In the spaces for play

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In the twenty-first century, as we seek to reimagine society, take account of rapid technological changes, and prepare ourselves for an uncertain future, more and more commentators are calling for educational approaches that can support multiple and divergent interpretations of the world (Gallas, 1994; Fleer & Dockett, 2002; Bolton, 2003; Jones & Woglom, 2016). There are calls for education modes and practices that encourage young people not simply to learn, or even to learn to learn, but rather to engage with ‘wicked’ problems like those faced in real life (Rittle & Webber, 1973; Bentley, 2019). Wicked problems can’t be solved definitively; they are problems that must be continuously worked on. Engaging with wicked problems requires a dynamic and evolving process rather than a search for a single correct solution as an end point. Wicked problems can only be tackled by exploring multiple possibilities and perspectives and are best attempted through the creative collaborative efforts of a group, who grapple together over time (Bentley, 2019). Jones and Woglom (2016) present the concept of ‘mutant pedagogy’ as a way of working in a more open-ended way with wicked problems. They specifically argue for the potential of using imaginative and aesthetic learning tasks to open up new possibilities of how we might be in the world. A defining characteristic of ‘mutant pedagogy’ is that it opens up spaces of encounter where humans enter and interact (with one another and the material-discursive nature of the space) to think, do, and be differently. Such an encounter ‘dislodges fixed ways of perceiving the world’ and offers participants ‘emergent ideas and perceptions that re/creates multiplicities’ (Irwin et al., 2009, as cited in Jones & Woglom, 2006, p. 6). In the field of classroom drama, which is very much concerned with encounter and dislodgement, these metaphors of ‘mutant pedagogy’ and ‘wicked problems’ deserve further exploration.

Mantle of the Expert is a sophisticated approach to cross-curricula dramatic inquiry developed by Dorothy Heathcote. In this approach, teachers and participants work alongside each other as colleagues in a fictional enterprise, or responsible team, working on a commission for a respected client. A meaningful, authentic context is provided, and the teacher’s careful planning provides opportunities for participants to lead the learning within the ‘givens’ of an imagined world (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Heathcote, 2009a, 2009b; Aitken, 2013, 2021; Taylor, 2016). Mantle of the Expert, like process drama, has initiation, experiential, and reflection phases. Engagement is maintained using dramatic tension and controlled use of aesthetic dimensions (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O’Toole & Dunn 2002; Heathcote 2009b; Aitken 2021). While the experience is co-constructed with participants,
key materials and activities are also prepared by the teacher, and the work progresses through a series of carefully planned episodes. This ensures that the learning objectives are met, and specific knowledge and skills are taught.

The teacher using Mantle of the Expert always plans core elements of the work carefully, and with attention to detail, to successfully create the structure within which participants have creative agency (Taylor, 2016; Aitken, 2021). As Heathcote highlights, planning ‘gives us the boundaries so we can focus on the fields of experience’ (Heathcote, 2009b). In Figure 9.1, Taylor (2009) uses squares to indicate the planned-for material in Mantle of the Expert (the boundaries) and wavy lines in between to reflect the learner-directed, unplanned material. Another way of thinking of the model is as presenting ‘structured spaces’ and ‘spaces for play’. Note, the diagram is offered as a heuristic: the two spaces are presented in a linear progression over time, whereas often they will emerge in practice in a more netlike or rhizomatic form. We suggest that it’s the interplay between these two spaces that gives Mantle of the Expert a ‘mutant’ quality and sets up the possibilities for grappling with the multiplicities, divergent thinking, and dislodgement so central to tackling wicked problems.

In Figure 9.1, the squares represent all the considerations that establish the structured spaces in a Mantle of the Expert drama. Within the squares lie the teacher’s detailed planning for things, including establishing ties that bind the group, choice of responsible team or enterprise, the frame and backstory, signs to hook participants in, task sequence, and the ‘givens’ of the imagined world selected to enable participants to become invested in their work and meet specific learning outcomes (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, 1999; Bowell & Heap, 2001; Taylor, 2016; Aitken, 2021). Much of this planning happens before teaching begins, but once the Mantle of the Expert experience is underway, the teacher continues to plan responsively to what is unfolding. Teachers select strategies and conventions to slow down at moments of tension and to make the most of metacognitive opportunities to support student reflection in both real and imagined spaces (Heathcote, 1988; Prior 2001; O’Toole & Dunn, 2002; Taylor, 2016; Aitken 2021). Also carefully considered is how to position the teacher alongside the participants as colleagues, co-artists, co-researchers, and collaborators (Aitken, Fraser & Price, 2007; Edmiston, 2003, 2013). In the structured spaces, clear curriculum learning goals can be planned for and the teacher prepares to notice, respond, and reflect upon participants’ achievements of these goals. At the same time, the structured

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**Figure 9.1** The ‘structured spaces’ and the ‘spaces for play’ in Mantle of the Expert, adapted from a conference presentation handout by Tim Taylor (2009)
spaces support a teacher to establish a frame for play, in which nonlinear, socially mediated, metaplay experiences can occur.

