INTRODUCING MANTLE OF THE EXPERT

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In this article, AST & Primary Strategy Consultant, Tim Taylor gives his personal view of Mantle of the Expert, an exciting and creative system of teaching and learning that integrates the curriculum and promotes children’s active involvement in the process. In following issues of LCF we’ll be looking at the implications this system has for literacy teaching.

The Background
Anyone who works in education could be forgiven for thinking the system is in crisis. The QCA schemes of work, the literacy hour, and SATs have created ways of learning that many believe are fragmented, meaningless and boring. According to Mike Tomlinson, former Ofsted chief inspector, 10,000 children in the UK no longer attend school. They have literally disappeared from the system. Countless others are disillusioned: disappointed and bored with lessons that have little to do with their own lives, interests, and passions.

Targets
It is perhaps not unfair to say that our education system has become distorted by an obsession with targets. Targets are everywhere in our schools. Head teachers have targets, teachers have targets and, of course, children have targets.

But, targets are not about children. They are about performance and accountability, the collecting and quantifying of percentages. The pressure to impose them comes from outside schools - from local authorities, who are answerable to ministers, and ministers who are answerable to the electorate - but the effects are felt directly in the classroom. Teachers are told to plan lessons with clear, attainable learning objectives and defined, measurable outcomes. There is little room for ambiguity or imagination. Instead, we get basic skills and the timetabled curriculum, where learning is pre-planned and preordained.

There is a danger that targets have an inhibiting effect on creativity and innovation. They can make people less likely to take risks and more likely to choose the path that appears to guarantee the quickest and most obvious route to success. Indeed, they often lead to narrow and direct teaching because the tests that measure them are themselves narrow and direct.

QCA Schemes of Work
So, you can understand why schools quickly adopted the QCA Schemes of Work after their publication in 2000. Despite their obvious flaws, they were seen by many teachers as the safest option. The testing and inspection process had created a climate of uncertainty where teachers felt de-skilled and as if they didn’t know their jobs. Indeed, the literacy strategy was described as being ‘teacher proof’. Not only that but planning and record-keeping were taking up huge amounts of time.
The Schemes of Work seemed like a quick fix, but they resulted in the break up of the curriculum. Maps and timetables were introduced into primary schools and soon, in many cases, anything that might involve taking a risk was eased out. Learning became a series of teacher-designed activities (unconnected with what came before or after) with learning objectives (decided by the teacher) and measurable, recordable outcomes. Teachers were told to start tracking their children by setting them, giving them targets and planning differentiated lessons.

Is it any wonder children got bored, and so many decided to opt out?

A New Climate
But, things are changing and there is a new climate in education. The tests are not going away any day soon, despite the fact that everyone – teachers, head teachers, advisors, inspectors and even government ministers (see ‘Meetings with the Minister’ - Powling et al 2003) – knows they are deeply flawed and damaging to education. But now at last there is a growing acknowledgment that learning is not something you simply do to people, but something that has to be actively engaged with - something that has to matter to the learner - something active, meaningful and fun.

There is a new director of curriculum at QCA, Mick Waters, who has stated a firm commitment to restructuring the curriculum. He wants the new curriculum to be flexible and open to interpretation. There will remain some basic requirements that all schools must teach but the rest will be up to schools to design in their own way that is appropriate to meet the needs, interests and resources of their children, staff and setting.

When describing his vision, he uses the analogy of architecture. Architects, when designing a building, are required to conform to certain regulations. The windows and doors must be a minimum height and width; there must be proper access for wheelchair users and there must be clear exit routes in case of a fire but beyond these legal requirements, architects are only limited by the extent of their imaginations. And, of course, the limits of the budget and the laws of physics - but you get the point I’m making.

The Primary Strategy
The Primary Strategy (2005) has given us a new challenge – to make learning in school exciting, meaningful and enjoyable. We have been given permission to innovate, to try out new ways of working, and to restructure the curriculum. It is a very great opportunity and is up to us to grab it and make of it what we can. If we don’t, if we wait for something to happen or don’t make a success of it, you can be reasonably sure the next administration will be ready and waiting to put the shackles back on.

Of course, there are limits to our freedom and rightly so. Children are entitled to abroad and
balanced curriculum. The changes over the last twenty years have brought rigour to the system and that is good. But, now there is also flexibility, the flexibility to re-design the curriculum in our own way, based on our own professional judgement and the needs and interests of the children. We can choose what kind of education we want in our schools. We can choose between a dull, grey, utilitarian curriculum and one that is fantastic, vivid and exciting: it’s a choice between the Sagrada Familia and a concrete tower block.

