

A co-created, relevant, and engaging education approach fosters student ownership, deepens learning, and enhances motivation by connecting content to real-world experiences and personal interests.

# Mantle of the Expert

USING STORY  
WORLDS TO  
ENGAGE  
YOUNG MINDS

|| Tim Taylor  
*Mantle of the Expert*

**I**magine a classroom. All the students are gathered together, their eyes glued to a large sheet of paper on the floor in front of them. The teacher is drawing on the paper; as she draws, she starts to tell a story: “The elephant arrived early that morning. They knew right away something was wrong; it limped as it stepped cautiously off the back of the transporter. They could all see there was something wrong with its leg.”

The teacher stops and looks at the students. She has drawn the outline of an elephant on the paper. On one of the elephant’s rear legs is a mark representing a wound. The teacher asks, “If you were the people who worked in the animal sanctuary where this elephant has just arrived, what would be your most urgent concerns?”



## Fictional Worlds, Real Learning

This is the first step into a Mantle of the Expert context. The teacher is setting the scene and bringing the students into the fiction as if they are a team of experts. They don't need to have any real-world expertise in looking after elephants; the “mantle” of the expert is not about what they know, but about taking on responsibility. By asking, “What would be your most urgent concerns?,” the teacher is inviting the students to enter the fiction and take on the responsibility of caring for the elephant, as if they worked in the animal sanctuary.

As they get to work, the teacher weaves in curriculum content—information about elephants, first aid skills, caring for animals, and natural environments—while also developing skills in drawing, writing, and creating. Over the course of several sessions, the





students create a map of the animal sanctuary. They draw pictures of the different animals being cared for and identify what they need to survive and thrive. They write information sheets and instructions, invent backstories for the animals and why they are in the sanctuary, and develop plans for caring for the animals and reintroducing them into the wild.

In this way, the curriculum comes alive. The content—the knowledge, skills, and understanding—is relevant and immediately applicable. The events of the story are happening now, and the animals need help urgently. As you can imagine, once the students start to invent problems for the animals, they are rarely simple or straightforward to solve. Students enjoy a challenge, especially when it is one they have created for themselves!

As they work and develop the context, it becomes something that matters to them—something they care about and become heavily invested in, just like the best stories. This is the magic ingredient of the Mantle of the Expert approach. It makes learning not only meaningful and relevant but also fun. Students use the word fun most often when they talk about Mantle of

the Expert. They don't mean fun in a frivolous or silly way, but rather in the sense of something that matters and gives them agency.

## Co-Creation of Learning

The teacher decides on the context that will best develop the students' learning, but the context is expanded and extended by the students' own imagination—their ideas, their contributions, and their growing knowledge and understanding. The story may be started by the teacher but is co-constructed with the class. This means Mantle of the Expert develops a number of significant learning outcomes:

- **Critical thinking and problem-solving:** Students learn to approach complex issues with thoughtful analysis, developing solutions through inquiry and exploration.
- **Collaboration and teamwork:** The co-constructed nature of the Mantle of the Expert encourages students to work together, share ideas, and build on each other's contributions.
- **Empathy and perspective-taking:** By adopting expert roles and caring about fictional scenarios or characters, students develop empathy and learn to consider different viewpoints.
- **Responsibility and accountability:** Students take ownership of their learning by engaging with scenarios where their actions have consequences, fostering a strong sense of responsibility.
- **Creativity and imagination:** Students are encouraged to think creatively, inventing stories, solutions, and ideas that stretch their imagination and problem-solving abilities.
- **Communication skills:** Through writing, drawing, and presenting ideas, students improve their ability to articulate thoughts clearly in both written and oral forms.
- **Real-world application of knowledge:** The Mantle of the Expert integrates curriculum content in a way that feels relevant and applicable to real-life contexts, making learning more meaningful.
- **Increased engagement and motivation:** The immersive, story-driven nature of the approach keeps students highly engaged, as they are actively involved in their learning process.
- **Emotional investment and agency:** Students feel personally invested in the fictional scenarios, giving them a sense of agency and making the learning experience more powerful.

## Other Mantle of the Expert Contexts

- A team of archaeologists uncovers a long-lost tomb in the Valley of the Kings and creates an exhibition of their findings at the Cairo Museum.
- A restoration team restores an ancient castle ruin and reopens it to the public.
- A team of problem-solvers helps characters from fairy tales and traditional stories with their problems—escaping from tall towers, building safe homes, and finding lost children.
- A team of explorers lands on a strange island and begins to catalogue the extraordinary animals and plants they discover there, including dinosaurs.
- A team of garden experts helps an elderly groundsman maintain a large park and public woodland.





