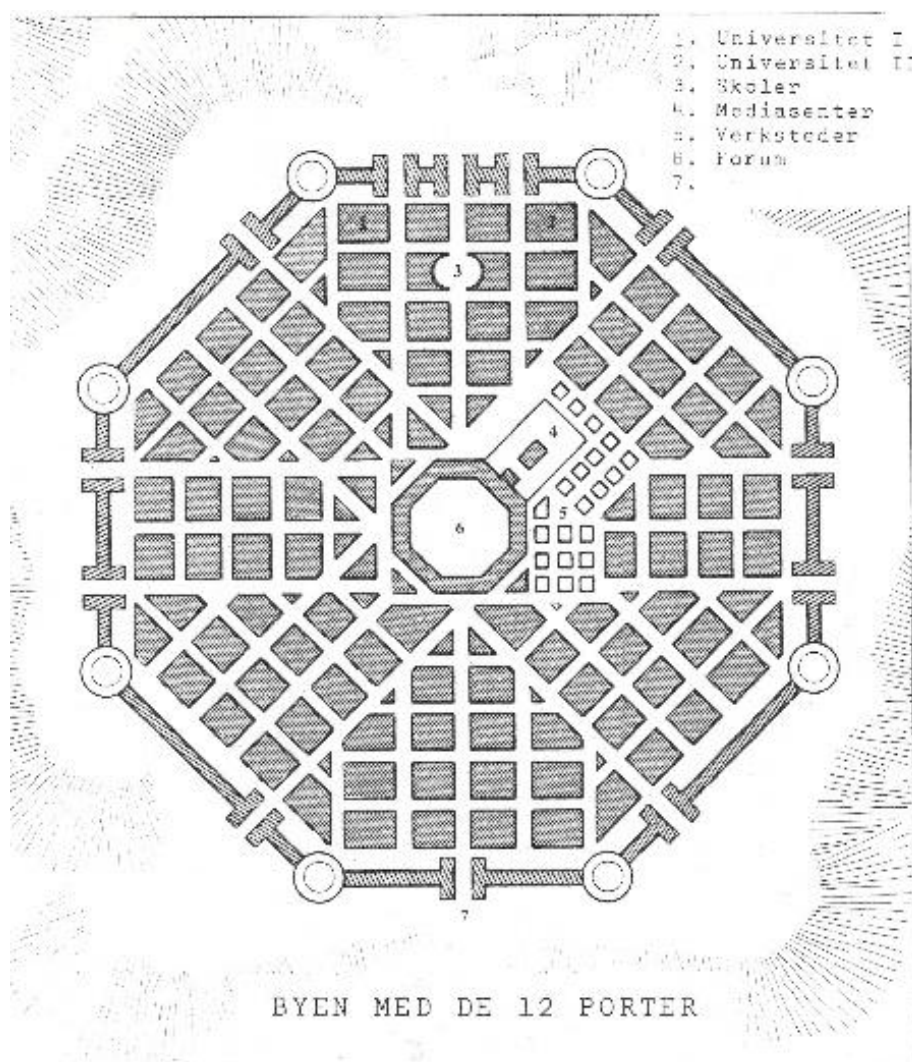


Figure 11: City plan of C-12.



Figure 12: “silver” gecko pin.

Having used this starting point before with Norwegian students, I believed that these stimuli possessed the potential to evoke a compelling dramatic world (O'Neill, 1995, p. 136). I purposely chose not to alter the Norwegian words on the city plan; instead, I incorporated them as a defining feature in shaping the emerging culture. Retaining the Norwegian words was intended to immerse participants in an unfamiliar linguistic landscape, fostering curiosity and encouraging them to negotiate meaning together. The plan was printed as a poster “for study purposes”, but I also produced it as the front of an “identity card”, featuring the gecko image on the back. The identity cards served as both a tangible entry point into the fictional world and a tool for participants to establish their roles during the first phase of the workshop. I prepared enough identity cards so that each participant would receive one at the outset, supporting engagement and providing a concrete anchor for their involvement in the process drama.

AN ISSUE-BASED APPROACH

In today's world, many things have been turned upside down. What is truly essential now? How are concepts like truth and trust being practiced? Why is DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)—a set of principles commonly promoted in workplaces, schools, and

organizations to foster fairness, respect, and inclusivity—seen as threatening in some places? What can we defend through education, and what role can the drama teacher play? It feels increasingly important to address current social issues through drama work.

I chose to facilitate an exploration of the past, present, and future of the City of Twelve Gates. Influenced by contemporary global events and aiming to give participants the chance to grapple with questions like these, I began planning the workshop as a framework for exploring themes such as history, tradition and culture, civic and community rights, and democracy. I drew inspiration from contemporary critical social thinkers, like Timothy Snyder, whose *On Tyranny* (2021) offers a concise exploration of warning signs and strategies for resisting authoritarian regimes; and Grace Blakeley, whose *Vulture Capitalism* (2024) argues that meaningful social change arises not from individual leaders but from grassroots, democratic collective movements built from the bottom up. Closer to the applied drama field, stimulus came from the concept of post-aesthetics, which marks a move away from traditional aesthetic concerns, placing greater emphasis on meaning, context, and social impact. By prioritizing participation, creativity, dialogue, and community engagement, post-aesthetics aligns closely with principles of process drama that I value: that aesthetics is an essential foundation of applied theatre and drama education, providing the ethical, imaginative, and meaning-making capacities that distinguish drama from mere social intervention (Haseman & Winston, 2010).

To support this, I incorporated a range of literary text excerpts:

- 1) statements from characters in selected children's books (Dahl, 2024; Ende, 2009; Lindgren, 2005, 2009, 2011)
- 2) aphoristic passages from the works of Brecht (1939, pp. 70, 74; 1971, p. 120; 2003, pp. 26, 34, 78)
- 3) a handwritten “declaration of independence” by inhabitants of C-12 (fig. 2)
- 4) twenty lessons for resisting tyranny, presented in poster format (Snyder, 2021).

These materials are discussed in more detail in the workshop section. I selected them with the expectation that they might stimulate critical thinking and, ideally, inspire subsequent action. One can never know in

advance whether the transformative potential of such texts will be realized, but the choice of material always carries an intention. I appreciate authors with a socially critical profile, as this type of literature is often regarded as well suited to fostering transformation and critical awareness (Gallagher and Booth, 2003; Nussbaum, 2010). The choice was informed by the view that literature provides a way of experiencing the world, and by recent research indicating that literature, like drama, can possess transformative power (Fialho, 2019; Gray and Pasco, 2027) and can serve as a resource for resistance.

LITERARY DOCUMENTS AS CULTURAL RESOURCES

The decision to incorporate literary fragments into this context stemmed from the belief that art and culture can act as bulwarks against oppression and the erosion of democracy. They offer tools with which communities may counter lies, propaganda, and misinformation—in short, they serve as sources of resilience. Even though this may sound overly idealistic, Western cultural history offers many examples showing that resistance to media-driven and more overtly political attempts at manipulation can have an effect, as seen, for instance, in the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Morgan, 2010). The imprisonment of dissidents with backgrounds from literature and theatre was a widespread practice in Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War. Yet such mechanisms are not confined to the past. Today's digital media environment reproduces and intensifies framing processes known from earlier historical contexts, and solid contemporary evidence confirms that cultural and artistic resources remain vital in resisting such manipulation and control (UNESCO, 2022).

A current example of underlining the importance of developing cultural awareness as a resilience measure, is the Norwegian Government's white paper on plans for national preparedness for crisis and war (2025). It contains concrete reference to the importance of education, arts and culture:

Voluntary activities, libraries, archives, cultural institutions and the independent arts and cultural scene in all artistic fields are components of the population's opportunity and ability to be enlightened and apply critically thinking, to find meaning and

insight in life, and to be open and search for solutions and opportunities. / Well-informed citizens, with good access to knowledge about and a firm grasp of their own cultural identity, will have greater opportunities to make good choices for themselves and their local community in a time of crisis (chapter 6.4.2).

The integration of literary and cultural artifacts in the workshop was shaped by these insights, which also clarify the ensuing workshop's focus on using "treasured archival documents," engaging in narrative exploration, and fostering interpretive resilience.

A DYSTOPIA/UTOPIA SET-UP

The use of a dystopia/utopia contrast is embedded in several drama education traditions. Perhaps most notably, Augusto Boal explored this through his concept of image theatre, where the image of transition (1992, p. 173) stands in direct opposition to the image of oppression. He further developed this idea in his approaches to forum theatre, viewing it as a rehearsal for future action (op.cit., pp. 224-247). More recently, Selina Busby has been referring to her applied theatre work as a pedagogy of utopia (2022). Busby argues that applied theatre is not merely a set of techniques for community engagement or social intervention. Instead, it is a pedagogical space where participants collectively imagine and enact utopian possibilities—not perfect worlds, but what could be otherwise. Much earlier, in Scandinavia, I found the work of Björn Magnér inspiring. Magnér's socioanalytical role play approach (1980) suggests that imagining utopian alternatives to an unsatisfactory reality can empower us to see potential for change. However, he warns against treating utopia as a mere escape or easy fix for harsh realities. Before moving towards improvement, we must first recognize and understand the forces that oppress us. Only then can we develop a vision of something better, with utopia serving as inspiration rather than solution. This process is not instantaneous, but rather a dialectical journey: insight (thesis) motivates and equips us, utopia (antithesis) sets our aspirations, and transformative action (synthesis) brings about change (Magnér, 1980, p. 68). Of course, Bertolt Brecht preceded these drama educators. While Brecht never formally used the term dystopia—he favored the concept of dialectical—his dramatic method often relied on contrasting dystopian

elements: portraying the world as it is to expose its brutality, absurdity, and preventability. This approach is especially evident in his *Lehrstücke* (learning plays) (Steinweg, 1995), some excerpts of which I am using in the workshop. In planning the work for this context, I have kept all these approaches in mind. But I have sought to apply them within the process drama genre (O'Neill, 1995; DICE Consortium, 2010, p. 203), which provides a space to explore, represent, and imagine various situations and possibilities. This genre unfolds collaboratively, as participants build a dramatic world together in an episodic, Brechtian style (Eriksson, 2009b). It is characterized by improvisation and inquiry, enabling participants to engage directly with situations, viewpoints, and dilemmas from within the drama itself.

HEATHCOTE, POLITICS WITH A SMALL 'p', AND DIALECTICS

Heathcote generally refrained from engaging directly with politics in her work. When considered alongside established teaching models (Eriksson, 2009a), her practice aligns more closely with the Socratic, dialogical tradition than with an emancipatory-dialectical standpoint. Alistair Muir (1996), in his master's thesis, described Heathcote as, at most, political 'with a lowercase "p."' This assessment resonates with my own analysis, in which I contrast Heathcote's theory and practice with those of Brecht (Eriksson, 2009b). While I am deeply indebted to Heathcote in the field of drama education and regard her as one of my most significant mentors, I have often wished for a more pronounced political dimension in her drama processes. Accordingly, the present workshop adopts a more 'political' stance than I believe Heathcote herself would have favored. Still, I believe a clear thread of Heathcote's thinking runs through my planning for this work, especially her principle, shared with me in a 2008 interview: "You always get nearer if you go first away." This idea, which I perceive as a distancing device—a means of making strange (Eriksson, 2009b)—has influenced how I structure the workshop. Additionally, my use of drama conventions—like collective writing, depictions, effigies—producing artifacts and documents, and facilitating through role, draws directly from Heathcote's methods (Heathcote, 1984). I aimed to employ these strategies to enable a dialectical exploration of the material, building up towards a dystopian/utopian context, and to generate tension. Tension is inherently dramatic, and throughout Heathcote's work, she

consistently frames learning around productive tensions (2015, pp. 55-61, 88, 134)—such as the gap between what is and what could be, or between the familiar and the unknown. These tensions are not hindrances but are the very drivers of meaning-making. In this way, they operate dialectically: learning happens through the meeting of opposites and in search of resolutions. Tension is a concept in Heathcote's philosophy that quite resembles dialectical thinking⁵—although she doesn't present it in Brechtian terms. If Brecht's dialectic reveals contradictions to spark critical awareness, Heathcote's tension pushes for critical reflection, but hers is focused on education rather than politics. A dialectical dynamic also appears in her approach to role categories.

ROLE CATEGORIES

During the workshop, three distinct teacher in role (TIR) approaches are employed. This widely recognized strategy in drama education enables engagement with participants through the adoption of three different figures. I intentionally use the term 'figure' rather than 'character' to prevent the common misconception that TIR involves impersonation. Rather, TIR is about embodying a persona with a particular stance and attitude—one that elicits response, encourages reflection, and prompts participants to reconsider their perspectives. If one were to reference theatre theory, this approach aligns more closely with Brecht's epic theatre, which foregrounds attitude and critical distance, rather than with Stanislavski's tradition of immersive character portrayal. For this workshop, I have drawn inspiration from Morgan and Saxton's categorization of role types, themselves adaptations of Heathcote's pioneering strategies:

1. Authority Outside the Action (Morgan & Saxton, 1987, p. 47); *status*: high/middle; *stance*: enabler/facilitator; *appearance*: modest but assured. This first figure I named Yoshi, an elderly surviving member of the city state, C-12, now living in a home

⁵ Heathcote's co-worker for many years, Gavin Bolton, actually has used the term 'dialectic' in his drama practice. The editors of the first collection of Bolton's articles, David Davis and Chris Lawrence, present an interesting analysis of his dialectics in their Introduction to Section One of Bolton's *Selected Writings* (1986, p. 24-26).