In the spaces for play – the wavy lines between the squares in Figure 9.1 – teachers and participants become co-players and co-constructors. The expression of their play might occur in multiple ways: physically, verbally, through imagery, writing, sound, or music, but it is always inherently dramatic (i.e. involving participation in or awareness of an imagined world). Play involves using the imagination to explore new ideas and to visualise how things might be different beyond the limits of our lived experience. Vygotsky (1966) provides the example of two young sisters, who decide to play ‘being sisters’, to illustrate how in their imaginary play their conceptual understandings about the roles, responsibilities, and behaviour of being sisters are more consciously explored:

One day two sisters, aged five and seven, said to each other: “Let’s play sisters.” [...] the child in playing tries to be a sister. In life the child behaves without thinking that she is her sister’s sister [...] In the game of sisters playing as “sisters”, however, they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact that two sisters decided to play sisters makes them both acquire rules of behaviour. [...] they enact whatever emphasizes their relationship as sisters.

(p. 6)

In this way, through play, children both invoke and explore the implicit rules of everyday behaviours and experiences. Fleer (2009) uses Vygotsky’s ‘let’s play sisters’ example to draw attention to how play supports concept formation. She argues that Vygotsky’s example of sisters at play illustrates an important link between metaplay and learning. It’s worth remembering here that, while the word ‘play’ is most commonly associated with young children, play develops in sophistication with age and evolves into many different forms that support creative problem-solving and concept formation in lifelong learning (Fromberg & Bergen 2006; Johnson 2006; Wood, 2009). It’s also important to avoid the over-simplistic idea that play is the binary opposite of structured experience. Indeed, Vygotsky (1966) argues that although play ‘feels’ free, it is in fact always rule-governed:

I think that whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules – not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation [...] If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behavior [drawn from the child’s own provisional understanding of motherhood...] In play the child is free. But this is an illusory freedom.

(Vygotsky, 1966, pp. 6–7)

While some researchers have observed that older children are drawn to games with rules (Johnson, 2006), Vygotsky argues that there is, rather, a transition between implicit rules and explicit play in early childhood, to games with explicit rules and an implicit imagined world in the play of older children. Mantle of the Expert brings these two types of play together by invoking both at different times. In the structured spaces, where teachers explain and gain the participants’ agreement to ‘play along’, the teacher makes the rules of play explicit. Once the drama gets going and the teachers and participants agree to the established frame and signs, everyone begins to play along with the implicit rules that they invoke themselves. The participants, with their teacher as co-player, maintain these implicit rules by stepping in and out of an established play frame of their own accord.
The spaces for play within Mantle of the Expert support participants to contest and negotiate the rules as part of their collective sense-making play. ‘Rules’ here refers to assumptions, ontologies, and/or perspectives held by participants and teachers alike. Through invoking implicit rules in play, children (and teachers as co-players) become conscious of their own working theories and their concepts of the real world (Vygotsky, 1966; Fleer, 2009). These concepts and theories are then reworked through metaplay negotiation as co-players (Fleer & Dockett, 2002). Further, participants and their teachers stretch their ethical muscles and ‘co-author’ their ethical identities through a process of answerability in a dialogic space (Edmiston, 2000, 2010, 2011; Enciso et al., 2011). The spaces for play within Mantle of the Expert, then, have the potential to be rich learning spaces where knowledge is actively created in relationship with others and thinking is tested against a variety of experiences, perspectives, and viewpoints that exist in a learning group. This aspect of play, as a means of teaching children that theories of the world are provisional, contestable, and always evolving, could be a key strength in an educational context. Observations have shown how adept children at play can be at adopting communication strategies to maintain the implicit rules they have invoked (Fleer & Dockett, 2002; Dunn, 2009). These communication strategies, or metaplay negotiations, are used to coordinate multiple perspectives in order to create and sustain ‘common ground for their play frame as it flows and expands’ (Nourot, 2006, p. 89). Children entering school with a strong basis in play have been found to be highly skilled in metaplay negotiations (Johnson, 2006), and Mantle of the Expert allows teachers to build on these capabilities to support learning across the curriculum.

