

Learning in the “Labyrinth”: Dorothy Heathcote’s Transitions Project

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a retrospective analysis of a Mantle of the Expert project devised by Dorothy Heathcote in 2007 to address the transitions from primary to secondary school. Drawing on planning transcripts and archival materials, it shows how the project reframes transitions, not as preparation for a single institutional change, but as entry into a condition of strangeness characterised by uncertainty, complexity and shifting relationships. While initially focused on school transfer, the project developed into an inquiry into transitions as multidimensional and ongoing processes, anticipating and resonating with Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory.

Within the drama, pupils assumed the role of “Life Coaches,” supporting others through unfamiliar situations. This repositioned

learning as response rather than self-reflection, where understanding emerges through attention to others, interpretation of situations, and the design of possible responses. The classroom functioned as a kind of laboratory, in which learning was investigated and tested in practice. The article argues that the project's enduring value lies not in the acquisition of strategies but in a shift in orientation—a capacity to read and navigate complex environments while remaining attentive to others also undergoing transitions.

In 2007, Dorothy Heathcote worked with Midland Actors Theatre (MAT) to devise a Mantle of the Expert project for young people on the threshold of moving from primary to secondary school. Its organising question was deceptively simple: *How do we learn what we know?* Rather than treating primary-secondary school transitions as a matter of preparing pupils for new rules and routines, the project approached learning indirectly through Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert (MoE) system (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). In Mantle, the class works within a fictional enterprise—an agency, company or organisation—assuming responsibility for complex tasks and real-world dilemmas. Authority is thereby subtly reconfigured: pupils are positioned not as recipients of instruction, but as a community of practitioners whose judgements matter.

In this case, the enterprise was a team of “Life Coaches,” helping fictional clients who were themselves facing moments of change and uncertainty. This shift of perspective was crucial. Instead of beginning with pupils' own anxieties about the move to secondary school, the drama directed attention outward—towards the situations of others and the question of how people learn when they encounter unfamiliar environments. In responding to these clients, pupils entered a shared inquiry into learning itself, gradually developing a language for understanding how people adapt, struggle and make sense of new circumstances. In this way, reflection did not begin with the self, but with the attempt to understand and respond to the learning needs of others.

This article draws primarily on a transcript of the initial planning meeting between Heathcote and the MAT team, supplemented by the

company’s archival records of the project’s implementation. The project toured to five inner-city primary schools in the Birmingham area, working intensively for one week in each with a Year 6 class (ages 10–11) in the final term before transition to secondary school. What follows is a retrospective analysis of the only documented MoE project planned by Heathcote herself specifically to address primary-secondary transitions, tracing how the planning conversation reveals an implicit model of learning in which reflection emerges through practice, responsibility, and attention to the situations and needs of others.¹ As we will see, a project initially concerned with primary-secondary transitions developed into an exploration of transitions as a multidimensional condition.

Heathcote was clear that the Mantle should not be set in a school context. She observed:

There's a lot to be said for making strange, in order to get close to what you want to do. I think any notion where they feel like they're dealing partly with schooling of some kind or another, whatever it might be or wherever it might be, would to me be too close, and get them in a box of thinking. Whereas you want them to get out of the box, don't you? (Heathcote, planning meeting)²

This oblique approach is in contrast to a lot of drama work on primary-secondary school transitions, which tends to be situated within the school environment. A project for the Half Moon Young People's Theatre in 2020, for example, used a “Forum Theatre” approach. The company developed a play which followed two characters, Mark and Amari, through their first few weeks of starting secondary school. A report on the project stated: “The scenes within the play created clear dilemmas and choices, where the choices made would clearly lead to different outcomes for their secondary school future” (Half Moon, 2020, p. 5). A direct approach like this feels efficient, but in its very directness, it may activate compliance-thinking (“What answer does the teacher want?”) or social anxiety (“Are we talking about me?”).

¹ The MAT team was Gillian Adamson, David Allen and Iona Towler-Evans.

² Source: transcript of planning meeting with Dorothy Heathcote and the MAT team at Heathcote’s home in Spondon, Derbyshire, 11.2.07. Audio cassette recordings, unpublished, MAT Archive. All quotes are from this source, unless otherwise specified.

Moreover, it risks exposing current peer tensions, highlighting vulnerabilities, and rehearsing actual power hierarchies in the classroom.

A Forum Theatre model such as the Half Moon example isolates moments: the first day; peer pressure; a bullying dilemma, etc. This is useful in that it rehearses scenarios. But primary-secondary transition is not a sequence of discrete dilemmas. It entails a multiplicity of factors: a loss of familiarity and status; a renegotiation of identity, and uncertainty about belonging; a dislocation in time and place; re-mapping of relationships; and physical and emotional turbulence. It is a condition of strangeness. Moreover, according to Jindal-Snape (2023), transitions are plural: for example, there are transitions of age, friendship, body, family circumstances, culture, institutional setting, and so on. A direct school-based drama often narrows transition to one site and to an individual child (as if the child is the issue, not the school). An oblique Mantle frame allows children to explore transitions in different contexts; and this widens and generalises the phenomenon.

In the move from primary to secondary school, transition is often experienced as something done to children. They do not choose the school, the timing, the institutional structures, or the process. The resulting loss of control is one source of transition anxiety. Heathcote therefore avoided addressing the move to secondary school directly. Within the frame of “Life Coaches,” the children became responsible for helping others navigate change and unfamiliar environments. They were not cast as those with a problem; they were positioned as those who must respond to it. This obliqueness is deliberate. By relocating questions of fear, exclusion, uncertainty and adaptation into a fictional context, Heathcote avoids turning any individual child, or any real personal anxiety, into the case under discussion. The difficulty belongs to the fiction. Yet the distance does more than protect; it redistributes agency. Positioned as practitioners rather than subjects of transition, pupils must listen, interpret and design responses to the situations presented by their clients. The inquiry therefore shifts from the personal, to the relational. The central question is no longer “How will I cope?” but “What does this person need, and how might we help?”

THE “LABORATORY”

Heathcote saw drama work in Mantle as a form of “laboratory” (1993),

in which reflection and review are built into the process. In this case, she observed to the project team:

You seem to want them to set up from the very beginning, to be examining their thinking as they go along. So the reflective elements have to be on: “What we now know about how we learn.”
(Heathcote, planning meeting)

This question became the project’s key “through line.” Heathcote’s insistence that reflection should operate within the unfolding work may appear to align with Donald Schön’s conception of *reflection-in-action*: the capacity to examine and adjust one’s understanding in the midst of practice (Schön, 1983, p. 49). Schön’s model of the reflective practitioner, however, has been criticised for remaining grounded in a notion of individual cognitive mastery. In the Life Coaches project, reflection emerges differently: through the practical responsibility of responding to the needs of others.

