

THE ‘MANTLE OF THE EXPERT’ APPROACH TO EDUCATION.

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‘Mantle of the expert’ is the name that Dorothy Heathcote gave to her revolutionary approach to education. Heathcote, now retired from her teaching position at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, has developed this approach throughout her half-century career as lecturer, teacher, and author of how ‘drama’ can be used to deepen and extend any educational project. Classroom drama, at its simplest, harnesses our human ability to play together for curriculum purposes. In Drama for learning: Dorothy Heathcote’s ‘mantle of the expert’ approach to education, the book that she co-authored with her long-time colleague Gavin Bolton, she describes and analyses her work with various groups of pupils in order to show how adults can work with children of any age and ability, using the imaginative possibilities and conventions that are opened up through using drama, in order to develop deep and rich curriculum studies in classroom learning communities.

I stumbled across mantle of the expert (or ‘MoE’) over twenty-five years ago when I was a secondary English teacher in Bristol. After studying with Heathcote for my master’s degree and having moved to the United States for graduate studies, I was able to begin to experiment with using MoE in other people’s classrooms and eventually my own primary classroom. As a university professor of education for the past fifteen years through my collaborative teacher-research with classroom teachers and with my colleague Luke Abbott (also a former student of Dorothy Heathcote’s and now a Lead Senior Adviser for teaching and learning in Essex) I have deepened my understanding of

why this approach is so significant for education. Tim Taylor is one of the teachers that I am fortunate to be working with in England. I am collaborating with him and Luke Abbott to write a book on using the mantle of the expert approach in primary education.

The mantle of the expert approach is grounded in the principle that young people learn best when their relationship to learning and teaching is more like that of experts than that of pupils in most schools.

In everyday life, people learn expertise as they live their lives. This happens not only in their jobs (that could be anything from archaeologists to cleaners to teachers) but also in their hobbies (from gardening or cooking to football supporting) as well as in everyday activities (like driving the car or cleaning the oven or, when we were younger, learning to use a knife and fork). In living their lives, people draw on what they already know and can do as they learn with and from others about how to communicate and collaborate, how to use tools, how to use specialist language, and in general how to learn more about whatever area of study is important to them and to those with whom they associate. People also learn from and with other people both in person and from what others have recorded in materials, books, on the internet etc. that forms the knowledge base for particular communities of expertise and in doing so they identify with those communities. As Wenger puts it, ‘learning transforms who we are and what we can do ... it is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming a certain person’ (215). For example, archaeologists learn alongside their colleagues how to write group reports, how to take care as they sift or dig, and how to speculate with others about the age of historical objects, all as part of their ongoing collaborative research into the particular time period that concerns them during an excavation. They also learn to

become the sort of people that archaeologists are. Cooks, gardeners, cleaners, etc. can all learn in similar ways about particular materials, skills, specialist understanding, and ways of identifying with others.

When teachers use the mantle of the expert approach they create conditions in their classrooms where children can learn most often as people do in their everyday lives – from and with others in activities that draw on and extend their existing expertise. When children take on a ‘mantle’ of expertise they adopt the viewpoint of an older experienced adult who already has expertise and who is working to acquire more expertise because of a particular project. When children take on a mantle of expertise it means that they ‘frame’ their relationships with other people and with any area of study quite differently than they tend to do when they see themselves as ‘pupils.’ As Heathcote & Bolton (1996) put it, “Mantle of the expert provides a centre for all knowledge: it is always experienced by the students in terms of the responsible human being an *active, urgent, purposeful* view of learning, in which knowledge is to be *operated on*, not merely taken in” (32). Here’s what some Essex children said recently about why they liked using MoE.

... you think like an adult and how their life is

... you can feel what it’s like to work

... you learn from people

... you learn that you have to keep up with things that you don’t want to do

... learn things you didn’t know before

... you get to know things you would like to learn and things you wouldn’t like to

learn

... think of ways to make [life] better and ways to make it worse

MoE breeds engagement because it harnesses children's enthusiasm and ability for imagining that they are other people in a community (like a group of archaeologists) doing the sort of interesting things that those people would do (like uncovering and entering an ancient tomb as well as imagining the life of ancient Roman and Iceni peoples). Over time, MoE work develops pupils' intrinsic motivation for curriculum study. In addition to interacting in the actual world of the classroom, when using MoE additional fictional contexts emerge that children are eager to enter and re-enter to engage in certain activities. I've often seen young children eagerly pretend (without any adult involvement) that they are, for example, astronauts flying a spaceship. In Tim's classroom I've seen children use this enthusiasm as part of an on-going curriculum study that centred on running a space rescue station jointly created in imagination through drawings, stories, charts, movement, and interactions among children and adults. No one had to encourage the pupils to imagine that their desks were part of the flight desk, or that they should write down plans for how to rescue stranded astronauts, or that they needed to show how they would land on a planet. The children were 'in role' but they were also deeply engaged as they participated in on-going activities in rich supportive fictional contexts.