- **Adaptability and resilience:** Students face challenges that require flexibility and perseverance, helping them build the ability to adapt to changing situations and overcome obstacles.

### A Bit of History

The Mantle of the Expert idea started with Dorothy Heathcote in the 1990s while she was working at Newcastle University running a teacher training course. Heathcote's idea was to develop an approach that supported teachers in using drama and story-making to create contexts for curriculum study. In the 2000s,

Mantle of the Expert was further developed by teachers, scholars, and researchers, including Luke Abbott and Tim Taylor (UK), Brian Edmiston (USA), David Allen (UK), and Viv Aitken (NZ). Today, the approach is used by hundreds of teachers and other educators around the world. The learning supported by Mantle of the Expert is sometimes given the name “imaginative inquiry” or “dramatic inquiry.”

### How Does Mantle of the Expert Work?

- **Creation of a fictional context** – *planned by the teacher and developed in collaboration with the students.*



The main functions of the fictional context are to create broader opportunities for curriculum learning, make learning meaningful and purposeful, and engage students in curriculum study.

- **Use of a narrative** – *planned by the teacher and developed in collaboration with the students.* The main functions of the narrative are to set up the context for students, offer them a way into the fiction, and make curriculum activities memorable, understandable, and coherent.
- **Use of inquiry questions** – The main functions of inquiry questions are for students to explore, study, and analyze the curriculum; for students and teachers to work together in a learning community; and for the teacher to create opportunities for students to assess, rethink, and shape the direction of the work as it develops.
- **The Expert Team** – *planned by the teacher and developed in collaboration with the students.* Expert teams are made up of people with authority, power, and status; people with responsibilities and duties to others; a community with agreed-upon values and a defined purpose; colleagues with a shared history of challenges, mistakes, and success; and experts with training and experience.
- **The client** – *planned by the teacher.* The purpose of the client is to generate purposeful activities for the team, create a focus for the team, reflect back to the team about how they are performing and what they need to improve, assess and evaluate the work of the team by requiring high standards, provide information and specialist knowledge, and make demands of the team.





## What Teachers, Academics, and School Leaders Say About Mantle of the Expert:

“At the beginning of every term, the first question on the lips of almost all children at our school is: ‘What’s our next Mantle all about?’ They cannot wait to get involved in the tension of a narrative, to work as a team solving problems and to use their collective imagination to create a story, solve problems for their client, and argue their point of view. For 14 years, the children at Woodrow have been telling stories with their teachers, while unboxing the curriculum.”

*Richard Kieran, Headteacher, Woodrow First School, Redditch, UK.*

“Mantle of the Expert was the missing piece in my practice as a progressive educator striving for authenticity and deep engagement in students’ learning. The fictional contexts created through Mantle of the Expert allow entire worlds — past, present, imaginary, and complex — to come to life and be explored. It uses children’s innate ability to imagine as a powerful resource for teaching and learning. Teachers across the US talk about how the inquiry and joy of learning through Mantle of the Expert is critical for schools today.”

