



*All play means something.<sup>1</sup>*

—Johan Huizinga

In the first part of this book we discussed the question ‘what is Mantle of the Expert?’ and looked at the principles and values underpinning the approach, as well as its various elements, strategies, and conventions. In this second part we will tackle a new question, ‘how can I use Mantle of the Expert in my classroom?’ and in the process look at four new topics: imaginary contexts for learning, planning, starting, and teaching.

This chapter is about how imaginary play, something children seem to do universally, can be adapted and applied to create engaging contexts for learning. In particular, we will look at the way language operates as the primary mechanism in this process, and how shifting in and out of the fiction can be used to generate both student interest in curriculum activities and to give a sense of purpose to their learning.

When I first started using Mantle of the Expert, I struggled to understand how to move the children in and out of the imaginary world. I used all kinds of props and tricks, including clipboards, music, and activities, to make it easier, but nothing seemed right, and it was all very clunky, like a new driver grinding the gears.

I remember one strategy which involved me wearing a badge with two names on. On one side was ‘Mr Taylor, teacher’, on the other ‘Mr Brown, security’. Whenever I wanted the children to be outside the fiction I would turn the badge to Mr Taylor. Whenever I wanted them on the inside, I would turn it to Mr Brown. This involved quite a lot of badge-turning on my part, which the children generally ignored.

One day they were busy doing a piece of writing – instructions for feeding the dogs, I think – when one of them, Callum, raised his hand.

“Yes, Callum?” I said.

“How do you spell ‘kennel’?” He asked.

“Who are you asking?” I replied, being clever and twisting the badge to give him a clue.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Who spells best?”

That was it for my silly badge strategy, and the badge went in the bin, along with the clipboard, my collection of hats, and the team’s name on the classroom door. All were unnecessary as far as the children were concerned; they were just props to help me in the process.

What I needed was to work out how Luke, Dorothy, and the other people I saw using the approach made it look so easy and uncomplicated. My breakthrough came one day while playing at home with my own children. They were quite young at the time.

“This is for you, Daddy,” said Lilly, the oldest, putting a crown on my head. “You’re the prince and you’re going to marry the princess.”

“How’s that going to happen?” I asked.

“Ettie is in the church. Finn and me are going to bring you in. I’m the Queen, he’s the King.”

“I see. How should we start?”

“We’ll hold your arms.” Lilly took one arm, Finn the other, and they led me into the church (our living room, all dressed up for the occasion).

To help out the mood, I hummed a tune: “Dum, dum, dee-dum... dum, dum, deeee-dum.”

Ettie stood there in her wedding dress. She looked at me and giggled. (I must have looked a right state in my plastic gold crown and tiny pink cape.)

And then – BAM! – I got it. This is it! We’re doing it! Lilly is doing what I find so difficult and she’s doing it without even trying. She’s *guiding* me into the fiction and she’s using the language of drama to make it happen. One second we’re on the ‘outside’ talking about it, with her telling me who I am and what’s going to happen, and the next we’re on the ‘inside’, walking into the church as if in a story.

There were no tricks, no gimmicks, no complicated strategies: Lilly and the others just did it. And because I shut up and listened – rather than overcomplicating things with my adult view of the world – I did it too. Easy.

This revelation changed my practice forever: I realised I had to stop thinking like a teacher if I wanted to do this, and start thinking like a child. My rational view of the world was getting in the way of my practice and I had to stop treating *Mantle of the Expert* as something I did to my class, and start thinking of it as something we did together.

Imaginary play was the key, and it made me entirely rethink the way I used language in the classroom. I started talking much more ‘in the moment’, as if events were really happening, and began explaining to my class when we were ‘in’ and when we were ‘out’, just as Lilly had done when guiding me into their story.

It was literally child’s play, but I’d forgotten how to do it.

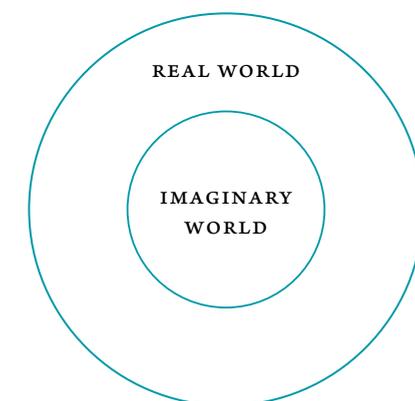
To illustrate the process I’m going to tell two stories. The first involves a young boy at home with his mother, playing a game centred on his own interests. The second involves a class of children in Year 1, working with their teacher to create an imaginary context, which they are using to explore the curriculum. Both stories involve the use of language and the way it moves the participants in and out of the fictional world.

