



FEATURE

The use of Dorothy Heathcote's conventions within Mantle of the Expert in a primary classroom

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DOI Number: <https://doi.org/10.26203/93hs-na61>

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To cite this feature: Hinton, L., (2024). The use of Dorothy Heathcote's conventions within Mantle of the Expert in a primary classroom. *Education in the North*, 31(2) pp.133-147.



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The use of Dorothy Heathcote's conventions within Mantle of the Expert in a primary classroom

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Synopsis

This article provides an illustration of the use of conventions within Mantle of the Expert in a class of 8 year olds in an English school. The work described spans a 10-week period and shows how conventions can be combined in a meaningful way to build layer upon layer of meaning. Working as 'teacher/artist' with 'flexibility, ingenuity, personal creativity' and 'an ability to exploit opportunities as they occur' (O'Neill, 1989), a teacher can maintain the sense of internal coherence for the children and avoid a disjointed learning experience.

Introduction

During the autumn term of 2022, a class of eight and nine year olds were starting their final year at first school. From the time they started Woodrow, aged four, a large chunk of their learning had been through Dorothy Heathcote's approach called Mantle of the Expert. They had become skilled at 'suspending their disbelief' (Oxford Reference, 2024) to work as if they are members of a responsible team with jobs to do and a client to satisfy.

Woodrow First School was introduced to Mantle of the Expert by Luke Abbott and we have been learning about and practicing Heathcote's work since 2010. I believe that this way of learning is exciting and meaningful for both teachers and children. The curriculum is linked to the real world through tasks and through interacting with and building concern for 'the other' and this other is represented using dramatic conventions.

Dorothy Heathcote collated a list of some 33+ conventions for drama work in her essay *Signs and Portents* (2014). She saw them as a way to "make human presences come into the room; so that what we are considering and who we are considering loom large in all the work". She said: "I am obsessed with the power of these conventions – the means by which we can make the presence of an Other, present in the room" (Pennington and Pennington, 2007).

She observed:

"These ways of bringing in the presence of "others" demand that the students have an investment in needing to understand the person because matters depend upon it. It is never casual. Everyone must recognize the significance of the "other's" presence as part of the enterprise." (Heathcote, 2010)

In Mantle of the Expert, the elements of team, commission and client are interlinked throughout with inquiry and drama. The timely and thoughtful use of Heathcote's conventions for dramatic action can and does in my experience develop a coherent experience for the children. I plan for each convention to lead on from the previous one in a logical way to build a story.

Whatever conventions you set up, Heathcote observed, the children "have to be in a state of productive tension, to need to know from these people, or from evidence of these people" (Pennington and Pennington, 2007).

In *Progress in Drama and Aesthetic Unity*, Fleming has argued that "these techniques can be used in a way which gives pupils and the class a rather unsatisfying, fragmented experience" (1995, p.3). What follows though is an illustration of some of the tasks and episodes my class engaged with in role in Mantle of the Expert as The Animal Rehabilitation Care team. It will show how careful planning and in particular the effective use of conventions can be used to build a shared and coherent story (which is also the framework on which curriculum tasks and learning hang).

Good stories need productive tension and the conventions use this to induct the children closer and closer to the 'heart' of the story. In other words: the Other becomes more and more powerful/present for them. The learning has an affective dimension and without the careful use of conventions the work would be less authentic and more like 'topic' work with 'a bit of drama' thrown in.

This was my plan for this particular 'Mantle' and is not a set procedure I follow every time I plan. Indeed, part of the excitement of working in this way for me is that there is no set way to use or mix and match the conventions. Each Mantle is different even if the curriculum objectives are repeated.

My discussion of each 'episode' draws heavily on two documents: *Conventions List with Notes* (Heathcote and Whitelaw, 1985) and *The Conventions of Dramatic Action: A Guide* (Taylor, 2021). They explain what the numbered conventions are as well as giving an example of each.