- in the country where the drama is taking place.
2. Authority Opposed to the Group (Morgan & Saxton, 1987, p.45): *status*: high; *stance*: manipulator; *appearance*: arrogant and bossy. This second figure I named Tork. He is a government official in the country that has occupied C-12.
 3. One of the Gang (Morgan & Saxton, 1987, p. 43): *status*: low; *stance*: enabler; *appearance*: cautious and soft-spoken. The third figure, Thrane, is a university teacher in the country, with critical and oppositional attitudes to the present regime.

I developed the story and plot of the drama around the entry of these three figures at different points in the workshop.

THE PRACTICE

Building upon these theoretical reflections on pre-text, cultural resilience, critical inquiry and role categories in relation to the devising process, the article now moves from the conceptual framework to the practical workshop format. This section details how the C-12 process drama is operationalized through the structural lenses of story, plot, and other form conventions. The participants are invited to explore how culture, education, and democratic values can function as forms of resistance to authoritarian regimes.

The C12-Drama in Workshop Format

The format of the workshop was built around the concepts of Story (Fabula), Plot (Syuzhet), and Elements of Form (Forma). Although these terms are traditionally rooted in Russian Formalism from 1914/1915—an approach to literary analysis associated with Victor Shklovsky (2015), an inventor of estrangement as a poetic device—I have found these categories quite useful for structuring process drama. In my applied drama publications in recent years (see www.drama.no), devising and analyzing drama structures with literary theory tools—especially those inspired by Russian Formalism and Brecht's epic theatre—has become something of a mainstay. I find that this approach offers both clarity and practical utility. In this context, it might look like this:

Concept	Russian Formalism	The City of Twelve Gates (C-12)
STORY / Fabula	Basic (chronological) sequence of events. The raw material of a story. The 'what happened', before interpretation.	A city state with a distinctive, tradition bound yet technologically advanced culture, is occupied by the authorities of the larger surrounding society, and is subjected to attempts to render it invisible and strip it of its cultural and technological status.
PLOT / Syuzhet	The sequences as they appear in the narrative. Artistic arrangement of events. The 'how' the story unfolds through the most significant encounters.	A group of investigative journalism students meet privately with Mr. Yoshi, a survivor from the little-known city-state of C-12, to learn about its history and culture. After submitting their reports, they unexpectedly are deemed incompetent by Mr. Tork, a representative of the country's authorities, and threatened with losing their positions. While waiting to meet with their trusted teacher, Mr. Thrane, they encounter further evidence about life in C-12. Upon meeting Mr. Thrane, the students discover he has been dismissed from his post, but he encourages them to continue exploring this overlooked chapter of their country's history. To aid them in their pursuit of resilience, he shares valuable archival documents for them to interpret and potentially act upon.
Forma	Stylistic shaping. Aesthetic devices. The cultural and stylistic conventions used to mold and depict the story.	A key formal element is the use of three TIR categories, each of which functions as an episodic, epic style, dramaturgical driver in its own way. In addition, various drama conventions are employed (DICE Consortium, 2010, p. 201; Cziboly et al., 2021; Eriksson, 2024) both as aesthetic devices and as devices for reflection. In my thinking, all the formal elements I have used are examples of distancing. They belong to the same tradition and stylistic lineage as the defamiliarization strategies of Shklovsky and Brecht (Eriksson, 2009b).

Teaser and foreshadowing

Quotes (from children's literature by Lindgren, Dahl, Ende but authors' names not to be mentioned here). Each participant receives a line and begins to move around the room, reading it aloud—first to themselves. Gradually, as they find ways to understand and express it, they begin to address the line to other group members they encounter during their wandering.

- “When you are extra strong, you have a special obligation to be kind to others”.
- “There are things you have to do, even if they are dangerous. Otherwise you are not a human being, but just a bit of filth”.
- “I enjoy the birds singing. I enjoy the music of the silver poplars”.
- “I’m wondering what to read next”.
- “I only listen”.
- “I have never tried that before, so I think I should definitely be able to do that”.
- “That what’ll happen to him happens to all tyrants sooner or later... That he’ll be crushed like a louse and will be gone forever”.
- “I’m so afraid of getting a heart of stone, because I think it chafes in the chest and hurts”.
- “And don’t worry about the bits you can’t understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash around you, like music”.
- “You’re lying. You don’t love people. You only want to use them”.
- “No, bother all this learning. I can’t study anymore because I must climb the mast to see what kind of weather we’re going to have tomorrow”.
- “I don’t know what’s waiting in there in the dark, but I’m going in there now”.
- “I don’t believe the ground can ever forgive anyone who has killed the soft green grass that once grew there”.
- “Never do anything by halves. Go the whole hog”.
- “Cassiopeia always knows the way”.
- “I’m not afraid of you”.
- “The storm of liberation will come, and it will break the

- oppressors, as when a tree breaks and falls”.
- “It doesn’t matter which way we go, as long as we go together”.
 - “Make sure everything you do is so completely crazy it’s unbelievable”.
 - “Sometimes you have to be a little bit naughty”.
 - “A person who has good thoughts cannot ever be ugly”.
 - “This evilness flows swiftly outside, killing all that is beautiful and alive and it withers away all the green leaves and flowers and soft grass”.
 - “Even when your whole world is shaken up, you can stand up tall and strike back”.

The lines are all expressions from people in a given situation or context. But from a bird’s-eye view: What themes seem to be at play? What tensions are emerging? What do the statements appear to be concerned with? Participants write opinions on big brown sheet in the middle of the discussion circle.

Imagined headlines. 3 groups, each representing one of the following media types: a) Editorially controlled media, b) Commercial or advocacy media, c) Social media. If some of these issues found their way to media, what news items could plausibly appear in your category? (Your lines can be applied if you want to). Subtitles and/or illustrations/depictions encouraged. Sharing.

Meeting with a figure (I)

Equipment: A-4 sheets. Pencils. Felt pens. Big sheet of brown paper. Identity cards: C-12 plan with picture of a gecko at the back, and A-3 size copies of the C-12 drawing. Document tray.

Frame (facilitator introduction): You are going to be journalism students in your final year of education. You have been offered a place at a prestigious university in an unknown country. The exam is approaching and you have a deadline today for an interview-based media report. The report should briefly convey impressions and information from the interview. It should be written by hand—eligibly—and only fill about ½ A4 page. The report should be done as pair work. You are expected to have an investigative attitude, a critical eye and a flair for what is

important.

This country has a very unclear part of its history related to a period in recent times. For one reason or another, little material has been available. But many of you have “heard something” and are motivated to find out more.

Now you have received a tip from one of your teachers, Professor Thrane, that there is a man in a home near the university who may be able to shed more light on this unclear period. Thrane has encouraged you to interview this man and at the same time arranged the necessary agreement with him, as well as obtaining permission from the authorities for the entire group to enter the home. Several of you have noticed, however, that Professor Thrane seemed unusually cautious and discreet regarding this tip. The only advance material he has given you, and not openly from his own hand, is a card for each one of you in a document tray.

Professor Thrane expects the interviewers to form an opinion about the *time* and the *place* this man worked, the community he comes from; some knowledge about values of the population, level of societal development, culture traits, technology, education, etc.—and if possible why this part of the history is so unclear, and how the state you live in has positioned itself in relation to this community.

Preparation: Facilitator gives each participant an identity card with a drawing of C-12 on the front and a an image of a Gecko on the back. Study the card. Give yourself an imaginary name, to be shared with your partner. Then form pairs. The partners discuss impressions and associations from the card and formulate some interview questions for themselves.

Before meeting the person: All parties can ask for a moment of ‘time-out’ during the interview. This means that you can ask for a short break while playing to make any clarifications, adjustments, etc. (e.g. “is this important to know”?)

Space 1: The facilitator invites the participants to bring chairs for a couple of half-circles in one end of the room. The space for the interview. Prepares himself to be *the figure*.

Meeting: TIR as Yoshi, an elderly resident in a “home”. Name tag on

his white shirt and a needle of a gecko. Old-fashioned round specs. Role: Authority Outside the Action (Morgan & Saxton, 1987, p. 47); *status*: high/middle; *stance*: enabler/facilitator; *appearance*: modest but assured.

After having acknowledged the students' presence with a nod, Yoshi invites them to start. Quite early in the interview he refers to C-12 as 'the City of Twelve Gates'. During the interview, he conveys an impression of a minority society founded on equality, democratic forms of organization, high quality education, advanced technology, and a deep appreciation for culture and artistic expression. Civic ideals: *knowledge, truth, justice*—KTJ. The *duodecade* as a normative framework for organizing the society, emphasis on long-term thinking, intergenerational responsibility, and cyclical planning.

Yoshi is at the service of the journalist group, and on their side, but lets the main initiatives and questions come from them. Opposes easy solutions and tries to invite response and commitment from many. The role gives advice and direction for further investigations rather than very definite answers—yet with some authoritative knowledge if asked about it.

The interview-based media report: The journalists, in pairs, have about 15 minutes to write their reports. The reports are placed in the document tray.

The plan of C-12

Facilitator invites the participants to take a more detailed look at the drawing of C-12 (A3 copies). He asks them to take a different perspective this time—that of an urban planner, i.e. to read the plan from this particular viewpoint yet with their previous knowledge in mind. The plan must be approached with scrutiny and curiosity, in search of clues to what kind of community The City of Twelve Gates may once have been. 3 (or 4) groups. The facilitator's role is undefined in strict terms, a shadow role in Heathcote's terms (Moore, 2013). He steers the process, yet belongs to the work of the groups; he is hoping that they can find some answers regarding:

- Buildings?
- Open Spaces?
- Lanes?

- Gates?
- Aesthetic layout of the city?
- Symbolisms?
- Which subjects, fields of study, projects, or professions are being pursued there?
- Which needs are being served?
- What are the goals of these institutions?
- Vision statements?
- What might be the gate numbered 7?

If asked about his role, the facilitator can say that he is Thrane's assistant, and that he "thought they knew". While the groups are working, the facilitator must find time to look at the media reports.

Plenary: Group presentations of how the city plan has been interpreted. Facilitator invites to hear ideas of what might be Gate No. 7? (Tries to reach a common understanding).

Collective sculpting of what can be placed in or in front of Gate 7. The portal is delineated by a large elastic band, held in tension by four figures—each integral to the total composition. The sculpting unfolds through silent negotiation.

Meeting with a figure (II)

Equipment: Teacher's desk. Document tray with the students' reports. A wastepaper basket.

Facilitator narration: Several days have passed since the meeting with Yoshi. However, the students have not yet had the opportunity to meet their lecturer/supervisor, Professor Thrane. Today, a substitute from the ministry is coming. His name is Tork.

Space 2: The facilitator invites the participants to set up their classroom. Rows of chairs. A teachers desk. Wastebasket beside it. Prepares himself to be *the figure*.

Meeting: TIR as representative of the present authorities. Name tag on his black shirt. Sun glasses. Role: Authority Opposed to the Group (Morgan & Saxton, 1987, p. 45): *status*: high; *stance*: manipulator;

appearance: arrogant and bossy. Challenges the group, puts pressure on them, applies sarcasm and irony (O'Neill, 2006, pp. 141-149). But the role's function is to inspire further investigation in the group—for later. Tork is the one who 'knows best'-type. Wants to know why (the interview), what (information), how (the interview took place), who (took the initiative)—and why this vigilant group of students could risk their careers by carrying out such a ridiculous exam project. In between his questioning, he reads aloud from the reports that he has brought with him, and flings them in the air. His final gesture is to drop the rest of the reports in the wastebasket.

The facilitator in role tries to conduct the encounter in such a way that participants learn more about what is going on in the country right now but also something about the past, for instance: The authorities' view of "them", why they are in opposition, their roots in the country's history and culture, educational policy, intelligence services, family structures, their obsession with the duodecade, etc. May well make claims that contradict what Yoshi has said.

Naturally, the reports serve as a valuable source of information for the facilitator, offering insight into the students' interpretations following their encounter with Yoshi. Furthermore, these reports provide the facilitator with concrete "evidence" that can be utilized in a dramatic context. In this article I have not analyzed the content of the reports in detail (even though they contain intriguing findings); instead, I simply employ them in the present context as props, adopting them with a sense of disdain in my portrayal of the bureaucrat, Mr Tork.

Plenary: Brief summary out of role about what has happened and what we currently "know". Long big sheet of brown paper on the floor (use the other side of the first). In the middle facilitator places two of the maps of C-12. Participants write what we presently know on the sheet on both sides of the drawing(s): a) What people like Tork think about "them" on one side, and b) what people like Yoshi think about "them" on the other.

