

The Artistic Value of Mantle of the Expert: Dorothy Heathcote's dramatic-inquiry approach to teaching and learning – a Belgian Research Project

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ABSTRACT: *This article gives an insight on the first results of a Belgian Research Project where Bob Selderslaghs examines the artistic value of the Mantle of the Expert approach in a Flemish primary school. He focuses on artistic roles that students can adopt while studying the curriculum.*

Introduction

In Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, we like to show off our international level of education. The government as well as the media tend to announce and emphasize that we belong to the absolute European top: only a few countries, mostly Scandinavian ones, are ahead of us. These bold statements are absolutely correct. But there is a flip side to that coin: we used to be able to say we belonged to the top *worldwide*. And PISA(1)(Program for International Student Assessment) states that our scores between 2006 and 2015 have significantly dropped in the areas of science and math. In December 2017 international research showed that the reading skills of our ten year olds are quickly sinking away(2). Suddenly the top seems out of reach: in 2006 we positioned ourselves 8th in that ranking worldwide. Today we pause at 32. In elementary school the learning area that scores the weakest is that of the arts: 49% of all Flemish primary schools don't reach the set standards(3). And so we enter my field of expertise: the arts, and more specifically, drama.

Quality in art education

Over the last twenty-one years I have been a professional actor and teaching artist in Belgium. In 2008 I became the artistic coordinator of the Drama Teacher Training Program at the Royal Conservatoire in Antwerp (AP University College). I visited all kinds of schools, observed lessons, supervised internships, published a handbook on interdisciplinary arts with 6-year olds(4) and taught drama with children, youngsters, adults and drama teachers in the making. I found a recurring phenomenon in drama education with young children is the kind of teaching that only aspires to be fun, lovely, amusing, entertaining... It often presents itself in the form of non-committal (theater) games and focuses on *pretense* instead of genuine *make believe*. This kind of drama has little to do with art or art education but more with entertainment. Nothing wrong with entertainment, but it mostly happens within what you already know, whilst art is what happens outside what you already know and expands 'the sense of the possible'(5). I believe this is a first important indicator of quality in art education.

Dorothy Heathcote

In my search for different approaches and practitioners in drama education I came across Dorothy Heathcote MBE (1926-2011). I saw several documentary videos about her and her work on YouTube(6). Immediately I was intrigued by the dedication and seriousness she showed in co-constructing an imaginary world with the children she was working with. The earnestness of her practice didn't make it less enjoyable, on the contrary, the children soon became engaged and showed commitment and empathy. They not only got intrinsically motivated to investigate all sorts of things throughout the school's curriculum, they indirectly developed, in my opinion, important artistic competencies.

I started reading more about Heathcote and her transformative approach to education called *Mantle of the Expert*: an ingenious teaching methodology that has been evolving since she invented it in the 1970's and that continues to strengthen, thanks to dedicated teachers and MoE ambassadors in the United Kingdom as Luke Abbott(7) and Tim Taylor(8).

MoE: what is it all about?

In a nutshell: Mantle of the Expert is the students and the teacher working together to create an imaginary context. Within that context there is an unresolved story. In the story, there is something going on involving a mystery, a problem, a difficulty or something that has to be overcome. And the people working on that are a *team of experts* (the students) with imagined know-how, as well as responsibilities and most significantly, the power to influence within (and outwith) the fiction to *make decisions*. In MOE, the experts are working for a *client*: people they are answerable to, people they go back to and report and explain what they're doing. The client is significant as this person generates a *commission* to be undertaken: in other words, the work that is involved in solving the problem.

Important elements of the approach are tension, a narrative, and people with different points of view. The story isn't a mere simulation but can be stopped and paused whenever the teacher feels the need to. This *in & out of fiction*-modus creates opportunities to teach the curriculum and make it meaningful and purposeful(9).

The research project

The further I got into investigating and practicing MoE, the more it began to surprise me that so little attention was paid to the artistic value of the approach. Yet that was what stood out for me as a teaching artist. Of course I am convinced that its use of drama as a learning resource leads to intrinsic motivated students, self-determination and increased learning outcomes: I witnessed that when I visited Bealings School(10) (in Woodbridge/UK), Recreation Road Infant School(11) (in Norfolk/UK) and Woodrow First School and Nursery(12) (in Redditch/UK) in May 2017. I observed classes and spoke with children, teachers and principals: all were enthusiastic about the possibilities and educational values of Mantle of the Expert, but often hesitated when I started

talking about its artistic worth. To be clear, I am not saying MOE is an art form or a piece of art on itself. I am saying it develops artistic competencies in children without directly focusing on them (which mostly is the case in art education).

