

Mantle of the Expert - The Sea Company

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On March 12th 2007 we finally got our first glimpse of The Titanic. The room was hushed as the children worked in their submersible teams to navigate through the darkness of the deep Atlantic Ocean. All we could hear were intermittent radio reports. The last one was urgent “something has fallen on us – we’re trapped!”

It’s going on in the playground as well – the children tell me they’ve been talking about it and ‘playing’ it outside. The parents keep talking about it too. “He’s consumed by it!” said a mum enthusiastically. “It’s so different – personal and intriguing – he takes it to heart”, said another. So what is ‘it’? It’s called Mantle of the Expert.

Mantle of the Expert (MoE) was devised by Dorothy Heathcote, teacher, lecturer and author, now retired from the education department of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. It is a revolutionary approach to education rooted in drama, enquiry and imagination. Children and teachers work together to create an imaginary community within which they function as if they were experts e.g. they might be a team of architects, scientists or exhibition organisers. They are commissioned by imaginary clients, so might be asked to design a new theatre, explore a previously undiscovered island or organise an art exhibition.

The children are never tricked into thinking this is real. The children ‘contract into’ situations within the drama, knowing they are not ‘true’ but knowing that they seem real as they are experiencing them. It builds on children’s natural ability to imagine worlds and to role play and they slip easily in and out of the dramatic situations explored. As the work progresses many possibilities begin to emerge. These are explored in episodes in which a range of dramatic conventions are used to shape, enrich and deepen the meaning of each situation.

The children engage in a series of collaborative tasks, motivated by the client’s demands. Teamwork and communication are at the centre of the learning process in MoE, with everyone having a group responsibility for a project as it progresses. The children are constantly feeding in their own ideas – I always see these as gifts – for every one of my ideas they have 10 more! They act and make decisions with responsibility and authority, tackling big problems which seem purposeful and urgent to them. Because the children are in the imaginary world they can explore potentially dangerous and exciting situations like exploring outer space or diving down to shipwrecks, all within a safe context.

I work in a two form entry First School near the centre of Norwich. My Year 2 class have been working since September (it is now April) as a shipwreck salvage team called ‘The Sea Company’. We have established a company HQ (in Cromer!) explored the various jobs within the company (divers,

restorers, researchers etc) and have created an imaginary history, establishing our expertise in salvaging important shipwrecks, restoring valuable artefacts and doing historical research.

Our Museum Education Service is very keen to support MoE and have worked with the children in role at the local museum, culminating in them commissioning us to dive down to The Titanic. The whole project has taken on a huge life and energy driven forward by the children's commitment and enthusiasm which I hope will carry it on to the end of the current academic year.

We call the MoE 'company work' and engage in it most afternoons through cross curricular tasks and also through much of the English curriculum in the morning. We have also had immersion days or weeks when there is important business to be done! By the end of the year we will have covered most of the Year 2 curriculum through the salvage company. Tenuous links are not made though – any areas of the curriculum that do not fit coherently into the work are taught separately.

We are confident that our children are still covering the curriculum content required by the NC but also developing the essential Key Skills that are hidden in the introductory pages of our NC: information processing, reasoning, enquiry, creative thinking, evaluating, working with others, problem solving and communication. Areas such as PSHE and Speaking and Listening are an integral part of MoE and teachers can plan frames that will have the potential to cover specific curriculum areas – history is a prime example of a subject that is rich in 'Mantle' potential!

Across the rest of the school we have seen architects commissioned to build a safari lodge in Kenya, a film company making a documentary about Egypt, animal carers looking after owls and hedgehogs and a company that solves problems in stories! It is an approach that works effectively across the primary age range and has the potential to be a powerful way of learning right through the school system and beyond.

We are lucky to have an inspirational head who is committed to developing creativity and innovation in the curriculum and who has whole heartedly supported the development of MoE as a whole school initiative. I have also had the support of enthusiastic and committed colleagues both at school and in wider learning networks. For schools that are thinking about embarking on MoE, it might be reassuring to know that it is growing rapidly and is gaining recognition and endorsement from the DFES, QCA and OFSTED . There have been a series of influential national conferences and a growing number of enthusiastic practitioners across the country trying it out in their classrooms, with the support of their heads and management teams.

I love using MoE with my class because it creates such a rich fictional context for learning and it uses the richest of all our resources – the children's imagination.

I have been so proud to see my class working together as a team, making shared decisions, respecting each others' positions and solving problems with true collaboration. I watched a child who has difficulties fitting into

'conventional' learning, come alive with thinking, talking and imagining. He seemed to have found a big, joyous space where he could be himself. He came up to me at the end of one Mantle session and said, with a great grin on his face, "all our little ideas have turned into one big, fantastic idea!" He was so right!

I am a Year 2 Teacher at Avenue First School in Norwich with a TLR post for 'Implementation and Development of an Enquiry Based Curriculum.' I have taught for 20 years and worked in inner city schools in London and Oxford before moving to Norwich. Although still teaching in the classroom full time I am currently also involved in training other practitioners in the use of MoE and in delivering workshops at a series of national conferences. I have published a blog of my class's current MoE project on the web address below.

www.mantleoftheexpert.com

<http://theseacompany.blogspot.com>

The following are some selected quotes from children and parents in my class - could one or two of them be highlighted / indented into the text as in 'Anyone for phonic tonic' (p 12 of last year's supplement).

'It's like real life – there's big trouble! We can learn about solving problems.'
Joshua (7)

'It's exciting because anything can happen.' Luke (6)

'It extends and challenges her way beyond the classroom.' (Year 2 parent)

'She talks about it all vividly.' (Year 2 parent)

'He's completely motivated – I believe it's because it's so different – personal and intriguing – he takes it to heart.' (Year 2 parent)

'Carry on educating others about the importance of this exciting and much needed approach to teaching. I only wish that we could guarantee that Year 2 children will get more chances in the future to experience this imaginative work.' (Year 2 parent)