The drama therefore shifts the focus away from the pupils’ own anxieties about transition to secondary school. Instead, the work begins with the arrival of a letter from a “client”—someone struggling to navigate a complex set of transitions. In the MAT project, handwritten on the envelope of one such letter were the words: “Hope you can help.” The learner is addressed. Responsibility precedes reflection. In responding to the client’s appeal, pupils enter a shared inquiry into how people learn, adapt and cope with unfamiliar systems and multiple transitions. The reflective practitioner that emerges is therefore not a subject who masters experience through cognitive control, but a person whose understanding develops through responsiveness to others. The centre of gravity shifts from the self to the Other. Learning about learning becomes necessary not to perfect oneself, but in order to respond responsibly to those whose voices may at any moment appear with the call: “Hope you can help.”

“How Do People Learn?”

At the start of the planning meeting—before the Life Coaches frame had been defined and agreed—Heathcote discussed some of the different ways that people learn. She offered examples such as “learning to be careful,” noting that:

“Learning to take care” is quite different, because that's attending to process of doing. I suppose what I'm doing is saying: there isn't a blanket word. This [word] “learning” is too blanketed. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Other examples included learning to tolerate, learning to forgive, learning to make good, learning to listen, learning to share, learning to conserve and learning to make. In this way, Heathcote dismantled the abstract educational category of “learning” and re-situated it within human practices. In contemporary education systems, “learning” often refers to measurable attainment, knowledge recall or subject progress. Heathcote’s list, by contrast, focuses on the development of capacities for negotiating reality.

The implication is that different situations call for different modes of learning. Consider, for example, her example of “learning to discriminate.” She remarked: “If you think of your feral child, he mustn't eat the wrong berries. And that goes with learning to observe what other animals are eating”. Here the learning required is perceptual and situational: attentive observation, discrimination and judgement in relation to a specific environment. In another context—restoring a damaged relationship, for instance—the learning required might be reflective, forgiving and emotionally attuned.

Heathcote therefore expands the concept of learning beyond the accumulation of knowledge, reframing it as a repertoire of human capacities—ethical, perceptual, relational, restorative and practical—mobilised in response to particular circumstances. Learning, in this sense, is not primarily the acquisition of information but the development of ways of acting and responding in the world. The emphasis is on “doing to learn,” and on the reflexivity that arises within action itself.

Heathcote observed that,

In moving from primary to secondary school, students have come from a place where they're cop of the midden, and they know all the places where things can be found, and who to go to for the different kinds of services you need. ... And then suddenly, you're in a place where you don't know anything. You're in this wilderness, among all these giants. ... So I suppose what you might look at is: how do we learn in a new country? But it mustn't

look like school. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Her metaphor of going from “cop of the midden” to a “wilderness among giants” reflects a change from a place where the pupils are locally competent, to a place where they lose spatial orientation, relational familiarity, and status. This is not just a logistical change; it entails a loss of mastery, belonging and scale. Heathcote reframed the experience, not as “starting secondary school,” but as “entering a new country”, raising questions of how to read signs, who to trust, what is dangerous, and which customs matter. Learning is thereby reoriented—from absorbing information to navigating uncertainty, from acquisition to orientation within unfamiliar worlds, and toward a form of situated learning, or “doing to learn”.

Heathcote reviewed the “world” of the secondary school, as it might be experienced by newcomers:

So it seems to me it's a labyrinth, isn't it? A high school is a labyrinth. It's corridors and journeys and classrooms and labels. ... It is a land of giants. It's a land where everybody knows what they're doing, or seems to. ... It's a land of messages, but you can't yet interpret them, can you. ... It's a land of signals. ... It's a land of many tongues, really. Because different teachers talk differently. Each giant gives their own style of address. But it's also a land of hierarchy, which you don't yet understand. ... It's also a land where you can be interrogated at any point. “Where are you going? Are you lost? You should be there.” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Heathcote’s analysis here reframes transition to secondary school as entry into an opaque symbolic environment. Contemporary studies on school transition consistently identify as common transition anxieties, the fear of getting lost (literally and socially); doing the wrong thing; humiliation; not understanding “how it works”; and not belonging. These anxieties are not primarily academic; they are relational and procedural (Symonds, 2015).

In these early stages of planning, Heathcote briefly considered a drama that would take the form of a journey through a labyrinth, with a series of encounters presenting different challenges and foregrounding different modes of learning. For example, she returned to the idea of

“learning by listening”: “What can we find out in this labyrinth by listening?” The imagined journey would allow children to experience strangeness in a structured and manageable form. Rather than rehearsing specific school incidents, it would stage the condition of transition itself: incomplete knowledge, ambiguous signals, missteps and the need for collective sense-making. The labyrinth could thus provide a metaphorical environment in which pupils might explore the kinds of learning required to navigate uncertainty.

Yet the metaphor also carried limitations. It risked positioning pupils as “small” explorers moving through a threatening landscape, progressing only by successfully passing a series of tests. In this sense, it reproduced the very vulnerability it sought to address. It was also uncomfortably close to the children’s own situation. Most importantly, the frame retained the individual learner at the centre: the drama would focus on how / find my way through the maze. Heathcote’s later solution moved decisively away from this orientation. By introducing the Life Coaches enterprise, the work shifted the centre of gravity. The children were no longer explorers seeking their own path through the labyrinth, but practitioners responsible for helping others navigate unfamiliar environments. Attention shifted from the self’s struggle for orientation to the practical task of responding to another’s need.

Heathcote herself expressed reservations about the labyrinth idea, partly because the “expert” frame for the children remained unclear:

The big thing that isn’t resolved, as far as I’m concerned, by thinking this way, is: What would be their expertise? What are they running? What are they administering? And they’re administering it, by understanding how difficult it’s going to be for these people.
(Heathcote, planning meeting)

She was searching, in other words, for the form of responsibility the pupils would hold within the drama. In *Mantle of the Expert*, the class does not simply inhabit a situation; it administers something, serves someone and acts with authority within a defined enterprise. Heathcote’s comment already implies a shift in orientation. The children would not themselves be the people lost in the labyrinth; their task would be to understand how difficult such journeys might be for *others*.

The difference is significant: instead of experiencing disorientation directly, the pupils would be responsible for helping others face it. Their role would be to analyse situations, interpret difficulties and design ways of supporting those entering unfamiliar environments. The status of the pupils therefore changes. They are no longer travellers asking, “How do I survive this?” but practitioners confronted with a different question: “What might someone need in order to find their way?”

One possible outcome the MAT team considered was the creation of a website on which the children would publish materials explaining their understanding of “how people learn.” This suggestion led Heathcote to a clearer formulation of the expert frame: “They provide the materials for the website, so they’re a research unit. They’re a research unit about helping people deal with strangeness.” The idea brought several elements into alignment. Pupils would have expertise (as researchers), responsibility (investigating how people learn in unfamiliar situations), a form of publication (the website materials), and a purpose: to support those encountering change. The focus was therefore not on the pupils’ own transition but on the needs of others. “Strangeness” might involve entering a new country, a new institution, a new language, a new workplace, or any unfamiliar system. The children’s task would be to investigate how people learn to navigate such situations and to offer guidance drawn from their inquiry. In this way, the project redirected attention outward. The pupils were not invited to reflect on their own anxieties but to respond to the difficulties faced by others. This shift altered the nature of reflection itself, from reflexive self-awareness, to response-ability.