Smear and gossip scenes

1. A (young student) interviews B (an elderly neighbor) with sincere curiosity about B's memories of "that time"—when B was young and living in "that community." B responds with warmth and a generous willingness to explain.

2. A (young student) interviews B (an elderly neighbor) with sincere curiosity about B's memories of "that time"—when B was young and living in "that community." B tells A something that might be damaging to both parties if it reached the authorities.
3. A (mature child) wants to know from B (parent) about "that community" and the people who lived there. A asks with curious persistence, while B responds with warmth and a generous willingness to explain.
4. A (mature child) wants to know from B (parent) about "that community" and the people who lived there. A asks with curious persistence, but here B responds coldly, revealing a prejudiced and biased attitude.
5. Three gossip women chat casually about rumors concerning "that community"—for example, where it's located, that they know someone who's been there, what kinds of people live there, how life is organised, what people do there, and so on.

More info to be added to the sheet? Participants write in both columns on the sheet.

Effigies

Everyone, still grouped around the sheet.

- a. Give each gate a name—perhaps one that reflects a central value of the city.
- b. Create statues—effigies (Heathcote, 1984, p. 166)—that embody the gate's name and meaning.
- c. Can the statues speak?

Circle of statues. Forbidden words

Participants stand in a circle, facing outwards. When the facilitator calls out a keyword, each participant spontaneously creates their own interpretation of the word, then turns to face inwards to display it. We should not shy away from using *clichés* in this activity. Even a cliché can hold a grain of truth.

ACTIVISM	ADVOCACY	BIAS
B.A.M.E.	DIVERSITY	EQUALITY
ETHNICITY	EQUITY	GENDER
INCLUSION	INEQUALITY	INEQUITY
MARGINALISED	MINORITY	PREJUDICE
PRIVILEGE	RACIAL	STATUS
SYSTEMIC	TRAUMA	UNDER-VALUED
UNDER-REPRESENTED	SOCIAL JUSTICE	SOCIO-CULTURAL
VICTIM		

Once the activity is complete, the facilitator explains that all of these words come from a list of banned concepts issued by the country's administration for use in media, academic writing, and education.⁶

Meeting with a figure (III)

Equipment: 'Treasured documents' shrouded in beautiful cloth.

Space 3: The facilitator invites the participants to bring chairs for a circle in the middle of the room. An enclosed space for collective work that ensures privacy for its users. Prepares himself to be *the figure*.

Meeting: TIR as the teacher Thrane. Name tag on his green shirt. No glasses. Role: One of the Gang (Morgan & Saxton 1987:43): *status*: low; *stance*: enabler; *appearance*: cautious and soft-spoken. Authority is not overtly in his hands but he can lead or assist the work by questions and suggestions. He does not know all the facts; the role's function is to let the class make some decisions and take some responsibility.

Thrane begins by acknowledging, with regret, the harassment he has heard his students have endured. He lets the moment linger—an opening—should anyone choose to speak. He has recently been laid off from his job as a teacher at the university; he is not supposed to meet anyone in capacity as teacher; but he has taken the risk to meet with them again. He seeks to inspire them to continue what he himself could not complete:

⁶ The words listed appear in US federal directives instructing agencies to avoid, remove, or flag specific terms in official documents, websites, and communications. These restrictions differ between agencies but follow a similar trend: reducing references to diversity, equity, inclusion, climate change, gender identity, and other topics of social or scientific importance.

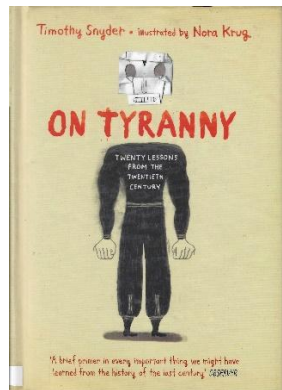
- a. To gain more knowledge about events in the history of the country, which has been kept hidden
- b. to share with them sources of inspiration that may strengthen resilience and offer strategies for resisting authoritarian rule.

Then he shows them something wrapped in fine black cloth. He unwraps it slowly, with reverence, and says: "This comes from C-12. I cannot share how it came into my possession. But I need your help to interpret it—to understand its meanings—and possible usefulness. I've trained you to look at things with fresh eyes and a critical mind. Now I trust *your* judgment."

The cloth contains documents from the C-12 archive. They are highly treasured:

1. A handwritten text in poster format—apparently a *memorandum* from C-12 citizens—dated 20.10.1966 ("from the past")
2. An adorned box containing six excerpts of *aphoristic writing* ("in the present")
3. 3. A *manual* for resisting tyranny ("for the future")

Thrane informs the students that he has managed to make some copies of all the documents, and a translation of the memorandum (which was not composed in English), so that the students can work with the materials in groups.

HISTORY & MANIFESTO	APHORISTIC WISDOM	STRATEGY
The City of the Twelve Gates, 20.10.1966. On behalf of our male community members aged 18-30, and in agreement with our female members, our community will collectively respond to the military drafts we have received. We will first be allowed to inform you about the ideals and rules of our	"He who says A need not necessarily say B. He may realise that A was wrong". [Brecht. <i>He Who Says No</i> (2003), p. 78] "A man who doesn't know the truth is just an idiot, but a man who knows the truth and calls it a lie is a crook". [Brecht. <i>Galileo</i> (1939), p. 70] "The aim of science is not to open a door to infinite	20 images of lessons from: 

community. Unlike you, we have no government or any form of governing authority. All important decisions are made collectively, where everyone living in the city has the right to vote. We therefore do not see you as our government. We are an independent community. Since we here in the city have taken a stand on conscription, we cannot in any way accept this order. All our citizens are pacifists and are convinced that this is right for us. Our pacifist philosophy is based on three pillars: Knowledge – Truth—Justice. Our scepticism is also based on your government's attempts to illegally penetrate the city gates. Our intention is to protect our citizens, our cultural ideals, and our society. Greetings from all in the city of twelve gates.	wisdom, but to set a limit to infinite error". [Brecht. <i>Galileo</i> (1939), p. 74] "Taught only by reality, can reality be changed". [Brecht. <i>The Measures Taken</i> (2003), p. 34] "Misfortune doesn't grow on the breast like leprosy; poverty doesn't fall like tiles from the roof; misfortune and poverty are the work of Man". [Brecht. <i>The Measures Taken</i> (2003), p. 26] "It may be a mistake to mix different wines, but old and new wisdom mix admirably". [Brecht. <i>The Caucasian Chalk Circle</i> (2003), p. 120]	+ gecko rune as front page: 
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The treasured documents – 1) From the past, 2) In the present, 3) For the future

Task: Each group examines one of the three categories of treasured documents above. Each group is invited to interpret and embody selected essences/key elements within the materials, using forms such as dramatisation, movement, sound, choral speaking, visual depiction,

reflective commentary, dialogue, agit prop, and more. “Try stylization rather than social realism”.

Note to the reader: During the work, I never referenced the real sources of the documents. That was left for the closing of the workshop.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

In the presentations of the final tasks, the participants showed strong commitment to the work. However, I was left feeling that there was an excess of material introduced, and we lacked enough time for a meaningful debrief of what we had accomplished within the four hours available. Looking back, I realize that the materials in this concluding sequence are so rich that each category could serve as the basis for a drama in its own right. Yet, they might not possess the same dramatic potential without the careful structuring and development of the C-12 drama, as discussed earlier.

Although participant reflections after the workshop were limited in number, what I received suggest that my aim to build a process drama from pre-texts removed from the present can, by analogy, become highly relevant. One participant noted: “For my part, I gradually realized through the practice that with C-12, we were not discovering a ‘future Utopia’ (or Dystopia) in the far distance, but actually speaking about our world. Eerily, the threats that had been posed to C-12, I realized, became the threats posed to our own civilization in the now, on the brink of getting lost. I particularly enjoyed how the non-verbal drama practice intersected and fed into the story unfolding, and the use of quotes (Brecht, Snyder) in the ‘presentation exercise’. Using archival material from our own civilization(s) rendered the experience of loss or threat particularly sinister and tangible.” Another participant reflects some of the political sentiments here, but also comments on the dramatic structuring: “For me, the most interesting part was the way you developed tension by not revealing too much too soon—it was difficult for participants to frame the ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’, which was nicely theatrical! I also enjoyed your use of the C-12 archive ‘smuggled out’—in fact straight afterwards I went out and bought a copy of Snyder’s book! I used to teach PGCE students on how the drama teacher operates (amongst other things) as a playwright in the

classroom, and the ‘smuggled archive’ , which framed us more clearly as ‘investigative’ journalists, was a good example of this. The document that needs to be ‘decoded’ is almost an archetype—present in lots of popular fiction/films, and I think one reason the participants found it so engaging is because it is reassuringly familiar—whilst actually being involved in the process of interpreting the materials was also exciting!”

This article has not sought to identify ‘findings’ or offer any other form of summarizing analysis—beyond each participant’s experience of the workshop (or each reader’s interpretation of it). My central research question concerned how to design and facilitate a process drama that might inspire critical questions about educational and societal issues, as well as how to share my own pedagogical and aesthetic reasoning behind its realization. I consider that ambition fulfilled.

Durable power of attorney

In drawing the article to a close, it is appealing to revisit the notion of utopia and link it to the concept of a durable power of attorney. This could provide the final chapter to our C-12 drama—one we lacked the time to explore fully—or it might offer a practical exercise for you, the reader, whether at your desk or in your own living room. Picture, as a fictional thought experiment, the idea of extending the principle of *a durable power of attorney*—typically applied to individuals unable to make decisions for themselves—to society as a whole.

In this scenario, society, while still capable of governing itself, formally sets out instructions or guidance for how it should be cared for and governed if it ever loses the ability to make responsible or rational choices. This idea, though imaginative, prompts a series of ethical and philosophical questions: Who determines when society is “incapacitated”? Who is granted authority to act on its behalf? As we consider these questions, it is worth noting that certain constitutions and treaties already operate in a similar way, aiming to prevent future abuses of power and ensure continuity and accountability.

For the purposes of this thought experiment, let us extend the idea further: What if we could grant an enduring power of attorney to future generations—those who are not yet able to vote or participate in decision-making? What might this look like in practice? Might it involve laws, institutions, resources, rights, enforcement mechanisms,

collective trust, education, culture, technological systems, and more?

To help bring this thought experiment to life, I invite you to take part in a creative exercise. While it is designed as a group activity, you are equally welcome to undertake it on your own.

1. Find a comfortable spot in the room and have a piece of paper ready. Close your eyes and reflect. Envision your ideal society. How would you wish it to be? What fundamental values would define its future? Feel free to include overarching educational aims for a new era, if you wish. Let your imagination roam freely, unconstrained by what seems realistic or logical. Listen to your aspirations and, whenever inspired, jot down notes or sketches.
2. Join a group of three and share elements of your vision. You decide how much to share; visions are dreams and should not be criticized, though clarifying or exploratory questions are welcome.
3. Ask each other: “What can you do to help society become the way you envision it?” (A asks B, B asks C, C asks A). Discuss possible actions and reflect on them as a group.
4. Use your answers as prompts to transform these actions and reflections into a creative artefact: a durable power of attorney for society. This might take the form of a manifesto, a speech, a poem, or another expressive format of your choosing.

Once your group has shaped its vision, present your creation to the wider group. In a final plenary discussion, consider how these ideas might inspire real action, foster resilience, and connect with the broader themes of the conference: “What education do we need? What society do we need?” Through this process, the concept of a durable power of attorney for society becomes not just a thought experiment, but a catalyst for imagining—and enacting—a more robust, accountable, and caring future.

Summing up

In the workshop, participants were challenged to interpret historical traces and the tension between utopia and dystopia in the fictional city community, C-12. They had to navigate the political within an educational setting, where the purposes of education and culture were

put into play, and where C 12 could be seen as an analogy to events in contemporary contexts. As a closing activity, I proposed a creative exercise in which participants drafted a societal ‘future mandate’ to secure the rights of coming generations. In this way, I hope that both the participants—and now the readers of the article—will make critical, reflective connections to their own positions.

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collaborative research projects such as the EU-funded “DICE”: Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competencies in Education (2008-2010) and the national “Drama, Teater og Demokrati”, (2014-17) exploring how drama/theatre can support competencies, democracy and learning in diverse settings. His work is widely published in both national and international journals. He has been a presenter and workshop leader at all the Dorothy Heathcote Now-conferences (2021-2026).