A Radical Vision
Mantle of the Expert (MoE) was devised by the Dorothy Heathcote, with her MA students, at the Education Department, of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, in the early 1980’s. For, over forty years, she had been expanding the boundaries of learning thorough drama. Mantle of the Expert opened this field to the rest of the curriculum, creating meaningful, purposeful and deeply engaging contexts for learning. Her drive was to radically alter the commonly held view of education from one that held it was a preparation for future need, to one where children’s learning is not defined by their lives as adults, but by the value of what they do (collectively) in the classroom today. She wanted education to be less like a waiting room and more like a laboratory.

An Imaginative Approach
MoE is an approach to education that is rooted in enquiry, community, and dramatic imagination. Children and teachers investigate aspects of the curriculum through shared, focused, and extended enquiry in contexts for learning and teaching that are purposeful, authentic, and meaningful to everyone. It works by children creating, with their teacher, an imaginary community within the classroom. The situation defines how they function: they are working ‘as if’ they are experts. This is called framing and is something we do all the time, usually without realising it. For example, at home I am a dad and a husband. At work I am a teacher in class and a colleague in the staffroom. Down the pub, after football, I am a mate, a drinking companion. In each situation I behave differently, depending on the setting. I modify my language, the way I behave and the way I think of myself. I do it naturally, I am rarely, if ever, aware that I’m doing it.

Of course, children do it too, all the time, but usually on the playground. The willing suspension of disbelief, swapping roles and moving in and out of an imaginary setting, are all common features of their play. But they are rarely shared with adults and almost never, in my experience, except perhaps in some drama lessons, used for learning.

Yet the children’s imagination is the greatest resource we have in the classroom. Mantle of the Expert taps into that resource and creates opportunities for children to make meaningful and valuable contributions to their learning environment.

The Main Features of Mantle of the Expert
To illustrate the main features of Mantle of the Expert, I’m going to use an example from my own
class. I’ve been using the system regularly for the past six years. This project or ‘frame’ took a term (14 weeks) in the summer of 2003. There were 26 children in the Year 2/3 class.

In Mantle of the Expert, the children create an enterprise, which is commissioned by a client, to carry out a project. In this frame, the children created a film enterprise, called The Star Company. They were commissioned (in the imaginary context) by Dreamworks to make a film based on the Egyptian myth of Seth and Osiris. To find out more about The Star Company, and see clips from the film, visit the website, linked form www.tuckswood.co.uk

See appendix 1 & 2 outlining the main elements of Mantle of the Expert and illustrated by examples from The Star Company frame.

The Children’s View of MoE.
Children get excited when they use Mantle of the Expert - excited about learning, excited about their work, excited about finding out more and digging deeper as the following quotes from children who’ve been involved with Mantle of the Expert make clear:

“Making it more exciting helps you learn better... because we're doing it ourselves. If we read it out of book we would learn stuff, but we wouldn't learn how we would do it... when you act it out its like your own story you're doing... It's fun because you all get to do stuff, it's not like a boring teacher, saying do work, do this work, all boring work. This is work, but its like fun work, its creative stuff.” Sasha (8)

“You want to make it more exciting because we won't learn nothing if we think it's boring... We wouldn't want to learn if it wasn't fun... that's what all this Roman stuff is about, we're actually wanting to learn. That's the thing that we like.” Bobby (8)

“It’s like having golden time all the time!' It helps me to learn – it’s a fun way of learning.” Ethan (7)

"You're not really at school. I'm interested in it because it seems like it's serious and really real.” Tia (6)

"It's interesting and fun. I like deciding things." Ella (7).

What Teachers Think of MoE
Teachers who use the system, report their classrooms become a different place, where children are energised and excited about learning.

“Lessons are far more enjoyable, the children seem to thrive on needing the relevant knowledge to complete the tasks before them. The class are far more engaged in the learning process.”
Simon Thomas, Acle St Edmund Primary School, Norfolk
“The children believe in it and in themselves. They know they are learning and feel much more a part of it. They see, the decisions they make have consequences and effects, they have to face up to and deal with. The classroom becomes a bigger place and a wider world. The work is fun and purposeful for them.” – Emma Hamilton-Smith, Tuckswood Community First School

“Over the last year it has been a major part of the children’s learning and we have watched our classes become transformed by the powerful thinking, speaking, listening, and freedom of imagination that happens within MoE.”– Jenny Burrell, Avenue First School, Norwich