There is another layer to teaching and learning in Mantle of the Expert that has only been briefly mentioned so far but is critical to its ‘mutant’ quality. As with other forms of dramatic inquiry, the approach depends on participants agreeing to operate in a dual reality: the real world of the classroom and the imagined world of the drama. In fact, this is an oversimplification – there may be multiple imagined worlds at play: the world of the client; the world of the content; the world of the responsible team; the worlds of people past, present, and future who are impacted by or silenced by our imagined actions; and so on. However, we tend to refer to what Boal (1995) terms ‘metaxis’, a state of duality where there is awareness of both the real world and the imagined world simultaneously (Edmiston, 2003; Aitken, Fraser & Price, 2007). Participants’ sense of metaxis means that they navigate the journey between structured experience and spaces for play in both real and imagined worlds. Play generally has an initiation phase in which children decide on a frame for their play (Fleer & Dockett, 2002; Nourot, 2006). Once the frame has been decided, children step in and out to establish a flow of play, either by negotiating within the play frame or by stopping the play and stepping outside the play frame. This stepping between the real and imagined worlds to play, negotiate, and reflect increases the potential for dislodgement of existing understandings.

Also crucial to the ‘mutant’ quality of Mantle of the Expert is that learning happens in a group. Metaplay negotiations and the socially mediated development of concept formations underpin group learning. Edmiston and Enciso (n.d.) use the term ‘refraction’ to describe when a child alters their conceptual understandings in response to having their performances contested by their peers:

When children write about and build performances of their worlds, their words, intonations, and gestures reflect fragments of the relationships, identities, and ideas they value. As their worlds become increasingly public, they also become contested and transformed, refracted, across the dynamic and social relationships in the classrooms.

(p. 868, our emphasis)
Through invoking implicit rules and engaging in metaplay negotiations, participants engaged in Mantle of the Expert collectively reflect and refract their concepts and working theories of the world. They become more aware of their concepts of the world and how it works. Their theories become provisional and open to being reworked and refracted through the development of shared understandings. In Mantle of the Expert, as in child-structured play, participants need to understand the understandings of others to successfully negotiate and move the shared experience forward. Teachers, meanwhile, need to recognise that, through play, participants are building understandings and reworking their theories and conceptual understandings of the world in directions that may not always be clear to an observer (Fleer & Dockett, 2002). Fromberg and Bergen (2006) argue that the group process of coming to shared understandings and re-working theories in play provides support for learning as a non-linear process. By setting up a relational and collaborative engagement with uncertainty, participants can develop more nuanced and robust conceptual understandings akin to those required to respond to the wicked problems and complexity of the real world.

Of course, no pedagogy in and of itself is transformative. As Neelands asserts, ‘it is what we do, through our own human agency, with drama that determines the specific pedagogy and specific powers’ (Neelands, 2004, p. 48, emphasis in original). Any pedagogy that seeks to successfully engage participants with ‘wicked’ problems depends on the skills of a teacher using it. In the case of Mantle of the Expert’s spaces for play, teachers need to learn to notice, recognise, and respond effectively to participants as they drive their play forward, and encourage them to test their thinking against the variety of experiences, perspectives, and viewpoints that exist in the learning group. In the structured spaces, teachers must consider materials that can effectively support participants to convey their conceptual understandings and working theories as they develop, materials that they can trust ‘to hold and communicate the complexity of their ideas’ (Cadwell, 2003, p. 146). Further, teachers must also value the learning of the group as a collective, by recognising the group meaning-making effort; valuing the learning that happens in a group because of the group (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). Teachers can harness the opportunities as a co-player, in the spaces for play, to facilitate the enrichment and modification of provisional theories. The teacher as a co-player can engage in the contestation of ideas as the play unfolds, negotiating through metaplay, and, in doing so, guide participants to develop more nuanced understandings of what constitutes ethical and just behaviour.

If Mantle of the Expert is to reach its potential as a pedagogy for the twenty-first century, there is a need for further research to inform professional practice. While there is increasing recognition of the value of play in learning internationally, there is also a tension with the perceived need for intentional teaching aimed at ensuring that learners successfully achieve curriculum outcomes (Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014; Mardell et al., 2016). This tension is heightened by a lack of teacher education and understanding around different forms of play and limited research into how play can best be harnessed pedagogically, particularly beyond early childhood education (Fleer & Dockett, 2002; Frost et al., 2012; Kuschner, 2012). In the search for a pedagogy that ‘provides theoretically rigorous underpinning for creating unity between playing, learning, and teaching’ (Wood, 2009, p. 38), we suggest that Mantle of the Expert, with its constant interaction between intentional, structured, planned-for elements and periods of playful, dialogic, co-creation as a group, offers a rich starting point for further research and praxis. Properly understood, theorised, and practised, the Mantle of the Expert approach is well positioned to equip young people to face the ‘wicked problems’ of the real world. With this, we can stretch the pedagogy of play promisingly beyond the preschool years.
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References


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