Undersea Savers and The Golden Elizabeth

*Exploration of a Mantle of the Expert Frame*

By Julia Walshaw

This is an account, told as accurately and honestly as possible, of Mantle of the Expert work that I did with my mixed Year 1 and 2 class over the course of two terms, in the Spring and Summer Terms 2008. It cannot begin to cover every episode, every detail, every nuance, but I hope to explore the principal experiences. The main curriculum areas I intended to cover over this time were a historical enquiry of the way of life of people in the more distant past who lived in the local area, the suitability of various materials for their purpose, map skills, and measurement (length, capacity, mass) using different scales. The literacy objectives were many and varied. The frame I eventually selected was a diving organisation, for reasons I hope will become obvious as this account progresses! It was a frame that captured the interest and emotional engagement both of the class and of myself as a teacher, and I look back on it with fondness as a time of deep learning that often seemed to be ‘in the flow’.

I felt it necessary to start with a small initial client and commission, that would both grab the children’s interest and help them feel comfortable in the role of diving team. I felt that their prior understanding of deep sea diving would be limited (this proved to be the case – at first most associated diving with platform diving in swimming pools), and so that to jump straight into the main commission would be too much for such young children to take on. So, our initial client would be a coastguard who, concerned that a Minke Whale with net tangled round its tail is both in danger itself and posing a danger to passing shipping, asks the diving team to dive into the sea to untangle the net. I felt confident that with its animal content and the excitement of the time pressures to get to the whale quickly, this problem would draw in the full range of children in my class.

I explained to the children that I was going to draw a picture of something that would be important in our new story. On a piece of sugar paper, I drew the Minke Whale, which provoked discussion amongst the children about what kind of whale it was, how big it was etc. I then drew on the tangled net, which naturally led to heated discussion about how it got there. I asked what could be done to help an animal like that, and listened intently to the children’s ideas. I then explained that there was going to be an important phone call in our story, from a coastguard. Many children were unsure what a coastguard was, so we discussed it, and together negotiated the kind of badge a coastguard might wear. Once the children had negotiated this badge, I stuck it to my front to sign the role of the coastguard, and in role made the phone call explaining the problem with the whale. The discussion that followed was
lively, and, led by my questioning, the children soon started to talk from within the frame, for example ‘I think we could use our scissors, but the whale might be wriggling so we’d have to be careful.’ As they started to discuss the equipment they might take, I provided sugar paper so they could start to ‘sign’ the room, for example with an arrow pointing the way to the changing room, or a drawing of the lock on the cupboard containing the gas tanks.

The children were soon making plans for the dive. It was a time of great invention, with the creation of a rule book for safe diving, maps of the Headquarters, and the invention of many pieces of bespoke diving equipment all adding to the rapidly emerging sense of ownership the children felt towards the company. Prompted by a few initial questions from me (for example ‘I suppose it must be a while since you’ve had to use these special suits?’) the children got very absorbed in the history of the company, and created the company’s archives. The timeline we created on the wall included the arrival of new pieces of equipment, the opening of the company’s new building, the dates that each member of the company joined, and details of some amazing dives in very challenging locations such as the Arctic! A strong feeling of self esteem and value was developing around the company. The children soon began to weave their own personal history within the larger history of the company:

‘The day I joined – yippee! I joined on the 16th February 2003. When I just stepped on the doormat I felt well scared. But then I felt brilliant!!!!! And they said welcome to our centre. There were flippers suits pictures safety maps signs everything. I couldn’t believe it!’ Evie, Y2

During preparation for the dive, some of the boys in the class became very interested in dangerous sea creatures. Talking about the history of the company, they described how in the past they had fought off giant squid, or been chased by an octopus. I was very pleased to see how this element of danger was really engaging the boys, and drawing them into the heart of the company. In particular cases this engagement was providing reluctant writers with a very meaningful and immediate need to write. For example, a Y2 boy who in many cases found it hard to engage with reading and writing enthusiastically wrote a whole page for the company records about a time in the company’s history when he had to dive through sharks, puffa fish and an oil slick to reach a stricken oil tanker. The success of this fictional dive seemed to be echoed in his raised self esteem as he wrote about it.

