



## FEATURE

### The ABC of Mantle of the Expert

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## The ABC of Mantle of the Expert

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### Synopsis

In this article, the author discusses how he arrived at the identification of 26 components or building blocks of Mantle of the Expert - conventions, strategies, pedagogical and didactic insights, and applications - that can help teacher artists in arts education settings to initiate an artistic process and strengthen an artistic product.

**Keywords:** drama in education, education in drama, Mantle of the Expert, toolkit, conventions

### Introduction

Can you really fathom from A-to-Z Mantle of the Expert, the dramatic inquiry approach to learning and teaching that drama teacher and academic Dorothy Heathcote (and others) developed from the 1980s onwards? Probably not. Many teachers, teacher educators and researchers worldwide are still today engaged in understanding, unravelling, interpreting, and developing this way of generating meaningful and engaging learning activities through imaginary worlds. Mastering the approach, myself, as a non-native speaker, I like to compare it to learning the English language: at first, it does not seem too difficult. After all, we in the Low Countries are introduced to English from a young age through pop songs, movies, and television series. So, we quickly understand and speak a mouthful of English in Belgium and the Netherlands. But if we want to master the language thoroughly, we are soon startled by its complexity: after all, the English language has more words than any other language and its grammar contains many pitfalls and exceptions. For Mantle of the Expert, roughly the same applies. The basic idea seems quite simple: your students become experts who carry out a certain commission on behalf of a fictitious client. Teachers confronted with this core principle regularly respond with: "Oh, but I already do that in class". Until you zoom in on exactly how these elements are (or can be) introduced in Mantle of the Expert, which dramatic conventions and strategies are used, and which pedagogical and didactic principles underlie the method. Then it soon becomes apparent that it questions or challenges your entire teaching approach. It sometimes leads to teachers dropping out or limiting themselves to a 'light version', a bland copy of the original. In short, mastering Mantle of the Expert is not easy. To quote Tim Taylor in *A Beginner's Guide to Mantle of the Expert* (2016):

"Like learning to drive, learning to use Mantle of the Expert involves three stages: The first is *conscious incompetency*, where everything you try is difficult and you are painfully aware of your lack of expertise. The second is *conscious competency*, where after much practice you find yourself able to use the elements well, even if it still takes a great deal of planning and effort. The third is *unconscious competency* where things really start to click, and the elements become an integral part of your practice. By this point you'll notice (like driving from one place to another and not

remembering how you did it) that your MoE sessions flow by without you struggling to make them happen or planning them in great detail.”

My experience, as a practitioner, researcher, and teacher trainer, is that too broad a focus - wanting to give due attention to all the individual elements of Mantle of the Expert at the same time - can be frustrating: there always seems to be some aspect where you fall through. So, a synthesising approach to Mantle of the Expert, where you try to build an experience from composite parts, does not seem appropriate. Moreover, it suggests that the approach is at best a sum of its parts, but nothing 'different', nothing 'more' (Selderslaghs, 2022a). Practitioners know better. During my doctoral research, I experimented with an analytical approach: discovering from the whole what components are needed to make Mantle of the Expert a success story. It led to my ABC of Mantle of the Expert: an identification of 26 building blocks - one for each letter of the alphabet - of Heathcote's dramatic inquiry approach to learning and teaching, accompanied by a practical application of it in the classroom. Before I continue, it might be important to briefly explain my research work. It focuses on the artistic value of Mantle of the Expert rather than its transfer effects. Through the specific strategies and drama techniques the teacher uses - to introduce students into the fiction, to build the imaginary context with them, to enable them to put on the 'mantle of an expert' and to generate belief and involvement - Mantle of the Expert indirectly develops several artistic competences. I demonstrated this in a two-year research project in the arts (2017-2018) that served as preliminary research for my PhD: *MoE 2.0 - Mantle of the Expert: from dramatic inquiry towards an artistic result in arts education*. The MoE 2.0 doctoral research project explored how the dramatic inquiry approach to learning and teaching could be enriched into a methodology in arts education for creating non-scripted theatre performances with young audiences and thus create a harmony between the artistic process and product. I conducted qualitative research between 2018 and 2022: I carried out three single case studies at DE SINGEL international arts center in Antwerp (Belgium) with groups of children aged between six and twelve years old. I conducted desk research, kept a journal recording participant observations during field research, held semi-structured interviews and a survey with the participants, analysed video footage and presented four drama performances, developed through co-creation (three live theatre performances and one video performance during covid). The MoE 2.0 methodology proceeds from Mantle of the Expert as an overarching method and connects to it a set of practices that relate to the collective role element, to the non-scripted approach to drama and theatre, to conditions for teacher artists to achieve real participation with young target groups, to the toolbox that is expanded in function of an artistic goal, to a model that highlights the four worlds of process and product both in and out of fiction, and to the holistic approach to artistic competences (Selderslaghs, 2022b).

