

Mantle of the Expert

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"To most truly teach, one must converse; to truly converse is to teach."
(Thorp and Gallimore, 1988)

Of the many ingredients that make up the Mantle of the Expert system, the shift in teacher language and communication, for me, is one of the most essential and one of the most challenging.

Mantle of the Expert will demand that teachers and children 'truly converse', that their conversations are a genuine exchange of ideas where children grow to take responsibility for the work and learn to teach each other. Through these conversations, which may seem casual, the teacher will have carefully fed in useful information but without teacher telling'.

The spreading of responsibility is an important feature of Mantle of the Expert, where the teacher is always planning ways of discouraging teacher dependency but encouraging an investment from the children in what seems like real work carrying a real responsibility and commitment. The children enter the functional roles of people who run an enterprise and through a series of incremental tasks learn the skills and understanding which build their expertise. The Mantle of the Expert is a way of teaching the curriculum but the skills and understanding developed and the knowledge encountered always arise from the context.

The authority which drives them is not the teacher, but the Enterprise and the client and the problems that need to be dealt with. If children are to function as Experts, then they must be treated as such but they also need the support from the structure which builds on their growing expertise. Sources of information have to be built into the structure so that the children interrogate these sources when they are needed. The teacher is not the only source of information and s/he has to select when to give information and how this information is received within an authentic context. For example, in the enterprise about running a stable, if the teacher wants to alert the children to the dangers of too much Spring grass, s/he might introduce them to a task of checking charts detailing times/months/ stabling of horses or organising rotas for putting them in the starvation pen. The children will build their expertise through action, beginning with manageable tasks which do not expose their inexpertise but which allow them to operate as experts. Gradually, their tasks will become more complex.

Within this context the teacher will also adopt a functional role but will always adopt a collegiate relationship with the children, so instead of saying something like this,
"You see, when horses have too much spring grass they could get colic, so we'll have to make sure we keep them off the grass"

s/he may say something like:

"Has anyone seen the vet's report on Molly? Was it colic? I know she'd been on that Spring grass a good while. What did the vet say when she came?"

The teacher in us will want them to understand the first explanation so we will tend to tell it like a teacher. The second example demonstrates a way of talking which gives the same information but

allows the children to make the connections. It also allows the children to respond in an interactive way and perhaps, most importantly, it personalises knowledge.

The whole point is, that the children will gather understanding in context and will discover more as each episode develops. This will also move into action. Molly can be difficult to 'catch' (note the use of authentic language), and through the drama the group may collectively make attempts at attracting her to the stable. If you want the children to begin to work together the 'moving of Molly will engage them in a collective problem. If you want the children to look at the implications of their responsibility they may need to explain to a horse owner the details of their horse's ailment and the procedures that have been taken. Running a stables can take you into several curriculum areas but in Mantle of the Expert it is the 'point of view' frame which colours how children learn and motivates them to discover new things. Knowledge is to be operated on by the children, not merely received. At the 'Interactive Drama Conference' held last year at UCE in Birmingham, Gavin Bolton remarked that "tying a knot as a boy scout is rather different from just tying a knot". In the same way, checking accident reports as a person running a stables who needs to be accountable for those accidents, is rather different from just checking accident reports.

In the workshop at the conference I introduced a way into the 'Running the Stables Enterprise', and together with the participants, reflected on the possibilities and implications of this way of working. The resources I prepared to support the structure included a pictorial map which I named 'The Old Well House Stables' and a letter regarding lottery funding in order that we could move to new and expanded premises. I thought it was important to establish our stables as ones which gave access to all kinds of people in the community and which had created 'horse-share' opportunities and so on, so that from the outset the main thrust of the stables was seen as working for the community, not for profit. These stables needed to have a special dimension. I introduced the Enterprise through a combination of teacher talk and visual resource (pictorial map). My aim was to demonstrate the shift in teacher language within Mantle of the Expert which eased the group into entering the fiction. For example,

"Often, they think people like you can't run big jobs [suggestion of a challenge here] but would you agree with me that if you were pushed we could run a market stall, buying, pricing, ... [a hint of 'let's show them what we can do] Would you have a go with me at running a big enterprise? ... [the teacher here is modelling courtesy - they are being asked] I wonder whether you'd help me run a big stables ... we could give it a go if they trust us [they will be accountable]. Of course, I'm just inventing this stable, wouldn't it be interesting if we did... " [reminding them it's a fiction, but it will be a very truthful context].