The curriculum focus of the Animal Rehabilitation Care team Mantle of the Expert work was science and geography. The children were to learn about animal classification, habitats, food chains, changes in the environment and map skills. There was also design technology work to be done on structures and art work on sculptures. However, my first aim for the class was for them to become interested about the unusual goings on in a local woodland - all fictional of course within the Mantle of the Expert context.

Prior to this, the children had been immersed for the first two weeks of the term in the poem *The Jabberwocky* written by Lewis Carroll (1871) and set in Tulgey Woods. At this point the children were not working with Mantle of the Expert and were producing their own illustrated book versions of the poem. In order for the Animal Rehabilitation Care team (ARC team) to become intrigued I would need to sequence layer upon layer of conventions; building from the hint of a problem through to urgent and imperative need for action.

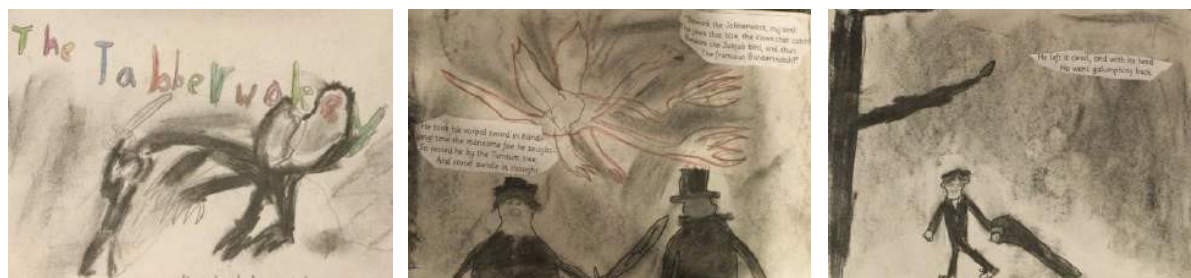


Figure 1: examples of pages from a book made by a child illustrating “The Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll

Setting up the commission

I decided to start by recounting a report via telephone to our ARC team from a concerned member of the public. Positioning myself as a member of the team rather than the teacher allowed me to be deliberately vague about details and we were immediately in the fiction together. The only details I gave them were the sighting of an animal where it would not usually be.

My interaction with the children was almost ‘chatty’ in style and responsive to what they were saying. I had to be ready for anything to happen and be willing to go with what the children would bring. Therefore, this episode was short. The drama was stopped and followed up with reflection and discussion out of role.

In the fiction, it resulted in the ARC team observing what turned out to be a deer of some kind in a car park next to the woods. The deer was represented by a piece of brown cloth and the children gathered together a little way from it - speaking aloud their observations and ideas. Through the use of narration where I ‘told the story’ for us, the animal was taken to the ARC centre for further monitoring.

At this early stage of the work I know I have the curriculum objectives to attend to - after all Mantle of the Expert is a pedagogy laced with curriculum tasks, but I need to build concern from the children and add in productive tension to make the curriculum learning urgent, important and meaningful. This comes through the use of conventions. Although the children were interested in the deer, this was not enough tension yet - the deer was safe and we would soon return it to the woods.

I decided to use convention 1- *the role actually present, naturalistic, yet significantly behaving giving and accepting responses*, in conjunction with convention 16 – *an account of a person by another person in a naturalistic fashion*. This time I had witnessed the death of a white deer which had run out of the woods straight into a car in front of me.

I gave a verbal account and the children asked questions and made comments. The tension was raised, but the fact that I was speaking as an eye witness although it brought us closer to the ‘action’, provided distance from the event for the children (plus they are experienced at working in this way and know it is fiction). Now the children as the ARC team wondered what was going on in the woods and wanted to take a look!

To use convention 1 again where we were all in full role exploring the woodland would have meant we would discover anything the children wanted to create and we could lose opportunities for curriculum tasks later as well as ending up in a chaotic mess. Convention 1 can be exciting and involving, but it can also be unpredictable and lose focus easily. I wanted to slow down time and action at this point, but add in further mystery and create opportunities for speculation and discussion.



