Fostering learning communities with Mantle of the Expert

Louise Ryan advocates a learning approach that encourages students to use their imaginations

‘It makes me united to my class, as we are always a team in Mantle.’ (Year 4 student)

In a world where education is growing increasingly more concerned about statistics and test results than about the students’ experience, exploration and understanding of the world that they live in, Mantle of the Expert turns the concept of children as ‘commodities’ in education on its head and focuses on building collaborative and thriving learning communities between students and teachers. Mantle of the Expert (MOE) supports children from all backgrounds and cultures, and positions them as agents in their own learning, allowing them to explore the world through the medium of authentic drama, within the framework of Vygotsky’s social constructivist paradigm. With the protective layer of drama, children can push themselves further in their learning and become risk takers, explorers and adventurers as they navigate their mandated curriculum.

What is Mantle of the Expert?

Mantle of the Expert is a fictional based, drama-led inquiry approach to education which aims to bring meaning and life to any curriculum, and allows students to have ‘authentic’ experiences in their learning by using drama conventions and imagination to build a make-believe world, where they can take on roles as if they are experts (Taylor, 2016). The teachers and students work collaboratively to co-construct a story which becomes the vehicle in which they will
navigate the curriculum together as a learning community (ibid). The learning objectives are carefully curated to cover the curriculum by the teacher, who will then provoke the class with a ‘hook’ (maps, photos, letters, audios, videos and peculiar items) and will then begin to build a story context around the item in the make-believe.

In Mantle of the Expert, children are inducted into the drama in order to protect them. As curiosity can be seen as the prototype of intrinsic motivation, it can manage to sustain interest until the provocation becomes clearer or acquires more meaning (Bruner, 1966:114). The children are often inducted into the drama through use of storytelling or with the use of a provocation that stirs their curiosity. Even with the use of provocation, the children are positioned to have a choice in whether or not they participate in the story. MOE is not a tool used to impose learning upon children, but rather is a tool that is offered to them as something they might like to try (Taylor, 2016:24).

Mantle of the Expert is built around three dimensions of imaginative inquiry: Drama for Learning, Inquiry, and a Mantle of the Expert. These dimensions can work independently and interdependently of each other.

Mantle of the Expert could be considered as a tool for all teachers to have in their teacher toolkit.

The three dimensions of imaginative-inquiry

INQUIRY LEARNING IS:
• Collaborative
• Process of investigation
• The curriculum is explored & created, not delivered
• Students ask questions & contribute ideas
• Students are guided and supported by the teacher
• Learning is planned around inquiry questions
• Opportunities are created for reflection & evaluation

DRAMA FOR LEARNING IS:
• Created by people
• Fictional and clearly signed as such
• Happens in the NOW of time to create immediacy
• Requires people involved to adopt roles of others
• Involves the deployment of ‘tension’ in specific circumstances
• Is able to be reflected upon as in all other art forms

MANTLE OF THE EXPERT IS:
• A team of experts with responsibilities & the power to influence & make decisions
• Working for a client
• On a commission
• Requiring team to do various tasks

Figure 1 The Three Dimensions to Imaginative Inquiry (Abbott and Taylor, 2013)
Within the dimension of Mantle of the Expert there are the sub dimensions of client, commission and team of responsible experts. These sub dimensions are key to building collaborative classrooms. In Mantle of the Expert structure, the children need to work collaboratively together as a team of responsible experts, along with the teachers, to co-construct their story and complete the commission set by the client which requires them to meet a set of standards, tasks and activities that fit together piece by piece toward an end product or project (Taylor, 2016:22). When in the drama, each child and the teacher bring their own social and cultural dimension to the fiction, as well as their own skills, which enriches the experience for all.

How does it build strong and collaborative learning communities?
There are two factors that can contribute to the creation of a strong and collaborative Mantle of the Expert learning community:

1) The will and the motivation to learn; and
2) the positioning within learning.

When these two factors are brought together, they create an opportunity where learners thrive in a supportive and collaborative setting. Figure 2 shows how, when they come together, the two factors support the creation of a strong and collaborative Mantle of the Expert learning community.

**Figure 2 Diagram of how a Mantle of the Expert learning community is supported by two main factors (Ryan, 2019)**

Mantle of the Expert supports the children to take ownership of their learning and be active agents in their own education. They are positioned as responsible beings who are capable of leading their own education journey, with the help and support of their learning community. They are no longer passive imbibers in their education; they are active learners who are working just as hard as their teachers to explore the world they live in, while meeting curriculum standards. This process of co-construction with a skilled teacher enables great challenge and therefore deeper learning to occur.

A Mantle of the Expert learning community is a powerful student agency tool and supports the will and motivation to learn, as students have voice and choice in how they learn. This causes the students to become more intrinsically motivated to work and learn, as they have ownership over their learning. As Mantle of the Expert allows children to experience real-life moments in the make-believe, it allows children to develop a good work ethic, as the commission is authentic and true to real-life.

Mantle of the Expert could be considered as a tool for all teachers to have in their teacher toolkit. In a society where test results are often seen as more important than the children who take the tests, it offers the opportunity to allow children to explore imaginative inquiry in a thriving learning community, with meaningful engagement with the curriculum, as well as supporting children to achieve high academic results.

Mantle of the Expert is not about standing around the classroom, pretending to be a tree. It is a framework in which students and teachers can build fictional contexts in which they can explore the world safely, using their imaginations, and build learning communities together. It moves learning from being a passive action into a powerful form of active learning where knowledge is a powerful tool, but where both learning and imagination are limitless. When students are given the freedom to explore their learning through their imagination, it takes away the fear of making mistakes in the classroom. In the make-believe they can be braver, stronger, smarter and bolder – as they are protected by the make-believe. This allows students to make bolder decisions and to delve deeper into their learning, as the teacher is in the learning taking the risks right alongside them.

References

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