

Between Worlds: The Function of Twilight Role

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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.

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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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