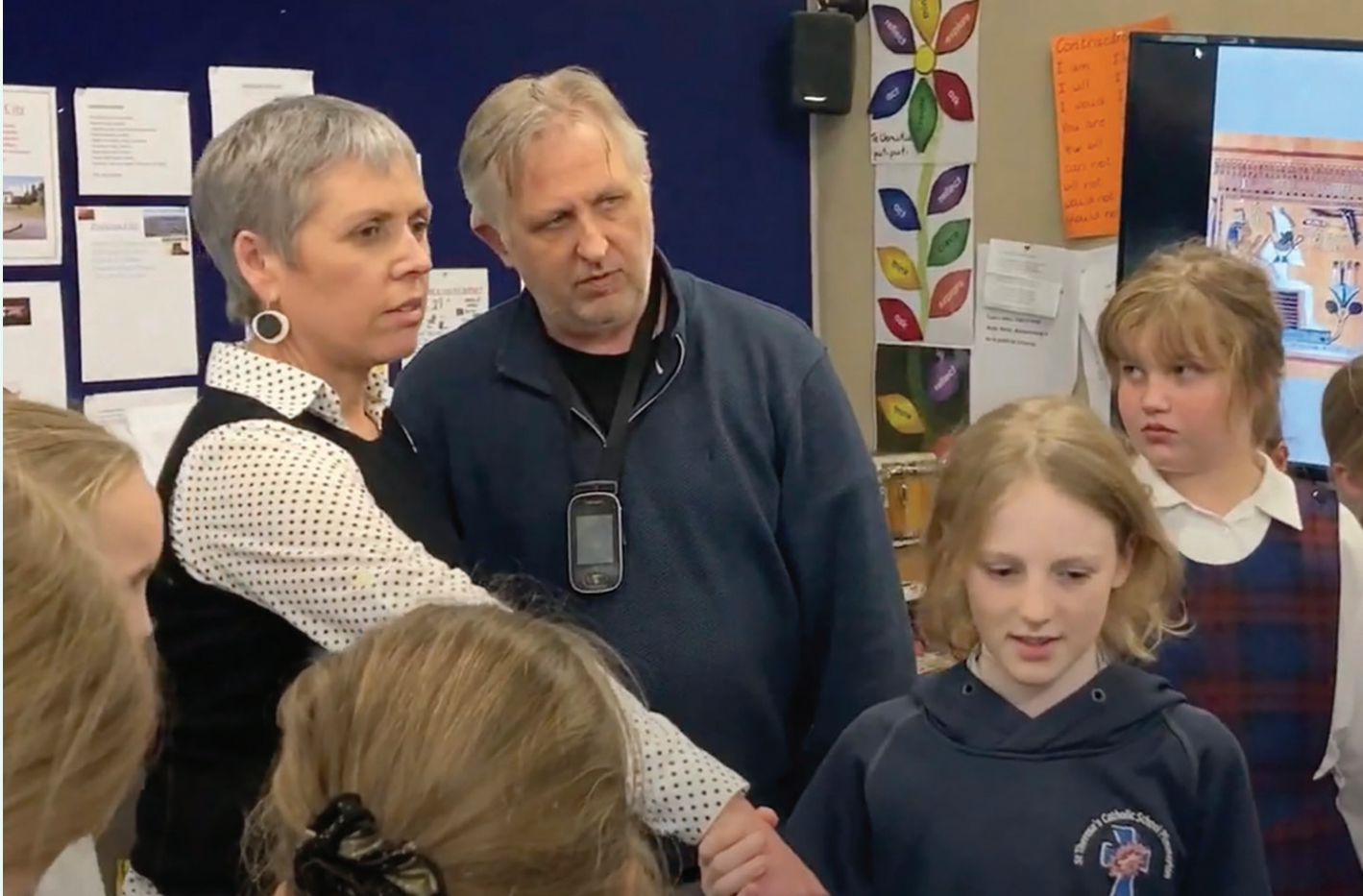
*Elaine Chu, Institute for Imaginative Inquiry, New York, USA.*

“Using Mantle of the Expert pedagogy in Morda Primary School has transformed the way we teach and how children learn. It is wonderful to see children immersing themselves completely in a dramatic fiction. Through carefully structured MoE contexts, pupils travel to distant places, meet and talk with historical and fictional characters, and are at the center of world-changing events. We have found that children become deeply engaged and even positively obsessed by their learning. Being within a story and part of an expert team means children’s learning is so much more purposeful; the story is important to them and so they remember so much more. We have also found that dramatic inquiry fuels and ignites incredible writing.”

*Helen Chapman, Headteacher, Morda Primary School, Shropshire, UK.*

- **The commission** – *planned by the teacher and developed with the students.* The function of the commission is to give purpose to the team’s work and, by extension, to the students’ curriculum studies; focus the work and keep it on course; provide a goal to strive for; create a sense of responsibility; and generate self-worth and a sense of achievement.
- **Different points of view** – The purpose of providing students with different points of view is to examine events from multiple perspectives; provide alternative attitudes, values, and beliefs; generate opportunities to explore people’s motivations; challenge students’ views and conventional thinking; and create opportunities to explore people and events in depth.
- **Tension** – *planned by the teacher and developed in collaboration with the students.* The purpose of tension is to create excitement and interest; generate productive energy by drawing on students’ excitement and commitment to events; create opportunities to examine people’s actions, motivations, and values; and build resilience.
- **Drama conventions** – *planned by the teacher and used in collaboration with the students.* The purpose of drama conventions is to play with time (hold it, rewind it, or jump forward); create opportunities for exploration, examination, discussion, and reflection; investigate people’s actions, motivations, and values; give students the power to influence events; and create a “safe zone” for experimenting with different possibilities and choices.