Figure 2: teacher in role as one of the team entering the workplace whilst everyone is working and wanting to tell them what has happened. The team had lots of questions to ask and then discussion took place as to what to do next.

Therefore, I chose to use a version of convention 31 - described by Heathcote as *the finding of a cryptic code message*; in this Mantle it was a sign at the entrance to the woods and the woods were completely enclosed by a tall fence. The wording on the sign, prepared by me on large paper, was incomplete as if parts of it had worn away over time. This required the children to try to work out what it had originally said. In *Conventions List with Notes*, Heathcote and Whitelaw suggest that this “taps into the natural inclination to solve puzzles” and “having to work it out brings commitment and investment to further developments”. They worked out of the fiction during this time - talking, pondering, trying out ideas but always I believe with the fiction still at the forefront of what they were doing.

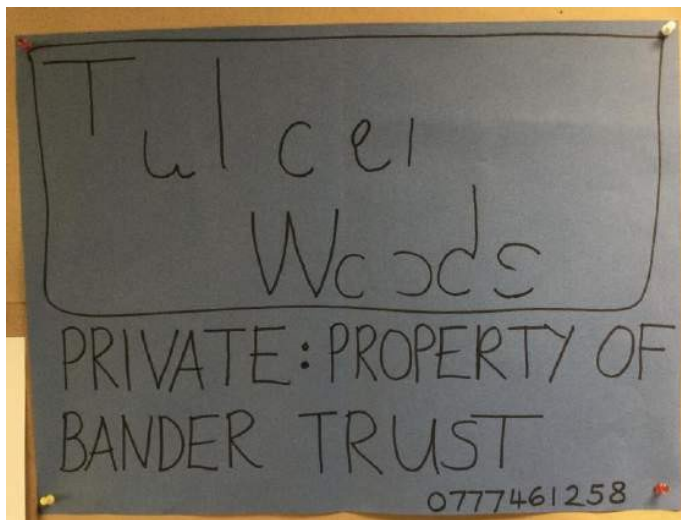


Figure 3: sign at the entrance to the woodland.

You may be able to work out that the sign said Tulgey Woods - the name of the woods in *The Jabberwocky* poem. Hence the work at the start of the term. The Bander Trust refers to an animal from the poem too. I was beginning to layer in the possibility of an ‘other’ in the woods and a commission for the team.

The sign included a phone number and the children were keen to go back into role to speak to someone at The Bander Trust - here was our Mantle of the Expert client.

When I include a phone call within any Mantle work I am doing, I am careful to set it up so that the people speaking on the phone do not look at each other - it is voice only. I use implications from convention 25 – *the voice of a person overheard talking to another in informal language, that is using naturalistic tone*; mainly that the class are listeners and that information can be fed in. In role as Julianne Cooper from the Bander Trust, I didn't really engage with any requests or questions from the children and instead stressed that no one goes in to the woods because of what's said to have happened there in the past. Now they had so many more questions!



Figure 4: examples of inquiry work – researching what species of deer it might be living in Tulgey Woods and analyzing data on the local deer population [in the fiction].

Building the story together and weaving in National Curriculum tasks

The introduction of a letter from the client whilst the children were thinking about what to do next, gave us the opportunity to learn more about them without actually meeting them. I planned the content of the letter to stress that in the fiction the woods are dangerous. However, I have learned to be careful to ensure the tone from the client means that they can be trusted and have our safety as their priority. When read in this instance as convention 24 – *a letter read without feeling*, the emphasis is very much on the words themselves and demands a lot of the children in terms of making meaning. A letter can be reread in and out of role until, through discussion, the children have gained enough sense from it. An advantage of this convention is that it stops any potential conflict which could arise through direct interaction with the role and also lets the children dwell on implications, possibilities and consequences.

The letter also set up a curriculum opportunity - for temporary camouflage shelters to be built from which the ARC team could make observations from precise locations within the woodland.