A boy is watching his favourite film about dinosaurs. His arms and legs twitch in response to events on the screen, and his lips move as he repeats the familiar words of the actors. He knows the film by heart and all around him are the dinosaur toys he plays with from morning to night: constantly lining them up in rows, organising them into sets, and bringing them together for epic battles. These things represent in their different forms (movies, toys, pictures, and stories) the landscape of his imagination, played out and repeated time and time again. Together, they provide him with a meaningful and exciting context to explore his ideas and to develop his personal understanding of the world. They are the bridges that link the internal world of his mind with the external world of reality around him.

When the film finishes, he jumps down from the sofa and lies flat on the ground, bringing his eyes to the level of the dinosaurs. He looks at them intently for a while, exploring them from different angles, then starts to move them around, growling and roaring as they attack each other. Reaching into a box, he pulls out a human-shaped figure, dressed in khaki and carrying a rifle. He carefully places the figure behind a wooden building block and then edges him out so the figure can watch the dinosaurs without being seen. The boy then shifts his own position so he can lie behind the figure and see the dinosaurs fighting from a different point of view. In his mind, he has brought together his toys and the events of the film into a new landscape: an imaginary world, where he is in control.

Suddenly, his concentration is broken by his mother, calling him for lunch. Although he is reluctant to leave the world of his imagination, the boy notices his hunger and stops his game for food. The real world has intervened and for a while it takes precedence.

As he leaves his toys and walks into the dining-room, the boy’s attention switches from the internal imaginary world of dinosaurs, to the external real world of home and family.



The two worlds continue to exist simultaneously for the boy for as long as he chooses or until his mind moves on to something new.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, the dinosaur world of his imagination is nested within the real world of his home. During the time he is playing with his toys, the boy is foregrounding events in the imaginary world (dinosaurs fighting, explorers hiding) and pushing into the background the real-world aspects of his home: the carpet, the sofa, the walls of the house. When his mum calls him for lunch, the emphasis switches and the boy concentrates instead on the real-world events of sitting at the table and eating.

As they share lunch, the boy is keen to tell his mum all about events in his imaginary world. She listens carefully and asks him questions. Of course, she has heard much of it before, but she recognises that it is important to her son and she is keen to encourage him.

“Tell me about this explorer,” she asks. “Can the dinosaurs see him?”

“Not at the moment,” he replies.

“Are they going to?” she asks.

“Yes,” he nods.

“Then what will happen?”

“They are going to chase him.”

As they talk, the two of them are outside the fiction, in the real world, thinking about and discussing events in the dinosaur world of the boy’s imagination. Importantly, both treat this imaginary world as if it were real. The mother’s questions are serious and respectful (she does not want to diminish his game), while the boy’s answers treat her as someone he can trust. There is no sense of irony between them: she is not laughing at his earnestness or making sly comments that undermine his enthusiasm. She understands that her son has invested a lot of his time and emotional energy in this world, and for him it is a serious business.

After lunch the boy invites her to join in.

“Would you like to play?” he asks.

She checks the clock and agrees with a smile.

“You can be the *T. Rex*,” he says.

“All right,” she replies, “show me how they look.”

The boy bears his teeth, turns his fingers into claws, and goes into a crouch. “AAAAAAHHHHH!” he roars.

“I see,” says his mum. “So, how should we start?”

“You chase me,” he replies, “like in the film.”

“OK,” she says, letting out a roar of her own and chasing him into the living room.

At that moment both mother and son have jumped into the imaginary world and the game begins. He takes on the role of an adult explorer: a resourceful character, unafraid, knowledgeable, and able. His mum becomes a terrifying dinosaur with a mouth full of sharp teeth: hungry, intelligent, and intent on catching her prey. It is not that

the real world has entirely disappeared – the living-room furniture and the dining table are still there – it is just that the boy and his mother have chosen to put these things to the backs of their minds, concentrating instead on the events, characters, and scenery of the fiction. This is a conscious and negotiated suspension of reality, agreed by both parties, in order to create a shared fictional world where they can enjoy being entirely different. The boy wants a safe and controlled way to experience the excitement of his favourite film, and his mum is happy to help him by taking on the role of a *T. Rex*. Entering the fiction is easy for them: all they have to do is suspend their disbelief for a short time and play as if the imaginary world were real.

As they run around the lounge and up the stairs, the *T. Rex* snaps its jaws and roars loudly. The explorer ducks and weaves, trying to escape. Suddenly, the *T. Rex* grabs the explorer and pretend-bites his neck. “AAAAAAHHHH!” it roars, chomping and biting.