“Mantle of the Expert is an extremely immersive approach to learning and teaching with a particular impact on students’ motivation and learning outcomes, both academically and socially. Curricular learning is accompanied by the development of civic competencies and indirectly by artistic skills such as experimenting, practice-based research, and expressing oneself individually in personal and effective ways.”

*Bob Selderslaghs, teaching artist, postdoc researcher, and lecturer at the Royale Conservatoire of Antwerp*

“As we work with children and young people to instill life skills and intelligence through drama, Mantle of the Expert gave us essential tools and the right lens to look at our curriculum and to engage children meticulously with inquiry-based learning. At Joy of Drama, we began experimenting with executing Mantle projects online with our students during the pandemic. To our surprise, the online medium was never a hurdle. It only made us innovate and able to reach new spaces of discovery with each Mantle project.”

*Vishakha Chakravarty, Director, Faculty & Operations, Joy of Drama, India*

### Find Out More:

- [www.mantleoftheexpert.com](http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com) – a treasure trove of information and resources, including over 50 planned Mantle of the Expert contexts written by teachers
- [www.trythisbook.org](http://www.trythisbook.org) – a website with resources, plans, and lesson ideas
- <https://mantleoftheexpert.co.nz> – a Mantle of the Expert website in New Zealand
- [www.facebook.com/groups/commissionmodel](https://www.facebook.com/groups/commissionmodel)
- [www.woodrowfirstschool.co.uk](http://www.woodrowfirstschool.co.uk) – a school in the UK using Mantle of the Expert
- [www.bradshawprimaryschool.org](http://www.bradshawprimaryschool.org) – a school in the UK using Mantle of the Expert
- *A Beginner’s Guide to Mantle of the Expert*, by Tim Taylor; available at [www.mantleoftheexpert.com](http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com)
- *Try This: Unlocking Learning With Imagination*, by Tim Taylor & Viv Aitken; available at [www.trythisbook.org](http://www.trythisbook.org)
- *Real in All the Ways That Matter: Weaving learning across the curriculum with Mantle of the Expert*, by Viv Aitken; available at <https://mantleoftheexpert.co.nz>



- “An Introduction to Mantle of the Expert,” a free online course available at <https://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/online-courses-test/>

*About the Author:*

Tim Taylor is an author, freelance teacher, and international trainer. He has worked in schools for over 30 years and regularly supports teachers in developing the approach by working in classrooms to demonstrate Mantle of the Expert and running courses. Tim has worked in the UK, New Zealand, the United States, and Europe. You can contact him at [timtaylor4@me.com](mailto:timtaylor4@me.com) and [@imagineinquiry.bsky.social](https://www.instagram.com/imagineinquiry.bsky.social).

*Disclosure Statement:*

The author is an employee of Mantle of the Expert.

## Education Programs Using Imaginative Inquiry

Imaginative inquiry places students within compelling narratives, encouraging them to explore and learn through imaginative scenarios. The following programs that apply the imaginative inquiry approach demonstrate its versatility and effectiveness in fostering creative and critical thinking skills among students:

**Institute for Imaginative Inquiry:** Based in the United States, this institute offers workshops, coaching, and curriculum development tailored to schools’ and teachers’ needs. Their programs are designed to integrate Imaginative Inquiry into elementary education, fostering deeper learning and engagement among students.

[imagineinquiry.com](http://imagineinquiry.com)

**MicroSociety:** Founded in 1991, MicroSociety is a non-profit organization that creates learning environments where students apply classroom knowledge to real-world settings. Operating in over 300 schools across the United States and in several other countries, the program allows students to engage in dynamic miniature societies, promoting hands-on learning and imaginative exploration.

[www.microsociety.org](http://www.microsociety.org)



**Learning Through Art:** An educational program of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, Learning Through Art pairs practicing artists with public elementary school classrooms. These resident artists collaborate with teachers to create art curricula that tie in with current museum exhibitions, encouraging students to explore and express their creativity within imaginative contexts.

[www.guggenheim.org/for-educators/learning-through-art](http://www.guggenheim.org/for-educators/learning-through-art)