The Pleasure of the Drama: A New Materialist Approach to Boundaries in Dorothy Heathcote's Conventions for Dramatic Action

[KATE KATAFIASZ](#)

ABSTRACT

This article investigates how drama organises bodies in space to generate human subjectivity that is open to 'other' experience, while safeguarding participants' imaginative and emotional wellbeing. The paper explores how the boundaries at the Theatre of Dionysus distributed power between stage and auditorium by giving the active gaze to the auditorium and the active voice to the stage, so that each side needed the perspective of the 'other' to function as a unity. The paper uses Bruno Latour's critique of Modernism to argue that when modernist theatre practitioners dismantled this hybrid structure, they took the vitality of 'other' experience—the pleasure of the drama—out of their performance practices. When Dorothy Heathcote liberated drama from the constraints of the theatre space by taking it into the classroom, many took her work to be part of poststructuralism's broader, boundary-breaking, revolution. But the paper argues that this understanding fails to grasp the dramatic integrity of Heathcote's

practice, resulting in applied theatre practices that ignore the validity of 'other' experience; or that blur boundaries between self and other to risk confusion, coercion, and psychological harm. The paper offers practitioners interested in ethical relationality a new materialist reading of Heathcote's '33 Conventions for Dramatic Action' (1980/2015). One which shows how contemporary practitioners like Tim Taylor maintain Heathcote's boundaries; to allow postcolonial schoolchildren, to quote Donna Haraway, to 'take difference seriously'.

Dorothy Heathcote was irritated by the cry 'let's have more drama in our schools!' (1980/2015, p. 77). It seems perverse for the originator of Drama in Education to say such a thing. Had Heathcote been able to foresee the demise not just of drama, but also of the arts and humanities in favour of STEM subjects in schools and universities, she may not have put it quite like that. Strangely though, it is by asking ourselves what she was getting at with that remark that we can get right to the heart of what drama is, how it works, its social impact—so that we can build on the ingenious ways in which she adapted it for the classroom with accuracy and precision.

WHO WAS DOROTHY HEATHCOTE?

The comment comes at end of her seminal paper [Signs and Portents](#) written for the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre in the UK and originally published in the *SCYPT Journal* in 1980. Heathcote had come to teaching from actor training; she left her first job as a mill worker aged nineteen in 1945 having gained sponsorship from her employer to attend the Northern Theatre School. Realizing in her second year of actor training that the British theatre was not going to be for her, Heathcote moved into teaching. She brought with her an actor's understanding of drama that she used in schools to make imaginary situations from their curriculum feel personally authentic to children. Together they could imagine what it would be like to help the elusive Scarlet Pimpernell smuggle aristocrats out of France; or enact what Florence Nightingale might have said to Queen Victoria after Scutari. Heathcote's 'living through' or 'experiential' drama liberated

the imaginative power and energy of the art form for people who may not have been able to access it via literary texts and theatre tickets. At the same time, her work gave her classes the opportunity to shape culture for themselves; for instance, whenever she used words on the page, Heathcote put the children in charge of them; tasking the class to edit, adapt, annotate, voice, or interpret—as well as read them. This new way of using drama gave children extraordinary insight into their lives, allowing—in the words of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate in 1967—the boys and girls in the school to investigate ‘with great profundity such subjects as birth, marriage, death, in all their personal, social, anthropological, and artistic aspects’ (cited in Bolton, 1998, p. 173).

The work fed into the post-war British zeitgeist which aimed to rebuild a better society by making things that had only been available to the middle classes and elites—culture, education, and healthcare—accessible to everyone. Heathcote’s teaching gained significant international interest. Having begun her extraordinary career in schools and special education units, she moved to Newcastle University to train experienced teachers at Master’s level; all the time travelling extensively to give keynotes and workshops and share her extraordinary version of drama in education worldwide. She retired in 1986 but continued developing her practice and giving national and international workshops and lectures right up until she died aged 85 in 2011.

Of course, progressive educational practices came under attack during this time—particularly just as I was leaving school, when Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979, when work began on writing a National Curriculum. This coincided with a huge schism in the field that had been brewing for over a decade. Practitioner Brian Way tried to define the problem by suggesting ‘there are two activities which should not be confused—one is theatre, the other is drama’ (1967, p. 2). The advocates of what became called ‘process drama’ wanted, like Heathcote, to educate children *through* drama; while advocates of David Hornbrook’s education *in* drama felt drama should be approached via traditional literary and theatrical routes. The National Curriculum in effect watered down both approaches by including Drama as part of the English curriculum, which has made it easier for cash-poor schools to sideline over time. But the drama vs theatre debate rumbled on, to be fed by a developing poststructuralist distrust of text and language which we will explore a little later. Indeed, the

article under investigation here, *Signs and Portents* shows Heathcote engaging with semiotics in 1980. In it, she urges actor-teachers in the (then) emergent fields of Drama and Theatre in Education to sign in the manner of actors—rather than explain in the manner of teachers.

WHAT WAS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HEATHCOTE'S MOVE?

When teachers focus on signing to children as opposed to lecturing them, it gives the class permission to scrutinize and critique the things they see and hear; this puts the class in a position to actively engage with, rather than just receive the information presented to them. It also—crucially—takes the focus off the children themselves. This is important: Heathcote's irritation with drama in schools came from her observation that actors, TIE teams, and teachers 'have all made a contract to allow people to stare at them, but the children have not made that contract'. Heathcote disliked 'the embarrassment which happens during drama lessons when children feel stared at', and said she spent 'a lot of time preventing classes to feel stared at' (1980/2015, p. 72). Central to *Signs and Portents* is Heathcote's list of 'thirty-three conventions for dramatic action'. These give teachers various different strategies to present the dramatic situation the class is exploring, so that the children can activate it in a variety of ways. As we shall see, each convention focusses and constrains the class differently; but all of the conventions give the class something 'other' to engage with, taking the pressure to 'perform' off the children themselves. Heathcote declared role to be 'one of the most efficient 'others''. But it is not just about role, and it's not just about distraction—it's about social involvement. Heathcote's conventions open the child's perspective to a world of human and non-human 'others' in ways she knew they would find irresistible:

I do not mean something which is merely interesting or entertaining... What I am discussing here is that the 'other' be the gateway to all the full depth of exploration which will follow as the class get involved with the issues. (1980/2015, p. 72)

For Heathcote these conventions offer a portal which will allow children to imaginatively inhabit their curriculum; an involvement that confers social responsibility and with it, agency. When we use Heathcote's

conventions, we do not just relieve the class of the panopticon pressure of the social gaze that is constantly embarrassing and categorizing children in schools: we actively democratize the classroom.

DRAMA AND DEMOCRACY

For the ancient Athenians in fifth century BCE going to the theatre was a paid civic duty; drama went hand in hand with democratic governance, so it was all about the social gaze. Like Heathcote though, the ancients managed it very carefully. They used the curvature of the local hillside to focus the auditorial gaze and amplify the staged voice; then convention repressed each side of the boundary from returning either gaze or voice in kind. We are so used to this practice now that we barely notice it, but the survival of this physically and conventionally split space in theatres well into the twentieth century suggests its importance. The practice kept stage and auditorium ‘together-apart’, to use Jacques Rancière’s concept from *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009, p. 51). Apart spatially and modally, because one side looks and the other speaks; but together, because everybody on both sides is focussed on the dramatic situation. As the auditorial gaze and staged voice crisscross, each into the space of the other, they generate an entangled, monadic, unity—not unlike the one Aristophanes jokes about at Plato’s *Symposium* (1999).

At his *Symposium* in the 4th century BCE, Plato records comic dramatist Aristophanes describing how Zeus punished humans by splitting them in two. In doing this Aristophanes tells us, Zeus accidentally generated ‘the innate desire of human beings for each other’. The archaic humans developed a compulsive attraction to each other, because each half-person needed unity with the ‘other’ to function as a ‘single living thing’ (1999 p. 28, 29). Aristophanes’ story is a metaphor for sexual desire of course; but also, I suggest, for drama. My proposal here is that both erotic attraction and drama instigate a lack that generates desire for unity with the ‘other’. Sexual unity is usually a personal matter; but the dramatic split between gaze and voice instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus pulls bodies together socially, so that fictional representations of social life onstage become personally important to people in the auditorium.

ECSTASY...

Aristophanes was not alone in hinting at a connection between theatre and sexuality; ancient Greek culture brought theatre and fertility together in the apparently eclectic portfolio of pursuits they associated with the god Dionysus—which included madness and wine. On closer inspection we can see that Dionysian concerns all share a potentially ecstatic dimension. For the Greeks *ek-stasis* meant standing outside yourself; losing, (or getting out of) your head, to take on the perspective of something or someone ‘other’. Classicist Edith Hall (2004, p. 2) characterises Dionysus himself as a breaker of boundaries; and in ancient drama, most notably Euripides’ *Bacchae*, he is certainly represented as such: joyously jail-breaking, shape-shifting, and cross-dressing the misogynist Theban King, Pentheus. But boundary violations can have tragic as well as comic consequences. Dionysus ultimately defends the freedom of his Maenad-followers by causing Pentheus’ mother Agave—herself a Maenad—to go mad and decapitate her son. We watch her ‘coming down’ from her manic state to realise she is holding his head. It is this double-edged aspect of Dionysian transgression that brings to mind Freud’s observation that ‘the performance of Tragedies’ can take us ‘beyond’ what he terms ‘the pleasure principle’ (2006, p. 143). I associate it here with the boundary-violating pleasure psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1992) terms *jouissance*; this embodied response to the ‘other’ is usually associated with sexual pleasure and orgasm. But I suggest it is also apparent when comic and tragic energy jumps across the stage, to be released in the bodies of audiences as laughter, pity, and fear.

... IN THE CLASSROOM?

Thinking about Dionysus tells us a lot about drama generally, and about Heathcote’s adaptations of it in particular. Of course, educationalists do not want children to lose their heads, or experience the decentring (*ek-static*) extremes of tragedy and comedy in the classroom. Heathcote was alert to the Dionysian dimension of the art form, and felt annoyed by her more conservative teacher colleagues in the 1970s who felt there was ‘something rather ungenteel about behaving like that in classrooms’ (1980/2015, p. 71). But she did want

to give children a ‘viewpoint which gets them into an effective involvement’ with their curriculum (p. 77), which drama achieves because ‘the medium of expression is the human person’ (p. 71). Her conventions, written in 1980, adapt drama so that it retains its power to attract—to bring the human and non-human ‘others’ in the curriculum into personal play for the class—crucially without the heightened emotion and psychological risk attached to other Dionysian exploits.

It has helped me and my drama students over the years to understand Heathcote’s move by using her 33 conventions for dramatic action with the boundaries at the Theatre of Dionysus firmly in mind. I offer this reading of the conventions here to practitioners who might find it useful to grasp how Heathcote adapted drama for the classroom structurally, without losing its capacity to draw us safely into a fictional situation. My proposal here is that Heathcote’s classroom offers a topological equivalence to the Theatre of Dionysus; that is to say she bends, but does not rupture, the porous boundaries put in place by the ancients. Without a physical boundary between stage and auditorium it is not about where the children are in their classroom, but whether the convention primarily activates their gaze or their voice.

BOUNDARY-CROSSING, HALLUCINATION, AND BEING ‘ON THE CUSP’

Seen in this light, the first fifteen conventions activate the auditorial gaze for the class by giving the class something ‘other’ to look at. So far, so Theatre of Dionysus. But in addition to focussing their gaze on the dramatic situation, each convention gives the class a subtly different way of influencing it; Heathcote terms focussing the gaze ‘the *seeing* position’, and influencing the dramatic situation physically, as ‘the *doing* position’ (1980/2015, p. 74). To achieve this state of affairs it is as if Heathcote allows the auditorium to overlap the stage by bending—not rupturing—the boundary between them. This gives the class the immense Dionysian pleasure of following their gaze over the boundary to enter the ‘*doing* position’ inside the drama themselves. Their physical involvement is key to understanding how Heathcote adapted drama to give agency to children. But as we know from Euripides’ *Bacchae*, Dionysian boundary-crossings can have adverse, as well as pleasurable consequences. The downside of Dionysian boundary crossing kicks in when we are unsure where the boundary is.

Agave in *The Bacchae* for instance has no idea she has crossed it; she revels in the super-heroic agency and strength that her imagination has conjured, under the illusion that she has killed a mountain lion. The dramatic irony her audience experience is unbearable because they can see what Agave cannot: that it is Pentheus' head she is brandishing. Being unable to distinguish between what we imagine, and what is literally real, defines hallucination.

The trick for Heathcote was to keep things, as she used to put it, 'always on the cusp'. I visited her at her home in Spondon in November 2006, after an NATD conference when she had used this phrase repeatedly. I wanted to get to the bottom of what she meant by it. We spent the day in incredibly rich discussion which I documented and must at some point write up. But just as I was about to leave, my notebook put away, Dorothy leapt up and fetched one of her late husband Raymond's engineering books to show me how cuspid valves work in car engines. There was an illustration which showed a diaphragmatic structure; it reminded me of the bicuspid heart valves I had studied doing A level biology years before. Bicuspid valves feature a single boundary which keeps two spaces separate but at the same time inseparable; oxygenated blood cannot be allowed to mix with deoxygenated blood in the heart for instance. The key feature of the bicuspid boundary is its mutability; like topological space or 'rubber sheet geometry', a mutable boundary can bend in shape and deform without losing its limits, its connectedness and continuity. This allows the contents of one space to overlap into the space of the other, without collapsing into, or merging with it. Raymond's cuspid valve, she told me as I was getting into my car, was what she meant by being 'on the cusp'.