The drama frame also widened the concept of transitions, as a broader condition of human experience. We may understand this more clearly through the lens of Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016, 2023), which conceptualises transitions not as single, linear events (such as “primary to secondary school”) but as layered, overlapping and ongoing processes. From this perspective, a child moving school is not simply entering a new building or institution. They are simultaneously negotiating multiple forms of transition: spatial (new environments), social (peer groups and hierarchies), linguistic (new subject vocabularies), epistemic (different ways of organising knowledge), identity (“who am I here?”), and emotional (fear, anticipation, loss), often alongside biological and familial changes.

These transitions do not occur in isolation. They unfold within a wider ecology in which other people—peers, teachers, family members—are themselves undergoing change. One person’s anxieties or expectations may shape another’s experience; transitions intersect, overlap and reverberate across relationships. In this sense, the environment is not stable or singular but dynamic and discontinuous. To prepare a child simply to “fit” a new setting is therefore conceptually inadequate, since what they encounter is not one transition but a field of interacting changes.

Heathcote’s project can be read as a pedagogical response to this kind of complexity. Rather than rehearsing a single transition, it invites pupils to investigate how people learn to navigate unfamiliar systems. Within the Mantle frame, the question is widened from “our move to secondary school” to a more fundamental inquiry: how do human beings find their way in situations where expectations, meanings and relationships are not yet clear? In this sense, the project does not simplify transition; it treats strangeness itself as the object of study.

Schoon and Heckhausen have argued that the way individuals position themselves in relation to transition influences outcomes (2019). Heathcote’s frame actively restructures that positioning. By relocating the inquiry into research, publication, and helping others, the drama transforms the child from passive experiencer, into epistemic agent. The children are no longer subjects of strangeness; they are the analysts of it. This is a shift in positional identity: instead of “I am the anxious newcomer,” they become “the researcher of transitions.”

The frame was finally defined as a team of “Life Coaches”—an enterprise supporting fictional clients experiencing multidimensional transitions. The role was metaphorical rather than vocational: as in all Mantle work, the purpose was not to simulate a real profession but to structure responsibility and perspective. “Life Coach” functions here as a socially recognisable position that legitimises attention to learning processes, and careful listening and care for others.

Through the recurring question—“What do we now know about how people learn?”—the role gradually becomes internalised, giving pupils a shared language for learning and a repertoire of strategies for negotiating change. Crucially, reflection is oriented toward the needs of the Other. This orientation distinguishes the project from Schön’s model of the reflective practitioner, where reflection centres on one’s own professional action. In the Life Coaches enterprise, reflection is

triggered by another’s difficulty. The inquiry moves away from self-centred mastery, towards attentiveness to the situations of others; from reflective practitioner, to responsive practitioner. Learning becomes less a return to the self, than an orientation within a shared and shifting landscape of transitions, in which many lives are unfolding at once.

THE PROJECT STRUCTURE

As Life Coaches, the children worked in teams, and were given data files on fictional clients, all of whom had different needs and issues. The clients were not physically present at any point; they were evoked through letters, data files, and imagined encounters. Heathcote described the work explicitly in experimental terms: the classroom, she saw, would:

become a laboratory for working out how to teach somebody to learn by one of these systems. So, the children will be planning a learning scheme, on the basis of trying and never giving up, keep trying again and again and again. They would have to design the journey. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

The metaphor of the laboratory was central to Heathcote’s conception of Mantle. The classroom is viewed, not simply a stage for dramatic situations but a research environment in which ideas could be tested, revised and shared. As she explained:

In the laboratory, we care about what we do, we get the information we require, and we share it all the time. That means we process it: we process it in talk, we process it in action, just like a laboratory outside school works. (1991)

In this sense the Life Coaches project functioned as a collective inquiry into learning itself. The children were not merely helping individual clients; they were investigating how learning occurs under different conditions.

Heathcote stated that she always planned by deciding what children would be doing each day. What follows is the structure she outlined for the project. The first stages establish the frame and “expertise,” firstly through a “history” for the “team.” She observed:

In Mantle of the Expert, you really should have provided them with something they've already done [as a team/enterprise], so they will have a list of their successes, that they successfully managed to get through this system ... [and] that we can add to our "roll of honour." Somebody's passed through and has written in, and they now are doing whatever job they are doing in the world. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

She suggested a kind of staff meeting, or a "state of the firm" meeting,

to see our latest graduates: how many they've got through, that we feel we helped, we got them settled. That would allow you to say, "I only met that gentleman once, but I sensed from the very beginning he wanted to be an engineer, and I presume those were the things he learned best, if he's now doing this." (Heathcote, planning meeting)

In the meeting, the children share and read some letters from previous clients (prepared in advance by the teacher). Heathcote envisaged that the children would quickly begin to join in the fiction, and talk about the clients as if they had actually worked with them: "Well I knew him," or "I did that," or "I showed her this."

So the things that come back as letters of thanks, back to the place, always indicate that the skills they're now using are a sort of [guide]line to them, and we are the people who helped them find those lines. ... What they'd have under their belt from that meeting is: "We are already established. Each of us has had some sort of input"—because they will always do this.³ "I can't remember which of us started—do you remember?" And they'll say, "I did." "Oh, yes. I don't know whether he began with the mathematics, or whether he was taking motorbikes apart." And they tell you. So that you're establishing *doing* to learn. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

This episode has several aims. It builds the idea of the role and what

³ In other words: they will always take on the idea that the team has a "history."

they *do* as Life Coaches; and it starts to endow them with a sense of “expertise” (“we have had previous successes”). This overcomes the problem that children in Mantle cannot act like experts if they are asked to *become* experts from scratch. Instead of saying, “You are starting a new Life Coaching firm,” she gives them a “history” of an established firm, with a “roll of honour.” The children, then, do not have to prove themselves; they step into continuity, and inherit success. This produces confidence, legitimacy and responsibility. They are not pretending to be experts; they are (so to speak) “remembering” being experts. As Heathcote stated, children will usually respond to the invitation to join in the drama, and co-create the backstory (“I remember him,” etc.). The statement, “I can’t remember which of us started—do you remember?” serves as an invitation, and leaves space for them to co-author the “history.”

The episode also establishes what the team does, and how it helps clients to learn, without the teacher having to explain this. It indicates that the clients have learned in different ways; for example, a letter might state, “I really understood it, when you advised me to break it down into smaller steps.” This starts to establish a shared professional language, a collective responsibility, and commitment to evaluative reflection (“We review outcomes. We analyse what worked. We infer learning pathways”). There is also an implication, that the team has standards to uphold. Moreover, a statement such as “you told me to break it into smaller steps” indicates that the help given to clients is not based in teaching them skills or knowledge. Rather, it is process-based: understanding is constructed, strategies matter, and different people learn differently. Other statements invented by Heathcote include:

“You taught me that questions often taught me more than the answers I found out; because every question made me think of some more questions, whereas the answers tended to just say: ‘Oh, that’s the answer’.”