This is too much for the boy and he bursts into tears. Without meaning to, his mum has gone too far. She has scared him, and at that moment (for the boy at least) the story stops. His tears are real-world tears, his fears are real-world fears. His mum, recognising this change, stops being the *T. Rex* and turns her pretend bite into a cuddle.

The two of them are back now in the real world.

“I’m sorry,” she apologises. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“No,” the boy sniffs, “the *T. Rex* doesn’t catch the explorer.”

“Oh,” says his mum, “I got that wrong. Please, tell me what happens next.”

The boy explains how the *T. Rex* nearly catches the explorer, and how the explorer makes the dinosaur fall into a trap.

His mum listens carefully.

“I see,” she says. “I think I get it now.”

The boy stops crying and wipes away his tears.

“Shall we try again?” she asks, making her hands into dinosaur claws.

The boy smiles and agrees.

Turning away, he runs back into the jungle, dodging and weaving his way through the trees. His mum roars and chases after him, now careful not to actually catch him.

Both are back in the imaginary world.

This is how child-initiated play works. The child decides on the fiction – location, characters, narrative – and the adult plays along. To enter into the imaginary world of the child, the adult needs to be invited in. She needs to ask questions to understand the context, and she needs to stop and start at the behest of the child. The child is in charge, it is his world, and the adult is entering the world on his terms. This is why, when she gets it wrong by grabbing him and making him cry, she has to come out of the fiction (stopping time in the fictional world) to apologise and negotiate her way back in.

This process of stopping and starting the story so the participants can step in and out of the imaginary world is a fundamental aspect of imaginary play. It allows the participants to create and then reshape the imaginary world as they want it to be. There is no final version as such, just a temporary and contingent *something*, which those involved can enjoy for as long as they will.

The following table illustrates the inside-outside-inside nature of the boy's game:<sup>3</sup>

DESCRIPTION	FICTIONAL WORLD		EVENTS	PURPOSE
	Child	Adult		
A boy watches his favourite film	outside	outside	A boy sits and watches a film	For the boy to enjoy fictional events in a film he knows well
The boy plays with his toys	inside	outside	An explorer hides from dinosaurs	For the boy to create and explore the story using his toys
The boy eats lunch with his mum	outside	outside	The boy and his mum eat lunch together	To satisfy their hunger
The boy tells his mum about the film and his game	outside	outside	The boy tells his mum about events in the film and his game	For the boy to inform his mum and share his ideas
The boy and his mum play his game	inside	inside	A <i>T. rex</i> chases the explorer through the jungle	For the boy to experience his story world
The boy cries	outside	inside	The boy is scared by an unexpected event	For the boy to signal fear and confusion
The boy and his mum talk	outside	outside	His mum apologises; the boy tells her how he wants the game to go	For his mum to allay the boy's fears and renegotiate her way back into the game
Both return to the game	inside	inside	The <i>T. rex</i> chases the explorer without catching him	For the boy to experience the story as he wants it

It is important to emphasise the social and cultural dimensions of this process. The boy, although he is playing alone to begin with, is not inventing the world of his imagination from thin air. His game of dinosaurs, jungles, and explorers is a variation on what he has learned from watching films, reading books, looking at pictures, and talking to others. When he involves his mother in this game, she brings her own social and cultural information about dinosaurs, jungles, and explorers, which she can share and add to their combined pool of knowledge. For example, later, while they are building the trap together for the dinosaur (outside the fiction), she teaches her son

how to tie pieces of wood together using string and tells him about other animals, such as tigers and pythons, found in the jungle.

Imaginative play, then, is a medium for learning about the world, including its fictional dimensions. It creates psychological landscapes where those participating can connect new sources of information and experiences to existing banks of knowledge and understanding. This process is about making meaning, joining together, and forging links. It is also about exploring the use of power, taking risks in a safe environment, and expressing thoughts, ideas, and values. These represent the key aspects of imaginative play as a medium for learning and can all be found in the boy's dinosaur game:

- It is a world the boy controls, and which operates under his rules. He decides what happens, when it happens, and who is involved. It is a place for him to explore what it is to have power and authority, and both opportunities and responsibilities.
- It is a 'safe zone' the boy can use to generate exciting and risky scenarios which, in the real world, would be far too dangerous for him. He can create opportunities to explore risk and danger, as well as their implications and opportunities.
- It is built from 'stuff' in the real world: that is, storylines, contexts, landscapes, creatures, and people. The boy can interact with these features and shape them for his own purposes.
- It creates a learning environment where the boy can make meaning of the world. That is, he can experiment and explore what it is to be a human being, including the fictional worlds of his imagination.
- It is a landscape where the boy can make connections in his mind between what he knows and what he is finding out about. That is, the interactions between the two worlds can help the boy build cognitive bridges, connecting new and existing knowledge and understanding.
- It generates opportunities for the boy to create 'products', using various forms of representation – pictures, writing, enactive movement, and spoken words – for him to develop his skills of communication and human interaction.