To investigate this hypothesis, I submitted a research proposal at my University College and I got a scholarship of 40000 € (app. 35000 £) to do a two year research project from January 2017 until December 2018. During this time I engage(d) in literature study, residential training weekends(13), implementing the approach in my own teaching practice, a field research in the United Kingdom, the translation of Tim Taylor's book and an experimental research in Flanders(14). I would like to share with you the design and initial results of that experimental research.

Artistic competencies

What are we talking about when mentioning 'artistic competencies'? Within the field of drama, do such competencies have to do with authenticity? Physical skills? Performance techniques? If I were to ask an international group of drama teachers we would probably end up with a long, but incomplete list going from concentration skills to the ability to transform, from interacting & accepting impulses to building credibility, from vocal skills to theatrical imagination. Where does 'artistic competency' start and does it ever end?

At December 18 of 2006 the European Parliament and Council adopted a recommendation on lifelong learning(15). It's an international frame of reference with eight key competencies that function as the core curriculum in education in the European Union. The last competence is about cultural awareness and cultural expression, and thus includes the arts. Under the impetus of the Flemish government, a group of experts in the arts and art education moved forward with this recommendation and designed in 2012 a study profile for art education(16): they resolutely opted for an in-depth and broad artistic training for students of all ages and suggested six key competencies concerning the arts. In 2016 researchers Luk Bosman and Erik Schrooten made a transparent, recognizable and usable translation of these competencies into five artistic roles(17) so that children, parents and teachers could communicate with each other in an intelligible way about art skills, knowledge and understanding. These artistic roles, that result in a 'unique me' within every student, are the frame I used for my experimental research:

- The artist = experimenting, expressing oneself in a personal way, creating, experiencing role
- The researcher = being curious and investigative, naming own strengths and working points, making process visible, expanding horizons
- The craftsman = mastering technique, materials and basic skills, working with/on quality, developing work attitude, using expertise
- The collaborator = working together, creating together, showing respect for others and their work, giving and receiving feedback
- The performer = showing with quality, using certain codes to present something, building up your own oeuvre, moving an audience

So this is the frame I use to talk about artistic competencies. Now let's get a look at the design of my experimental research.