However, I soon began to notice a flip side to this excitement and engagement amongst certain boys. As we came near to our ‘dive’ to the whale, it became apparent that some of the girls were feeling anxious about the dangerous sea creatures, and had been having scary thoughts about giant squid at home. I naturally felt worried, as the last thing I wanted to do was scare children! In my determination to involve the hard-to-engage boys, had I let things go too far? Right from the outset, I had made the fictional nature of our work very clear, and I was
confident that all the children in the class understood that it was not real. I talked to the girls who were worried, and, yes, they were completely clear that it was just a 'story'. But I obviously had to find a way of making them feel comfortable while not destroying the boys’ enthusiasm. As this point, I was worried whether I had chosen an appropriate frame, and had to think hard how to remedy the situation. Doubts began to take over in my mind!

I talked to the small group of worried girls, reassured them, and gave them the option within the frame of staying on the boat to guide proceedings when we went to save the whale. They were happy with this suggestion, and set about drawing walky talkies for them to communicate with the divers from above the water. Outside the expert frame, the whole class did some enquiry based research into the habitats of various sea creatures, and which animals live in British waters. Through this, the children started to understand that creatures such as giant octopus, giant squid and Great White Sharks are not resident in British waters. The boys were not denied their adventures with dangerous creatures around the world in the company’s past, but I knew that both this commission and the main commission soon to come both involved diving in British waters. They seemed happy to accept that they wouldn’t be meeting any dangerous creatures in these dives, and the girls seemed reassured. I felt confident that the historical element that our current work was leading up to would deeply engage the particular girls who had been worried. Indeed, as time went on, they became some of the most deeply engaged children, and soon forgot their earlier concerns. Indeed one later said of her work in the company, ‘it’s really comfortable, as in I feel like I’m at home’, while another said ‘you do it and then when you’re older and really do something or really see something you’re not scared.’

The geographical location of the company became central to its work. When planning the whale rescue, the children were discussing the quickest route to Cornwall, where the Minke Whale was based. One of the youngest boys in the class went up to a map of the British Isles that we had pinned to the company notice board and explained, ‘our company is up here’, pointing to the Western Isles of Scotland. The other children seemed happy to take this as a ‘given’, and before long they had invented the name of Ruonde for our island. I could see the potential of this location, both in terms of tensions within the Mantle of the Expert (for example storms disrupting our departure, difficulties of getting supplies to our headquarters) and of curriculum (NC Geography study of a contrasting locality).

We created a large model of the Isle of Ruonde, using fabrics, stones and wooden bricks. On this, each member of Undersea Savers (which the class had negotiated together as the name for the company) put their house, and described their journey to work. Company HQ was constructed using wooden bricks, and turned out to be a very environmentally friendly building, with a wind turbine and solar panels on its roof! Maps were drawn of the island to help any visitors to the company find their way.
The Isle of Ruonde

Outside the expert frame, in the ‘enquiry’ circle, we explored the island in greater depth. I provided cards labelling various geographical features (for example loch, mountain, stream, valley, bay), which the children placed appropriately onto our model. I then invited the children to imagine the colloquial name of each feature, as known by the locals of the island. So for example, the large bay was known as Giant’s Jaw Bay, the shingle beach was called The Magical, and the mountain Lava of Death. The children soon became very absorbed in the idea of the stories behind these names, and I decided to use this interest as an opportunity for writing Myths and Legends. As usual with Mantle of the Expert, valuable curriculum areas were presenting themselves which I had not necessarily planned for but would not want to miss! We used the dramatic conventions to explore a moment from each feature’s past, through which many of the elements of the myths and legends emerged. The children were then highly immersed in writing full legends, for example ‘The Legend of the Good Luck Times of the Lava Monster’. Their investment and interest in the island provided rich stimulus for their writing. Many of the ideas that emerged in their written stories seeped into the Mantle of the Expert work, for example it emerged that scratches on the jetty outside the company HQ were from the Lava Monster and could bring good luck. Before setting off for the whale dive, we constructed the ‘jetty’ out of wooden bricks, with drawings on sugar paper to represent the claw scratches. The ceremony of walking along the jetty to receive good luck for the dive ahead was powerful.

