



Exploring history through drama

Tim Taylor explains how by using various dramatic conventions and visual resources, you can transport your students back to the times of the Romans and Celts to develop their historical knowledge, understanding and enthusiasm.

It's funny how time creeps up on you. A little over ten years ago, I wrote my first article for Creative Teaching and Learning. It was called 'Expert Thinking' and was about my very first tentative experiments with using mantle of the expert in the classroom. I admitted to feeling nervous about using drama, being prepared to 'suspend my disbelief' and work in an imaginary space with the children. Reading it now feels odd, a bit like the person in the article is not me. A lot has happened in ten years and having spent a great deal of that time developing my understanding of mantle of the expert, I feel considerably less worried about using drama now and a good deal better qualified to write about Dorothy Heathcote's remarkable approach to teaching and learning.

This article details an imaginary context for learning that I hope you could use in your own classroom. It incorporates much of our current understanding of mantle of the expert, which has developed over the last ten years, in particular because of the work of Heathcote herself, which she continued up until her death in 2011, and the pioneering work of her student, Luke Abbott.

Mantle of the expert has always been an enigmatic approach, not least because of its name, which is hardly catchy, but also because it seems to contradict many of the assumptions of how a classroom should work. Some have called it nothing more than a drama convention while others like to label it as a return to progressive, laissez-faire education. The truth is mantle of the expert resists easy analysis and is difficult to pigeon-hole. On the surface it seems quite straight-forward – establish an imaginary context in which the children work as a team of experts for a client who commissions them to complete various tasks that create opportunities for curriculum teaching and learning – however, underlying this simple structure is a sophisticated pedagogic approach that incorporates drama and inquiry to create multi-layered narrative threads, complex power relationships and dynamic learning opportunities.

Here, we will start with a straight-forward inquiry using a painting which will establish the historical background to the work, then we will 'step into' the past (the world of the context) by using various drama conventions, before finally building the expert team around the children's ideas and developing knowledge.

The imaginary context begins with a farmer finding an ancient Roman security box while tending his field. The box has lain undiscovered for 2,000 years, originally buried during the Iceni revolt following the Roman invasions of AD 43. By using the box as a bridge into history, the context is further developed by the children recreating the dramatic events surrounding its burial. It then returns back to the present as the children adopt the expert point of view as a team of archaeologists, working first outside the fiction to invent the objects hidden in the box and then working inside the fiction as the team interpreting the objects' historical meaning.

To make the planning steps easier to follow, I've divided them up into three discrete sessions of approximately one hour each. This does not mean you have to teach them as three separate lessons although you may choose to.

Session 1 – The Painting: Introducing the Romans and Celts

Resources:

- Painting of 'Vercingetorix throws down his arms at the feet of Julius Caesar' (1899), Lionel Royer (pictured)
- Different coloured post-it notes
- Topic box with books on the Romans and Iceni

For many of the students in your class, this might be the first time they have studied the Romans and the Celts. It is likely some of them will have a bit of background knowledge, but for others it will be an entirely new subject. As a teacher, I resist as much as possible telling kids stuff. For one reason, it's too easy for them. For the second, I've noticed they don't really listen until they are interested. When I'm starting a new area of study, I concentrate first on getting them actively engaged in the subject – asking questions, making connections and drawing conclusions. Once this happens, they are more likely to be receptive to new information.



'Vercingetorix throws down his arms at the feet of Julius Caesar' (1899),
Lionel Royer

To make this work, I need to choose a resource that will grab their attention and at the same time, give them a wealth of new information. Stories can sometimes do this, as well as films, photographs, and first-person interactions with an adult-in-role. These are all useful strategies, but for this context I've chosen a painting – '*Vercingetorix throws down his arms at the feet of Julius Caesar*' by Lionel Royer, painted in 1899. I like this painting a great deal because it is full of dramatic tension and captures wonderfully the moment of triumph and defeat that lies at the heart of the Roman invasions. However, it does have drawbacks. The first and most obvious is that it was painted nearly 2,000 years after the events and is merely an artist's interpretation. The second is that the Celts in the painting are a different tribe from the Iceni and from a different country. Nevertheless, the painting's advantages (in my opinion) outweigh its disadvantages and I've used it many times with children of different ages who have all found it stimulating and exciting.