“It was so useful when you showed me how making a mistake is often very useful—for example, when I—(whatever it might be).”

“There were things I didn’t think I’d enjoy doing, and you said: ‘Go again and try again, and see whether you like it better now.’ And

so I now do painting, or sometimes I like to go to galleries and look at pictures, and I'll never be good at it, but I learn a lot from looking." (Heathcote, planning meeting)

The letters do not state, "Thank you for teaching me about fractions," or "You helped me understand photosynthesis." The enterprise is not defined by subjects, grades and outcomes, but by ways of learning. While framed as client reflections, the letters are in fact modelling alternative epistemic attitudes; for example, the statement "Making a mistake is often very useful" repositions error from failure to data, and encourages an experimental stance. The statements are also indirectly addressing some of the multidimensional anxieties that pupils themselves may carry into transition. They foreground, for example, valuing questions, trying again, and so on. The children are not told directly: "Don't be afraid to ask questions." Instead, they encounter a world in which successful clients attribute growth to questioning, learning from error, and persistence.

Heathcote's statement about "establishing doing to learn" shifts the epistemological ground. Learning is not framed as acquiring the correct information, receiving advice, or being told what to do. Instead, successful learning appears grounded in effort, adaptation, strategy and growth. The client's learning emerges through engagement. The Life Coach does not solve the problem directly, but helps create the conditions in which the client can discover something through action.

Within the drama, these statements position the children as enablers of learning rather than providers of answers: supporters of risk-taking, validators of questions, and witnesses to another's effort ("You taught me..."). The dynamic is therefore relational. In attending to another person's learning, the Life Coaches develop a language for recognising how learning unfolds in practice. The structure of the project quietly establishes two complementary forms of practice. In the clients' letters, reflection appears as something emerging from action: knowledge is generated within activity, insight follows engagement, and understanding becomes visible in retrospect. The Life Coaches, however, operate differently. Reflection is triggered not by their own experience, but by another person's needs. Their task is to interpret situations, infer obstacles to learning, and design responses that might help someone else move forward. In this sense, the project distinguishes between the reflective practitioner and the responsive

practitioner. The client becomes capable of reflecting on their own learning, while the Life Coaches practise the capacity to respond responsibly to another’s learning situation.

THE FIRST “CLIENT”

The letters help to establish the culture of the “team”; so when new clients are introduced, the children are already operating inside that frame. Heathcote suggested that there might be a shared focus first on just one client, introduced at the end of the “staff meeting”:

[Speaking as if in role at the meeting] “But we’ve got a very special person coming through now, because people are coming through now from very different places in the world, and some are coming through who didn’t expect to be coming to us. And I understand this morning there is one such person for us to begin on. And this person has been chosen for us as our sort of model for our system, a system we now understand seems to work. And this is why we’ve noted these things that they meet when they first come.” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Heathcote observed: “So now we’ve got our client, but we also have to know we’ve been selected particularly because of our success, because we know that learning is not always about getting little lumps of information in your head, but learning is how to use what you know to get to know more.”

Heathcote invented a client called Anita, whose ambition is to work in forestry. The children are introduced to this (and other clients) through a letter (created by the teacher). They then have to consider: “‘What are the attributes that we believe would help you become this, that you need?’ And that will really make the children think about learning.” The group together, then, look at one case, before later working in smaller groups, each with their own client/case. Working on Anita provides a model for how they can then approach planning a programme for their own clients.

Heathcote considered what the children might be able to achieve on the first day: “I divide things into the days. I say, ‘Well, come Monday night, what will they manage to have got to, in terms of their understanding?’ And one of the things you seem to need is something

like: We know where we're at with Anita up to now; that we've decided on a programme for Anita that will matter." They will be in a position to write to Anita, welcoming her to the "learning world," and explaining,

"These are the things we would like to help you [with], so that you will learn how to learn." And you see, the last thing they're going to be doing is [saying]: "You'll need to learn about trees"; but, looking closely at things, differentiating, realising there's no one colour called green—these are all aspects. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Client "Cases"

The approach to the question of "How do people learn?" was based, then, in individual "case studies." Heathcote argued that, in Mantle,

The case study is the curriculum. The man with one leg, the wounded men at Scutari [etc.]—the case study. The case study is our cats, if we run a cattery, and all the other cats in the world, that we will understand because we run a cattery. (2009a)

The "case study" approach puts human interest and concern (or in the cattery example, a zoocentric concern) at the heart of the work. Learning begins, not with a subject area, but with a person or "case," in a context, with some issue, or problem, that engages the expertise of the team. Knowledge and process emerge from interrogating the details of that situation. This is classic case-study epistemology.

Heathcote emphasised that the case-study approach involves sustained attention to sources and evidence: "Studying sources and resources over and over again. Refine, review, reassemble, rethink. Constant productive obsession" (n.d.). Case studies are widely used in professional fields such as law, medicine and social work as a means of analysing complex, situated realities and refining interpretation over time. When Heathcote anchors Mantle in the case-study method, she aligns classroom inquiry with a recognisable mode of professional investigation, shifting the children's work from "task completion" to sustained interpretation.

In this respect, the structure may appear to resemble Schön's account of professional practice, in which practitioners frame

situations, experiment in action, notice outcomes, and reframe the problem (Schön, 1983). Yet Heathcote’s use of the case differs in an important way. The focus is not primarily on the practitioner’s reflection upon their own action, but on the careful interpretation of another person’s situation. What is encountered is not simply a technical problem but a human situation requiring understanding, judgement and response. In this sense, the case-study structure cultivates a form of responsive inquiry. The pupils must attend carefully to the situation presented, infer what kinds of learning might help, and design possible responses. Interpretation and responsibility remain intertwined. The task is not simply to analyse the case but to consider what might help this person move forward within the unfamiliar terrain they are facing.

Seen in this light, the case study becomes one of the principal working units of the classroom “laboratory” which Heathcote envisaged. Each client case provides material for investigation: a situation to interpret, a set of possibilities to test, and a basis for refining understanding through repeated cycles of action, reflection and revision. The sequence she proposed—“Refine, review, reassemble, rethink”—captures the experimental rhythm of this work.

These are the main elements that Heathcote suggested should be built into the fictional client “cases.”

1. The clients are people who are going to a new place, and are somewhat bewildered about what will be required of them; but they do not begin with no knowledge. Heathcote said: “They have the knowledge they’ve got to date, to draw on; but you want them to understand how to use that knowledge, and fathom out what it is about this place that will make it worthwhile going to.”
2. The clients may have been given some information about the place they are going to, but some of it is unclear or confusing: “It seems to me one of the first things they’d have to do is discover from this person the degree of their bewilderment.”
3. Their current life may be very different indeed from their planned new life, and this is a source of anxiety and sense of “strangeness.”
4. They fear they may get some things wrong, and look stupid. This was Heathcote’s example:

So if, for example, you'd said [speaking as the "client"], "I thought if you had to keep on trying and trying, it meant you weren't very good at it. People will think I'm no good at it if I can't do it the first time." [The Life Coach answers] "No, it's not like that." [The client says] "But I am worried about that. I want to be right the first time."