I used the dramatic conventions to scaffold the actual dive to the Minke Whale. The success of this dive (the whale was untangled and seen to swim off into
the distance) gave the company an added sense of achievement when it received its next commission – the main commission that would provide the historical focus I required. I prepared a newspaper article about the wreck of a Tudor merchant ship off the coast of Aldeburgh. The article explained that due to climatic changes, the condition of the wreck was starting to deteriorate, so an engineering company called BTM Engineering had been asked to raise the wreck off the seabed for preservation in a museum. There were however concerns about what would happen to the many items on the ship.

The class read and this article and I used the discussion to assess the children’s prior understanding of the Tudors, which, unsurprisingly for children of their age, was very limited. Back inside the expert frame, one of the children suggested that we could dive down to retrieve the objects from the wreck before it was raised. At their request, I took the point of view of the boss of BTM Engineering, who accepted their proposal and became the client for this major job. Right from the outset I tried to use role to establish him as a demanding but fair client.

Straight away the children set to work planning this next dive. It was clear that the divers would have to take exactly the right equipment to the Suffolk coast for such a demanding dive, so equipment became a central feature of the preparations. It also provided rich curriculum opportunities. I laminated drawings of divers’ wrist gauges, that included depth gauges, gauges for the volume of gas remaining, and watches (both analogue and digital). These provided many opportunities for reading scales, reading the time, using fractions and other key mathematical work. All done in the knowledge that when diving, questions such as how much gas is left, or how many minutes remain, are critically meaningful! Many scientific lines of enquiry also emerged from the diving equipment. Which materials would be best to use for the weights in the diving belts? Which would be best for making the underwater maps? Which ink should be used on these maps? All these questions led to science investigations that the children became deeply absorbed in, due to the vital nature of the questions they were investigating.

Amidst all these preparations, I knew that however engaging the children found the Mantle of the Expert work of the diving team, they would gain so much from exploring life on board the Tudor ship. I wanted to find a way of having the work of Undersea Savers diving down to the ship run parallel with using Drama for Learning to experience the voyages of the same ship. I prepared two sheets of paper. One read as following:

‘To all loyal people of Suffolk. It is now ten years since I became your Queen. To celebrate this, this good ship the Golden Elizabeth is being built of finest oak by master craftsmen in Aldeburgh. Soon it will set sail into the unknown to sell goods and to bring back magnificent things in the glory of my name. Men wishing to work
on the ship must report to the Captain of the Golden Elizabeth in the port of
Aldeburgh at midday on the seventeenth day of November 1568, the tenth year of
my reign. By Order of Her Majesty, Elizabeth R’

The second sheet was headed simply: ‘Men wishing to work on the Golden
Elizabeth’.

Within the Mantle of the Expert frame, the diving team had already set up, at
the suggestion of the children, links with a local (fictional!) museum. When they
wanted to find out more about what kind of objects they might have to retrieve from
the wreck, the museum was a legitimate port of call. I decided to use this museum to
send us the two ‘facsimiles’ I had prepared, as they thought they might be of
relevance to the divers. The diving team read and discussed the two documents with
great interest, focussing on the implications for their dive (for example ‘the Queen
Elizabeth letter talks about magnificent things – we’ll have to be very careful moving
these.’) I sat with the second sheet – ‘Men Wishing to work on the Golden Elizabeth’
in front of me, and said, ‘could we just imagine for a moment that instead of
Undersea Savers reading this document, we’re looking at the captain as he was
about to write it all those years ago...’