The following steps are a detailed outline of how I use this painting as the centre of an inquiry. My aims are:

- To engage the children in the context of the painting.
- To give them time and opportunity to study it without being told what it is about.
- To let them ask questions, make guesses and discuss possibilities.
- To encourage them to make inferences and deductions and to begin to draw conclusions.
- To give them new and detailed information (at the end) about the people and cultures depicted in the painting.



Step 1. Looking at the painting

"I'd like to show you a painting. It's quite an old painting, but not as old as the events it portrays. When you look at it, could I ask you first just to say what you notice?"

The students might try to guess what is happening in the painting. If they do, acknowledge their efforts but ask them to hold back on those thoughts for a while and just to describe what they can see as accurately as possible. Sometimes this can take a little while, but it is an important step because you want them to really 'look' at the painting but not yet start interpreting it.

"Hold on to those thoughts for just a moment, we will be coming back to them very quickly, but just for now, can you say only what you can see? For example - I can see a man on a horse pointing empty handed towards the floor and a pile of weapons."

As the students work, help them to use precise language, as if they were describing the events in a book without the reader seeing the painting.

Once you feel everything in the painting has been described (and before it becomes boring), move on to the next step.

Step 2. Interpreting the painting

"In art, nothing is included by accident. This is not a photograph of the event, but a painting, made hundreds of years later. The artist has thought carefully about every tiny detail and what it might mean to a person looking at it. For example, what do you make of this man kneeling here with his arms tied behind his back?"

Give the students time to talk and build on each others' ideas. Try not to do too much of the work for them and keep back your own knowledge - let them

speculate for the time being. It will be a good opportunity for you to find out what they already know. Ask questions to help them dig a bit deeper and make connections. Keep the language speculative...

"I see. So you think this man might be the king's brother. Is he hoping to free him do you think?" etc.

Step 3. Giving some background

Once the inquiry has developed, it is likely the children will be ready for some answers...

"If it will help, I can tell you something about this painting. It was actually painted in 1899 in France, nearly 2,000 years after the event. It depicts the surrender of a Celtic chieftain called Vercingetorix, who led a revolt (a war) against Roman power. Here he is surrendering to the Roman Emperor, Julius Caesar. After this, he was imprisoned for five years, then paraded through Rome and finally executed."

Give the students the opportunity to ask you questions. Be honest about what you don't know and don't make things up. It is important they can use you as an accurate historical resource. You can find all the information you need on Wikipedia and other similar websites.

Step 4. Reflection

For this next step you will need some post-it notes, ideally two different colours.

"So what do we make of these people, the Celts and the Romans? I'm wondering if by looking at the painting, the way they are dressed, their weapons, their banners and everything else, we might be able to say something about them as different cultures. For example, what about the different shapes of their shields and their motifs?"



Your aim is to begin a discussion about the contrast between the straight, angular, lines of the Roman designs and the more rounded, organic, shapes of the Celts. Encourage the students to ask questions and make inferences about the two different cultures and what was important to them as people.

Finally, use the post-it notes to work with the students to collect their thoughts. On one colour, ask them to write the things they know (or might know) about the Celts and the Romans, and on the other, questions they would like to know more about. You could also introduce them to the topic books as they work, putting them out onto the tables – *"You might find these useful..."*

By the end of this session, you are likely to have the makings of a quick wall display, with a copy of the painting surrounded by different coloured post-it notes recording the children's new knowledge and questions.

Session 2 – The Roman Box: Stepping back into history

Resources:

- Some large sheets of sugar paper (to write down key questions and ideas)
- Stack of A5 paper (for the children to use)
- An adult in role (AIR)

Step 1. The farmer finds the chest

Gather the class round a large sheet of sugar paper. Start drawing the outline of the box). At the same time, tell the following story:

"I'd like to tell you about something that was found in a field... it was found by a farmer, who was out ploughing one early morning. He was driving his tractor when the plough caught something hard. He knew a sound like that could spell trouble (a broken blade or something) so he jumped out of his cab and rushed round the back of the tractor to have a look. There, after he cleared away some of the earth, was a very curious thing. A large metal box buried deep in the ground, you can see the size of it, a large metal box with a curious lid. (Start drawing the two handles) The lid had two metal handles, that looked like this... he tried to turn them, but couldn't - that had to be done later at the museum, after the box was carefully lifted out of the ground and washed clean."