When pupils engage in self-motivated and collaborative activities they build their identification as part of a community. Pupils and teacher are always running a fictional ethical enterprise in MoE that both builds a sense of community (as pupils repeatedly re-enter fictional contexts to participate in activities) and that is recursively created out of the sort of interactions that become common-place in the existing classroom community. The enterprise can form a locus for any classroom activity. Whatever might reasonably

be needed by the enterprise becomes a possible short-term task or longer-term activity.

For example, the space rescuers had to contact mission control for instructions on how to proceed on encountering an alien space ship and the team of archaeologists had to create an annotated map of the site that they were investigating.

As teachers, we can plan activities that are at the same time both engaging from the children's viewpoint and required curriculum tasks from ours. Children are usually eager to engage in the sort of activities that they could do if they really were the experts whose lives they are imagining. In doing those activities they can also be doing tasks that we would want them to do as pupils. As Tim details in his article, as archaeologists the children in his class drew and accurately labeled skeletons and artifacts that could have been excavated from an Iceni tomb along with a map of the site; as Star Company colleagues they researched the ancient Egyptians in order to create a script, enact, and shoot a film for DreamWorks; as Space Rescuers they mapped out a space station, devised the principles, and kept on-going written records of their explorations in accordance with their mission. In all of these tasks the pupils were both learning and applying literacy skills and curriculum content knowledge as they developed new understandings about the Roman/Iceni world, the ancient Egyptians, and space.

Learning and teaching through MoE is always socially supported. Children can always work with, or seek help from, other people who in the fictional context are people with relevant expertise. The teacher as well as other pupils and adults can socially support learning and teaching. For example, Tim was always available as one of the astronauts on the space station to clarify goals as well as set up activities with pupils and work alongside them as necessary. Equally important was the pupils' readiness to share

with one another their knowledge of space, spaceships, and literacy as they collaborated on on-going space station activities like keeping written records of rescues and daily routine maintenance.

MoE creates contexts for learning and teaching where pupils are keenly aware of authentic purposes for all activities. Imagining that they are engaged in activities as experts does not give children any more expert knowledge or skill but rather creates a fictional context that activates the knowledge, skills, and understanding that they already have as they develop new facets of their expertise and thus new knowledge, skills, and understanding.

Whereas children frequently feel that they are only doing work for their teacher with no relation to everyday life, in MoE work they are engaged in work that has been commissioned by a client that has very real connections to life outside the classroom. Further, it is the needs of clients, rather than the teacher or the curriculum, that create the felt purpose for all pupils' activities. The ESA, as the astronauts' client, required them to explore and study planets peacefully in the search for other possible places for people on earth to live. Thus, pupils were eager to engage in a scientific study of the oxygen and carbon dioxide cycle as they considered whether planets they found would support human life.

The mantle of the expert approach is much more than a collection of ideas or activities. It is a pedagogical system that could revolutionize education. Perhaps it is most innovative because there is a 'continuous goal of raising the students' awareness of how responsibility arising from the particular expertise is part of a value system' (Heathcote & Bolton, 1996, p. 24).

Taking on a mantle of expertise is about more than adopting a professional attitude to work. Being an expert for Heathcote always means that we should be responsible for our actions and thus learn about what it means to be ethical in how we use our expertise. With MoE we can ensure that children are part of a community that is committed to the highest ethical standards. Equally, just as in everyday life, children can deepen their understanding of the moral dimension to learning, when they explore, from the inside, situations when it is not always clear what the right thing to do actually is. When I worked with Tim's class I was impressed that as the space rescuers they had developed and, in the fictional world, had lived by an ethical code of conduct to rescue all those who were in need. When as space rescuers they encountered me as a stranger in a space ship that had run out of power they initially were in agreement that they should rescue me despite danger to themselves. But when they discovered that the person had stolen the space ship and had likely caused someone's death they were caught in a dilemma. Should they rescue him after all? Some said that was their mission. Others said that he didn't deserve to be saved. Only some wanted to fly over to talk with him but all had to grapple with the question of whether or not they should trust him, or believe him, and how they could find that out? In exploring this dilemma the children's sense of community and moral sensibility deepened when they agreed that they though they might not be able to trust him, as they planned what they might do to test him they had to agree to trust one another to do their best.

I am delighted that the National Primary Strategy (2003) has put its trust in teachers. 'We want schools to feel freer to take control, and to use that freedom to ... think actively about how they would like to develop and enrich the experience they offer their children'

(12). The mantle of the expert approach to education offers teachers just such a possibility.

References

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