I continued to sit in front of the document, but with a change of expression to
sterne and businesslike. After giving the children time to register these changes, I
announced, in a calm but stern tone, ‘They’re late. Queen Elizabeth would not be
happy.’ The children watched, intrigued. After a while, I added, ‘I will wait just a little
longer. Then I will have to leave, and look for men elsewhere.’ At this point, a
magical moment emerged as one of the children stood up and stepped up to me. ‘I
would like to join the ship’, he announced. I then asked him a few straightforward
questions (I didn’t want to trip the children up through their lack of knowledge of the
Tudors), and I was very impressed to find him straightaway slipping into role as a
boy wanting to join the ship’s crew. I added his initials to the sign up list, and told him
to wait. After this first brave move from this boy, others of course wanted to follow,
and soon the whole class were fully in role as new recruits to the ship.
First encounters with the Captain

From this point on, the class were very happy switching between the Mantle of the Expert frame of the diving company, and the Drama for Learning of life on board the ship. The two strands obviously informed each other, since the objects the crew used, collected, traded, treasured and valued on board the ship were the very objects that Undersea Savers were later to retrieve. The children understood the stories behind each object to be retrieved in a very vivid way.

The role of the captain became a very strong role, and one which the children enjoyed very much. They often came in and asked ‘can we do captain today?’ I tried whenever in role to sustain elevated language, and was very surprised at the speed with which the children picked this language, and started to replicate it when speaking to the Captain, and also in their writing. Although on the surface the Captain was strict and cold, various episodes revealed deeper complexities to his character. For example, at one stage the ship was attacked by a pirate demanding gold. The pirate (my teaching assistant in role!) was adamant that he wouldn’t leave without gold, at which point the Captain admitted the only gold on board was the frame in which he kept his four most precious pictures (pictures that a group of children had previously created of his children, his wife, his cat and Queen Elizabeth). The captain took the crew’s advice and sacrificed his frame for the good of the ship.

From the day they first boarded the ship, the crew were given time each night to write in their ship’s logs. This gave the children a very meaningful context to their writing. Their deep engagement in the drama was reflected in the commitment to their writing, and in turn in the quality of language used. The ship’s logs recorded all manner of episodes explored through drama, for example the crew arriving on the ship having just left their families, the visit of Queen Elizabeth to the ship before it set
sail, the arrival of the Suffolk wool that was to be traded, the trading stops in Venice, Constantinople and the East Indies, the death of the ship’s cat, and day to day life on board...

‘After working for fifteen hours, just one tiny ships biscuit isn’t very much. My tummy rumbled like a thousand rubies shattering to pieces. We only got two hours sleep! And the night workers got none! It was very annoying with loads of rats scurrying all over you. I couldn’t get to sleep. And the people in the hammocks must have been very uncomfortable swaying about all the time.’ Lucy, Y2

Another central feature of the work was a large diagram of the ship. Myself and my TA created the outline, following the picture of a real Elizabethan merchant ship. The rest was entirely for the children to create. The captain’s cabin, crew’s sleeping quarters, food store and other areas were all created early on, through iconic means, with the children drawing directly onto the diagram. Other items were added in later episodes, for example the magnificent objects that the crew acquired through trading wool in foreign ports. Much negotiation (and scientific enquiry) went into deciding where to put each new load, both to balance the ship and to keep the goods for Queen Elizabeth as safe as possible. The smallest of details of the ship diagram could lead to powerful dramatic episodes. For example, one of the children drew a small portrait of Queen Elizabeth on the wall of the captain’s cabin. The children represented this portrait through role, and were able to voice the feelings of Queen Elizabeth towards the ship, the captain and the crew. A writing desk drawn in the captain’s cabin prompted a small group to write a very powerful letter from the captain to his children on the day of setting sail.

The Golden Elizabeth
Day-to-day life on the ship provided countless rich opportunities for learning. However the time eventually came for the inevitable to happen –the sinking of the ship. Before I gave each child their ship's log book for writing in, I had prepared and stuck in the final page, reading:

‘There is much excitement on board the ship. After 348 days at sea, the Golden Elizabeth should arrive today in England. We have a ship full of magnificent things and we have been to many magnificent places in the name of Queen Elizabeth. Much has happened.