Step 2. Speculation

"I'll show you how the opening mechanism worked." (Lean over the box and 'grab' the handles, turn them simultaneously. Show them again, and then sit back. The children might like to have a go.) *"Clearly whoever put things in this box must have thought a lot of them..."*

Wait a moment and see if the students say anything. If they're getting interested, they might start making some suggestions.

Give them a little time to think, if they don't start to speculate then guide them along, however try to avoid leading them or being 'teachery'.

"Someone obviously went to a lot of trouble, this box is very heavy and why would they want to bury it? When they cleared off the mud, the archaeologists found wonderful engravings carved into sides. This was not something you would want hidden in the ground."

This is a sort of 'fishing' exercise. You are not after the right answer, you just want to draw the children out, giving them time and opportunity to speculate. Don't worry if their ideas seem unlikely or fanciful, as the story-teller you can always get the narrative back on track and if someone does start to make the right connections then you have the perfect in.

Step 3. The Roman villa

"There was something else the archaeologists uncovered when they examined the site where the box was found. After some more digging, they found the ruins of a Roman villa – not much left now, but what there was showed signs of fire damage. It is possible the villa was completely destroyed by fire."

Again, give the students time to talk and speculate. Go carefully, this is all about negotiation and judging the right moment, the students don't want to feel as though you are playing them along. They might start to join everything up, but don't be disappointed if they don't.

Step 4. Burying the chest

Up until now, you have been holding back on information (in the same way you did with the painting inquiry) giving the children the opportunity to ask questions, make connections and imagine possible events. In this next step, you will use an adult in role (AIR) to shift the inquiry from the classroom space into an imaginary historical space and build a contextual inquiry through the use of dramatic conventions.

"I'm just going to ask Mrs Brown if she would help us out. What we would

like to see Mrs Brown is the moment just after the box was buried, but before the villa was burnt down. Obviously the people who burnt down the villa didn't discover the box, because it's here! But there might have been a moment when they were outside trying to get in. We'd like you to help us with that.

"Okay, we're just going to watch as Mrs Brown gets ready."

The adult then takes a position crouched on the floor, next to the box, her head down. This is a convention of drama where the role is depicted as frozen in time, like in a painting or a statue. The children have permission to stare and make observations and the role will not react.

After the class have had time to talk and the time is right, you can bring the role to life with a touch on the shoulder. Starting a new convention where the person in role will listen and respond as if they can hear what the children are saying even though they are not with them. The children themselves are outside the fiction looking in – the convention gives them the opportunity to question the person inside the fiction without having to participate. It is an extremely useful teaching strategy as it allows the person in role to give important information (including curriculum knowledge) to the class without it feeling like a lesson.

Through this process, the AIR should convey the following information:

- The house is being attacked and they are outside, she can hear them thumping on the door, screaming.
- They're climbing on the roof. There's no way out.
- When asked, she should tell the children the attackers call themselves the Iceni and give them some information – she might apologise for not knowing much.
- She has buried the box to protect the things inside. They are precious, family things, and she doesn't want the barbarians getting hold of them.
- Her husband is a general in the Roman army, he is away fighting the war and her eldest son is with him.

Step 5. The children step into the fiction

In this next step, you will use a further convention to help the children step into the fiction, joining the woman either as members of her household or as the Iceni warriors outside.

Start by addressing the woman in the story: *"Thank you, I think we have taken enough of your time."* AIR returns to the still-frame, head bowed. *"You know, rich Romans were rarely alone. They had large households of servants and slaves, and she might even have had other children with her at this time. If you would like to be in this picture as one of these people then, we could make that happen. Is there anyone who would like to represent one of her family?"*

Be careful to take this slowly. As each of the volunteers makes themselves known, ask them to say who they are and to join the AIR in the picture. Ask the rest of the class to watch and interpret their choice of actions. Are they standing close? Are they worried about themselves more than the woman? Are they being protective? etc. In this way the children will create a tableau, a moment trapped in time, just before the Iceni broke into the house and these people's lives were changed forever.



It is unlikely all the children will volunteer to be members of the household and you will be left with a group sitting and watching those now in role. These will soon join the fiction, but be careful, as they might be a bit worried about being stared at. Make sure the students feel safe and protected. The aim is to have everyone involved, but not scared.

