

THE DRAMAS OF HISTORY

- Luke Abbott

Introduction

I am always reminded of the work of John Fines (Fines & Verrier, 1974) when I embark on any historical investigation with young people using dramatic methods. Since his tragic death there has been a development throughout the country - tackling the history curriculum through not only his pioneering drama methods but also based on Dorothy Heathcote's pedagogic system-'Mantle of the Expert' (MoE). John had always revered the work of the great pioneer of drama in education Dr Dorothy Heathcote who still works at the forefront of innovation and educational reform at the age of 81!

The Mantle of the Expert

The Mantle of the Expert [MoE] dramatic system works quite simply whereby classes are first of all invited to imagine. Within this imagined world-the class view their world through the eyes of other people-and for a period of time-wear a 'mantle of expertise' associated with the point of view of these fictional people. In the world of the imagined-an enterprise or a company or a business is invented that holds the seeds to educational investigations. The MoE idea is to enable a longer term exploration of learning-rather than a short term dramatised event-though this in no way detracts from the huge benefits of dramatising historic moments-merely it offers yet another choice to teachers in the quest to find effective learning's across the curriculum as well as in the subject domains.

MoE, Creativity and Schools I was recently asked to work with a cluster of schools that were moving into a position where they wanted to get more creativity into their curriculum and move beyond QCA schemes of work into personalising learning for their primary aged students-particularly in the 'gifted and talented' category. I was asked to run a series of demonstration lessons using dramatic methods I had been trained in by Dorothy Heathcote herself when I took my Masters degree at Newcastle University.

Since then (back in the 1980's) - I have been trialling the methods in schools as a teacher, member of leadership teams, later on as a curriculum adviser and now as the national project director for MoE. In all these various circumstances -trying to construct the best learning experiences with and for students-the outstanding feature we managed as teachers and managers was the engagement of learners in the imagined worlds we and they created-as well as the plethora of historical knowledge skills and understanding dramatic enquiry seems to bring to the educational table.

MoE – Theory into Practice: A Classroom Example.

In running a MoE structure - there are a few clear boundaries.

- Firstly there is always an imagined enterprise that is being created-with an imagined client who drives the curriculum enquiry by supplying the class with a need for a 'job to be done'.
- Second, the system has at its heart the notion that classes can take responsibility together on an equitable basis within the fictional events-which is perhaps a far cry from many experiences children have as learners where they may often have to open their mouths to be fed for a lot of the time!

The class in question were year 5 [nine and ten year olds] and had already embarked on the Tudors for their half term explorative project. My brief was not only to focus on Drama and History but also to work within guidelines for teaching the Gifted and Talented. I was told the pupils had 'done Tudors' and knew a lot about the Tudor times, people and events of significance. I had the idea that we could begin an evaluation of their work to date (and help the class assess their learning) by creating a company called 'Tudor Times Limited'. The client the company would have to deal with was a fabulously wealthy industrialist who had just renovated an authentic Tudor mansion similar in style to Kentwell Hall in Suffolk. The person concerned wanted to collect together authentic Tudor artefacts, furniture, furnishings and fittings for the whole house-down to an authentic fire and utensils in the kitchen.

Those of you who remember the work of Dr John (Fines) will recognise the elements he often used-a beguiling context that would enable the class to use their existing knowledge skills and understanding as well make new discoveries along the way. This was so well exemplified in his series of videos on Primary History. (I suppose in a nutshell-we were investigating 'Tudor houses' in a slightly different way.)

This approach also allows a class to make connections and become immersed in aspects of practice associated with provision for the gifted and talented- of which of course there is a whole can of worms to open up! [*For a guide to what the G&T agenda and its complexity means for the teaching of history, please see Primary History 00: 00*] My simplistic view is that all children have gifts and talents-and are all therefore gifted and talented and with a few prompts from the G&T guidelines-I felt working with the class concerned would tackle the challenges the guidelines suggest.