Being 'on the cusp' then, allows Heathcote and her class the pleasure and agency of boundary crossing into the space of the 'other' without putting anyone in psychological danger. What the conventions seem to do is limit the nature of entanglement with the 'other' that is being made available to the class. Each nuanced constraint marks the boundary between the literal reality of the classroom and the imagined reality of the drama in a different way. We can soon see how they put the class 'on the cusp' between auditorium and stage, but in such a way that they never 'blend' into each other to confuse the class as to where reality lies. Heathcote does this by subtly altering the structure of the image to change the possibilities for dramatic action in the

'doing' position. For instance, activating the drama as if it were a film sequence gives the class temporal but not spatial control; that is to say they can start, stop, and rerun the action but not intrude on it. Portraits, paintings, and photographs, cannot be intruded upon either because, like film, they are two-dimensional. Effigies, cardboard cut-outs, and images in the making, such as depictions, are three-dimensional; this means they can be made, resculpted, dressed, and walked-around. These three-dimensional conventions open up the imagined realm of the stage to the class spatially, but not temporally; as though the children were designers and directors during rehearsal. It is not until the role enters the dynamic fourth dimension that time-and-space onstage and in the auditorium synchronize, or overlap, for the children in the classroom. Heathcote calls this 'action time, the seeming life rate of the theatre' (p. 198).

But 'action time' in the classroom is qualitatively different from the theatre. At the Theatre of Dionysus, the auditorium addresses the stage with their gaze, while the stage addresses the auditorium with their voice. Gaze and voice project across the boundary in different directions at life rate; each is introjected by those on the other side, so the two sides entangle or interpenetrate but never fully overlap. In Heathcote's classroom however it is as if stage and auditorium do sometimes overlap, but never so far, or for so long, that the class lose sight of the boundary. Heathcotian practitioner Betty Jane Wagner calls this 'shadowy role' (1985, p. 129); while Luke Abbott (quoted by Tim Taylor 2025) calls this 'going in-and-out of role'. Some conventions allow gaze and voice to both be reciprocated as they are in normal life outside the theatre; this happens when the role is represented psychologically as well as physically, as in conventions 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7. There are various ways in which the role can be 'brought into lifelike response' (Heathcote 1980/2015, p. 75); in person (1), as portrait (5), or as effigy (4). When this happens the boundary between stage and auditorium seems to dissolve and the children acquire the power to speak to the role; but acquiring a voice of their own comes at the expense of having to receive the gaze of the 'other'. Heathcote gives the class various ways to restore the safety and/or anonymity of the auditorium; they can activate and deactivate the role (4); allow it to hear and not speak (6); or speak and not move (7).

LIMINAL THRILLS

Their position on this boundary allows the class vivid imaginative glimpses into their curriculum, but the images are not supplied for the children—they are personal; that is to say each child brings their life with them when they use their imaginative insight. In the classroom the boundary between stage and auditorium, between the fictional situation that brings their curriculum to life and the reality of their desks and chairs, is in the head of each child—a mere shift of focus away. I used to ask my drama students what they ‘saw’ when they entered the dramatic space in this way and a huge variety of different but often vivid details emerged. Were we hallucinating? We did not think so because when you hallucinate you cannot tell the difference between what you imagine and what is real and Heathcote’s cusp never blurs that distinction. We felt the images our minds conjured were like the images we see in dreams; sometimes people said they imagined the staircase in the house where they grew up; sometimes the images just seemed to ‘land’ in ways that were unconscious. When they are in role children often have a far-away look that suggests the sort of *ek-static* double vision that psychologist Lev Vygotsky observed it in children at play, when they pivot between seeing a stick and imagining a horse (1966, p. 546). Aristotelian *mimesis*, or semblance, seems to have little to do with it. In fact, Heathcote commented that often the only concession she made to crossing the boundary and ‘acting’ was linguistic: ‘I talk as if I’m there’ (1980/2015, p. 72).

The first fifteen conventions put the class on a cusp between looking and acting; shifting between the safety of the auditorium and the thrill of the stage, and sacrificing invisibility for imaginative agency and vice versa. Never though, like Agave, confusing where they stand. The second fifteen conventions activate the voice that the ancients gave to the stage, putting the class in the position of actors, voicing, and considering the words spoken by, or of, the ‘other’. This shift takes us to another boundary the ancients instituted at the theatre of Dionysus: the *skene*, a wooden wall which divided the stage into visible and invisible sections. The first dramatists wrote for both sides of the *skene*, as classicist John Gould tells us:

The dramatic weight of comings and goings is proportional to the openness of the space that the Greek theatre presented to the playwright, who was also the producer, for exploitation. In its

function as part of the scene of imagined action, the *skene* is the place where those dramatic events that occur, as we should say, 'off stage' are imagined as happening. [...] violent death characteristically occurs within, that is inside the *skene*, and has its dramatic impact through the death-cries of the victim and the controlled passion of the messenger-speech. (Gould, 1999, p. 13).

Indeed, many of Heathcote's conventions in this second batch (16-33) fall into the *ekphratic* category of 'messenger-speeches'; I say *ekphratic*, because these accounts, reports, and stories of people and events translate first-hand experience into words, so we hear of things second-hand that we have not seen or experienced personally. Those conventions that are not 'messenger speeches' are 'death-cries' in the sense that we hear the voice of someone we cannot see. When sounds and words are not visually grounded it makes us pay more attention to their tone and timbre. Convention 22 conveys 'a letter read in the voice of the writer' which Heathcote describes as 'an emanation of a specific presence'; the 'other' is present vocally not visibly. And conventions 25, 26, and 27 are voices 'overheard (person not seen)', including 'eavesdropping' (1980/2015, p. 76). Only in convention 18 is the role 'present' audibly and visibly reading their own written account; and then only 'in contact through their writing as an author might be' (p. 76). Unlike 'messenger speeches' and 'death cries' the last four conventions are not voiced. Convention 30 for instance is read, but privately, and therefore silently. However, like conventions 14 and 15, conventions 30, 31, 32, and 33 resemble 'death cries' because they are metonymic. That is to say they represent the body of the 'other' by virtue of having been in personal contact with them; their clothing, possessions, written reports of their conversations, their cryptic codes, signatures, or 'special mark'.

HOW DRAMA CHALLENGES IDEOLOGY

In a sense the class brings the auditorium with them when they enter the liminal spaces that the conventions open up: they never stop looking at and/or listening to the drama as audiences do, even when the conventions allow them additional faculties. While they occasionally have to bear the gaze and voice of a single 'other', crucially the social gaze belongs to the class, as it belonged to the

auditorium at the Theatre of Dionysus. French psychoanalyst Louis Althusser can help us understand why this matters. Althusser theorised the structure of authoritarian communication that is used in the civic institutions he termed 'Ideological State Apparatuses' or ISAs; these include schools, churches, families, the military, prisons, the media, and so on (p. 138). Althusser termed this type of communication 'interpellation'—a portmanteau word containing the dual activities of interpretation and appellation. Interpellation then comprises an interpretative gaze twinned with a commanding voice. Althusser outlines how it works in his 'little theoretical theatre' below:

There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/ knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that it 'really is he' who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing. (Althusser, 1971, p. 163).

Interpellation is a travesty of the democratic allocation of gaze and voice we see at the Theatre of Dionysus, so it is strange Althusser should describe it as a 'theatre'. Althusser tells us the interpellating call usually comes from behind the recipient; this indicates that the caller commands both gaze and voice and puts the interpellated person in a passive position, lacking agency on both counts. Interpellation identifies and categorises you without your having any say in the matter. Foucault termed this the 'panopticon' gaze (1975) of the prison guard; it is also arguably the gaze of the stalker and gossip, who take care to see without being seen in return. Althusser teams this gaze with the 'acousmatic' or hidden voice, which Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Malden Dolar tells us gives the speaker the authority of 'his master's voice' to complete the cast iron gaze-voice configuration of autocracy (Dolar 2006, p. 61). According to Dolar, Pythagoras the ancient Greek mathematician used this set-up by teaching his disciples from behind a curtain which, like interpellation, eliminates their gaze altogether. Although traditional teaching does not usually go so far as to hide the speaker from the class, Heathcote termed the arrangement where the teacher's gaze and voice are trained on an entirely receptive

class, 'transmission teaching':

Teachers are noted for their propensity to share their understanding by a process of telling in one form or another. This often tends to look like one-way transmission. (1980/2015, p. 73)

I want to return at this point to how Dorothy Heathcote solved the original problem she had with drama in schools: namely, 'the embarrassment which happens during drama lessons when children feel stared at' (1980/2015, p. 72). Understanding 'embarrassment' in terms of 'interpellation' helps us get to the heart of how—and why—Heathcote gave gaze and voice to her class; as well as the *extraordinary* social radicalism of using drama to turn the school—which epitomises Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus—into a democratic space that gives voice and agency to children. Heathcote's first fifteen conventions give the active gaze to the class; and when she removes the gaze in the second set of conventions, she gives them the active voice instead. When we associate these moves topologically with the boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus, we can see that the first set of conventions have the class on the cusp between auditorium and stage, venturing onto—and back off of—the stage, to glimpse and interact with its fictional world. While the second set of conventions puts the class onstage, in front of and behind the *skene* as it were, to engage as actors do, with its invisible voice. Just as the interpellating gaze was never turned on the audience at the Theatre of Dionysus to objectify and ideologically appropriate the citizens of ancient Athens, so it is never turned on the children in Heathcote's classroom.

Unfortunately, the same thing cannot be said of many of the 'applied theatre' practitioners who seem to have misread Heathcote's memo—if they read it at all. And it is here perhaps that Brian Way's remark in 1967 about not confusing drama with theatre came home to roost: theatre studies had come to dominate the field. Few people understood, or could explain, how drama challenges ideology in the ways we have just been exploring. Indeed 'drama' acquired a pejorative inflection worthy of misogynist King Pentheus—to be dramatic was to be over-emotional like a woman: a 'drama queen' was someone we could all do without. Without Heathcote, my generation of drama teachers and students were likely to have been shaped by

Margaret Eddershaw's influential A Level Theatre Studies syllabus. I remember graduating from David Davis's life-changing Drama in Education PGCE course in 1988, and trying to reconcile the vividly experiential classroom practices of Davis, Heathcote, and Bolton—who all taught us in person on the course—with the boorish mid-twentieth century theatrical Modernists who populated the syllabus I was now obliged to teach: each practitioner at odds with the others and convinced of his own greatness. It is true that Brecht and Artaud did dominate *avant garde* and increasingly mainstream theatre practices in the UK in the 1990s; but their work seemed to lack the pleasure of getting out of your head without losing it—that Heathcote's practice understood, and that had drawn me and many of my students to a career in drama in the first place.

MODERNISM AND POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

What made Modernism and Drama such uneasy bedfellows? Two writers have been incredibly helpful to me in thinking this through. The first is Bruno Latour. His new materialist anthropology of science *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) explores how the scientific method drove the Modernist tendency to 'purify' its practices by splitting nature from culture, humans from 'things'. Latour challenges the subsequent rift between science and the humanities that keeps knowledge in specialist binary camps; instead, motivated by the problems thrown up by climate change and pandemics, he champions 'the exploration and proliferation of hybrids' (1993, p. 144). These hybrids contest anthropocentrism; questioning the binary notion that humans are active and nature is inert, new materialism foregrounds instances of human and non-human agency. Latour always gave the ozone debate as an example of nature-culture hybridity, but we can also see his family's Burgundy vineyards as iterations of the same thing.¹ For Latour, the interrelationship of human and non-human agencies demands public scrutiny because our survival as a species depends on it. Latour's work brings to mind the remarks of the schools' inspectorate I quoted earlier, who noted how Heathcote's classroom promotes an extraordinary level of curricular interconnectedness; allowing children to investigate 'with great profundity such subjects as birth, marriage,

¹ My thanks to Steve Shapin for pointing this out.

death, in all their personal, social, anthropological, and artistic aspects' (cited in Bolton, 1998, p. 173). Indeed, I have come to view the entangled boundaries we have been exploring at the Theatre of Dionysus and in Heathcote's classroom as prime examples of the hybrid subject-object complexity that new materialism foregrounds.

The other writer who helped me clarify what was going on in the field in the 1990s was Hans-Thies Lehmann, who published his groundbreaking *Postdramatic Theatre* in 2006. As I have argued here, Heathcote seems to have carefully honoured the boundaries at the Theatre of Dionysus; whereas according to Lehmann, Brecht and Artaud foregrounded post-dramatic theatre by dismantling theatre structure, and with it—I suggest—the hybrid vitality of dramatized experience itself.