Ask those sitting outside the fiction to please stand. *"This is the story of the night the box was buried in the ground. Desperately, those people of the Roman household hid away their most precious objects in the near and certain knowledge that they would never see them again. Outside the house, the Iceni warriors – fierce and angry – gathered, preparing to break in. Watching from the shadows were the Roman people's neighbours, terrified it would be their turn next."*

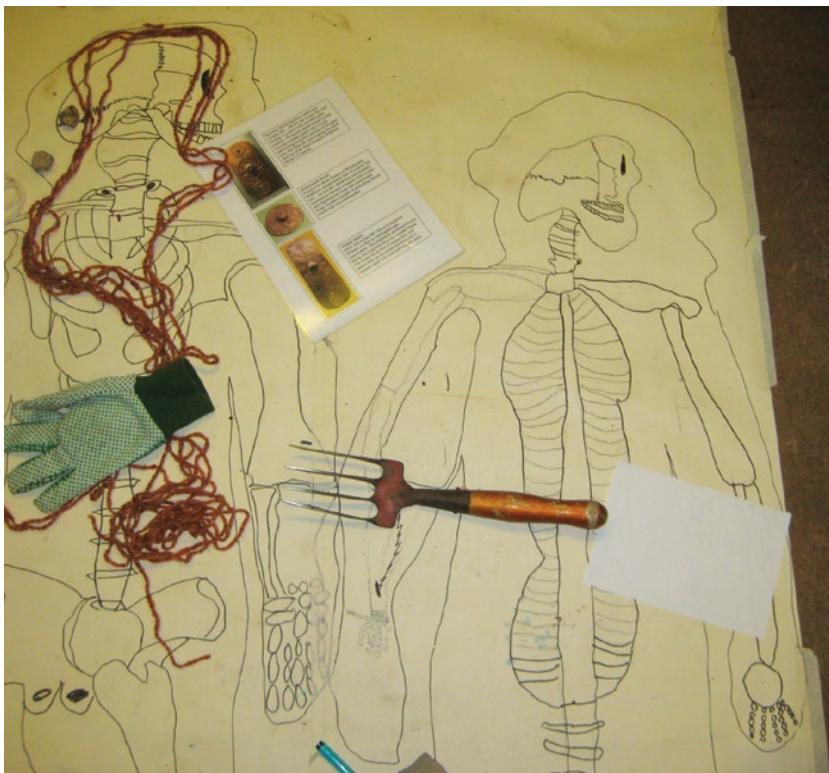
The remaining children can now choose between representing either the Iceni warriors or the neighbours of the Roman family. Allow them the opportunity to change role if they want to at any time.

Give the children time to decide where to stand. Gather together those representing the Iceni warriors.

"We are here because we have been driven here. We didn't choose this. We didn't ask the Romans to take our land, enslave our people, steal our food. Each of us must protect our queen, protect our land, take this burning flame and be ready."

Be careful not to let things rush ahead at this point. Step outside the fiction and talk to the children.

"I wonder what the Iceni warriors shouted?" They were angry. Terrible things had been done to them, to their people, to their queen. But the people in this house aren't soldiers, they are ordinary people, children and servants, try and hold the moment to give the class the opportunity to think and reflect. Remember they



are *representing* the people in the fiction, not being them. This is a chance for the children to experience in a small way something of what it might have been like, but they do not have to agree with the actions the Iceni took.

"I wonder which one of us will be the first to light the fire? Be careful, don't do this lightly... whoever it is will carry the burden for the rest of their lives. There are women and children in this household - innocents. And slaves who have chosen to die with their Roman masters... I wonder if there are any among us who have doubts?"

"Two thousand years later we know the Iceni did it, [Note, the shift in language to distance the students from the action] we can see the evidence, and I doubt they would ever admit it, but in their own hearts, some of the warriors might have been reluctant about doing this to innocent people. This is not noble, not the same as facing your enemies, looking them in the eye. I wonder what happened

to them to make them do such a terrible thing? To act in such a terrible way."

Here is a chance to hear from the Iceni. Again, hold the moment using convention and ask the warriors for their voices. You might want to structure it by using a line which all the warriors can repeat, something like: "I am here to/because..."

