The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education

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Publication details
Sue Bleaken, Viv Aitken
Published online on: 24 May 2022

How to cite :- Sue Bleaken, Viv Aitken. 24 May 2022, ‘Do Something Different…’ from: The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education Routledge
Accessed on: 14 Dec 2023

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‘DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT…’

A teaching inquiry into the use of Mantle of the Expert to support struggling writers

Sue Bleaken and Viv Aitken

Background to the study

When this inquiry began, nationwide data from the Ministry of Education in New Zealand indicated that significant numbers of children were struggling with basic literacy, especially writing (ERO, 2015, p. 5). In a 2013 report, the New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO) found most schools had yet to develop effective approaches for accelerating progress in literacy and that there was an inconsistent approach to identifying priority learners, including Māori and Pasifika (ERO, 2013, p. 1). ERO identified an urgent need for professional development for teachers. They suggested that where schools were seeing progress, this was because teachers had clear knowledge of children who were below the expected level for their age and refused to accept ‘business as usual’ for these learners (ERO, 2013, p. 9). This report, and a subsequent one written in 2014, made it clear that leaders of learning in school needed to ‘do something different’ and look for innovative pedagogies that could be implemented into classrooms to change and accelerate achievement levels for priority learners (ERO, 2014, p. 25).

In 2015 and in the following two years, Sue’s school made the decision to be involved in the Ministry of Education’s Accelerated Literacy Learning (ALL) programme, a school-initiated support programme designed to ‘accelerate the learning of students who have been identified as needing further support to experience learning success in literacy and numeracy’ (Ministry of Education, no date). The ALL programme encouraged teachers to continue to teach target students within their regular learning environment and to adapt their teaching in response to the individual needs of the target students. The key message repeated on the ALL Ministry of Education contract was: ‘there is no silver bullet, teaching practice has to change: do something different’. For the teachers involved in this study, the ‘something different’ they chose to try was Mantle of the Expert, Dorothy Heathcote’s cross-curricula approach in which participants are framed as members of a responsible team working on an important commission for a client, all within an imagined world and explored through drama conventions (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Aitken, 2013).
School involved in the study

The school is a small (N=240) multicultural intermediate school in the heart of Hamilton, New Zealand. It is funded according to its decile three rating. At the time of the inquiry, the demographics included 45% Māori students, 18% Pasifika students, and 15% of students with special education needs. Some students involved in this study had experienced previous schooling in bilingual settings where speaking, reading, and writing had been in a mix of te reo Māori and English. However, the teaching and assessment in this study were carried out in English only.

Participants in the study

**Teacher/Leader** – The first author of this report was the lead teacher for this inquiry. An experienced teacher of nearly 40 years, with a background in drama, including an established programme in which drama was used to teach aspects of restorative practice, Sue was deputy principal and literacy leader at the school. Over the years, Sue had noticed how when students wrote in role, they appeared to be particularly motivated and engaged in the writing task. They wrote for longer, used an elaborate vocabulary, and had a level of sophisticated structure not seen in other writing samples. Sue was particularly encouraged by the level of engagement she observed among Māori and Pasifika boys and the quality of their writing during these drama sessions.

**Teachers** – Sue’s colleague for the first year of the inquiry was a classroom teacher with ten years’ experience. This teacher was organised, used positive and respectful ways of working in the classroom, and had a clear knowledge in literacy and use of ICT to enhance learning. She had not used Mantle of the Expert in her classroom before, but was motivated to work differently with students to lift levels of writing achievement. In the second year, Sue worked alongside two teachers, one of which was a newly graduated beginning teacher. Neither of these teachers had had any prior experience of Mantle of the Expert.

**Students** – The other participants in this inquiry were two classes of students in years 7 and 8, with ages ranging from 11 to 13 years. In each year of the inquiry, a target group of six or seven priority learners was selected from these larger cohorts based on their teacher’s assessments of their achievement levels in literacy in English. Within the target groups, most were orally capable but were assessed as ‘below expectation’ in writing. Some had not experienced explicit, structured, purposeful writing activities within their schooling up to this point. Some students were disengaged from the writing process. In the first year, the target group reduced from seven to five due to students leaving the school. This group consisted of three students of European descent and two identifying as Māori. In the second year, the group contained six students and comprised four Māori and two European. The gender split in the target groups was roughly even between male and female students.

Intervention design

The inquiry was designed around existing assessment practices within the school. All students completed an AsTTle writing assessment at the start of the school year, with the assessment repeated at the end of the year for school-wide data analysis. AsTTle samples involve analysis of ideas, structure, organisation, vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling. These assessments were carried out by the teacher, re-marked by the literacy leader, and moderated by the school literacy team. For the purposes of the study, priority students
in the target groups were asked to complete their second assessment immediately following the Mantle of the Expert intervention.