In the ABC of Mantle of the Expert - 'the toolbox that is expanded' - I consequently aim for a direct approach to artistic competences. The underlying approach remains the same, but using 26 drama sessions, I focus on those elements that can add value in an artistic setting to initiate an artistic process and strengthen an artistic product. The ABC thus serves an artistic curriculum with meaningful assignments that can stand alone, but at the same time form a whole if you want to create a full-fledged Mantle of the Expert context. My aim here is to introduce teacher artists in an engaging and active way to the use of conventions, strategies, didactic and pedagogical insights, and applications in devising

processes leading to theatre work. The ABC does not pretend to be complete and, moreover, does not consist of ideas 'owned' by Mantle of the Expert: any experienced drama teacher will be familiar with certain building blocks. It is the combination of these components and their specific application that make Mantle of the Expert the unique approach it is.

I will start by giving an overview of the ABC, which usually starts from a Dutch language concept, and add the *English translation* where necessary. Then I will single out some components to explain them in more detail and give an example of how they could be practically approached during a drama session.

## From A to Z

- A. Authenticiteit door indirectheid = *Authenticity through indirectness*
- B. Be-teken-is = *Sign-ificance*
- C. Conventies van dramatische actie = *Conventions of dramatic action*
- D. Dimensies van de dramatische verbeelding = *Dimensions of dramatic imagination*
- E. Expertenteam = *Team of Experts*
- F. Fictieve contexten plannen = *Planning fictional contexts*
- G. Geestesoog en Geloof opbouwen = *Eyes of the mind and Building Belief*
- H. Hechting creëren = *Continuum of Engagement*
- I. *In & out of fiction-mode*
- J. Jongleren met spanningsniveaus = *Juggling with tension levels*
- K. Klant = *Client*
- L. Locatie en tijd = *Location and Time*
- M. *Make-believe*
- N. Narratief ontwikkelen = *Narrative development*
- O. Opdracht = *Commission*
- P. Pudding van gevoelens = *Pudding of feelings* (Wagner, 1976)
- Q. *Questions, questions, questions*
- R. Representeren = *Forms of Representation*
- S. Standpunten = *Points of view*
- T. *Teacher-in-role*
- U. Uitnodigen = *Inviting*
- V. *Vision of the possible*
- W. Waardenmodel = *Structuring dramatic-inquiry*
- X.  $X = (B + E + C) *?$
- Y. Yin & Yang van collaboratief werken = *Yin & Yang of working collaboratively*
- Z. Zone van de naaste ontwikkeling = *Zone of proximal development*

You can find examples or explanations of several of these building blocks in articles, books, on websites, and so on. In the ABC I published as a Dutch-language inspirational guide for drama teachers, I briefly situate each concept and suggest a practical application in an arts-educational setting (Selderslaghs, 2020). This makes the conventions - the way things are done in Mantle of the Expert -

concrete, accessible and manageable for practitioners, without losing the holistic nature of the approach. In this article, by way of example, I will single out three components that seem somewhat enigmatic or which strike me as relevant in the context of this special issue on drama conventions: the A, the C and the X. The 33 conventions of dramatic action designed by Dorothy Heathcote recur throughout the alphabet and the accompanying drama sessions but are also approached separately as a tool for young performers in training, as will be shown later (Heathcote, Johnson and O'Neill, 1984). But let us start at the beginning.

### **A from authenticity through indirectness**

"You are more likely to achieve authenticity through indirectness," wrote Dorothy Heathcote (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995). She was not talking so much about the veracity of an actor, but about the acquisition of knowledge: authentic learning, in other words. This often involves an appeal to an authentic or realistic context. In artistic settings, that context is in many cases created by the play, the performance, or the show the actors are preparing for. A direct approach then results in working on competences a performer needs to convey meaning to an audience. But young actors in training do not always sense this need. The result is that, as a teacher artist, you keep repeating the same exercises or feedback to underline the importance of this or that skill. The drama session I designed for this building block challenges you as a teacher artist to introduce artistic competences indirectly using an imaginary context. And then you can work on those competences in a direct way. In other words: with this drama session you create a holistic context that will lead the participants to want to work on specific artistic competences themselves without you as a drama teacher giving them the immediate assignment to do so.