The Bander Trust



Dear Caerwent Animal Rehabilitation Care Team,

I am writing in response to your phone call last week when you asked about Tulgey Woods and the deer which was killed by a car.

Thank you for alerting us to the fact that there is a hole in the fence around the woods. We have fixed this.

As we said, we do have a herd of deer there, but we let them live without human disturbance. We do not go into the woods and as it is private property no one else enters either.

However, we are concerned about why the deer are trying to leave their habitat and about the decrease in their population in Caerwent.

Our Trust does not deal with wildlife, so if you would like to investigate what might be happening we have a proposition for you.

We will allow you to observe any goings on, but only if you stay inside a shelter. Because of what is said about the past in Tulgey Woods, this is for your own protection. Please provide us with designs for a suitable shelter which will not disturb wildlife, is camouflaged so as not to draw attention to it and which will allow you to make your observations whilst also protecting you from any danger.

As soon as we are satisfied that you will be safe, we will make the shelters and allow you into the woods. In the meantime, PLEASE DO NOT APPROACH THE WOODS.

We hope we can rely on your cooperation in this matter.

Figure 5: letter from the client to set up the design technology task.

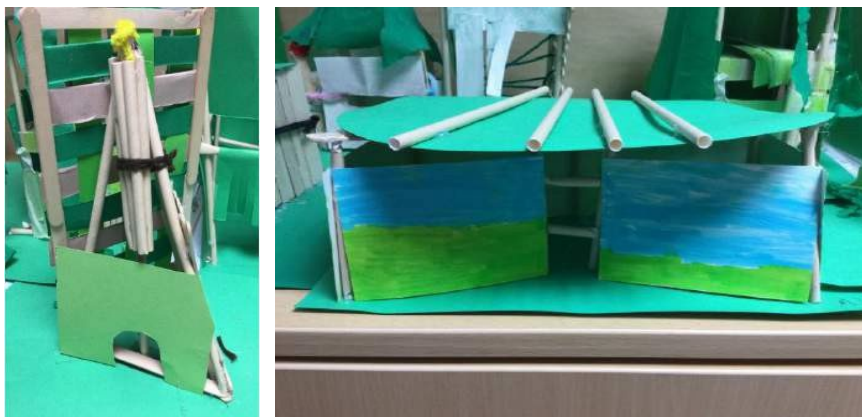


Figure 6: models of shelters to be built in Tulgey Woods, made for design technology.

Whilst this work was taking place outside the fiction, within the fiction the children wanted to look through the fence surrounding the woodland and send up drones to look through the canopy of the trees.

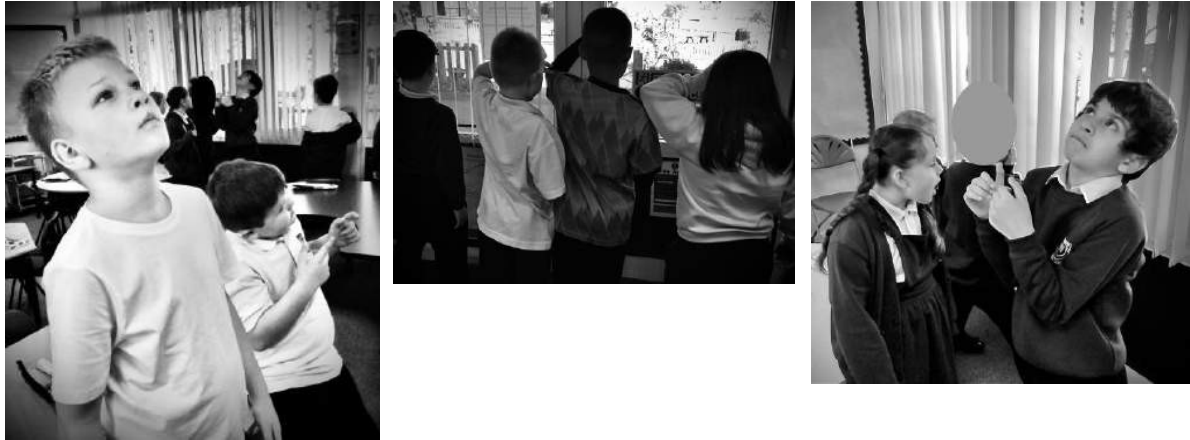


Figure 7: children creating still images of the team making observations through the fencing and with their drones