I continued, during my talk to fill in the context but also to shift to a greater use of 'we' and 'us'.

"You see, we will be moving to a new stables eventually and we'd need to look at some possible sites but I was so pleased that they gave us the grant. They were very impressed with our links with the community, the way we involved the youngsters from the school and the Riding for the Disabled Scheme. [Possibilities here for written instructions for mounting the horse for young disabled riders who want to do so independently, as well as possibilities for designing amounting block for a person who's lost the use of one leg.]

"Last night, I started thinking back to the time when we first came to these stables. You remember all the problems we had, that well was a problem. Rocky always caught his head collar on it. Anyway, I drew this plan as well as I could, the way I remembered this place ... [this plan is described as one I drew. I couldn't pretend it was an architect's plan as this would lose the authenticity]. Of course it's changed a bit since then. Now, we'll be starting all over again at the new place; I thought it might be helpful to remind ourselves of these things. I've also got the

accident reports, perhaps we could go through them and make a note of anything useful we need to think about when we move."

Now, I've given them resources to look at so they don't feel stared at and they are learning through tasks that will begin to build their expertise but which will also support them. These resources are the non-negotiable elements in the drama which serve to support the teacher as well as the children. They help to establish agreements, they become the authority instead of the teacher, and they breed curriculum work and so help you teach it.

In this particular structure the following details were built in so most curriculum areas could be addressed. The pictorial map of the stables provided a good opportunity for including the details which would address the curriculum.

The accident reports detailed incidents which were partly due to the 'givens' on the map, for example, a horse kicking out in a stable because of the disturbance of rain on the corrugated roofs, thus providing a need here to investigate suitability of materials, costing, budgeting and prioritising; a horse choking on a sweet wrapper will lead the group into looking at ways of alerting the staff and the public to this issue; several horses with damaged hooves may invite the children to design tests to assess the strengths and weaknesses of surfacing materials.

In order to encourage the children to read with care I might introduce the idea of checking horse records so that when they are transported we don't get muddled, along the following lines:

"We know some of the volunteers don't read too well so maybe if we just draw in the markings and colours on this, then they can just check the horse against the diagram. "

The process of drawing the markings on demands that the children scrutinise the text and copy details exactly. It also serves to build their belief in the existence of the horses. They can use this method to invent their own horse descriptions.

The forms and accident reports have to be authentic. Therefore, the language needs to be true to the world of the stables. When I planned this Mantle of the Expert structure I was constantly thinking of truthful ways in which the children could learn the vocabulary without teacher telling. By placing a chart for the 'new helpers who don't know all the different parts of the horse yet' in the 'office', children will have a useful source for supporting their own developing understanding and expert vocabulary.

Anything could happen in their stables, depending what you want them to address in the curriculum. You may introduce roles which inject problems for them to deal with. This may be a local fanner whose horses have been attacked and is concerned about the open access we provide at our stables. This will lead the children into the problem of security and of protecting the horses in their care.

This richness of approach allows for the work to develop and grow. Through detailed and thoughtful planning, this system will encourage a deep investment in the work from the children because as experts they will be empowered to run something that will become essentially theirs.

John MacBeath (1997) in a recent article describes a youth's response to his schooling: "Your whole school life is memorise, memorise, memorise, but afterwards you remember nothing." MacBeath argues that "in much of the so called problem solving in classrooms, it is the teachers who present the problems, and often provide a method for solving them. But the vital step,

recognising and defining the problem, is left out." As experts, children will carry the responsibility for recognising and defining problems.

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