



# Theatre practitioners

## Dorothy Heathcote

by Patrice Baldwin

**D**orothy Heathcote MBE (1926–2011) was a remarkable teacher. Her career spanned 60 years, during which time she worked with young offenders and handicapped hospital patients, as well as children and drama students.

In the 1950s, Heathcote started working innovatively in schools establishing 'inventive and agreed fictions' in 'now' time. She used Teacher in Role (TiR) and developed other conventions to provide structure and form.

'It was anathema to drama specialists, both the traditionalists who saw her work as rejecting real theatre and the progressives who thought she broke all the rules on which child drama was founded.' (Gavin Bolton, *Dorothy Heathcote's Story: The Biography of a Remarkable Drama Teacher* (2003), Trentham Books)



### Getting started

- ▶ The TiR is agent for a rich client who has acquired a remote, uninhabited island and is employing the class as skilled professionals to stay on the island and report back on it in detail and recommend how best to develop it. The children become archaeologists, botanists, geologists, zoologists, ecologists, anthropologists, photographers, etc. Negotiate which groups children belong to and ask what skills different groups bring to the team? Can they share examples of previous, successful work?
- ▶ The agent presents a basic island map. Alternatively, the children can collectively draw one or quickly build a 3D-island together using pieces of material and label it
- ▶ The mission is secret. They pack carefully, leave an ambiguous or coded note for a loved one, start their log of the journey and set off for the island!

### Four models: presented by Dorothy Heathcote at the NATD Conference 2002

- 1) Drama used to explore people**  
Behaviour, circumstances, responses to events which affect them.
- 2) Mantle of the Expert**  
Expert means opportunity to work at knowledge and master skills. Mantle means I declare my calling and live up to what is expected of me in the community.
- 3) Rolling role**  
The base work rolls from teacher to teacher and many classes can share in the common context. This can link teachers and subjects in secondary school and be used by one teacher with several classes.
- 4) Commission model**  
The staff and students will be responders to commissions sent to them from the community, with precise demands and built-in time structure, work and results will always be brought to a publication.

and teacher. The function of the teacher is that of catalyst, enabler, supporter and mediator, provider of tension and focus. In role, the teacher focuses and challenges the children's thinking from within the imagined context.

Heathcote was an exceptionally skilled listener, responding in ways that provoked deeper thought. She was always alert to what children offered, using it to share ownership and open valuable learning pathways.

Dorothy designed Mantle of the Expert (MoE) for teachers with little drama experience: 'I introduced Mantle of the Expert work when I was trying to help teachers who didn't understand creating tension by being playwrights and to cut out the need for children having to act, or express feelings and behave like other people'. (Dorothy Heathcote, *Contexts for Active Learning* (2002), [www.moeplanning.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/dh-contexts-for-active-learning.pdf](http://www.moeplanning.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/dh-contexts-for-active-learning.pdf))

With MoE, children become part of a 'common enterprise' that is fictional but feels authentic. It leads to the acquisition of knowledge, using and developing real skills. Tasks may be commissioned by an external client (imaginary or real), who gives a deadline, for example a TV client wants a short film made about Ancient Egypt.

Children work as community members, for example, as villagers or company workers. They are presented with problems and situations to solve, often involving them in enquiry and completing tasks for clients.

TiR was central to Heathcote's work, helping engage children deeply and shifting the relative status of the children

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### Cross-curricular possibilities

- ▶ Researching what various '... ologists' do!
- ▶ Studying/writing a ship's log/expedition diary
- ▶ Researching/mapping a historic voyage
- ▶ Locating/selecting islands on a world map (researching images and climate)
- ▶ Preparing press releases (written or filmed)
- ▶ Reporting to the client
- ▶ Designing an eco-friendly resort
- ▶ Designing a holiday advert/brochure
- ▶ Sketching the flora and fauna/sacred site/objects
- ▶ Curating a museum display about the island.

### Possible 'productive tensions'

- ▶ A sacred site/ancient writings/hieroglyphics/precious minerals/objects/unknown species of plant or animal/recent habitation are discovered
- ▶ Preparing for a client visit
- ▶ The client decides to make it a five-star tourist island
- ▶ Rumours spread, 'The island is cursed!'
- ▶ Someone leaks the story to the press.