“Lessons feel more relaxed and more purposeful. The children feel they can be themselves, because they know their real opinions and ideas will be valued. They don’t need to assume an opinion just to please me or their classmates.”- Michael Bunting, Avenue First School, Norwich

“Boys, especially lower achieving boys, have shown, through their verbal and empathic understanding, their real grasp of a situation and have participated in a way that they were reluctant to in ‘ordinary’ work.”- “It appeals, to some children, in a way that everyday lessons don’t seem to, watching them engage is fantastic.” – Catrin Parry-Jones, Surlingham Community Primary School, Norfolk

What Parents think of MoE

Parents come into school to ask what’s happening. Not complaining, but trying to find out why their children are talking so animatedly at home about what they are doing in school.

‘Mo has been really inspired by the ….project. She informs us daily of the progress of the architects’ company. Thank you so much …. you have given her a real passion for learning,’ – Parent, Avenue First School, Norwich.

‘My daughter always comes home full of enthusiasm and very keen to tell us about her day.’ – Parent, Bealings County Primary School, Suffolk

"I am amazed at how she is so interested in the history, she is telling us all about Nelson all of the time."-Parent, Tuckswood Community First School, Norwich

A Change for the Better

More and more schools are experimenting with the system. Learning networks in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Newcastle, and Northumberland are making it the main focus of their development. A research project, funded by the Innovation Unit, has just been completed with very encouraging results, and QCA and NCSL are showing a great deal of interest in the system.

Mantle of the Expert is a challenging way to work. It requires training and support over time. It requires teachers to take risks in their classrooms and to think differently about how learning is
structured. It requires school leaders to stand by their staff and not be deflected by the ‘Number Crunchers’ and the ‘Watchers’ who think they know best.

Those in high places say they want change. They say they want creativity and innovation, and they say they want children to enjoy their learning, as well as do well academically. Well, creativity and innovation take time. They take time to adopt and they take time to develop. They do not preclude high-standards - in fact, most research suggests, they are a prerequisite - but they do require a change in thinking, particularly about the way the system measures excellence. If we want children to be, self-motivated and excited about coming to school, with a love of learning, then we need to look very closely at the education we offer them. As an adult, I would feel cautious and unhappy if every piece of work I produced was levelled and I was put into a group based on my performance or attitude (with work made easier to meet my ‘special’ needs). And I wouldn’t spend too much time practicing for something that might, or might not be useful, to me, in ten years time. Even now I don’t get excited or motivated by targets or objectives. Yet this is exactly what we expect children to accept. Is it any wonder that so many of them are disaffected and bored with the experiences they are offered by so many schools?

But, things are changing; there is a new climate in education. As teachers we have a responsibility to meet the challenge, and to take advantage of the climate. Mantle of the Expert is one way ahead. It is not everything, and it not for every school, or every teacher - but it is a dynamic and exciting way to teach. It enflames children imaginations and makes them passionate, and committed, to learning. It creates meaningful and purposeful contexts for the curriculum and has the potential, to transform schools, into vibrant and purposeful, learning environments.

To find out more about Mantle of the Expert
www.mantleoftheexpert.com is a new Mantle of the Expert website, with explanations of how the system works, examples of the system in schools and resources, including planning.

www.tuckswood.co.uk Is our school website, which includes examples of Mantle of the Expert, in particular, The Star Company.

www.bealing Is the website for Bealings County Primary school, which has been using Mantle of the Expert for several years and has recently had a fantastic Ofsted report praising its use.

All the quotes included in the article come from the Innovation Unit report, which is downloadable as a .pdf from www.mantleoftheexpert.com

MOE Conferences – During 2006/7 there are going to be a number of national conferences. For more information contact Tim Taylor: tim.taylor4@btinternet.com
References:
Heathcote, Dorothy. Collected writings on Education and Drama (Northwestern University Press, 1991)