Four o’clock in the afternoon – land spotted in the distance. Half past four – the tower of Aldeburgh church spotted in the distance.

Five o’clock – large grey clouds spotted off the coast of Aldeburgh...’

This final page lay down certain givens from the outset, and had added the tension of inevitability to life on board the ship. I had always been keen to establish that the ship sank very near the coast, so that there was a strong possibility that the crew could have swum to safety. Maps the diving team had received of the wreck site had also made this clear. When it came to experiencing the actual storm, I decided to use a white sheet to represent the sails, to structure the sinking of the ship. The initial fluttering soon gave way to larger swaying, and the children became deeply immersed in the immediate drama of the sinking. Led by the Captain’s pleas, the crew all swam safely to shore, with him leading in a rowing boat laden with precious documents. Several children held the sheet and lowered it to represent the final sinking of the ship, with the crew watching from the shore. As the sheet dropped and the Golden Elizabeth sunk, they called out their final messages to the ship that had become their home. There was a real sense of emotional attachment to a ship that had lived vividly in all our imaginations:

‘I will remember this ship and I will never forget it.’

‘The Golden Elizabeth is special to me. Bye bye, I'll miss you.’

‘I hope nobody’s left on that ship. I wonder what Queen Elizabeth would say about the magnificent things. We’ve wasted all that wool.’

‘I'll remember every last bit of you. I hope someone goes down to get the magnificent things.’

Through the drama of life on board the ship, it had become clear to Undersea Savers how the ship they were about to dive to had sunk, and each object they were about to retrieve became deeply significant. Before the final dive, a vast plan of the wreck site was mapped out in chalk on the playground, with co-ordinates plotted to guide the divers to each object. Immense care was taken to retrieve each object without damage, and the determination on each child’s face showed that in their minds the ‘nothingness' they were holding really was a priceless piece of Tudor
glass picked up in Venice by brave sailors during a tortuous journey. A testament to the power of drama.

As the end of the Summer Term approached, it was time to bring the work to a close. I always find this tricky, especially when children have become so deeply immersed in a Mantle of the Expert. I thought the children would find it helpful to think of it as a storybook that we were having to close for the time being, but that could be opened again at any time. Both strands, the Mantle of the Expert Diving Company and the Tudor part on board the ship, could be part of this storybook. Together we used a piece of folded paper to represent this storybook. The children decided to place the piece of green and gold fabric I used as a neck scarf to sign the role of the captain inside the book. They decided on a title for it – *The Ripped Sail* – and I wrote ‘Can be opened again at any time’ on the back.

I had also prepared a mini book for each of the children with pages to fill with illustrations under the headings – ‘We worked together’, ‘I worked well on my own’, ‘I was proud of myself’, ‘I was proud of my team’, ‘worst memory’ and ‘best memory’. The responses to these confirmed to me what a powerful learning experience it had been, since as they drew the children spoke with genuine passion, emotion and commitment. The final page was entitled ‘can be opened again at any time’, where children could draw an episode we hadn’t explored that they would like to see. Seeing their ideas, I started to wish we had more time left in the term to look deeply into some of these episodes. They included the moment when the Captain is reunited with his children, the moment when the Captain has to go to Queen Elizabeth to tell her that the ship and all the magnificent things have been destroyed, and the moment the ship’s boy returns home to find that his baby sister is now three years old.

Finally, in a small ceremony, the children closed their representational books as they said their farewells –

‘*Goodbye Undersea Savers and The Golden Elizabeth. We’ll miss being on the Isles of Ruonde.*’ Holly, Y2

‘*Bye bye each and every bit of Undersea Savers and The Golden Elizabeth. I’ll miss you.*’ Jay, Y2

‘*Goodbye Undersea Savers and The Golden Elizabeth. We’ve had lots of memories from you.*’ Olivia, Y2