- "I am here to avenge my family."
- "I am here because the Romans burnt our crops."
- "I am here to kill the invaders."

"And what did the neighbours do? Were there any among them brave enough to speak out? To try and stop what was happening in front of them?"

Throughout this inquiry, give help and support to the students and give them opportunities to help and support each other. The idea is not too 'load' them with the guilt of the people they represent, but rather to create a dramatic situation that will create different points of view and different attitudes. The use of the conventions can help the students to pull back from the events themselves and to re-interpret them from the distance of history.

Step 7. Reflection

Once the dramatic-inquiry is over, bring everyone together again.

"What did you make of that? Did it have a sense of authenticity? I mean could you imagine it happening?"

"What did you make of the Iceni warriors? And the neighbours, I wonder if there was anything they could have done?"

"Do you think things like that still happen in the world?"

Session 3 – The Archaeology Team: The mantle of the expert

A timeline recording sequence of events:



Step 1. Establishing the expert point of view

Gather the class together. Put the picture of the box on the floor. *"I wondering what it's like opening something like this for the first time in 2,000 years..."*

Give the students time to think and talk. *"I mean for the archaeologists, working in the museum. I guess for them it's like a time capsule, something that is going to teach them new things about the past. I suppose some of the things in this box will be familiar, but others might be completely original, the first (or should I say, last) of their kind..."*

"What do you think? If we were the archaeology team, what do think might be in here? I'm guessing not just gold. When we heard from the lady who buried it, she didn't say treasure, she said precious. Precious I suppose means something different in this context. I remember her saying they were important

things, important to her and her family because they held memories and she didn't want the barbarians getting their hands on them."

"And they would be precious to us as well, as the archaeologists... but in a different way."

Throughout this monologue it is important to be slow and thoughtful, as if the thoughts are just coming to you as you speak. Be patient and give opportunities for the students join in with thoughts and ideas of their own.

"We'll have to wear our gloves. If the box is air tight, the artefacts won't have been exposed to any air for 2,000 years. If we are very lucky there might even be some surviving parchment... Have you got your cameras ready? After we take the objects out, one at a time, they will have to be photographed and researched..."

Pick up the A5 paper and start handing it out.

"You can use this paper to draw pictures of the things you find. Please use the books here (point to the topic books) to help with your research. You might find some of the objects within their pages."

Step 2. Research

You will need a selection of books and pictures out on the tables. There are many good topic books on the Romans, but you might also want to make up a collection of fact sheets.

Repeat as you hand out the A5 paper: *"Please take of these. For the photographs, you might find the books on the tables useful. Could you please make a drawing of the photograph of the object you are looking at from the box? Please include as much detail as you can. We don't want to miss anything important..."*

As the students start to work, help them out where needed. Try and hold the fiction as much as possible, although you might need to step out of role if you have a child who is really unsure. *"Have you looked in the books? You might find something that looks like one of the objects from the box in one of those. If you do, then a quick sketch would be very helpful."*

Remember the students are authoring and inventing, not pretending to be archaeologists. As they work, extend their thinking; *"Would you mind please writing next to your photograph what the object is and what (if any) use it had?"*

Once the objects are drawn collect them together on the evidence table. You can extend this activity by creating (with the students) the other tools and equipment used by the team. Alternatively, you could bring in real equipment – gloves, tweezers, magnifying glass etc.

Provide some feedback and invite thinking. Remember, this is not 'show and tell' and try not to praise. Try to find the language 'inside' the fiction. It's often worth practicing beforehand. Something like, *"There is more here than we could have ever hoped for. And so varied. Some of these artefacts are beautiful, look at this ring for example, and others just plain and ordinary, like this child's wooden toy. What's clear is there is a real mystery at the heart of all this. Why put all these objects in a security box and bury it in the ground? Do you think they meant to come back for them? They must have been important... but why?"*

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Knowledge trails

- 1) **Expert thinking** – Tim Taylor and Luke Abbott examine the common sense of using the mantle of the expert and other dramatic conventions to help children improve their critical and creative thinking.
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/expertthinking>
- 2) **Breaking the exam yoke** – Mantle of the Expert isn't just for primary age students. Louise Astbury describes how she led her A-level English Language class in a 'life coaching' role play project based on the work of Dorothy Heathcote.
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/breaking-the-exam-yoke>