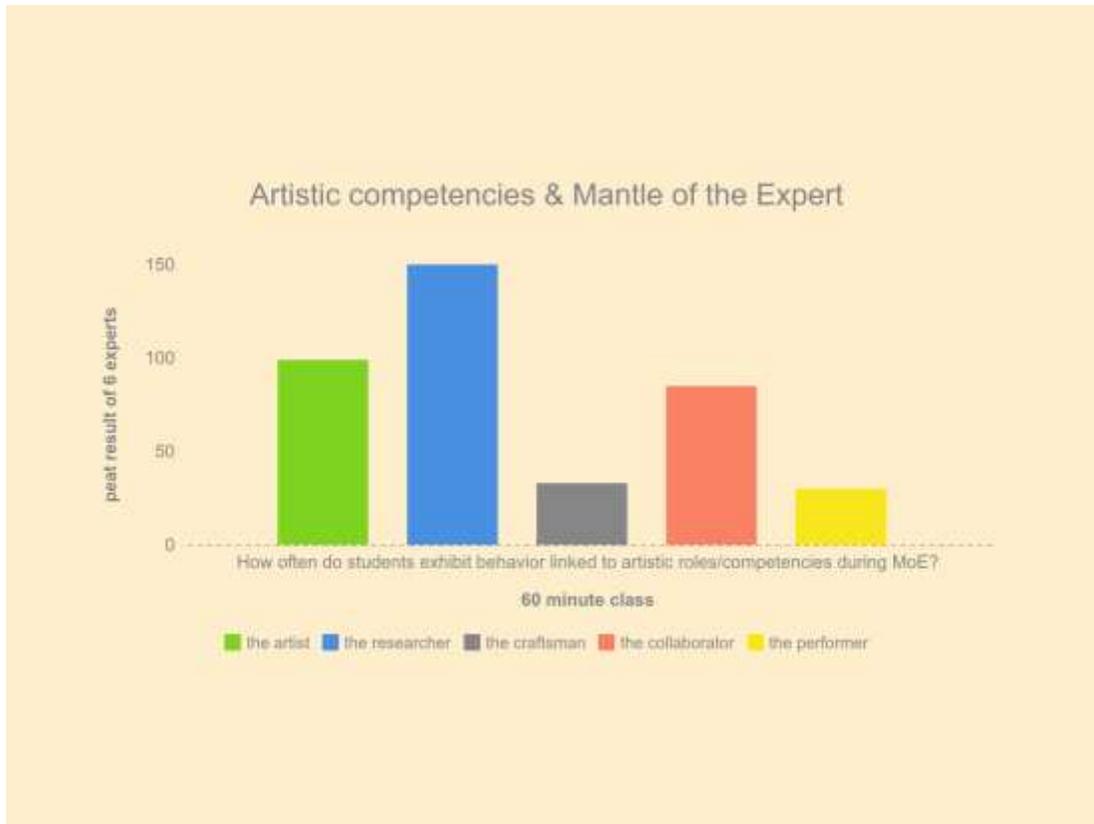
Qualitative research

As a form of research I opted for the combination of an instrumental case study, a multiple case study, and sampling. An instrumental case study is a study in which a certain group is studied in order to contribute to a certain theory or hypothesis. In this case a class of 8 year olds in primary school enjoying a MoE session: 24 children of mixed gender, origin and social background in Antwerp. I decided on three cases (multiple case study). Each case can be regarded as a single case, where a comparative phase is added at the end of the study. The design of the case study remains the same, but the sampling during the three case studies evolves from generating quantitative to explanatory results.

I composed a group of respondents based on several criteria I drew up in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the theme and to get an answer to my research question. I compiled a group of six respondents using the following criteria: they had to have a bachelor's or master's degree in drama, a pedagogical diploma, experience in teaching drama, but also in teaching primary school children, and in assessing artistic competencies. They also had to know the artistic roles as mentioned above well, but conversely, could not be too familiar with Mantle of the Expert, to avoid any prejudgments or bias.

The results are in

Today I can present the quantitative results of my experimental research concerning the artistic value of Mantle of the Expert in a primary school in Flanders. To be able to do that I designed an observation tool for the respondents allowing them to review the artistic roles during a Mantle of the Expert session of 60 minutes: how often did they observe behavior in the students that they linked to the artistic roles and competencies as mentioned above?



It was no surprise to me that the roles of the researcher and the collaborator scored so highly – Mantle of the Expert is after all a collaborative inquiry approach. Also, I wasn't thunderstruck by the fact that the roles of the craftsman and the performer scored less highly – since in MoE practices, there is often little direct focus on drama technique, artistic skills or showing our work to an audience (if not represented by the client or your fellow team workers that is). But take a look at the role of the artist: it scores second highest! A result that confirms the findings of students, teachers and MoE experts I spoke with in the United Kingdom. During my field research in May 2017 I presented these students and practitioners with twenty small cards that stated the different competencies I listed above, but without mentioning the artistic roles they belong to. I mixed the cards up, asked my respondents to read them carefully and then arrange them on a continuum from 'important' to 'not important', taking into account their own experiences with Mantle of the Expert. They all independently put the craftsmanship and performance competencies more or less in the middle (not one card was considered 'not important'). The research and collaborative competencies ended up very high-scored. But on top of the list, 'above important' actually, the role of the artist stood out: experimenting, expressing oneself in a personal way, creating, experiencing role.

Afterwards, I asked myself, if the competencies might be too generic and not necessarily about artistry. That is why the findings of a team of experienced practitioners in the arts and art education is so important: they do look at the roles and competencies from an artistic point of view and have nothing to gain from naming something artistic if it's not. All the more so because they might conclude that everyone can choose to work with the arts in a qualitative way: you don't have to be

a drama expert to work with Mantle of the Expert. Every devoted teacher can learn it, practice it and can thereby appeal to artistic competencies in children without focusing directly on these.