In the first year of the inquiry, Sue and the teachers planned a Mantle of the Expert experience in which participants were invited to imagine they were part of a company called C.O.L.A. (Collectors of Lost Artefacts): a team with expertise in locating, identifying, and repatriating important cultural artefacts to their countries of origin. Within an imagined world, C.O.L.A was commissioned by an international organisation to repatriate found cultural antiquities that they had recovered and held in their vaults. The experience lasted for a period of 15 weeks. Each session began with Sue and the classroom teacher working together; then Sue would withdraw the target students to work intensively on writing tasks associated with being in the company. In year one, the withdrawal was once a day for about 60–75 minutes for the entire 15 weeks of the Mantle of the Expert experience.

In the second year of the intervention, Sue worked alongside her teaching colleagues to create an imagined building company called ECO homes: a team of builders with expertise in producing environmentally sustainable designs. This company was commissioned by an imaginary government organisation to create sustainable and tiny homes for the Auckland housing market. This time, the intervention lasted for 13 weeks, with withdrawal of the target group students two to three times a week for up to 45 minutes for each session.

While the curriculum content explored within the two teaching experiences was quite different, the shared approach meant there were commonalities in the way writing was supported. In both cases, students had to travel back in time to locate and create the company and use different drama conventions to deepen and build belief. Teachers found this created a real purpose for writing tasks including job descriptions, letters of applications, CVs, business cards, security pass cards, advertisements for the company, reports, and explanations. Company logos, jingles, and television reports and advertisements were also created. Working on the commissions also provided opportunities for embedding literacy within cross-curricula tasks like creating artefacts including sarcophagi and Egyptian jewellery, planning questions for interviews with significant people from the story, drawing up and labelling designs for solar powered machines, creating 3D models of eco houses and dog kennels, and so on. These and other tasks opened multiple opportunities for producing recounts, instructions, diary entries, written explanations, brochures for tours, budgets, and many other kinds of texts.

**Assessment results**

Data in the fourth column (Figure 19.1), show that in both years of the intervention, target students made progress in their writing achievement between the start of the year and the end of the Mantle of the Expert experience: four of the 11 moved from ‘well below expectation’ to ‘below expectation’; six of the 11 shifted from ‘below expectation’ to ‘at expectation’; one of the 11 went from ‘below expectation’ to ‘above expectation’. In terms of curriculum levels (another measure of progress), column three shows all students in the target groups progressed by at least one curriculum level in writing, with one student moving up two curriculum levels. These results align with the ERO’s definition of accelerated progress:

> Progress is considered to be accelerated when a student moves from well below to below, at, or above the National Standard, or when the student moves from below the National Standard to at or above … students need to make more than one year’s progress in a year in order to achieve at the expected level of acceleration.

*(ERO, 2013, p. 4)*
At the time of the inquiry, the school-wide goal for all classes was to have 75% of students in each class to be writing at or above the expected level, that is curriculum levels three and four, respectively. In the classes in which Mantle of the Expert was used, 78% of the students attained this level, while the closest result achieved by any of the other classes in the school was 65%. While it is impossible to prove cause-and-effect, the teachers were convinced that their use of Mantle of the Expert was a significant factor in student success. When the results achieved in year one was mirrored in those of the second target group, this added weight to their conclusions.

Other data

As well as quantitative data from the assessments, some qualitative data were also generated. Student feedback was gathered through informal learning conversations and written reflections. All students were positive about the experience and noted different kinds of growth. Comments included:

- I improved a lot.
- I improved especially in writing.
- I was focused.
- I was organised.
- I felt motivated to write.
- No distractions.
- I wrote more.
• I shifted in my writing.
• Can we do a sequel?

Teacher feedback was also gathered through notetaking at planning and reflection meetings. Comments included the following:

• The confidence transferred to general achievement in the classroom.
• I was surprised at the take up of the boys, especially the Māori boys.
• Why didn’t I know about this way of working before?
• Using this way of learning was extremely effective.
• As a beginning teacher. I was lucky to be part of this.
• Mantle of the Expert had a huge impact on the students’ attitudes towards writing, especially my reluctant writers (boys).
• Not only did this improve their writing skills, it also improved their reading and visual language skills.
• Most of the students in my target group were extremely shy, but they thoroughly enjoyed going into character and filming their news report.

Parents and family were not formally invited to participate in the inquiry, but teachers received comments over emails and in one on one conversation. These included:

• One parent commented that their child’s writing of job application letters and CVs was of such a high standard that they could use them as models for themselves.
• Another parent said the students’ letters were better than the ones they received when they advertised for a job.
• ‘Great way to learn’.
• ‘She comes home buzzing about what she has been doing’.
• ‘Really impressed with his writing’.
• ‘Fantastic artwork’.

It is important to note that the student, teacher, and parent/whānau feedback was anecdotal and non-rigorous (in the sense that no efforts were made to generate non-confirming data). All the same, it provided the teachers with useful confirmation of the assessment results.