5. They want to make a change, but do not know if they have the right skills or aptitude, but also, if they are ready for it.
6. The client has attributes which the children need to identify. When the client is introduced, the children have to consider: "What are the attributes that we believe would help you become this, that you need?" And that will really make the children think about learning."
7. There are things that the client recognises about themselves, that they know might hinder their capacity to adapt to new circumstances. The letter from the client contains indications of some challenges to learning, e.g.: "I have never learned to speak up in class. I am shy. My mother and father are very hard at work. We do not have much time together." Heathcote commented: "So you're not building pathetic pictures. You're building quite strong pictures."
8. There may be things about themselves that they don't recognise, that might hinder their capacity to adapt to new circumstances. The letters may contain clues to these problems; the children must read between the lines, diagnose gently, and anticipate consequences.⁴

The cases are both specific and patterned. Each client appears as an individual—with particular circumstances, anxieties and dispositions—yet across the cases recurring features begin to emerge. The children therefore engage not only with singular lives but with patterns in how people encounter and navigate change. Their task is to interpret situations: to consider what the client already knows, what obstacles may arise, and what kinds of learning might help them move forward.

Each case also contains an implied future. The client will soon enter a new workplace, university or environment and must eventually

⁴ This is our summary of the stages that Heathcote discussed in the planning meeting.

continue without the support of the Life Coaches. Accordingly, the programme is not designed to create dependence but to help the client approach unfamiliar situations with greater confidence and flexibility. Existing knowledge may remain relevant; attitudes toward difficulty may need to shift; strategies for learning may need to be adapted. The central question is not simply what the client must know, but how they might learn in circumstances that are new or uncertain.

For the children, this structure sustains attention on another person’s situation. They must consider how temperament, expectation, fear and circumstance interact in shaping the client’s ability to learn. Over time, the group develops a vocabulary for describing these conditions: the interplay between aptitude, attitude and context; the value of questions; the role of persistence; the usefulness of mistakes. Such language emerges through the work of interpretation and response.

The cases inevitably resonate with the children’s own experiences. The clients function as what might be called “thin mirrors.” Recognition may occur—“that sounds like me”—but it is never demanded. Crucially, however, the structure of the work prevents the inquiry from turning inward. Pupils are not asked to analyse themselves; the focus remains directed toward another person’s situation. In this sense, the cases do not invite introspection, but rather, exteriorisation. Feelings of uncertainty, fear of failure, difficulty adapting to unfamiliar systems, are displaced into the shared world of the drama. Within the classroom laboratory, attention is directed outward: toward the situation, toward the problem to be understood, and toward the person whose learning is at stake. This produces a shift in orientation. Instead of turning back upon the self, the work draws pupils *outside-of-themselves* into a task that demands careful attention to what lies beyond them. The difficulty belongs to the situation; the responsibility is to respond. The learner is therefore repositioned, not as the object of analysis, but as a participant in a shared effort to understand and assist another person navigating unfamiliar terrain.

BUILDING A “REFERENC SYSTEM”

One task undertaken in the early phases of the project invited the children to categorise different ways of learning. The MAT team prepared cards based on Heathcote’s earlier suggestions—for

example: “Watching others do it”; “Hearing about others’ experiences”; “Testing ideas to see what happens”; “Helping someone do it”; “Seeing other examples.” Working in teams, the pupils sorted the cards into three categories: *Most useful*, *Sometimes useful*, and *Seldom useful*. They could also add their own suggestions. One group, for example, proposed “Using your imagination,” placing it in the column *Most useful*. In this way, individual observations entered a shared pool of knowledge. Ideas could later be recalled and referenced—“One of our research groups identified imagination as central, didn’t they?”—so that children’s contributions were treated not simply as “good work” but as part of the collective inquiry.

Heathcote suggested that such material should accumulate visibly in the room, forming a growing record of the group’s investigation into how people learn. Cards, charts and notes were displayed on the walls and repeatedly revisited: “Have we got anything about learning through x?” The classroom thus became a space organised by the question, “What do we now know about how people learn?” Knowledge was externalised and thinking made visible. The displays did not represent fixed conclusions but the group’s current understanding—open to amendment as new cases and experiences prompted reconsideration.

In this way, the walls themselves became a form of epistemological architecture, holding fragments of insight contributed by different participants at different moments. As cases were analysed, ideas were added, revised and reclassified. Heathcote’s injunction to “Refine, review, reassemble, rethink” was embodied spatially. No single pupil possessed the whole understanding; it was distributed across the group and the environment. The room functioned as a kind of collective intelligence—a living archive of the laboratory inquiry in progress.

Within the structure of the project, three layers of learning therefore begin to appear. The clients’ letters model reflective learning in retrospect, while the Life Coaches practise responsive judgement in addressing another person’s situation. Surrounding both is the collective inquiry of the group itself: a shared “hive mind” in which understanding accumulates, circulates and evolves over time.

Heathcote suggested that each group, having received a letter from their client, should create a portrait of that individual as they imagined them. In the MAT project these were large-scale drawings on A0 paper, displayed around the room. The clients—though fictional

and physically absent—were thereby made continuously present as particular, situated persons. The classroom became populated with faces and names, reminders that the inquiry was always directed toward someone’s difficulty.

Placed alongside the evolving displays about different ways of learning, these portraits created a deliberate tension between the particular and the general: concrete lives beside emerging principles. The children were not simply collecting strategies; they were repeatedly asking how such strategies might apply to *this* person, in *this* situation. Moving between the research materials on the walls and the client portraits, they practised the work of interpretation and response: considering a case, selecting from the group’s shared knowledge, and adapting it to the circumstances of another.

The spatial organisation of the room therefore mattered. Around the walls accumulated the collective “bank” of ideas about learning; among them were the imagined clients whose situations called those ideas into use. Knowledge and responsibility remained visibly connected. The room itself became a working laboratory environment of inquiry in which the presence of the Other continually redirected attention from abstract theory toward the practical question: what might help this person learn and move forward?

Over time, this visible network of cases, portraits and ideas formed a shared reference system for the work of the room. When facilitators asked, “Have we anything about learning through x?”, they were not prompting recall but modelling a practice of consultation—returning to the collective record in order to reconsider a situation. The displays therefore functioned less as a storehouse of answers than as a working environment for inquiry. Rather than encouraging pupils to internalise a fixed toolkit, the process habituated them to revisiting experience, drawing on shared knowledge, and reinterpreting situations in response to the needs of others.

PUTTING THE HUMAN AT THE CENTRE

The MAT team prepared letters from the “clients” which included a range of different personalities and learning needs. They sought to give the letters a sense of an individual voice, as a first step in creating a sense of the Other. For example: one letter, from “Val,” was contained in a small turquoise envelope, with the words, “from Val

Bailey. P.S. Hope you can help!” handwritten on the cover. Inside, on two pieces of lined paper, “Val” had written:

Dear Agency,

I would be glad of the chance to get help with reaching my goal of working in a store again, as I did enjoy it before, that is, before the fire.