They did this by creating 'still images' or tableaux of themselves in role. They then created photographs through drawing. I need to be careful in these instances with what I provide for the children to use – for instance the size of the paper, the pens to be used must be appropriate. There is always what Heathcote and Whitelaw describe in their notes as a 'busyness of doing' and although this is less immediate than other conventions where there is direct interaction with a role, there is a 'coding in of significance'. The children can explore their ideas with each other in a non-threatening way and on this occasion the coding in of significance was the idea of eyes watching through the trees and of bloodshed in the woods. Perhaps it was the Jabberwocky!



Figure 8: drawings showing what had been seen through the fencing or through the woodland canopy

Developing the creature

As chance would have it, a poem we had read from a 'poem a day' book in class offered up a structure for some writing about this possible creature looking at us from the woods. I framed this as if we had asked the local villagers about Tully Woods and the children read the poems they created in the voices of the villagers; convention 22 – *a letter (text) read in the voice of the writer*, allowing the children to represent other attitudes to this possible creature. I hope this is illustrating that I didn't ask them to write a poem for the sake of it but as a way of encountering 'the other'. I was using the conventions to deepen the learning experience.

3.11.22 The Monster
 After dark
 when the people leave
 and the paths are clear
 the monster comes
 stomping through the woods.
 He kills the animals when he walks
 and steals the food
 with his mighty horns, massive teeth
 and his huge feet

3.11.22 Leaf Eater
 After dark
 when the forest is quiet
 and the looper comes
 and zig-zags around the trees
 He spots and attacks his prey
 with his red wings, the legs and pipe
 of his horns.

3.11.22 The mutation
 After dark
 when the nocturnal come to life
 and the dogs go to sleep
 mutation comes
 he changes and the trees
 he stalks the trees as he goes
 and catches deer for food
 with his red wings and in the
 way, and then with his black
 wings and kills anything in the way

3.11.22 two
 The Magical creature
 After dark
 when the animals go to sleep
 and the moon and the stars come out
 magical creature comes
 stomping, creeping in the Tully woods.
 He kills some lagers
 and makes some deer footprints
 with two silver horns, sharp scaly scales
 and lots of night dolly eyes

Figure 9: Examples of the poems written by the children

Back in the fiction, the client agreed to the team entering the woods and making observations overnight. I wondered how best to do this with the children! I discussed this with them - how it might end up like the kind of playing we might do on the playground and that would be fine or maybe we could try a different way.

I tried to draw on convention 27 – *a conversation overheard, the people are not seen; deliberate eavesdropping as in spying*, allowing for the element of 'don't let them know we're here'. The visual impact is curtailed so that the children need to focus on listening. To do this, we signed shelters on the classroom floor as squares of masking tape. Some children stood inside representing dusk and darkness by closing their eyes or covering them with their hands as much as they were comfortable with. Other children moved around the shelters representing the sounds of the woodland. Everyone had the chance to try both roles.

This was a very powerful experience as each child took this seriously and created an atmosphere which would probably have been missing otherwise. I wasn't sure it would be effective but I was able to try it because I know about the limitations and possibilities of the conventions and can mix and match them or even add my own interpretation to them sometimes. I believe this links with what Cecily O'Neill says

about 'teacher/artist coping with uneasiness and unpredictability' to Heathcote's 'teacher-artist' in this explanation:

"There are teacher-artists and there are teacher-technicians. The trouble is our establishment tends to think there's one sort of teacher. They stand in front of 30 children or 40 children and teach them all about something.

Teaching is re-invented and re-fashioned on site all the time in situations that never repeat themselves." (Heathcote, 1988)

Following the drama, the children then drew the changes which had occurred in the woods during the night discussing and sharing ideas - including a giant footprint which they placed next to the shelter by the cave.



