

USING MANTLE OF THE EXPERT FOR THE FIRST TIME

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INTRODUCTION

The following is a report and evaluation of my first attempt at using Mantle of the Expert. Luke Abbott had introduced me to the system during a two-day workshop where I worked with him to plan this short dramatic-enquiry.

This was a sort of *mini* MoE and lasted for two hours. I wanted to explore with my class the steps we had talked through with Luke at the workshop. In particular the use of 'dramatic action' - the actual way a teacher sets up a moment to explore by using the conventions of drama. This seemed to be at the heart of the work and was difficult for me (as a teacher who had never used drama) to understand. I had trouble accepting that the children would agree to the imagined context, without falling about laughing or destroying the moment with 'ironic' comments.

Also, imagining things that aren't there was hard for me. Of course, imagined situations and objects had their place in the play-corner in the Reception classroom - as did writing in imaginary books, typing on imaginary keyboards, and driving imaginary cars. But using them in a 'normal' classroom context, without the trappings of the play-corner, seemed odd and silly. Taking the work seriously, honouring the situation and using my 'drama eyes', as Heathcote calls them, was a real and significant shift in my thinking.

As an adult, I was finding the willing suspension of my disbelief a struggle. Something I had done easily and naturally as a child. Luke assured me if I introduced the situation sensitively and thought carefully about my use of language (something he would help me with) then no one would laugh – and if they did, it wouldn't be the end of the world. It could be accepted and then we could move on.

THE FRAME

Using the theme of Little Red Riding Hood as a mythic backdrop I planned for the children to take on the 'mantle of expertise' of:

'Detectives, who are to plan and investigate the 'death of the so called 'Big Bad Wolf' in suspicious circumstances,'

Class: 22 pupils, year 2/3

1-hour session plus 1 hour extension: total 2 hours

NC Context: English 1/2/3 (Range Levels 2-4)

Using and applying speaking and listening skills.

Interpretation of a known text. Reading 'in between the lines' for meanings, not obvious at first.

Writing. Using prepared and invented writing frames to capture thinking and improve written outcomes of boys in particular.

Explanation

I tell the children I'm going to try out a different way of working this morning and that it might seem a bit strange to start with. I tell them the work is going to mean that we have to use our imagination. I begin by telling them a phone is about to ring and I'm going to

pick it up. I point to an imaginary phone next to the arm of my chair. There are a few looks of surprise, but no one questions the convention. I ask if this is OK for them. Some nods, most look undecided but unconcerned. I tell them I'm a detective inspector and ask if anyone knows what a detective inspector does. There follows a short conversation where the children discuss their knowledge of the police. Most of it seems to have been picked up from the telly.

In a short while we are ready to start.

Dramatic Action

The phone 'rings'. I pick it up.

"Hello, yes sir." (To the children [my hand over the receiver] "it's the chief inspector. Must be important.")

"There's been a suspicious death? I see."

At Grandma's house.

Is that the pretty one on the other side of the wood? Yes".

(I nod and look at the children for recognition).

"You want me to put together a team of my best detectives and get over there right away, Will do sir. Yes, straight away." (I put down the phone).

Making the Contract

Out of role I ask the children:

"Do you want to investigate what's happened at Grandma's house?"

Some nods, a few blank or puzzled expressions.

"You'll have to sort of 'pretend' that you're detectives on an important case, what do you think?"

More nods this time.

"I'm going to take you over there now?" I stand.

"We're going to use the carpet as Grandma's kitchen."

They follow me off the carpet. At this point I stand between them and the imaginary front door. I know that whatever happens I must not let them in until I'm sure they have made some kind of emotional investment. If I do there is a risk that they won't care whether the drama works or not and they could very quickly lose interest.

Dramatic Action

Back in role, I say:

"From what I've heard on the radio it's pretty messy in there. Have you all got your white zip-up suits? Good, we don't want to corrupt any of the evidence. Can you put them on?"

Most of them do, a little half-heartedly.

"Have you got something to record the evidence with?" Lots of puzzled faces, one or two cup their hands uncertainly. And then one gets it and holds up a camera. I know I am getting somewhere now.

"A camera, yes that will be useful, to take pictures of the scene." Most of them now become more certain. There are video cameras, tape-recorders, notebooks and then, out of the corner of my eye, I see the first gun and what looks like a chain-saw and maybe a flame-thrower!

I can't ignore it, but I don't really want to knock them back either. There are now a few giggles as they get more confident and begin to wave their new weapons about.

I try and think, during the seminar with Luke, we had discussed the ways to scaffold with respect to the dignity of children as well as having to uphold the dignity of the dramatic investigation under way

And then I work it out, *“Good I’m glad you brought your guns along. But you won’t be needing them in here, the scene is secure, so can you flick on the safety catch and put them back in their holsters?”* I wait. They comply without complaint. I’m excited and amazed!