I suppose I just got into the habit of avoiding people, but I think it is time to put on a brave face and that is a real problem for me at the moment.

People tell me you can help. Will it be just me and one of you when I come to your centre?

Please let me know.

Val ⁵

The letter was not just a prop; it was a careful construction of presence, as a step towards putting the “human” at the centre of the work. It is an example of the way that small, concrete details can carry dramatic and ethical weight. The small turquoise envelope, with the handwritten note on it, already did something before the letter was even opened. It signalled individuality, vulnerability, and a reaching outward. “Hope you can help!” is not formal or institutional language; it is human, and slightly tentative. It positions the students, not as abstract problem-solvers, but as people who are being appealed to. Inside the letter, the voice is carefully pitched: “I would be glad of the chance...”, “I suppose I just got into the habit...”, “Will it be just me and one of you...?” There are gaps the students must interpret: What happened in the fire? What does “put on a brave face” imply? Why is she anxious about how things will work at the centre? The students have to read carefully, infer sensitively, and avoid making assumptions. In other words: they must treat Val as a person, not simply a “case.” They must consider, not simply a “learning

⁵ Copy preserved in the MAT Archive.

programme,” but issues of safety, trust, environment and consent. The drama becomes relational, not procedural. There are real human consequences, albeit within a fictional context: if the agency mishandles the situation, then Val might feel unsafe, retreat further, and not return. Because the fiction is carefully built, the stakes feel real enough to matter. The letter also resists reducing Val to a stereotype of a trauma victim. She has a past competence (“working in a store”), a goal, self-awareness, hesitation, and hope. This complexity prevents the students from flattening her into a “problem.” They must meet someone who exceeds their initial assumptions; and this—even in a fictional context—is an encounter with “Otherness.”

Read in terms of MMT theory, Val’s letter reflects rupture and transition across multiple domains: social, emotional, linguistic, and relational. The small turquoise envelope, with the handwritten “P.S.,” already performs transitions: it signals vulnerability; it positions the sender as crossing into a new relational space; it asks for entry (“Hope you can help!”). The envelope functions as a threshold object: it marks movement from private struggle to public request. This is already a relational transition, from isolation to appeal. The letter describes a biographical rupture: past identity as store worker, socially embedded; intervening event (the fire); present condition (avoidance, withdrawal); and future aspiration (return to work). This is not simply re-employment; it is identity reconstitution. MMT stresses that transitions are emotional processes as much as structural ones, and the letter foregrounds this dimension. The transitions required changes not merely behavioural but affective: from fear to courage, from concealment to participation, and from habit (“got into the habit”) to deliberate continual adaptation to change. Moreover, the letter moves across three temporal planes: before the fire, after the fire, and hoped-for future. This layering reflects the multidimensionality of transitions: it is not a clean forward move; it is an attempt to restore a broken continuity, or a constant state of discontinuity.

In this way, when the class, as Life Coaches, receives this letter, they are not merely solving a problem; they are entering a complex transitional ecology. The children are required to think multidimensionally. The letter also demonstrates why Heathcote’s preparation is not about fitting into a single system. Val’s situation is discontinuous, layered, fragile. To help her, the Life Coaches must tolerate ambiguity, recognise intersecting transitions, design graduated

entry, respect emotional pace, and analyse systems of work and social re-engagement. The children themselves are not outside this condition; they too are navigating transitions of their own, and these ongoing changes inevitably inflect how they respond to others. However, transitions are not confined to those explicitly designated as “in transition.” As MMT theory emphasises, transition is ongoing and non-linear: it unfolds relationally, such that any engagement with another’s transition also implicates one’s own. Thus, when teachers or peers respond to a child’s movement from primary to secondary school, they are not neutral observers but participants in a shifting field that includes their own reorientation—whether institutional, relational, or personal.

Yet the Life Coaches drama does not rely on shared experience or identification. Instead, it situates pupils within a shared but differentiated field of transitions, requiring—crucially—an outward orientation toward the Other rather than a return to the self.

PLANNING PROGRAMMES FOR THE “CLIENTS”

The MAT team developed a sequence of steps to guide children through the process of preparing a programme for their client, based on Heathcote’s suggestions. (As we have seen, the sequence was modelled for the children, initially, through the collective focus on one client, Anita.)

1. The letter from the client is studied, and discussed. It is presented as part of a “case file” which contains also a “data sheet” of information (age, current job, etc.).
2. Groups draw an image on A0 paper of what they think the client looks like.
3. On the paper, they write: “What we know about the client, and what we think we know.” They also note what they surmise might be difficulties or obstacles to learning and to change.
4. They begin to select (and prioritise) the ways of learning they think will help him/her most, using the “learning” cards; and then concretise these in terms of activities or tasks. These details are also added to the A0 sheet.
5. The chart is used for a “seminar presentation” which each

group does about their “client.”⁶

In the drama, a teacher or participant might at times stand in for a client, for example in testing how a particular client might respond to a task or learning style; but otherwise, they never actually appear in the drama. The client does not “exist” in any literal sense, but through careful, detailed action, they are made to seem “present,” as the “client in the head”—a presence that is cognitively sustained, and collectively held.

By keeping the client imagined, Heathcote preserves the drama as what she often called a “no penalty zone” (Egglestone, 1982). This means high stakes without harm. Students can test ideas, change direction, fail productively, without the risk of injuring a real person. The drama becomes a space of ethical rehearsal. In many classrooms, fear of being wrong shuts down thinking. Heathcote’s drama inverts this: you can get it wrong, test, revise, rethink. But the detailed documentation—letters, files, charts—creates accountability inside the fiction. The imagined client becomes a kind of ethical anchor: the work must be viable and make sense.

In selecting learning approaches, the students are comparing strategies, weighing appropriateness, prioritising, and justifying choices. The step of turning strategies into actual activities is where theory meets practice. For example: “Seeing other examples” might become visiting a workplace, watching a demonstration, analysing a model, and so on. Heathcote envisaged that the process of planning a programme for the clients would culminate in a “symposium,”

When we are meeting, before our clients arrive; and we have planned their course, and we are here debating and considering just how this course would work for these people. So we'd have to organise it in some way where every group ... must explain somehow what they've noticed about the person, that makes them attend very specifically to certain things. Like, if, in the letter [it says], “I like things done very fast. If I'm not first to finish, I'll get upset.” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

⁶ This summary has been compiled by David Allen, as one of the facilitators on the project. It is based on notes in the MAT Archive.

In the MAT project, the A0 charts were used by groups in the “symposium,” to explain their plans. Presenting to others in this way requires clarity and justification, exposes reasoning to scrutiny, and invites comparison across cases. It also allows for feedback from other participants, which may lead to further revisions to the plan.