G&T Students The Essex guidelines to challenge G&T students are as follows: creating opportunities for students to experience -

- Self direction
- Opportunities for group work
- Experience of 'difficulty'
- Imaginative and creative work
- Incubate ideas
- Originality
- Being led
- First hand experience
- Intellectual challenge
- Time to dream
- Enrichment
- Thinking skills
- Collaborative group structures
- Independence and research skills
- Problem solving/investigation/creative work in any field

The trouble with lists like this is that is exactly what they are, *and in the case of the one above what should be on offer to all pupils!* But, I hope this outlines the general idea of the framework within which learning to *incorporate* G&T features can be structured. *It is for you to judge the extent to which the team reflected the G&T principles above, and those that the 00 edition of Primary History presented on pages 00-00.*

Into the classroom

I had a diagram of a door on a flip chart that the class saw me draw in situ-this was quite a beguiling strategy as they were seemed quite intent on finding out what on

earth I was doing![[pin?]] up. On the door I wrote in a lower case script (with appropriate capital letters of course)-

Tudor Times Limited

Before we began I asked the class to agree that the diagram represented a Tudor door. They agreed - with one exception – that if it was an authentic Tudor door then no one in their right mind would put a plaque on it as such an act would be ‘historic vandalism’. I of course concurred and tried another drawing with the help of the class who now placed the title of the firm above the door and then proceeded to inform me - through adding significant details on the door – (a Tudor door of course.....) such as the squared nails, the oak panelling for the construction of the door, the struts used to hold it firm and secure, the see-through grill to look at the people who wanted to go across the threshold but could be seen before they did so, the door knob, the key, the wooden lock, the thickness of the wood and finally the hinges. In the words of Dorothy Heathcote-they were putting their ‘Tudor eyes’on!

Imaginative construction It was then that I asked the class what they supposed might be on the other side of the door with such a sign above it, especially to help a visitor visualise the place. The first response clarified that there was a reception area - fitted out in Tudor fashion - with authentic leather and oak chairs and tables with wall hangings and paintings – all of which were authentic Tudor. As we could have gone on talking all day-I felt we could begin to ‘transmediate’ their knowledge (a term I learnt from Professor Gerry Harste from Indiana University) as the class were now getting very excited about what else was behind the door in other parts of the imagined building.

Mantle of the Expert: Imagination to visualisation As I know the system of MoE quite well now-I was happy to let the class invent and create the objects of great worth and meaning that lay behind the door of Tudors Times Limited. I knew that there would be simple steps from creating the building with all its marvellous furnishings and artefacts to inventing the actual people whose job it was to take responsibility for the security and safe keeping of such wonderful objects. I asked the class to stand in the place in our Tudor Times building where the objects they were discussing were able to be viewed. This the class did with great skill - here I scaffolded their learning by using some of the first 8 of the series of conventions for representation from Heathcote’s dramatic toolkit. Within minutes the class created a ‘visualisation’ of their building.

Labelling The next task was to label the artefacts created (here are some of them):

- The arm of Jesus Christ as a relic in a glass box
- St Peters hand and his ring in a glass container
- A painting of Henry VIII hunting deer
- A peasant caught poaching on the king’s land (a sculpture on a table)
- A wall hanging of the royal party hunting with hawks
- A painting by a famous painter of Henry viii after a battle
- A painting of Anne Boleyn
- A tapestry of the Queen Catherine with her royal helpers
- A picture of Pontius Pilate washing his hands (this was owned it seemed by a Tudor courtesan)
- A table owned by Henry VIII-oak and very long-long enough for a banquet for lots of people!
- Silver plates used for dinning at a royal banquet
- Sword owned by royal family

- Eating and drinking objects used by the poor
- Eating and drinking objects used by the rich.....

I had been swiftly around the room as they were creating their objects to ask if any were for sale and if so could they give me a clue as a possible buyer for a rich client how much the objects were on sale for. This had the immediate effect of classification into objects of national importance (not for sale) and objects that would go on sale at an 'appropriate' price. The group of teacher observers could see how the class then created a label- to describe the objects (very useful writing activity) and whether they were for sale or not. We then 'signed up' our building once more by placing the 'objects' (i.e. class representing their objects) in appropriate positions throughout our Tudor Times Limited building.