A brief description of the application: design a hospital intake form (a kind of triage document used in the emergency department. You can find an example at [www.mantleoftheexpert.be](http://www.mantleoftheexpert.be)). Print a stack of the forms and fill them in with names of well-known presenters, television personalities and actors working for the same TV station. Then come up with all kinds of injuries they suffered during a team-building activity that got out of hand. Don't make them too serious injuries, but injuries that prevent them from doing their jobs for a while: for example, a well-known newsreader who was hit in the face with a Frisbee, resulting in a broken nose and a torn upper lip. Put the forms in a large, thick envelope and write 'CURRENT SITUATION' on it in big letters. Gather your participants around the envelope and discuss with them what they make of it. Maybe they want to hold the envelope for a moment, weigh it, study it? Who might it be intended for? Introduce the recipient by representing him or her as teacher-in-role in his or her office (convention 2: as in a film). What observations do the participants make? The recipient seems nervous and expresses his or her thoughts: "When am I finally going to know how bad things are with them?" and "How on earth am I going to fix that?". Take your time to reflect. Then suggest opening the envelope and discuss what it triggers in the participants. Do they want to meet and question the recipient about the envelope? Then, as teacher-in-role, interact with the participants (convention 1: role present here and now). Through this conversation, they find out that he or she is a programme director at a television station. During a team-building day with the broadcaster's entire staff, all sorts of things have gone wrong. It is clear that a lot of programmes will have to do without their

creator or presenter for a while. The programme director is at a loss for words. You can guess what happens next: can the participants temporarily replace the injured radio and television staff? Are they willing to provide crisis programming until the traditional broadcasting schedule can be resumed? The possibilities of linking this to an artistic curriculum are numerous.

### **C from conventions of dramatic action**

The word 'convention' sometimes evokes a bit of resistance from teachers, I have noticed. At least in Flanders, they are usually not very familiar with it, and it requires some explanation: a custom, a common usage or, in a dramatic context, something we agree on for the sake of the willing suspension of disbelief. There are a lot of tacit agreements in theatre. As soon as I give some examples of these, everyone is on board: for instance, if we see a picture of a tree on stage, as spectators we accept that it represents a real tree in the play. If an actor wears a crown, we accept that he is a king. The use of a smoke machine and lighting leads us to believe that the action on stage is taking place in a foggy night, even though we know it is not so in reality. The list of 33 drama conventions designed by Dorothy Heathcote allows us to represent and reflect on objects, people or events that are not (or cannot be) there in the classroom, in the rehearsal room or on stage. Those conventions are to a drama teacher like the notes a composer uses to create a piece of music. But young actors in training can also benefit from them and expand their theatrical imagination if they learn to use them consciously. Especially during a research phase, they come in handy.

For this drama session, I will work with a selection from the convention list as Tim Taylor added it to his beginner's guide that I mentioned earlier. Gradually, as a teacher artist, you can expand the list:

- *Convention 4*: The role presented as a statue. It can be talked about, walked around, and brought to life to give a real-life response (e.g. by touching it) before turning back into a still image.
- *Convention 8*: The role represented by an image of real life. For example, a painting, a photograph, or a drawing.
- *Convention 15*: Objects representing (the interests of) a person.
- *Convention 17*: An account of a person as if written by him- or herself, but now read by someone else.
- *Convention 25*: A person's voice overheard while talking to someone else in a naturalistic tone.
- *Convention 31*: Finding a cryptic message.

A brief description of the application: Choose a scene from a play that everyone knows or that is easy to explain. Possibly it is a scene the participants are working on with you at the time. I choose here as an example the balcony scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*: "Discuss briefly with your neighbor what you know about that." You then try to recap the scene in group. You complement where necessary. Important to know is that Romeo and Juliet are very young, grow up in two rival families and fall in love with each other. On the evening of their meeting, Romeo seeks Juliet at home: he declares his love to her under the balcony of her bedroom. The infatuation is mutual. They must be careful not to get caught. Juliet is called away by her nurse, who becomes very impatient.

The aim of this session is to explore the fictional context. What can participants find out about the protagonists - the situation they are in, their environment, state of mind, thoughts, intentions - through a drama convention? Perhaps 'the balcony' has something to say as a silent witness? How then will the participants represent that balcony? Or do they choose a gossiping owl who has heard and seen everything from the tree next to the house? Or maybe they will let Romeo's hand speak, clinging convulsively to the plantation of the house in an attempt to climb up? Discuss the above conventions with the participants and ask them to choose one in pairs. Give them some time to brainstorm who or what they want to represent and how they will go about it. Go past the different groups to offer support where needed. Then have the participants present their drama convention. Ask them in advance whether the intention is only to watch and listen or whether the audience is also allowed to interact, and if so, in what way? For example, "We form a statue together. If someone puts a hand on my shoulder, he or she can ask me a question and I will answer" (convention 4), or "We made a drawing. You should first try to observe and interpret it yourself. Afterwards, we will explain in more detail" (convention 8).