Here is an example from the project itself. One group produced a chart for “Jasmin Bailey.” The difficulty for her, they felt, was that she was “shy and uncomfortable.” They made a list of “ways of learning” which they thought would be most useful for her: Talking things over / Listening to someone explain / Asking somebody / Comparing things / Looking at her life. Then, they began to consider the activities that might help her to do this—for example:

Drawing things in her life
 Someone talk to her. She writes notes
 Ask a professional how to sort things out
 Comparing things in a list
 Role-play good / bad things ⁷

Even if the group’s ideas were somewhat underdeveloped at this stage, they show that the pupils were beginning to follow the logic of applied thinking, moving from abstract principles to concrete processes and activity language (for example, from “Looking at her life” to “Drawing things in her life”). They were designing mediated encounters: drawing, writing, role-play, comparing lists, and so on. Implicitly, they recognised that confidence might grow through structured activity rather than through advice alone. They were considering: what kinds of experiences might help this person begin to change?

In this sense, the children were acting as designers of learning situations rather than transmitters of solutions. Their task was not to diagnose Jasmin’s difficulty from a distance, but to construct conditions in which she might act, reflect on what happened, and gradually move forward. The client, within this structure, becomes the reflective practitioner—learning through engagement with experience—while the Life Coaches operate as responsive practitioners, attending to another’s situation and designing encounters through which new

⁷ Copy preserved in the MAT Archive.

learning might become possible.

DRAMA ENCOUNTERS

Heathcote saw the potential for drama encounters arising from the planned programmes for clients. For example:

Now you see, that should enable you and them to say: if you want people to learn by copying, let's set up a trial test. And we'll design something that's best learned by copying. I'm sure Michaelangelo needed people to mix the plaster right. Otherwise, they couldn't be painted well. If it's going to fall off, it's not going to work. So, when is it useful to copy?

Somebody (i.e., one of the students, or a teacher-in-role) could stand in as the “client” for the “trial.”

But all the time, there is this echoing: “Now, wait a minute, what did we do there? What was it helped? Was it when we said this, or was it when we did that?” Or: “Can you now teach *us* that?” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

These “trials” could then lead to the production of a kind of “textbook,” emerging from the work of the research: “‘These are the kinds of information that are learned best by repetition. These skills are best [learned] by repetition ...’ And there's your trial and error, I think, of the ones that lend themselves best [to learning].” At this point the children are no longer designing learning only for Anita (or other individual clients). The drama becomes a working laboratory for exploring how different kinds of learning might be supported in practice. For example, the group could ask: when does copying help? When is repetition useful? When does someone need time to explore or experiment?

In this way the “textbook” is not a body of abstract theory but a record of discoveries made through action. The key device, Heathcote suggested, is what she called “echoing”: “Wait a minute, what did we do there?”, “Was it when we said this?” Reflection occurs as a return to the episode—revisiting what had happened and asking what seemed to help. The drama creates situations in which participants have to pause, look again, and articulate what they have learned from the

encounter. The emphasis remains on “response-ability,” and the final question—“Can you now teach us that?”—tests whether the insight could be shared and used again, not as a rule, but as a possibility that might help someone else learn.

These “tests” also create an opportunity to critique some conventional teaching methods. For example, Heathcote took the idea of “looking for information”:

And what you might need to say: this is a model of a way that doesn't help anybody learn to look for information. “Right, have you all got page 54? Right. On page 54, go down the left-hand column and blah-blah-blah. And there you are.” Or somebody who does something on the board, and the sum's finished, and you've no idea how the figure is worked out at all. So the children now have some interest in devising really poor teaching, in order to say: “Now, wait a minute, let's break this down. Where does it start to go wrong?” (Heathcote, planning meeting)

Someone representing a client such as Anita in role might say: “I didn't understand any of that.”

So where did it first go wrong? What was assumed? Anita wants to know about forests. She'll learn anything at all, if she can relate it with forests. But the thing is going at a speed that makes it impossible [for her], and she dare not feel foolish. So teaching Anita not to worry about feeling foolish may be something they might design a way to do it. (Heathcote, planning meeting)

What appears playful here—“devising really poor teaching”—is in fact diagnostic. By staging examples such as “Right, have you all got page 54...”, or a board demonstration that jumps directly to the answer, Heathcote invites the group to expose patterns that usually pass unquestioned in classroom practice: speed mistaken for authority, assumed prior knowledge, or compliance mistaken for understanding. The question “Where does it start to go wrong?” shifts the discussion away from blaming the learner or judging the teacher and towards examining the conditions under which learning occurs. The difficulty becomes something to interpret rather than something to attribute to personal inadequacy.

Seen in this light, the group is not merely analysing methods but investigating the ecology of learning itself. The client’s confusion becomes the starting point for inquiry: what assumptions were made, what barriers were created, and what alternative conditions might help this person learn? In this way the drama relocates difficulty from the individual to the situation, opening a space for the Life Coaches to design more responsive ways forward.

“READING THE LABYRINTH”

A report on “Critical Self-Reflection” in the transition to university, published by QAA Scotland, has stated:

If students are encouraged from the early stages to become more critically reflective on what they learn and, in particular, how their learning habits need to be altered to fit the new academic environment, they may be able to move more easily from one learning style to another... . (Cheng et al, 2023, p. 2)

This formulation assumes that the system is given, stable and normative. Reflection is instrumental: it helps students adjust their habits so they can “fit” the new academic environment. The burden of adaptation rests with the learner; the institutional structures and pedagogical methods themselves remain largely unquestioned.

Heathcote’s position is structurally different. The Life Coaches project emerges from her own description of secondary school as a labyrinth: a landscape of subject silos, each with its own language, pace, expectations and implicit rules. Rather than training pupils to modify themselves in order to comply with these differences, the project equips them to recognise such differences as styles and systems. When Heathcote proposes “tests” of different ways of learning, she is not coaching children to become more adaptable consumers of teaching methods. She is staging inquiries into pedagogy itself.

What Heathcote offers, then, is not a set of strategies for coping with institutional complexity but a way of *reading the labyrinth*. The pupil is encouraged to attend to the conditions under which learning occurs: the pace of explanation, the assumptions made about prior knowledge, the forms of participation that are expected, and the ways

in which understanding is demonstrated. Instead of treating confusion as personal inadequacy, the learner learns to interpret the situation itself—asking what kind of learning is taking place, what obstacles are present, and what alternative routes might be possible.

This way of seeing situations is closely connected to the laboratory orientation of the project. In the classroom laboratory, cases are examined, strategies proposed, and outcomes tested through action and discussion. “Reading the labyrinth” therefore becomes part of the same investigative habit: breaking situations down, identifying patterns, and considering possible responses. In this way, complex environments are not presented as structures to submit to, but as terrains that can be interpreted, questioned and explored.

In MMT terms, the Life Coach project is not tied to a single school transfer. The pupil is situated within networks of practices, expectations, relationships and responsibilities that extend beyond any single classroom. To recognise this is not to master the system, but to understand oneself as part of a wider ecology of learning in which meaning, difficulty and possibility emerge through interaction with others. Heathcote is not equipping pupils for a single transition event, but for transitions as a complex and ongoing condition.

