How do you go from “We deliver on time, every time” to using tiger bones for medicine, exploring animal welfare, discussing what a criminal is, finding out about Buddhism, exploring racism and investigating Ancient Egyptian curses? With my Year 2 class of six and seven year olds you co-construct the curriculum and enjoy learning with Mantle of the Expert; a dramatic enquiry based approach to learning invented by Dorothy Heathcote.

Becoming drivers working in an imaginary transport company [the responsible team element of Mantle of the Expert] had started with reading customer reviews, researching and buying lorries of different kinds, calculating lengths of journeys for delivery jobs and designing company logos in the style of Eddie Stobart! But it was when drama was introduced into the story - one of our drivers, a Learning Support Assistant in role, heard breathing and scratching in her container lorry, that the attention and interest from the children grew into total investment and the learning through the Mantle of the Expert work deepened. There was a tiger in the locked container not silk as we had thought, brought here from Thailand for our client [another necessary element of the work] the silk company owner to use for medicine for his dying father. The children had steered the learning away from the teacher planned idea of a human presence in the container towards an animal and the narrative built in this direction with them driving the drama and enquiry work. After talking to the tiger – the head teacher in role, they were adamant that it would not be returned to the Buddhist monks in the Tiger Temple from which it came until the team were sure it would be cared for appropriately.

This led to the next episode of the Mantle story – one where the children had complete ownership of their learning and demonstrated total obsession with their enquiry. Within the story the reputation of our transport company was spreading and new drivers were needed. Using a large role on the wall type activity a person specification was created and contracts were drawn up. Using a dramatic convention [www.mantleoftheexpert.com] we met one of the drivers; and as I began to draw an outline of him the children took over. “He needs a badge on his shirt.” “This is his driving license.” He developed on large paper in front of us as children collaborated to develop his character. “I wonder if he has a photo of his family” was immediately followed by someone inventing his wife and children. Pictures of them, his home, pets etc appeared around him alongside his car, favourite things and pastimes. They had built a picture of him and using the dramatic imagination we felt as if we knew him; so much so that when we heard his diary entry we empathised with his feelings of excitement and nerves as he prepared for his first day at work.

However we left him for the rest of that morning as the extension to our staffroom to accommodate Josh Davies and the other new drivers was complete. The classroom was signed as the staffroom each drawing - be it of a fridge, a TV, cups or sofa carrying huge significance for the children and the story and placed around the room with great consideration. We used drama to welcome the new drivers and were ready to continue with our transport jobs after lunch.

Returning to the classroom an hour later though there was immediate outrage amongst the children! Totally immersed in the imaginative world they had created, when they noticed signs “NO MEAT ALLOWED” “QUIET PLEASE” and objects including a statue, flowers, and bowls in the staffroom the class was instantly filled with inquiring conversation, speculation and discussion. Their need to explore the environment was urgent and important.

Gathering the children together a short time later to share our initial observations and thoughts and to decide on what we wanted to do it was clear from their comments that they were drawing on previous knowledge of Buddha [the statue had been elsewhere in the room as part of exploration of Buddhist monks from an earlier episode] and making links to this fiction we had created together. The obsession was tangible with the children constantly responding to each other, hypothesising and questioning. Such motivation and engagement meant there was a need to abandon the planned direction for the afternoon.
and continue in this inquiry mode with suggestions made such as talking to Josh Davies, meeting with our boss and examining the objects as some of the possible ways to find out more. I drew the children’s attention towards a box of books which they might also find useful and off they went; totally on task and learning independently. There was an expectation to be ready to share their learning at an agreed time in response to children saying, “I need to tell everyone this”, and they decided to sit in a circle speaking one at a time in a clockwise direction.

The learning shared included:

- A drawing of the driver meditating and one annotated with the words no meat following a conversation with the teacher in role
- A tree diagram of the driver’s family who were also Buddhists
- A security code for the staffroom door and a new keypad to prevent further intrusion
- Location of Nepal, Thailand and India on the globe and Google Earth with interest stemming from the boxes of incense sticks
- Connections between areas on the globe and possible Buddhist places with a question about how well travelled the driver was
- Notes written collaboratively and individually on ipads
- Information on Buddhism instantly accessible and read from an ipad – extending lines of enquiry
- An explanation of rituals and clothing linked to worship and prayer in other religions
- Spy bugs with CCTV pictures of what had been seen in the staffroom
- Detailed drawings of a Buddhist shrine
- Information identified in nonfiction books and read out or shown
- Hypotheses about the importance of flowers, bowls and colours in the shrine
- A discussion around a note left for Josh Davies “Your sort are not welcome around here”
- Questions for further exploration including “What is enlightenment?”

Amazing learning - which could have continued way past the end of the session!

However this part of the afternoon then led to further connections, questions and speculations. So we agreed that each child would write a question either for Josh Davies or our company boss and the way forward for the next day was set. “How can we ask these questions?” I asked. “We can talk to his picture – you can talk to anything in drama.” “Someone can be in role.” We began to consider how to do this as it was important to find out for certain what had been happening in our staffroom.

Realising we didn’t have time that day but that there is always tomorrow the comments such as “I don’t want to go home”, “I want to do Mantle on Saturday and Sunday”, “Mantle is the most special time” and “That’s the best Mantle ever” continued on the way out of the class at home time and I couldn’t have agreed more!

What followed included a staff meeting planned and organised by the children and led by one of them, discussions with the drivers and bosses including a sensitive conversation using drama with those who had written the confrontational note, apologies using dramatic conventions, cards and letters written to Josh Davies, finding and setting up a meditation space away from the hustle and bustle of the staffroom and information leaflets on Buddhism for the drivers to read. Who would have thought that children working as if they are a transport company could result in, amongst other things, so much RE learning!

Mantle of the Expert at Woodrow First School [a MoE training school] has made such a difference to the culture of learning at our school and is raising standards in all areas of the curriculum. It has only been made possible through the leadership of Head teacher and National Trainer Richard Kieran and a whole school commitment to ongoing training and support from Luke Abbott [Director of MoE], Tim Taylor, Iona Towler Evans and Hywel Roberts.