Discuss with the participants their experiences. Did the research yield new or surprising information? Could you use these conventions when presenting the story to an audience?

### **X from X = (B + E + C) \*?**

No, Mantle of the Expert is not an exact science, not just a sum of its parts. The approach offers no watertight formula that guarantees immediate success. Even if you think you combine the right and precisely balanced elements, there will always be a certain X-factor at play: an indefinable quality that can turn a successful session into a magical moment. In my experience, such a result cannot be enforced or emerge one-two-three. But there are some aspects that always seem to be part of a successful session: in this regard, the B from the title then stands for the participants' Belief in what they create, which can be added to the E of their Engagement and the C of the Collaborative nature of their work. Those elements are then multiplied by an unknown factor (\*?), which is not a constant, but depends on the context (the environmental factors) and the input (such as characteristics of the participant group and the choices made regarding the creation process). This session is a reflection exercise that makes young performers in training think about their own X-factor formula: what turns a strong performance into a moment of magic, according to them?

A brief description of the application: Ask participants what they love about drama or acting. Could they say what exactly they feel when acting? And when do they feel that all the 'pieces of the puzzle' fall together nicely while performing? Could they name those puzzle pieces? Write down as much as possible of what the participants provide on a large sheet or board (for example: timing, empathy, interaction, and so on). Feel free to think along with the participants.

Next, watch a scene from the movie *Billy Elliot* with the participants on YouTube (search for 'Billy Elliot - What Dancing Feels Like') and read the monologue below with them. It's best to introduce this briefly: *Billy Elliot* is a 2000 British film by Stephen Daldry. The story is set in England during the 1984-1985 miners' strike, which hit a lot of families hard. In one of those families lives little boy Billy, who would



like to take ballet lessons. His father prefers him to box, but eventually agrees to let his son audition for a London ballet school. There, they ask him how it feels when he dances:

*I sort of disappear.*  
*Like I feel a change in me whole body.*  
*Like there's a fire in me body.*  
*I'm just there ...*  
*... flying ...*  
*... like a bird.*  
*Like electricity.*  
*Yeah ...*  
*... like electricity.*

Ask participants what, for them, are the key words in this monologue and, if necessary, add your own.

For me, these words stand out: *disappear – change – whole body – fire – there – flying – bird – electricity.*

Ask participants to work together to transform each key word into a letter or short letter combination that can serve as a symbol for the key word. Any letter (combination) will do, as long as it is unique, and the participants reach a consensus on it. Write down the legend so that the meaning is visible to all.

For example:

Disappear = D  
Change = c  
Whole body = Wb  
Fire = F  
There = Th  
Flying = fl  
Bird = B  
Electricity = e

Next, ask participants to individually choose three key words that they think most closely represent Billy's feelings. For example: *change + there + electricity* (but any other combination is also possible). Suppose they could multiply this by one extra element to give the whole thing an extra boost: which key word would they choose as a bonus? For example: *flying*. If players turn this into a formula where X represents Billy's feelings, what do they end up with? Use \* as the multiplier. In this case, that becomes:

$$X = (c + Th + e) * fl$$

Have participants look at, decipher, and discuss each other's complicated formulas.

Then do the same with the list of keywords the participants drew up at the very beginning. Ask them to create a legend, choose three key words that are crucial to them when performing and one key word



that can lift the whole thing even further from a good to a magical performance. Which formula do they reach? Let them compare and exchange ideas again.

Discuss with participants what the real purpose of a formula is: to find a solution. Obviously, the moment when everything seems to fall into the fold during a performance and the performers take wing cannot be expressed in a formula. But it can be very fascinating to see what different 'solutions' participants arrive at in an attempt to answer that question of a successful session. It is precisely that attempt that can guide individual learners or the group to (re)orientate their focus within performing.

## To conclude

With this ABC, my aim is to demystify Mantle of the Expert on the one hand and make its richness accessible on the other. Practitioners do not have to master the approach from the start to use it in a meaningful way, but can very concretely get acquainted with conventions, strategies and pedagogical and didactic insights and apply them in their teaching practice to gradually make connections and combinations. That way, they do not have to feel like inexperienced drivers who might cause an accident if they do not pay attention to everything at once. With the step-by-step approach used in the ABC, all teacher artists can gradually professionalise themselves in the immersive approach that is Mantle of the Expert and combine its cognitive, affective, behavioral, and artistic components in their teaching.

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