The “Flow” of the Project

The flow of the work with the “clients” can be summarised as follows:

1. Case data (letter)
2. Hypothesis (possible learning strategy)
3. Presentation at symposium
4. Drama episodes (trials)
5. Reflection (“echoing”)
6. Revision
7. Codification (textbook or website)⁸

As we have seen, Heathcote insisted that the group should be “examining their thinking as they go along”; and here, reflection emerges through the shared work of “response-ability”: interpreting a case, testing ideas in action, revisiting what happened, and

⁸ This summary has been compiled by David Allen, as one of the facilitators on the project. It is based on notes in the MAT Archive.

reconsidering the next step. The production of a “textbook” or website therefore does not simply consolidate knowledge. It records what the group has discovered through their attempts to respond to particular situations. “What we now know about how people learn” remains provisional, grounded in cases and open to revision as new encounters arise.

In schools, the project culminated in an “Open Day,” where each group presented its work at a stall and explained its client to visitors. This public moment extended the same process of articulation and testing. Ideas that had emerged through action were now offered to others for scrutiny, explanation and discussion. Understanding was stabilised not through individual cognitive mastery, but through communication, accountability, and the collective responsibility of making sense of the work.

The MAT team received written feedback from a class of children at Rookery School in Handsworth.⁹ Their regular classroom teacher had provided headings for the responses (“Teachers,” “Sessions,” “Like the most?” “Unsure about?” and “Skills”). The children did not explicitly discuss “transition” or “types of learning” in their comments—though this may partly reflect the way the questions were framed. Nevertheless, their responses align closely with the deeper structure of the project.¹⁰

What they emphasised most strongly was the experience of working together: communicating with one another, preparing presentations, and explaining their thinking to visitors. One pupil wrote: “We had to think about the thing we were going to say about our person [client] who wanted to change their job. We all had communication with each other and done [sic] group work.” What stands out here is not reference to content but to the process of

⁹ Copies preserved in the MAT Archive.

¹⁰ The feedback cited here was not collected as part of a formal research design but forms part of the project’s archival record. Responses were written by pupils under teacher-provided headings, and no systematic coding or thematic analysis was undertaken at the time. In revisiting these materials, we have identified recurring features (e.g. references to collaboration, communication and presentation) that appear across responses. These are treated not as statistically representative findings but as indicative of how aspects of the project were experienced and articulated by participants. The possibility of desirability bias—particularly given the classroom context and teacher framing—should be borne in mind.

collective inquiry. The pupils recall thinking together, discussing interpretations, and preparing to articulate their ideas publicly.

This emphasis reflects the laboratory structure of the work. As Heathcote suggested, the classroom functioned as a place where information was gathered, processed through discussion and action, and continually shared. The repeated references to “communication” and “group work” suggest that pupils recognised learning as something relational and investigative rather than individually received. They were not simply completing assigned tasks; they were participating in a shared effort to make sense of situations and propose ways forward.

Moreover, the work culminated in public accountability through the “Open Day,” where groups presented their thinking about their clients. In this sense the children were not only participating in inquiry but explaining its outcomes. Several pupils commented, for example, that they felt like “real proper people that can really help other people.” Such remarks suggest a shift in how they were positioning themselves.¹¹ Rather than describing what they had done (“we did an activity”), they were articulating a sense of being people who help. Read in this way, the Mantle frame appears to have shifted their stance—however temporarily—from pupils completing school tasks to participants engaged in purposeful investigation.

One of the children talked directly about the question of “how people learn”: “I chose comparing things because if your friend does a move and you copy it, but you do it wrong, you can compare what your friend [has] done to yours.” This comment shows an emerging awareness that learning often occurs through comparison, modelling and adjustment rather than through simple instruction. The pupil is describing a process of noticing difference, testing an attempt, and

¹¹ It might be argued that such statements risk signalling a subtle form of compliance-thinking, in which pupils adopt the language of “responsibility” expected within the educational setting. However, this reading is undermined by the conditions under which the remarks emerged. Pupils were not instructed to frame themselves as “helpers,” nor was such language modelled or assessed. Rather, it arose within a fictional context, structured around responding to clients—an arrangement that displaces institutional norms and introduces an external demand. In this sense, the ethical orientation expressed here is not the internalisation of a prescribed role, but a situated response to the Other. As Heathcote suggests, the client is “Somebody to be responsible to, and for”; and this “is why you get ethics, responsibility and morality” in Mantle (2009b). The demand is relational rather than imposed, and therefore cannot be reduced to compliance with pre-existing expectations.

revising action accordingly. In the language of the project, this is laboratory thinking: observing what happens, comparing outcomes, and refining an approach considering what has been discovered.

A similar orientation appears in a statement made by one of the project participants in an interview conducted some months later, after she had already begun secondary school.¹² She observed:

It’s, like, you kept on remembering it and referring to it... If we keep on referring to that, to help us, and then we keep on referring to it through our lives, when we get our own problems, we can think around them... If the information stays with us, then it will definitely help us.

Notably, she did not say that the project had taught specific skills, nor that it had simply prepared her for secondary school. Instead, she spoke about repeatedly “remembering” and “referring to” the experience. What persists, in her account, is less a body of information than a way of approaching situations. Her phrase, “we can think around them,” evokes movement rather than confrontation: finding paths, reconsidering direction, exploring possibilities. In the language used earlier in the project, it suggests an ability to read the labyrinth.

Equally striking is her use of the word “we.” She does not speak as an isolated learner but as part of a collective: “we keep on referring to it... we can think around them.” The reference point appears to remain the shared inquiry that characterised the project itself. The “we” recalls the collaborative work of the Life Coaches and the distributed knowledge of the classroom “hive,” where understanding emerged through questioning, comparison and response.

What the project may have left behind, then, is not a set of techniques but a shift in orientation. Instead of confronting transition as an isolated individual asking “How will I cope?”, the pupil’s language suggests a sense of being situated among others who are also navigating change. One enters the labyrinth not alone but with a disposition shaped by the work of the classroom laboratory: approaching situations as things to interpret, test and reconsider, while remaining attentive to others who are negotiating their own pathways through uncertainty. Read through the lens of multiple and

¹² Audio recording preserved in the MAT Archive.

multidimensional transitions, her words extend beyond the move to secondary school. The project helped to prepare pupils, not simply for a single institutional shift, but for discontinuity itself.

At the end of the planning meeting, Heathcote expressed the hope that “learning to learn” might become “so systemic” in schools “that it would be done all the time: I mean, how are we learning what we know? Rather than [me, as teacher] telling you what I know you should know—because it’s just nonsense in this day and age, with all the knowledge that’s floating around loose.” Her comment points toward a reorientation of education itself. The question is no longer how information is transmitted, but how learners come to recognise the conditions under which learning happens and their place within them.

The legacy of the Life Coaches project therefore lies less in preparation for a single transition than in cultivating attentiveness to the processes through which people learn, change and move forward together. Education, in this sense, is not preparation for escaping the labyrinth, but learning how to move through the shifting pathways of a world characterised by continual transitions; aware, moreover, that these pathways are shared, and that the work of finding them is always done in relation to others.

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