Figure 10: a shelter signed using masking tape and a large footprint placed by a child as if next to the cave.

This led me to think it was the perfect moment to represent the creature iconically. It made sense that the ARC team could all have caught different glimpses in the darkness and the children worked in self-selected teams to draw the part they had seen. Each part was then combined as in convention 10 – a stylized depiction of someone; for example, an identikit picture made by the class in frame as detectives.



Figure 11: Each part of the creature drawn by a pair of children and then combined in an identikit style

The element of having seen only glimpses of the creature, which they were now starting to refer to as the Jabberwocky, during nighttime removed any anxiety about the oddness of combining the parts and actually added to the intrigue around it.

I wanted to make sure that the predicament of the deer was not lost. Asking the children to stand back in the woodland shelters, they received a voicemail. I chose convention 22 - a text read in the voice of the writer and recorded this to play from an iPad so that the children could only focus on the words and not the role. I could also position myself as one of the team with them as we wondered about her tone of voice and how we should respond.

The client Julianne Cooper needed to see the team immediately as when the builders were erecting their shelters they found something. I used convention 8 – *the role depicted in picture*, at this point. Firstly, it was a case of having a look at the photographs without the worry of finding ‘right answers’ as described by Tim Taylor in *The Conventions of Dramatic Action: A Guide*. This developed as he describes into inquiry and speculation.



Figure 12: photographs shown to the children in role.

The photographs I used were of a deer skull (I did warn them about the content before they decided whether to look) and whilst leading us to look closely at the teeth for our science work the photos also renewed the focus on the deer. The children were desperate to communicate with the creature or Jabberwocky even though it couldn't speak as they wanted to know if it was involved in the problem with the deer.

The children taking the lead

I wasn't sure about this! However, they came up with plans to gain its trust by giving it meat and designing a yes/no/maybe set of buttons. I decided to go with it. One child wanted to take on the role of the creature and the others agreed. We had built up such a shared picture and understanding that I believe they trusted the child to be authentically THEIR creature. She took some time to write some notes whilst the others got their questions ready. The child in role showed a sophisticated understanding of how to represent the creature in her responses which were a mixture of strong, hesitant and loaded with body language, emotion and non-verbal communication. She was leading this episode in convention 1 - *the role actually present*. *Naturalistic, yet significantly behaving, giving and accepting responses.*



Figure 13: Child in role as the Jabberwocky/ creature inside its cave with the ARC team gaining its trust by giving it meat. Then using their communication system, they took turns to speak to it from their shelter or by getting closer and it touched the yes, no or maybe button

I believe that this shows how much children learn about the power of conventions that they were the ones to push for this and carry it out effectively. It turns out that the creature might be trying to protect its babies. The children added in the grace element to what we had so far been interpreting as solely a dangerous creature; empathizing with it and providing a motivation for its behaviour. They have learned not to assume, but to think more deeply about why a character might act in a certain way.

At the same time another child worked at home to create a badaswach dragon and wondered if we could include it in our Mantle.



Figure 14: The drawing on a large piece of wallpaper done by the child at home, rolled up and brought into school.



Figure 15: dragon and the Jabberwocky competing for deer.

The children developed the idea and we ended up with the dragon and the Jabberwocky competing for food - the deer - and one of them would have to go!

They created a sequence of episodes which involved moving the dragon to a safer habitat - especially after it had started a fire in Tulgey Woods - plans, still images, discussion with the client etc. They were 'obsessed' by this point and highly motivated to move the story and their learning forward.



Figure 16: Moving the dragon - which the children represented using blankets. Each still image is a photograph sent by the ARC team to the client to reassure her that the dragon was safe.

Introducing a new commission

I wanted to build on the episode of the fire in the woods and use it as an opportunity, whilst the ARC team were checking for injured animals in the clear up of the forest, to uncover some Roman remains. As this was a new development to the story we had been building and a new curriculum area, I felt I needed to use a convention where children could look, stare, comment and question rather than a convention which demands direct interaction with a role. It would need to be interesting enough to steal some of their attention from the Jabberwocky.