How did they do this? We can chart Brecht's experiments with the *skene* from his collected writings in *Brecht on Theatre* (1992). As he developed his Epic Theatre model to challenge Aristotelian or Dramatic Theatre, we can see how he progressively made the backstage space visible to the audience. In a Copenhagen production in 1936, scenes were changed behind a 'small subsidiary curtain which did not completely interrupt vision' (p. 102). In Casper Neher's production of *Galileo* Brecht notes that instead of creating a room or locality, Neher used the *skene* for a more abstract purpose—to project flags and 'make statements of historical or social interest' (p. 293). In Neher's production of *Antigone* the *skene* seems to be dissolving: the 'acting area is bounded by four posts', while the 'actors sit and wait for their cue' in a darker space behind it (p. 212). By 1951 Brecht has dispensed with the *skene* altogether, writing that Epic Theatre 'must acquire *qua* theatre the same fascinating reality as a sporting arena during a boxing match. The best thing is to show the machinery, the ropes and the flies.' (p. 233). Indeed, a *skene* does seem to be the key architectural feature that differentiates a theatre from an amphitheatre or sporting arena.

As we have seen, the backstage space—conjured by Heathcote in the classroom by voices, words, and contiguities that are not grounded visually—opens gaps that can trigger personal, imaginative, involvement in dramatic situations. This may be because, as Mladen Dolar has observed, sound penetrates our body through the ear canal: 'it pours directly into the interior'; whereas vision distances us from events (2006: 78). When our auditory and visual senses ground each-

other—from the moment a baby first follows the sound of a rattle with their eye—we can orient ourselves in time-and-space and separate ourselves from our surroundings. But when they are dis-integrated, as when we hear something we cannot see like a rattlesnake or an ancient tragic death-cry, distance collapses and we return to our decentred monadic state. The situation may be real and life-threatening as in the case of the rattlesnake, or it may be fictional and dramatized in the case of the death-cry; but either way we become personally involved in that situation because we are metonymically—physically—entangled in it. According to semiologist Charles Pierce, indexical signs, in contrast to icons and symbols, can activate us with an urgency he terms ‘blind compulsion’ (qtd. In Chandler 2002, p. 41); even though in the dramatized scenario we know perfectly well—because we can see it—we are in fact sitting in a theatre or a classroom. The *skene*, and conventions that understand it, allow us to ‘get out of our head’ into an intuitive place where imagination and reality coexist to produce insight, without psychological risk. Conditions in a sporting arena, with everything on show, are surely less likely to engage us in this way.

In another contrast to Heathcote, whose conventions tend to give authority to the auditorium, Brecht’s Street Scene increases the authority of the stage in the form of ‘the direct addressing of the audience by its actors’ (1992, p. 126). Brecht’s intention was to dis-integrate the components of a performance—an instance of the Modernist splitting Latour identifies—so that their relationships with one another ‘lead to mutual alienation’ (p. 204). But in effect the street scene gives the power of gaze *and* voice to actors, which may put us in mind of transmission teaching and interpellation. Even Brecht does not go so far with the boundary between actor and audience as Artaud, who eliminates it completely: ‘abolish the stage and auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind’ (Artaud in Bentley, ed. 1986, p. 61). Without a boundary between stage and auditorium literal and fictional realities become indistinguishable—certainly to audiences who, unlike actors, were not present at rehearsals. This puts audiences at psychological risk because, like Agave in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, when we cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined it is as if we experienced psychosis—something Artaud suffered with himself.

These ‘avant garde’ modernist practices were being

enthusiastically taken up by the theatrical mainstream in the UK in the 1990s. So, it was easy to see Drama in Education as part of a post-dramatic liberation from the constraints of text and theatre—an aspect of poststructuralism’s wider, rhizomatic, boundary-breaking revolution, which aimed to dismantle traditionally authoritarian structures. It was tempting to go along with this idea because it looked like a win for the radicalism of process drama over the theatre studies traditionalists. And of course, this was at least partly what Heathcote was doing when she unlocked drama from its literary and theatrical constraints to make it accessible to children in classrooms. But her conventions show us that Heathcote’s classroom operated in many ways *like* a theatre. Not in the architectural sense of having three distinct spaces to work with; but in the sense that her conventions managed the bodies of her participants in the same way as the boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus. Her conventions activate either the audience gaze (conventions 1-15) or the actor’s voice (16-33). Unlike people in a theatre, Heathcote’s class can enter the drama from either position, that of the actor or the audience: but crucially not both at the same time. We can say that the theatre manages the split between gaze and voice spatially, while Heathcote’s conventions manage it temporally.

DRAMATIC INTEGRITY

It seems to me that this split between gaze and voice is what defines drama and gives it its vitality and integrity. To go back to Aristophanes, the split triggers our desire for the ‘other’ by cutting each of us in half ‘like flatfish making two out of one’ (p. 29); in Heathcote’s terms, it puts us ‘on the cusp’. Together, the positions of stage and auditorium conjoin to form a looking-speaking unity of self-and-other, literal-and-fictional realities. The single boundary attracts each side to the other to form an integral whole; but it also guarantees the irreducibility of each to the other so there is no confusion between them. This gives drama what I will call its monadic integrity; because it holds together self and other, imaginative and literal realities, in a way that is fair and honest to both sides without any deception.

Epic Theatre famously estranges us from familiarity, but fails to attract us to what is ‘other’, to invalidate the imaginative aspect of the drama. Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty on the other hand—a bit like Euripides’ Dionysus—attracts us to the ‘other’ but blurs the boundary

so like Pentheus and his mother, we lose our heads. By maintaining the gaze-voice split Heathcote upholds the integrity of the drama even as she takes it out of the theatre space. Such integrity would seem to be what distinguishes drama from post-drama. So, tempting as it may be to view Heathcote's move as post-dramatic, technically—in terms of its gaze-voice split—it remains dramatic.

APPLIED THEATRE

We have only to look at many 'applied theatre' practices to see why this 'drama' vs 'post-drama' nomenclature matters so much. In 2022 John O'Toole (et.al) very usefully republished nineteen articles from 1991 onwards which he felt were instrumental in the developing field of participatory performance practice, or 'applied theatre' as it became known. It is telling that the new field soon dropped the term 'drama' to describe their practices. O'Toole's book charts drama educationalist Judith Ackroyd's dismay to find that 'drama in education is no longer the regular focus of the *Research in Drama Education*' journal, and that 'the places for focused academic debate on drama education are being usurped' (p. 124). Taking their eye off drama's careful choreography of gaze and voice had some pretty dire consequences in some of the practices O'Toole documents. Andrea Baldwin's 2010 paper about an Australian-funded project to promote sexual health around HIV and Aids in Papua New Guinea, has more than a whiff of colonial patronage about it (pp. 16-31). Kathleen Gallagher documents classroom practice that tries to deal with three shy yet challenging year 8 students by focussing a video camera on them (p. 179). And Roozmond and Wenzel also turned the social gaze on the young people at the World festival of Children's Theatre in 2002 by getting them to spy on each other and document every aspect of the children's public and private behaviour, as 'practice research' (pp. 210, 211). As Penny Bundy notes in her introduction to section three of O'Toole's book, blurring boundaries between fact and fiction—something Heathcote never does—can also be part of applied theatre's problem. In Shifra Schonmann's classroom in Israel for example, the unbearable violence outside the classroom plays out inside it, when a rehearsal for a fight scene turns real (pp. 130-140).

This is controversial, but I want to throw out a challenge to the community of arts educators by suggesting that any applied post-

dramatic practice is going to be authoritarian—even abusive—in nature because post-drama ignores the integrity of drama’s carefully nuanced, democratically balanced, boundaries. If we are in any doubt about the serious consequences of using post-dramatic strategies in applied settings, we have only to look at Persephone Sextou’s ‘bedside theatre’ project for children in hospitals, which is a cautionary tale *par-excellence*. Sextou says she gives the children the ‘gift of compassion’; she is concerned that ‘the identity of the ill person is a label that many children often adopt during their stay in hospital’; she wants to break ‘the circle of inability and disability that children experience in hospital’. Looking into what ‘the details of what a rather experimental, unconventional, actor-audience relationship can tell us about theatre in hospital’, she tells us:

Two elements are vital to this discussion. One is the accidental as an opportunity for playfulness. The other is the transformation of the hospital into a ‘stage’ [...] how the hospital space works as a ‘stage’; and how it affects the dramatic work.

Sextou’s actors engage each bed-bound child ‘in an intimate one-to-one performance’ which she films ‘for the needs of the study’ (2016, pp 1-22). In practice however, the children often surprised their benefactors by hiding behind their bedsheets. When we understand the dynamics of *The Theatre of Dionysus*, this need to take defensive action is not the least surprising. If the entire hospital space (including their own bed) is made to work as a stage, the child finds themselves the object of the social gaze because the privacy and anonymity of the auditorium is taken from them. So it is no wonder that this vulnerable bed-bound audience did whatever they could to protect themselves from being stared-at. Sextou gives the authority of gaze *and* voice to the adult performers, so it is unclear how the children have any agency that would prevent them from being interpellated by the adults—however well-intentioned they may be. In addition to this, Sextou’s inexperienced actors found the children were confused as to who they were: actor, or character. Although the boundary between stage and auditorium was clear to the actors, it was not clear to the isolated individuals in their young audience. As we have already observed, being unable to distinguish between what is imaginary and what is real defines hallucination and Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*; to bring the

much-vaunted compassion of the project into question, perhaps.

HOW TO HOLD ONTO THE BOUNDARY

If we look at a very recent account of drama in education practice published by the *NATD Journal for Drama Education* in the Autumn of 2025 (just a few months before I am writing this), we can see Heathcote's boundaries working beautifully. I am referring to Tim Taylor's charming account and analysis of using teacher in role with a class of four-to-five-year-old children. In it he pays particular attention to the importance of signalling boundaries so as not to frighten the children. It is striking how faithfully Taylor adheres to Heathcote's conventions—a feature I want to highlight in my own analysis of his work to demonstrate how successfully they function in practice.

The lesson goes through stages to show us how Taylor helps the children 'hold two ideas in mind at once' without confusing them as to which is literally real (he is their teacher) and which imaginatively real (he is a bear). The class have been reading *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen (1989), and getting up to 'act out' the challenges the family in the story encounter. This is an activity the class is used to doing with their teacher but they do not normally take it further. Taylor notes how the activity has already generated a certain amount of the enjoyment for the class; and he wants to harness the agency that dramatic playing has given the children: to 'keep the energy in the room and direct it to a purpose'. (Compare this sense of fun for a moment to the debilitating experience of the hospitalized children hiding behind their bedsheets). By taking the class further into the dramatic situation Taylor's purpose is to help them use their 'imagination to step into another perspective'; to picture 'the inner life of another being'; to make a fictional representation of someone 'other' become personally important to the class.

To do this Taylor uses the final double page image in the book which shows the bear, having chased after the 'hunters', trudging home disconsolately to his cave. But rather than reflecting on it from outside the drama by looking at the book, which would mean losing the impetus that crossing the boundary onto the 'stage' has given the class, he decides to activate their gaze by giving the class a three-dimensional (staged) image of the bear to look at instead. He brings it briefly to life by going into role to walk sadly like the bear, and then he

steps out of the 'doing position', to ask the class what they make of the bear's demeanour. This is Heathcote's convention 4, which puts the teacher briefly 'onstage' as it were, and asks the class from the 'seeing position' of the auditorium as it were, to comment on it afterwards. Heathcote was aware of the debilitating effects of gaslighting children when boundaries are unclear; so, she is explicit about asking the class to take decisions early on in their drama lesson from the auditorium or 'spectator position', 'so that everyone can see there is no confidence trick happening' (1980/2015, p. 74). Only then, having 'scaffolded' or modelled the 'doing position' for the class, does Taylor invite the class to join him 'onstage' inside the fictional situation. Would they like to talk to the bear? Of course they would! When the boundary is clear it is safe—and exciting—for them to cross it. In that case, Taylor tells the class, they will need to 'come into the story' themselves by standing up. Once the children are standing Taylor sets the scene by narrating what the bear is doing: trudging along staring at the sand on the beach. He helps the class step over the boundary into the drama by asking if they would like to 'be the bear'? They would. As they all trudge, Taylor helps them imagine the dramatic scenario they have just entered using an ancient *ekphratic* technique, where images and sensations are conjured using words just as they were in the messenger speeches of the ancient tragedies. He uses Convention 16: 'an account of a person by another person':

The bear trudged along the beach; he stared at the sand. His shoulders slumped, his mouth turned down in a sad frown. He could hear the sea lapping against the shore, but he wasn't interested. All he wanted to do now was get home to his cave. There it was, just up ahead, a dark hole in the cliff face. He went inside and sat down, dejected.

At this point the class are no longer in the 'seeing-and-doing' position between auditorium and stage, but in the 'doing-and-imagining' position of the actor, who operates onstage between visible and invisible aspects of the *skene*, imagining the fictional world beyond the stage. Taylor warns teachers not to overuse the narrative voice because you do not want the class to be simply acting out your story, you want them to connect to the feelings of the 'other'. The narrative voice sets the scene; but other conventions which allow the class to

voice the words of the 'other' as actors do, might connect the class physically to the 'other' more personally in a different scenario perhaps.