Mind you, this of course does not replace discrete art or drama education in any way. To create a piece of art a direct focus on artistry will always be needed, and art education has a great deal to offer when it comes to that. But as noted in my introduction: 49% of all Flemish primary schools don't reach the set standards in the learning area of the arts. How come? In my opinion it's because teachers are supposed to tackle the arts straightforwardly, but they aren't musicians, actors, dancers, painters, sculptors, or any other kind of an artist. They are teachers, and they need to find ways to engage students in a lifetime of quality learning. Mantle of the Expert shows such a way. It does not focus on artistic competencies but enables teachers to design compelling contexts to teach mathematics, science, history and all sorts of other curricular subjects and activities, and at the same time MoE requires an artistic effort from the students and challenges the collaborator, the researcher, the craftsman, the performer and the artist within them.

The arts and beyond

To close, with the MOE approach I think the UK has the knowledge, expertise and resources to formulate an answer to several current and enduring educational questions: answers that go far beyond the artistic value of the approach and more towards *the creation of a global civilization that seeks peace and shared plentifulness*(19). Who wouldn't like to take the lead in such a ranking? But I suspect it is my role to shed light on the arts, so that they don't get underestimated or forgotten. After all, it is the arts that offer us a '*vision of the possible*'(20), a vision that is so badly needed.

I hope the United Kingdom cherishes its wealth and will continue to share it. I on my part will try and make Mantle of the Expert an approach teachers and students in Flanders know about. I'm glad to say Luke Abbott and Tim Taylor have accepted my invitation to teach a two day international summer course in Antwerp in August 2018. You should come and experience it yourself! But be aware, it is addictive. As one of the children after the case study said: "Why can 't we do Mantle of the Expert all the time?'"

Notes

- (1) PISA 2015 key findings for Belgium, www.oecd.org/belgium/pisa-2015-belgium.htm
- (2) C. Van Driessche, 05/12/2017, vrt NWS (national news network).
- (3) Flemish government, *Onderwijsspiegel 2016*, inspection report.
- (4) B. Selderslaghs, A. Van Moorsel, S. Caluwaert & I. Wolfaert, *4 je mee? Initiatielessen voor 8-jarigen met cross-overs naar de kunstdisciplines drama, dans, muziek en beeld*, 2013, Garant nv.
- (5) E. Booth, *The Music Teaching Artist's Bible*, 2009, Oxford University Press.
- (6) for example *Three Looms Waiting*, BBC Omnibus, 1971.
- (7) Director of MoE.com and the National MoE Coaching Team UK.
- (8) Freelance teacher and teacher-trainer in Mantle of the Expert, author of *A Beginner's Guide to Mantle of the Expert*, 2016, Singular Publishing, and co-promotor of my research project.
- (9) T. Taylor on YouTube, *Mantle of the Expert: wat is het?* <https://youtu.be/OWIBrMCWr18>, 2017, ed. Bob Selderslaghs
- (10) <http://www.bealings.org.uk/>
- (11) <http://www.recreationroad.com/>
- (12) <http://www.woodrowfirstschool.co.uk/>
- (13) More info on www.mantleoftheexpert.com
- (14) More info on www.mantleoftheexpert.be
- (15) *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning*, (2006/962/EC), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32006H0962>
- (16) H. Crevits, *Conceptnota DKO*, 2012, Flemish government.
- (17) L. Bosman & E. Schrooten, *Kunstig Competent*, 2016, www.kunstigcompetent.be
- (18) Dimitri Mortelmans, *Handboek kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden*, 2013, ACCO Uitgeverij
- (19) L. Abbott, 'Mantle of the Expert' as a route to Irresistible Learning and Transformative Teaching, 2017, FORUM, 59(3), 423-432.
- (20) D. Heathcote and G. Bolton, *Drama for Learning – Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Education*, p.170, Heinemann, 1995

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BOB SELDESLAGHS (1973) is a Belgian teaching artist, a researcher and the artistic coordinator of the Drama Teacher Training Program at the Royal Conservatoire (AP University College) in Antwerp. Since 1996 he has been an actor for television, theater and voice recordings. He has written twelve plays for the Belgian stage and published a handbook for teachers on interdisciplinary arts with 6-year old children: *4 je mee? Initiatielessen voor 6-jarigen met cross-overs naar de kunstdisciplines drama, dans, muziek, beeld* (2013, Garant, co-writers Annouk Van Moorsel, Sanne Caluwaerts, Indra Wolfaert). He also teaches voice and speech training at the highschool of performing arts (de!Kunsthumaniora) in Antwerp. Since January 2017 Selderslaghs has been researching the artistic value of Dorothy Heathcote's approach to education: 'Mantle of the Expert'.

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