Convention 9 – *a drawing seen in the making, of someone important to the action* but with the *made beforehand* element of convention 11 being on this occasion 'decided beforehand' by me, allowed me to control what signs were laid in whilst still being discursive. Within a taped area representing part of the forest floor, I drew a skeleton and a sword with the name Boudicca on. I was able to draw, pause, listen and make comments whilst not directly responding to the children or giving them the "answers". I also laid down replicas of Roman coins, a lamp and a glass bottle next to the skeleton. Adding in objects as in convention 15 – *objects to represent person's interests*, results in children having



Figure 17: The drawing on the floor which was seen in the making and objects added. It was then partially covered for the team to discover in role. Thoughts and ideas were added afterwards – as if labelling a crime scene

something to handle and having to think about the implications of why those things are there. I had their attention!

All of this happened with the children out of role - it is suggested in Tim Taylor's guide to be "close to how a scene is introduced to an audience in theatre. As much information as possible is provided through visual signs rather than verbal explanation".

I then covered the drawing and objects with blankets representing the soil and the forest floor with some of the bones already uncovered. The children discovered the rest of the remains in role as if they hadn't seen them before and we did this in a series of photographs they sent to the client. Each photograph actually being a still image created with them in role.

I have included this example as there is sometimes a misconception that the children shouldn't know what's coming next, but actually by seeing the drawing and objects beforehand back as the ARC team the children's responses were authentic to their role - they had time to think about how they as team members would respond as they had already reacted as themselves as children. As Heathcote explains:

"Now you may not agree with this, you must do what you want, but I always show people the end of something. I never work on, "We don't know what's going to happen." What I work on is: we know what, but we don't know how. That to me is far more important. If we know what, we stop rushing towards it, and we stay slower at working out how it shall be." (Heathcote, 1992)

What I'm not including in this account is the work involving conventions stemming from this drawing of Boudicca or the amount of learning coming out of the whole story the class created - animal classification, deforestation, food chains, habitats, making clay nests, writing reports, using social media safely, grid references and map work, how Boudicca took on the Romans in Britain. All this having meaning to them as it was linked to Tulgey Woods and the Jabberwocky or to them as animal rehabilitation workers

Concluding the Mantle

We eventually ended the Mantle with a convention. The children imagined Tulgey Woods one year later and created a photograph through drawing. In this way, each child was able to conclude the work in the way they wanted – for instance some decided that the Jabberwocky was living safely in Tulgey Woods whilst others decided that it had been moved and a museum had been built in the woods.

We don't always do this, and as I have already mentioned we don't have a formulaic approach to using conventions within our Mantle of the Expert work. However, we consider when a convention is needed to move the learning forward and to encounter an 'other' in a particular way and which convention is best to do this. Through practice (and making choices which don't work) we have learned how to create our Mantle stories with our children. Every class from Nursery through to Year 4 has examples of the kind I have written about. A rich, shared story with episodes which flow from one to another authentically – our definition of internal coherence- is always our aim.

There are of course other conventions I have not discussed here. A different example perhaps with a strong history curriculum focus would mean other conventions would be applicable - such as those which include an effigy or portrait of someone from the past and more use of the symbolic conventions drawing on reports and conversations. It may be unhelpful to some not to have a set way of sequencing or structuring the use of conventions, but perhaps for others it brings their use closer to theatre.

Is this way of working and using conventions effective?

I hope this article demonstrates this by showing some of the commitment to it from the children and the rich outcomes.

I hope I have demonstrated that within current Mantle of the Expert work in a classroom it is possible to work as 'teacher/artist' and 'teacher-artist' weaving in conventions as elements of theatre rather than in a purely instrumental way or to lead to a curriculum objective. Yes, the list of conventions, as it is often represented, has been learned and picked from, but with careful thought and responding to the children.

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