Taylor advises leaving space for the children to 'bring their own sense of things' to the fictional encounter. It may be worth unpacking the nature of this *ek-static* space a little because it is built-into each convention. The first fifteen conventions put the class between Jerome Bruner's (1957) iconic and enactive modes of learning; while the second set of conventions work between Bruner's symbolic and enactive modes. Heathcote's conventions take us to the heart of ancient drama's hybrid of *logos*, the always-already logic of linguistic representation, and *pathos*, the emotional or metonymic connection with the 'other' that Taylor is after here. Drama allows images, words, and bodies to inform and confound each other on equal terms (Rancière, 2009); as they do when Agave brandishes her son's head and demands praise for killing a mountain lion. Taylor tells us *logos* should not dominate: 'If you tell them everything the character thinks, feels, and does you leave no space for their imagination'. Leaving a gap gives the class space to put meaning together for themselves during the event and not receive it ready-made or *apriori*, as in transmission teaching.

Following this short narration, Taylor and his class sit on the classroom carpet, whilst imagining they are in the bear's cave. Then teacher-as-bear speaks to the class using convention 1 when the role is 'actually present': 'Humph, I'm so lonely. Why does everyone run away from me? I just want to be their friend.' The bear gives the children a look and asks 'What can I do?', before Taylor comes out of role to ask the class as teacher 'did you hear what the bear said?'. 'He's sad, he's lonely' they respond. We might note at this point how brief each foray 'in and out of role' onto the 'stage' is in Taylor's lesson; this is what keeps things safely on the 'cusp' for the class. This gives the class glimpses of *ek-stasis* while at the same time giving them the security that, as Taylor puts it, the 'teacher is still there, guiding'.

TAKING DIFFERENCE SERIOUSLY

Having explored such a great example of Heathcote's dramatic boundaries at work in a contemporary classroom, I want to conclude by thinking about the wider significance of what Taylor is doing here.

He refers to what ‘psychologists call theory of mind’ and suggests that empathy—picturing the inner life of someone ‘other’—is ‘one of the most remarkable things human beings can do’. But in addition to the psychological benefits of drama, when we read it through the new materialist lens I am developing here, we can understand its extraordinary social impact too. According to biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway it is imperative for postcolonial societies to take difference seriously:

How can people rooted in different knowledge practices "get on together", especially when an all-too-easy cultural relativism is not an option, either politically, epistemologically, or morally? How can general knowledge be nurtured in postcolonial worlds committed to *taking difference seriously*? Answers to these questions can only be put together in emergent practices; i.e., in vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures. For me, that is what *significant otherness* signifies. (2003, p. 7, my emphasis).

It seems to me that ‘taking difference seriously’ is precisely what drama does; and it does it precisely because it is not post-drama. The Theatre of Dionysus established an architectural boundary between fictional and literal realities by building a stage and an auditorium. These spaces were governed by conventions for dramatic action that allowed the audience gaze to project onto the stage in one direction, and the staged voice to project into the auditorium in the other. In order to function as a looking-and-speaking unity each side had to introject the projections of the other. This state of limited entanglement seems to generate comic and tragic *jouissance*—the laughter, the pity and fear—that materially jumps the boundary from the fictional side of the arrangement to express itself energetically in the bodies of the audience. In this way *pathos*—‘other’ experience that resists signification—is brought into the social frame to generate what Haraway terms ‘significant otherness’. Perhaps this is what allowed Athenians in the fifth century BCE to reconstitute their entire social system and institute democratic politics.

As we have seen, the post-dramatic move disrupts this complex

dramatic boundary. By taking drama out of the theatre building and using it in the classroom, Heathcote seems to join the post-dramatic practice of eradicating the boundaries between backstage, stage, and auditorium. But as I hope to have shown, her classroom goes to great lengths to neither assimilate, nor estrange imaginative, fictional, and literal realities, so that they can use or inform each other. Heathcote's conventions seem to be interested in building *pathos* to attract the class to the 'other' by taking children 'through the layers from mere attraction, to interest, to attention and finally to concern' (1980/2015, p. 77). If we read her conventions for dramatic action as we do here, with the Theatre of Dionysus firmly in mind, we can see how they preserve the ancient gaze-voice dynamic that allowed audiences *ex-static* or 'other' experiences—without losing themselves in the process. The conventions do this by bending theatrical boundaries; 1-15 combine the active audience gaze with the director's, designer's, and actor's metonymic power to influence what they see; while 16-33 combine the audience's capacity to receive language with the writer's and actor's ability to shape it—all without the penalty of being looked-at or interpellated in return. Her move resolves Heathcote's annoyance at 'the embarrassment which happens during drama lessons when children feel stared at' (p. 72). But it also preserves the integrity of the democratically balanced—dramatic—boundaries that need to be in place for us to, in Haraway's terms, take 'difference seriously'. They are boundaries that anyone who wants to work ethically in educational or applied theatre practice might wish to take very seriously indeed.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kate Katafiasz set up Single Honours Drama at Newman University, Birmingham in the UK, where she taught drama (and latterly critical theory) for twenty-five years, retiring post-pandemic, in 2022. Originally a schoolteacher specializing in Drama in Education, Kate's doctoral study explored the relationship between drama and Lacanian desire in Edward Bond's plays for young people. She has published extensively on the pleasure of plays and playing in ancient, educational, and post-structural contexts. Her current writing focuses on the ways in which drama can disturb ideologized relationships between words and bodies.

Participatory Theatre as Democratic Rehearsal in Psychology Education

[CHETNA MEHROTRA](#)

ABSTRACT

This practice-based article examines how participatory theatre functions as a democratic rehearsal space within undergraduate psychology education in South India. While curricula increasingly acknowledge social determinants of mental health, structural inequalities such as caste, gender norms, and institutional hierarchy are often treated as contextual factors rather than constitutive of subjectivity. Consequently, students may acquire critical vocabulary about oppression without developing embodied awareness or relational capacities to navigate power in practice. Informed by participatory performance practices including Playback Theatre, Image Theatre, and Forum Theatre, the study introduces facilitative dramaturgy as a framework that sequences participatory forms to move students from narrative witnessing to embodied recognition and rehearsal of ethical response. Implemented within a second-year applied theatre course, the intervention engaged psychology

undergraduates from diverse social backgrounds through a structured progression of exercises. Playback Theatre enabled collective witnessing of experiences of loneliness, abuse, and institutional authority; Image Theatre translated these narratives into embodied representations of hierarchy; Forum Theatre created a symbolic rehearsal space to experiment with interventions in situations of social constraint. Findings suggest participatory theatre operates not merely as expressive pedagogy but as a structured environment where democracy is encountered as embodied negotiation. Students moved from perceiving distress as individual experience to recognising its structural conditioning while rehearsing relational responses. Classrooms can function as provisional democratic infrastructures, where recognition, ethical engagement, and collective responsibility are rehearsed rather than abstractly discussed.

INTRODUCTION: FROM CRITICAL AWARENESS TO EMBODIED PRACTICE

Research on the social determinants of health demonstrates that wellbeing is shaped not only by individual psychological processes but also by broader social, economic, and political conditions (Michael, 2005; Lund, et al, 2018). Experiences such as loneliness, abuse, exclusion, and vulnerability are not isolated but mediated by systems that distribute resources, opportunities, recognition, and safety unevenly across populations. For psychology education, this raises an important pedagogical challenge: how can students learn to recognise the relationship between individual psychological experience and the structural conditions within which it is produced?

While undergraduate psychology programmes may introduce students to concepts such as discrimination, inequality, and the social determinants of mental health, exposure to these ideas does not necessarily transform how students understand or engage with them. Students may learn to identify oppression, analyse institutional power, and describe structural inequalities, yet such knowledge often remains cognitive rather than embodied. The ability to explain inequality does not necessarily translate into the capacity to recognise, negotiate, or challenge it within everyday interactions. Within educational settings,

students frequently continue to enact learned patterns of compliance, deference, and self-censorship even while expressing democratic or critical values. Freire argues that critical consciousness emerges through praxis: the dynamic relationship between reflection and action through which individuals critically engage with and transform their social realities (2017, p. 9). From this perspective, awareness alone is insufficient. Without opportunities to experiment with alternative ways of relating, questioning authority, navigating disagreement, and responding to power in practice, critical awareness risks remaining primarily discursive rather than lived.

This challenge is particularly significant within the Indian context, where social life is shaped by intersecting structures of caste, class, gender, language, and institutional hierarchy. Although psychological distress cannot be reduced solely to social conditions, it is inseparable from the environments through which subjectivity is formed and negotiated. Yet these structural dimensions often remain marginal within dominant psychological frameworks centred on individual behaviour, diagnosis, and therapeutic intervention. As Sawariya argues (2021), caste in particular has received insufficient attention within mainstream psychology despite its enduring influence on social experience, access to opportunity, and everyday encounters with power. As a result, students may encounter structural inequality as an object of study without opportunities to examine how it is reproduced, resisted, or negotiated within lived relationships and institutional settings.

Participatory theatre offers a pedagogical response to this gap. Unlike approaches that rely primarily on discussion or textual analysis, participatory theatre enables students to investigate social relations through embodied action, reflection, and collective experimentation. By engaging participants as active contributors rather than observers, participatory performance can make visible the ways power operates through speech, silence, gesture, authority, and social expectation. Within educational settings, such practices create opportunities for students to explore alternative forms of participation, negotiate disagreement, and rehearse ethical and political responses to situations shaped by inequality and exclusion.

This practice-based study examines a second-year Applied Theatre course for undergraduate psychology students in South India that integrated participatory theatre practices as a means of engaging

with questions of power, democracy, and social responsibility. The study investigates the educational potential of participatory theatre as a democratic rehearsal space and introduces the concept of *facilitative dramaturgy* to describe the intentional sequencing of participatory encounters that support recognition, embodied awareness, and collective engagement with structural conditions.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How can participatory theatre in higher education function as a rehearsal space for democracy, enabling psychology students to recognise structural power and develop embodied forms of ethical, political, and collective engagement?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws together theories of democracy, critical pedagogy, and participatory performance to examine how participatory theatre can function as a democratic rehearsal space within psychology education. The framework is organised around three interconnected theoretical strands. First, Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy provides a way of understanding democratic participation as engagement with difference, disagreement, and unequal relations of power rather than the pursuit of consensus (2013, p. 8). Second, Freire's concept of critical consciousness and praxis offers a framework for understanding how awareness of structural conditions can move beyond reflection toward action (2017). Third, scholarship on participatory theatre provides a basis for examining how performance practices create spaces of witnessing, recognition, and intervention. Building on these perspectives, this article develops the concept of facilitative dramaturgy to explain how participatory theatre becomes a democratic rehearsal space. Facilitative dramaturgy refers to the co-constitutive relationship between dramaturgical composition and facilitative practice through which participation is progressively organised rather than assumed. Participatory theatre forms are understood as interconnected dramaturgical encounters whose sequencing shapes the conditions for recognition, embodied inquiry, ethical engagement, and democratic negotiation. The analytical focus therefore shifts from individual methods to the relational architecture through which participation becomes possible.

Central to this framework is a distinction between participatory

theatre as an aesthetic and pedagogical practice and therapeutic intervention. In this article, *therapeutic extraction* refers to the facilitation of personal narratives primarily for emotional disclosure or cathartic release rather than for collective inquiry and aesthetic exploration. By contrast, facilitative dramaturgy maintains *aesthetic distance* by working through role, image, metaphor, improvisation, and collective reflection, enabling lived experience to be explored as shared material for analysis rather than as an object of therapy. Personal narratives are therefore treated not as material requiring therapeutic resolution but as starting points for examining broader social and relational conditions.

Democracy as negotiation, contestation, and the practice of living with difference

This study approaches democracy not as the achievement of consensus but as an ongoing process of negotiation across difference, disagreement, and unequal relations of power. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic democracy, democratic life is understood as being constituted through contestation rather than the elimination of conflict (2013). For Mouffe, pluralistic societies are characterised by competing values, interests, and perspectives that cannot be fully reconciled. The task of democracy is therefore not to produce a harmonious social order free from disagreement, but to create conditions in which differences can be expressed, contested, and negotiated without exclusion.

This understanding challenges approaches to participation that equate inclusion with agreement or assume that productive dialogue necessarily leads to consensus. Instead, an agonistic perspective recognises that participation takes place within existing relations of power. Individuals enter social spaces through different positions shaped by histories, identities, and unequal access to resources and recognition. Democratic engagement therefore requires the capacity to remain in relation across difference, including moments of tension, conflict, and uncertainty.

Mouffe's account is further informed by her earlier work with Ernesto Laclau on hegemony and political subjectivity (1985, p. 86). From this perspective, identities are not fixed or purely individual attributes but are constituted through social, cultural, and political relations. Subject positions are shaped through intersecting structures

such as class, gender, caste, and other forms of social organisation, and these positions are continually negotiated within relations of power. Individuals therefore encounter the world not as isolated subjects but through historically and socially situated positions that influence how they experience vulnerability, recognition, exclusion, and possibility.