“Right, have you got your recording equipment?” They hold up cameras, tape-recorders and notebooks.

“We are going to have to go in one at a time. As you all know it’s very important we don’t disturb anything.”

By this time they’re all itching to get in. I judge they are ready.

Reflection

Out of role

“When we go in we will have to respect the scene. We will all have to tread carefully. I’ve noticed Detectives often collect evidence in small plastic bags, so you might want to do that. Do you want the body of the wolf to still be in the room?”

There are lots of nods this time. We choose one of the class to be the dead wolf. She lies down on the carpet. I open the door and the ‘detectives’ walk in carefully, taking pictures, making notes and collecting evidence. I’ve never seen anything like it. For fifteen minutes the children are operating as experts. They’re moving carefully and respectfully around the crime scene, picking up imaginary evidence, using imaginary tweezers and putting things in imaginary bags.

Lying on the floor is the body of the victim. The detectives photograph the scene, make notes in their books and approach the body. They find 21 different knives and a pair of slippers!! These are carefully removed, recorded and bagged. There is no sniggering, even when the slippers are discovered.

The detectives discuss the scene, reflect on the evidence and draw some conclusions. They decide they would like to interview their first witness, Grandma. I ask them if they would like me to be Grandma. They like the idea. So we go back to the police station, they sit on chairs in a circle. They have collected clipboards, pencils and paper from a box ready to start the interrogation.

Interviewing Grandma

The interview takes about ten minutes. They ask a series of questions based mainly on the events of the day and what it felt like to be eaten by a wolf. None of them question the credibility of the old lady’s story and, being in role, I can’t find a way to prompt them. I decide the next witness will have to be played by one of the children.

The session ends

Session 2

The following Friday I ask them if they want to carry on with the murder investigation. There is a cheer of excitement; I’m very much encouraged.

We begin with a pathologist’s report based on the children’s examination of the wolf’s body in the previous session. The children discuss, out of role, the report’s findings and draw some conclusions. I ask them if the report supports Grandma’s testimony, they think it does.

They decide they would now like to interview the wolf’s mother. I ask them if one of them would like to play the role, Nathan volunteers.

Interviewing the wolf's mother.

Nathan takes a seat, the other children, in role collect their clipboards and pencils. The detectives begin to ask a series of questions. They start by asking how she feels about the death of her son? They then move on to what sort of son he was? What was he doing on the day of his death? Could she explain why anybody would want to kill him? And why was there a pair of slippers found in his stomach?

On the surface, without the power to feel compassion for the mother figure, this could have been a laughing matter - after all we were only 'playing about' with a story. But the effect on the children was electric, their belief in the moment, and the grief of the mother, created an atmosphere of deep respect for her 'loss', as well as a ready regard for the need to find a way forward with the murder investigation.

After finishing the interview we discussed what we thought of the wolf's mother's answers and what significance they had to the case. Several of the detectives thought she may have been lying and that, '*She would say that about her son wouldn't she?*' Others thought her son might have been bullied or forced into trying to murder Little Red Riding Hood and her Grandma and that he sounded like a decent wolf, who had either been tricked or forced into crime. Several thought he was starving and had tried to eat Grandma and Little Red Riding Hood because he had not eaten for so long. Others began to run with the idea that the woodcutter, or Grandma or Little Red Riding Hood might have murdered the wolf. There might have been a conspiracy and it was they who put the slippers into his stomach and made up the whole story to cover up their crime.

The session ended.

Evaluation & Reflection

On reflection these lessons were no great shakes. Any decent drama teacher would have seen a thousand different 'mistakes' and missed opportunities. In many ways we never got to the true significance of the event. I certainly shackled myself when I went into role as the grandmother.

But the session was a revelation to me. I was astonished at how quickly the children were prepared to accept the responsibility of the role. How quickly they were prepared to suspend their disbelief and invest in the situation.

In no way was this an easy class. There were a number of children who often disrupted lessons (mainly boys), who I saw in a totally different light. They were completely engrossed in the drama of the situation and contributed in more thoughtful and intelligent ways than I had ever seen before.

I was also surprised and delighted at my own (simple) use of dramatic action. By taking it seriously and rejecting my feelings of foolishness, I was able to use the conventions to build and maintain belief in the frame. I had only learnt a few of the most basic conventions of drama but they had transformed the lesson and the pitch of the children's learning. The emotional investment, the ownership and enquiry skills reached a level beyond my normal expectations.

It was my first go at using the system, and I still had a great deal to learn. But I had had a small glimpse of what was possible when my class were excited and engaged by situations that were meaningful and relevant to them and *their* interests and how that

kind of involvement could transform their experience of learning in school. After that there was no turning back.