**Discussion**

Of course, as Neelands has pointed out, no teaching approach (not even drama!) brings about transformation by itself (Neelands, 2004). What matters is how skilfully the approach is implemented. Understanding this, teachers were careful to avoid ascribing the success of the intervention purely to the teaching method. They acknowledged that a key factor in the success of the intervention was the teachers’ level of experience in terms of cross-curricular teaching and literacy. Another factor was the high level of trust Sue had built up with students in her role as deputy principal and during previous drama sessions to teach aspects of restorative practice. Affirming relationships have been shown to be particularly important in student learning, particularly for Māori students (Bishop et al., 2007, p. 190), so the influence of this trust should not be underestimated. However, teachers concluded that there were aspects of student success that could be attributed to the design of the learning experiences and therefore the teaching approach itself.
Teachers reflected that working in Mantle of the Expert afforded several benefits for writing. First, writing in role allowed students to make mistakes in the safety of an imagined context, while their levels of engagement encouraged them to make corrections by revisiting their writing, something many had difficulty doing or had previously refused to do. Secondly, teachers observed a change in student mindset: their motivation was high to revisit written drafts because the purpose for quality writing felt real and immediate. Would a forensic investigator or an environmental scientist send an application letter or a report if it was poorly constructed or contained surface errors? Thirdly, teachers found that students in the classrooms using Mantle of the Expert had a stronger sense of where they were ‘at’ in their writing than usual, perhaps due to the numerous opportunities to ‘pause’ the drama and reflect on progress. Students came to understand that often their ideas and other deeper features were at or above their expected level, but their surface features were holding them back. A fourth affordance of the Mantle of the Expert approach was that it encouraged students to explore writing as a collaborative activity. Many wrote with partners or in small groups. There is strong research evidence to suggest that writing as collaboration (McLane, 1990, as cited in Barletta et al., 2011, p. 228), as a complex cultural activity (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978, pp. 117–118), or as a form of problem-solving (Bruner, 1978, cited by McLeod 2019, p. 19) produces elaborate and sophisticated writing as the result of students being part of a Mantle of the Expert experience (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Finally, teachers noted how the intervention by the teacher, including the subtle and flexible use of role (Hinton, 2011, p. 7), seemed to promote engagement and therefore higher-quality writing.

As well as supporting students, the classroom teachers and Sue agreed that their professional practice benefitted from this study. This was particularly so for the teacher in the first year of the study, who enjoyed repositioning students as competent co-teachers. The teacher used her considerable technological skills to guide students in using digital programmes to complete the tasks to a high level. However, instead of taking the whole group, she would often teach one or two students, who would then teach the other students in their group or take on the job themselves. This meant there was a sense of ako” – a two-way flow of expertise between teachers and students in the completion of the writing and cross-curriculum tasks. As for Sue, she found her own teaching became more explicit and highly visible as she worked with two sets of learners: the target students and the classroom teacher/s.

Research around engaging students at the middle school level indicates the need to introduce effective pedagogies that include variety, novelty, and practical relevance (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010, p. 27; Poskitt, 2016, p. 4). In this inquiry, teachers found that, in combination with strong relationships and experience in literacy teaching, the use of Mantle of the Expert provided ‘something different’ to support previously struggling writers to be creative, use problem-solving, and write with purpose, care, and attention to detail from a position of expertise.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to the principal, teachers, and students at Melville Intermediate School, Hamilton, Aotearoa/New Zealand, during the time of this teacher inquiry. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.
Notes

1 ‘Teaching inquiries’ are semi-formal research projects that all teachers in New Zealand are expected to conduct as part of their professional registration. The design of these inquiries usually includes a partial review of literature, identification of an issue or problem of practice, a planned intervention, and a generation of data, often including anecdotal forms. Teacher inquiries are not subject to the same standards of rigour as projects by trained researchers: no formal ethics is required beyond approval by the school’s principal and there is often only surface-level analysis of data. The design of teacher inquiries will not necessarily include attempts to find non-confirming data. Findings are used to inform future practice rather than develop theories or contribute new knowledge to the field. Teachers can share findings with students, the school community, and colleagues in the field, provided privacy of participants is respected. In this report, the school and the lead teacher within the inquiry are named, but other teachers and students have not been identified.

2 Intermediate is the schooling between primary and secondary. Children aged between 11 and 13 attend intermediate school for two years.

3 An assessment tool for teaching and learning.

4 This terminology comes from the National Standards, a set of reporting requirements that were in use at the time of this study, but which are no longer used in New Zealand.

5 Funding deciles are ratings used by the Ministry of Education to determine a portion of the funding a school or kura gets. Schools have a rating between 1 and 10. The lower a school’s rating, the more funding it gets.

6 Māori word for family.

7 A Māori-language term denoting reciprocal teaching and learning.

References