This perspective has particular relevance for psychology education. Psychological training often provides students with theories and frameworks for understanding individual behaviour, cognition, and mental health. However, when future psychologists encounter clients, communities, or social groups, these individuals are not only subjects of psychological processes or bearers of particular symptoms; they are also positioned within complex social worlds shaped by histories of inequality, identity, and power. Understanding psychological experience therefore requires attention not only to individual factors but also to the social relations through which identities and experiences are formed.

For psychology students, engaging with democracy in this sense involves more than learning about inequality as an external social issue. It requires opportunities to examine how difference and power operate within relationships, institutions, and everyday encounters. The pedagogical question is therefore not simply how students can learn about social structures and inequalities, but how they can develop the capacity to engage ethically with difference, contestation, and unequal relations of power in practice.

From Critical Awareness to Praxis

If agonistic democracy raises questions about how individuals engage with difference, conflict, and unequal relations of power, Freire's concept of critical consciousness provides a pedagogical framework for understanding how such capacities might be cultivated. Freire (2017, p. 45) critiques what he terms the "banking model" of education, in which knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student as a fixed body of information. In contrast, he proposes a dialogical and problem-posing approach to learning in which learners actively investigate the social realities they inhabit. Knowledge is not simply received but produced through critical engagement with lived experience.

This critique is particularly relevant within psychology education. Psychology curricula often emphasise theoretical knowledge, cognitive

frameworks, and the analysis of individual behaviour. While these approaches provide important conceptual tools, they can risk positioning social realities as objects of study rather than lived experiences. Students may learn about oppression, trauma, caste, gender, or inequality as topics within a curriculum without necessarily engaging with how these structures shape their own lives and the lives of the people with whom they will eventually work.

For Freire, such engagement becomes possible through the development of critical consciousness (*conscientização*): the capacity to recognise how personal experiences are shaped by broader social, political, and economic conditions. Critical consciousness emerges through praxis, understood as the ongoing relationship between reflection and action. Rather than accepting social arrangements as natural or inevitable, learners begin to identify relations of power, question dominant assumptions, and explore possibilities for change.

Within the context of psychology education, critical consciousness operates on at least two interconnected levels. First, students may begin to recognise how their own experiences are shaped by structures such as caste, class, gender, family expectations, and institutional hierarchies. Second, they may develop a deeper understanding of the individuals and communities with whom they will eventually work as psychologists, counsellors, or mental health practitioners. Psychological distress can then be understood not solely through individual or clinical frameworks but also in relation to the social conditions through which vulnerability and wellbeing are produced.

Participatory theatre becomes significant in this context because it creates opportunities for praxis. Through cycles of enactment, dialogue, and collective reflection, students do not simply discuss social realities but engage with them through action. Participatory theatre can therefore be understood as a pedagogical space in which critical consciousness is explored, tested, and rehearsed. The movement between action and reflection creates opportunities for students to examine how power, identity, and inequality operate both within their own lives and within the broader social worlds they seek to understand.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND STUDY DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative, practice-based research design examining a week-long Applied Theatre course with second-year undergraduate psychology students in South India. The classroom functioned as both a pedagogical and research site, allowing analysis of participatory processes as they unfolded through practice. The study draws on facilitator observations, workshop documentation, student reflections, and the analysis of participatory theatre activities to examine how democratic engagement emerged through the course.

Participation in all performative and reflective activities involving personal experience was explicitly voluntary. Students were informed that they could opt out of any exercise, remain silent during discussions, or participate in a reduced or observational capacity without academic penalty. Consent was treated as ongoing and revisable rather than a one-time agreement.

Given the emergence of disclosures relating to gendered violence, self-harm, and sexual abuse, additional safeguarding measures were implemented. These included clear framing of the work as non-therapeutic, the use of aesthetic distance through role, image, and improvisation to mediate personal material, and structured debriefing at the end of each session. Confidentiality was reinforced through anonymisation of all data used in this article, removal of identifiable contextual markers, and collective agreement on non-disclosure of peer narratives outside the classroom.

The facilitator also maintained a dual role boundary protocol: while guiding pedagogical processes, they did not assume a counselling role, and any expressions of acute distress were redirected to institutional support services where appropriate.

Method: Facilitative Dramaturgy as Pedagogical Design

The pedagogical intervention followed a structured sequence informed by *facilitative dramaturgy*, a concept I developed in this study to describe the intentional organisation of participatory theatre forms to progressively develop relational trust, embodied inquiry, and ethical engagement. Rather than treating theatre techniques as discrete activities, the course employed them as interconnected pedagogical phases through which participants moved from relational awareness to embodied analysis and finally to the rehearsal of intervention.

The intervention comprised four sequential phases: relational grounding, Image Theatre, Playback Theatre, and Forum Theatre.

Relational Grounding

The course began with relational grounding to establish trust and create conditions for participation within a cohort of students who had limited prior familiarity with one another. This phase employed theatre games, sociometric exercises, de-mechanisation practices, and collective Tamil-language singing. Sociometry (Jacob, 1946) enabled participants to explore patterns of affinity, difference, and group formation, while de-mechanisation exercises, adapted from Augusto Boal's work encouraged awareness of habitual bodily responses and social behaviours (2002, p. 30). Together, these activities established a shared rhythm of participation and prepared the group for subsequent exploration of more personally and socially complex themes.

Image Theatre

Image Theatre, developed by Augusto Boal is a non-verbal participatory method in which participants create and modify bodily images to explore social relationships and structures of power (2002, p. 174). Working individually and in groups, students constructed images representing concepts such as "power" and "power over" before collectively analysing posture, gaze, proximity, and spatial arrangement. The emphasis was not on verbal explanation but on examining how relationships of authority, vulnerability, and exclusion could be communicated and interrogated through embodied composition.

Playback Theatre

Playback Theatre, developed by Jonathan Fox is an improvisational performance practice in which participants share lived experiences that are immediately enacted by fellow participants through movement, dialogue, and symbolic representation (2003). Within this study, students volunteered narratives relating to loneliness, friendship, academic pressure, authority, gendered restriction, and experiences of interpersonal harm. Participation remained voluntary throughout. Narratives were explored through role, metaphor, and improvisation

rather than revisited as personal testimony, maintaining aesthetic distance while avoiding therapeutic extraction. Facilitated reflection following each enactment focused on shared social patterns and relational dynamics rather than emotional processing or therapeutic interpretation.

Forum Theatre

The final phase employed Forum Theatre, another participatory method developed by Boal, in which an unresolved situation of oppression is repeatedly performed and interrupted so that audience members become "spect-actors" who can experiment with alternative actions (2008, p. xxi). The workshop centred on a staged "bus" scenario depicting an ambiguous situation of gendered intimidation. A woman boarded a nearly empty bus, followed by a man whose physical proximity and persistent gaze created visible discomfort without explicit verbal aggression.

Participants entered the scene at moments of tension to test different forms of intervention, including verbal confrontation, spatial repositioning, initiating conversation, redirecting attention, and seeking assistance. Each intervention was followed by facilitated reflection before the scene was replayed, allowing participants to consider the possibilities and limitations of different responses within an ethically complex situation. Rather than seeking a single correct solution, the repeated enactments encouraged participants to explore how agency, responsibility, and ethical judgement are negotiated under conditions of uncertainty.

Across the four phases, facilitative dramaturgy functioned as the organising pedagogical framework through which participation was progressively structured. The sequence moved from establishing relational trust, to making social relations visible through embodied representation, to collectively exploring lived experience, and finally to rehearsing responses to situations shaped by unequal relations of power.

FINDINGS

The participatory theatre process produced distinct shifts in participation across the sequential phases of the workshop.

In the relational grounding phase, sociometric exercises and group

activities revealed differentiated patterns of participation. Some students consistently occupied central spatial positions and initiated interaction, while others remained peripheral, delayed entry into activities, or participated primarily through observation. These patterns varied across exercises but remained visible as recurring interactional tendencies.

In the Playback Theatre phase, students introduced narratives related to personal and social experiences. Contributions unfolded sequentially, with each narrative generating further responses. Several students disclosed experiences of interpersonal harm, including accounts of sexual abuse. Participation during this phase was marked by sustained silence, focused attention, and visible emotional responses in parts of the group. Following these disclosures, the scheduled break was delayed as students remained in the space, engaging in informal conversation and peer support, including instances of supportive physical proximity.

In Image Theatre, students engaged in repeated bodily composition exercises exploring “power” and “power over.” Across groups, consistent embodied patterns emerged, including expanded versus contracted postures, variations in spatial centrality, directional gaze, and bodily tension. In paired escalation exercises, participants repeatedly modified bodily positions to intensify perceived dominance or reduced agency.

In the Forum Theatre “bus” scenario, students intervened at different stages of the enacted situation. Interventions included direct verbal confrontation, spatial repositioning between characters, redirection of attention, and externalised help-seeking strategies such as calling out to the bus driver or simulating phone-based assistance. Timing of intervention varied, with some students acting immediately and others observing multiple iterations before participating.

Post-performance discussion generated multiple perspectives on responding to ambiguous situations of harassment. Students articulated both hesitation in real-world applicability and recognition of alternative intervention strategies. Some referenced prior personal experiences that informed their responses.

Across phases, participation patterns included speaking, bodily enactment, observation, delayed entry, and withdrawal, all contributing to the structure of interaction within the workshop.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that participatory theatre functioned as a structured pedagogical environment in which social relations were not merely represented but actively reorganised through embodied and narrative practice. Across the workshop sequence, participation emerged as situated and uneven, shaped by spatial positioning, interactional dynamics, and prior social conditioning. Students did not enter the process from a neutral position; rather, their responses were continuously inflected by relational histories and the emergent atmosphere of the group.

The movement from relational grounding to Image Theatre and then Forum Theatre shows that participation can be structured as a sequenced dramaturgical process. Each phase enabled different modes of engagement to come into view: relational attunement in the initial exercises, embodied analysis of social relations in Image Theatre, and situated ethical decision-making in Forum Theatre. Participation, in this sense, was not a fixed attribute of the learners but something produced through changing pedagogical and relational conditions.

Particularly in Forum Theatre discussions of ambiguous situations of harassment, sustained disagreement emerged around what constituted an appropriate response. This can be understood through Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic democracy, in which democratic practice is defined not by consensus but by the ongoing presence of legitimate disagreement within a shared space (2013). Importantly, these tensions were not resolved through facilitation. Instead, they remained active within the pedagogical process and shaped how students positioned themselves in relation to one another.

Facilitative dramaturgy, as developed in this study, offers a way of understanding this sequencing as a methodological structure through which participation is progressively transformed. Rather than treating theatre techniques as discrete tools, it organises them as interdependent phases that move from relational attunement, to embodied inquiry, to ethical rehearsal. Through this sequencing, theatre functions less as representational practice and more as a structured environment in which social relations can be tested and reconfigured under conditions of uncertainty.

This approach reworks Augusto Boal's notion of rehearsal. While Boal frames rehearsal as preparation for collective political

transformation, in this educational context rehearsal is re-situated within professional training in psychology. The emphasis shifts toward cultivating ethical judgement, critical reflexivity, and responsiveness to power as it appears in interaction, rather than orienting participants toward predetermined political outcomes.

The study therefore suggests that participatory theatre in higher education can function as a pedagogical environment for examining how agency, authority, and social positioning are enacted through interaction. Its value lies not in resolving disagreement or producing consensus, but in sustaining conditions where such dynamics can be observed, experienced, and critically worked through in practice.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that participatory theatre can function as a rehearsal space for democracy within undergraduate psychology education when structured through facilitative dramaturgy. Rather than treating participation as a pre-existing capacity, the workshops showed how it is actively produced through sequenced relational, embodied, and situational encounters that enable students to engage with power, difference, and ethical uncertainty in practice.

The contribution of this work lies in shifting attention from participatory theatre as a collection of techniques to the organisational logic through which those techniques are brought into relation. Facilitative dramaturgy describes this logic as a structured sequencing of pedagogical conditions that move from relational attunement, to embodied inquiry, to collective witnessing, and finally to rehearsal of intervention. In doing so, it offers a way of understanding how democratic engagement is not delivered through individual exercises but emerges through the relational architecture of the learning environment itself.

This has implications for how participatory and arts-based pedagogies are understood within higher education. Participatory and arts-based pedagogies should be positioned beyond expressive, reflective, or awareness-raising tools, as structured environments in which students rehearse how to perceive, interpret, and respond to social relations as they unfold in real time. Within such environments, learning is not limited to conceptual understanding but extends to the embodied negotiation of uncertainty, disagreement, and ethical

decision-making.

Importantly, this study does not propose participatory theatre as a solution to structural inequality, nor does it claim stable transformation in student subjectivity. Instead, it suggests that its value lies in creating conditions where power and social positioning become perceptible and negotiable within interaction. These conditions are necessarily provisional, shaped by context and facilitation, but they open pedagogical space for forms of learning that connect critical awareness with embodied practice.

Seen in this way, classrooms can be understood as temporary democratic infrastructures—spaces in which students do not only learn about social structures but rehearse how to inhabit them differently. The significance of participatory theatre in this context lies not in what it represents, but in what it makes possible: the situated rehearsal of relational, ethical, and political engagement under conditions of uncertainty.

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