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**Appendix 1. Elements of Mantle of the Expert**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements Of Mantle of the Expert</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>Being in role – not role-play, but taking a particular position in relation to yourself &amp; others. Elements</td>
<td>Experts – the children assume the expertise of the role, archaeologists, artists, astronauts, etc. Reasons Elements of Mantle of the Expert</td>
<td>Film-makers – the children do the things film-makers do, write scripts, storyboard, design sets, create costumes, etc. Examples</td>
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<td>Creating an enterprise – the work is done within a community of expertise. The work is contextualised &amp; purposeful.</td>
<td>The history, building &amp; tasks – the children create the enterprise by inventing its history, place of work &amp; activity.</td>
<td>They invent – a history of the company, films it has made in the past, significant events, etc. They submit ideas &amp; plans for architects are designing their new studios. They have the regular tasks that people who work in an enterprise have to do, they have to take on new staff, ensure the building is secure, deal with clients &amp; customers etc.</td>
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<td>The client – an outside agent who commissions the experts for a particular project.</td>
<td>Develops a tension – a reason to do the work. There is a client to satisfy, with high standards &amp; difficult demands. Creates the need for communication &amp; a clear purpose.</td>
<td>Dreamworks – mid-way through production, The Star Company got an unexpected email from their client, they had gone over budget &amp; Dreamworks were sending over one of their top executives to see how the project was developing. They had a week to prepare for the visit.</td>
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<td>The commission – the purpose of the experts work.</td>
<td>The work – the experts plan, develop &amp; complete a range of tasks to fulfil the commission. Linked directly to, and across, the curriculum.</td>
<td>The film of Seth &amp; Osiris – had to be researched, scripted, sets, costumes &amp; props designed, music composed, special effects created, etc. etc.</td>
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<td>The audience – the reason for the commission</td>
<td>The Consumers – have to be kept in mind at all times. They give the work meaning, urgency &amp; the need for quality.</td>
<td>Showing the film – the film was first shown to a test audience. The film had to be advertised and, on the night, The audience were sold tickets &amp; popcorn.</td>
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Appendix 2. Frame building for Mantle of the Expert

**Building a Frame for Mantle of the Expert**

Thinking social/cultural

- What’s the focus?
  - Ancient Egypt
    - How was ancient Egyptian society shaped by their belief in life after death?
    - Key skill: Communication – practice speaking & listening skills. To read & write – reflect critically & analysis.
    - Thinking skill: Inquiry - ask relevant questions, pose & define problems, plan & research.
    - To think creatively & work across the curriculum to represent their KSU

Think of a social/cultural question as a focus for the enquiry.

- Enquiry question?
  - 3 key learning skills/learning objectives, I want the children to practice/learn
    - The purpose
      - What’s the story?
        - How can I provide opportunities for children to work on & transform their knowledge/skills/understanding
      - What is the purpose of our work?
        - Who are the audience? Who is the work aimed at?
          - The enterprise: A community of people with a common purpose
            - The experts
              - What kinds of skills would they have/need?
                - The client
                  - Who would care about the purpose and commission the company?
          - Who would have expertise in this field?
            - Film makers & researchers
              - Research; Writing; Planning; Making; Creativity; Artistic; Acting; Music; Design; Communication – etc. etc.
            - People who like films. Children and adults, particularly those people interested in the past.
          - The enterprise: A community of people with a common purpose
            - The experts
              - What kinds of skills would they have/need?
                - The client
                  - Who would care about the purpose and commission the company?
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            - The experts
              - What kinds of skills would they have/need?
                - The client
                  - Who would care about the purpose and commission the company?
Appendix 3. Generic tasks grid for Mantle of the Expert

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Generic Tasks Grid</th>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Reporting</th>
<th>Cataloguing</th>
<th>Presenting</th>
<th>Security</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>Emails, fly, phone calls</td>
<td>Internal meetings</td>
<td>Webinars</td>
<td>CCTV, codes, passwords, gates, logs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Promotional materials, posters, leaflets</td>
<td>Writing reports, making films, interviews</td>
<td>Photo albums, computer data base, films</td>
<td>Books, wall displays, films, photo album, Lump head</td>
<td>Providing information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Induction</td>
<td>Training for new employees, booklets, posters</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Cloning</td>
<td>Portfolio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refreshments</td>
<td>Conference, presentations, posters, handouts</td>
<td>Internal meetings, multi-media</td>
<td>Networking,糅合, family, company history, personal, booklet, notebook</td>
<td>Rituals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human relations</td>
<td>Code of ethics, rules, support for new employees, formal, informal, etc.</td>
<td>Information gathering</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Routines, e-mails, meetings, press releases, phone calls</td>
<td>Wall displays, films, posters, leaflets</td>
<td>Investigating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roles &amp; jobs</td>
<td>Assignments, special duties, areas of responsibility</td>
<td>Equipment &amp; machinery</td>
<td>Enquiring</td>
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<td>Protocols</td>
<td>Effective working, meetings, for dealing with people at end of work</td>
<td>Working environment</td>
<td>Sound, space, resources, human interaction</td>
<td>Tim Taylor</td>
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A list of the types of tasks activities used in Mantle of the Expert.