Questioning These 'objects' could answer any amount of questions from interested observers-such as teachers –and of course their peers. It was when the questions started that we could see the potential for long term work unfolding in front of us-questions such as:

- 'How did Tudor Times Ltd. manage to get ownership of you?' (Referring to the object being represented). Such questions helped create and build the 'history' of the Tudor Times Ltd., another feature of MoE as a system.
- 'If you are not for sale (referring to the object as described on the paper plaque by the artefact) could you let us know the reasons?'
- Have you been used to make miracles? (Referring to the 'relics' in the building- Christ's bones and St Peter's hand.....)

Discussion This led to a further discussion out of the fictional mode-of the value of relics in Tudor times and the mystical nature of how they were used as well as a class discussion on the nature of miracles, religious beliefs, Islam (through the knowledge of 'ambassadors') and the life of Christ -as some children were a little vague on their understanding of how people became sanctified like St Peter for example.

Continuation Although this session lasted only an hour and a half-the potential for further investigations using the context of Tudor Times Limited seemed a strong drive from the children's point of view. The next session would begin by making contact with the rich client as well as clarify the 'value system' of Tudor Times Ltd.. So much to do for the future!

This is only a small glimpse into how the system known as mantle of the expert works-and more can be found on our website www.mantleoftheexpert.com

Conclusion

The long term potential using the Mantle of the Expert pedagogy to teach historical skills for 7-11 year olds is detailed in an exploration of 'Nelson's Box' taught by Emma Hamilton-Smith class teacher and Tim Taylor a trained historian (also an Advanced Skills Teacher in MoE). Both were at Tuckswood Community First School Norwich where MoE was the dominant pedagogy used to engage very hard to reach learners. The scenario, invented by Emma, Tim and the children in Emma's class, imagined that Nelson had a premonition of his own death on the eve of Trafalgar and in preparation packed all of his most important possessions in a wooden box. He then commissioned a team of English seamen to disguise themselves as Spanish sailors to slip unseen through the French lines and deliver the box to his daughter, Horatia, in Norfolk. The box arrived safely, but for an unknown reason was buried in

the orchard of the family home in Burnham Thorpe. It lay unopened and undiscovered until 2005 when a local farmer found it. The box was donated to the *Nelson Explorer's Club* (an organisation specialising in the life and legacy of Lord Nelson) and its contents put on display as part of the double centenary of Nelson's death.

In this scenario the children were effectively working on a double MoE inquiry, both as the expert seamen transporting the box secretly back to England and as the historians of the *Nelson Explorers Club* investigating and displaying the contents of the box to the general public, using the artefacts to teach people about Nelson's life and influence. Both inquiries ran simultaneously, feeding information backwards and forwards across the two time periods, and lasted for the entire academic year. Most, but not all, of the curriculum in Emma's class was explored through the scenarios creating meaningful, exciting and intensely engaging opportunities for the children to develop deep levels of knowledge and understanding. In the words of one parent with a child in Emma's class: 'I am amazed at how she is so interested in the history, she is telling us all about Nelson all of the time.'

Other examples include how a demolition company-Diamond Demolition Ltd-helped a class of year 1 and 2 students engage with Victorian England for 2 terms with Julia Walshaw at Bealings County Primary School Woodbridge, Suffolk - they too have a website www.bealings.net. When demolishing the chimney of a cotton mill, the company unearthed evidence of the building's former use, in particular of the children who used to work there. This lent a new angle to their demolition work – they felt it was no longer appropriate to simply demolish the building without due respect and ceremony. The company decided to find and invite the descendants of the child workers to watch the demolition, to witness on their behalf the destruction of a building that had seen so much suffering.

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References

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- Heathcote, D (1984) 'Signs and Portents' in L. Johnson, L and C. O'Neil, C, eds. in *Dorothy Heathcote -Collected Writings on Drama and Education*, Hutchinson