As far as we can tell, imaginative play is something human beings do innately and universally from a young age. There is no need for the boy and his mother to go on a 'How to Play' course or to read books with titles like 'Play For Beginners'. They just know how to do it. And as the boy plays, he learns, just like other children, from all over the world, have learned for countless generations.

The first important difference between imaginative play at home and imaginative play at school is that no single person is in charge of the imaginary world in the classroom. While playing at home, the boy is in charge of his imaginary world: he's the boss, he decides what happens and when. In the classroom it is the community that decides, under the guidance and support of the teacher. Co-operation and compromise play a much larger role in school, and the boy (along with his classmates) has to learn how to adapt and accept the different pressures and responsibilities this involves.

Unlike at home, where the primary focus of the boy's imaginative play is his enjoyment, in the classroom the primary and overriding concern is with curriculum learning. It is the teacher's job to plan and guide the activities of the imaginary world in the direction of purposeful and productive learning. It is no good creating an imaginary world full of fun and excitement, where the children can't wait to get into the classroom, if nothing of any substance gets done and the activities are nothing more than a series of disconnected games, without curriculum purpose or direction. Such a place is not a classroom: it's a playground.

Let's imagine we drop in on a Mantle of the Expert class about a week into their context called Dinosaur Island. If we look around the room, we can see signs of activity from the imaginary world: health and safety posters, a map of the island, pictures of dinosaurs, Lego models of vehicles and buildings.

Currently, the children are sitting in a circle on the carpet, discussing with their teacher how to help an injured triceratops. Lying on the floor, in the middle of the circle, is a member of the class. She is curled up and still.

"Is she still breathing?" the teacher asks.

"Yes," replies one of the children. Others nod in agreement.

"That wound looks nasty," says the teacher. "Did we bring a first aid kit?"

This first exchange is inside the fiction. The child on the floor represents the injured triceratops; the other children and the teacher are members of a team of explorers.

"Take a look in your rucksack," says the teacher, opening an imaginary bag in front of her and modelling this way of working for the children. They follow her lead.

"I think we'll need one of these," she says, holding up an imaginary syringe and squeezing it. "What else do you think we will need?"

The children make suggestions. The teacher supplements their knowledge with suggestions of her own. She is working in the moment, giving the class opportunities to make contributions of their own, but always looking to extend their thinking. When they are ready, they set to work.

For the next fifteen minutes, the children (as explorers) operate as a

team, working together to save the life of the triceratops, while their teacher (in the role of a colleague) supports and guides their work. In this way, inside and outside the fiction, she is able to give advice, provide additional information, and direct activities.

Occasionally, this involves her stopping the fiction entirely. She does this twice during the session: once to teach the children information on dinosaur anatomy (using a prepared image on the whiteboard), and once to deal with a member of the team who is administering his medicine rather too enthusiastically to the leg of the triceratops.

"We just need to stop the story for a moment." She says, and then waits until everyone comes out of the fiction.

"Thank you. I've stopped the story so we can ask Sarah a question. Sarah, are you all right having people poke your leg while you are in the story?"

Sarah shakes her head.

"I thought not. We need to be more careful. Let's try to remember that we're working *as if it were real*, but Sarah doesn't want people actually touching her. Shall we have another go?"

This exchange is very similar to the one between the mother and her son, where they needed to come out of the fiction to discuss the *T. rex's* attack on the explorer. The process works in exactly the same way, even if the power dynamic is subtly different. In the home-based scenario, the mother plays the boy's game under his rules and instructions. In the classroom, the teacher is the one in charge and has the power to stop and start the fiction whenever she needs to provide more information or deal with misunderstandings.

The purpose of the classroom activity is not primarily about having a good time (although the children might well be enjoying themselves). It is about learning, so the teacher takes every opportunity she can to develop the children's knowledge, skills, and understanding. She understands that this involves regularly stopping and starting the fiction, but is not worried that this will wreck the imaginary scenario. As in imaginative play, she understands the children are quite capable of keeping both worlds – the imaginary and the real – in mind at the same time.