Mantle of the Expert: a Further Paradigm for Education?

Aristotle’s thoughts on education are useful, “We deliberate not about ends but about means. A doctor does not deliberate about whether he shall heal. Not an orator whether he shall persuade; nor a statesman whether he shall produce law and order; nor does anyone debate or deliberate about his end. They assume the end, and consider how and by what means it is to be attained.”

Aristotle neatly encapsulates what lies at the heart of my teaching considerations since I was appointed in 1951 to work with teachers in the formal schooling system by the Universities of Durham and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. We cannot change our schooling methods by magic. The world moves on as more discoveries are made and cultures change to accommodate technology, and communications advance. Formal schooling surely must take notice of these changes.

The three paradigms I shall discuss are, The conveyor-belt type, the professional type and the leadership type. My references will be taken from the British schooling system, which in the main operates the conveyor-belt system. We test and grade students on (mainly) their academic abilities. To absorb, take in and remember what they have been engaged with so they can present their knowledge during tests which are then marked. Some teachers manage, even within such limits, to create study rooms in which children can contribute their own knowledge and have relationship with their teachers in a creative atmosphere. Latterly this has been threatened because the British government has become obsessed by testing and regulating the curriculum content. One result is that teachers feel disempowered and teach so that children will pass the tests rather than own their knowledge and learn how to learn.

The conveyor belt system has a long history. It has in the past contributed much to the human good. It was formulated at the time of the industrial revolution when craftsmen’s skills began to be housed in mechanised factories. Such conditions required organised training, especially in literacy and numeracy which have continued to be at the heart of the conveyor belt system.
in our time. Once the mills were developed, craftsmanship was no longer passed from father to son and mother to daughter on a personal mentoring basis. Machines regulated hours of work, groups of workers, rules for safety and regulations for quality. These must be written down and reading them becomes essential in order that the dangers of machinery-speed, power and heat- are understood. Also wages must be counted and related with the hours worked. Mill buildings overcame weather considerations and involved buildings rising close to the factories. There is increased importing and exporting of goods, so interest in and knowledge of other countries is essential as trade and travel become features of manufacturing. Business men and crafts people need to travel to seek out resources and markets. Children need to be introduced to the emergent ideas and be informed about the world and other cultures so the text book becomes the main means of them acquiring this information. The problem of text books is that information is pre-packed and written from the writer’s point of view and priorities. Facts tend to dominate and therefore seem very authoritative and convincing to the leader. Largely the conveyor belt system introduces the reader- especially the young reader to what to think.

I am old enough to have been taught in a small village school and it was, in the main, a pleasant experience among friends. School in my early years was a revelation. There were pencils and pens and paper, interesting coloured maps and story books, as well as the textbooks, and, in the main, teachers were kindly and lived lives remote from those of their charges. We had time for painting, learning poetry, singing and dancing, nature study and making plays, once the daily stint of reading, writing and arithmetic was achieved. We were “easy to deal with” partly because there were fewer distractions and limited aspirations laid upon us by our families. We recognised that teachers “know best and knew more” than anyone else. We also knew our place in the academic testing order without being told by the authorities. We moved smoothly between our ‘real’ lives in the community with its own rules and regulations and that of school work regulated by the clock.

To some extent many children do their learning in a modern version of earlier times, yet they are not so compliant, and as they grow and experience many subtle pressures from within their more complex range of cultures, school can be seen less of an adventure and more of a chore with an imposed curriculum and tests of their academic ability applied at regular intervals. Passing these tests matters!

Schools are run on clock time – profane time. Lives are experienced in sacred time – polychromic time. The conveyor-belt system is often dominated by learning about things and people, rather than using the original resources such people leave behind them. An example might be when junior age children hear about Luther and his quarrel with the church; they are usually not introduced to what he himself wrote regarding the reasons for the disagreement. The conveyor-belt style decides for the children what resources they will encounter.

There is much ‘good’ in this system, but it lays upon teachers an enormous burden, namely to keep students actively engaged with the pre-selected curriculum and a limited range of tasks and activities as the means of owning the knowledge. Teachers have to have Aristotle’s “means” at their fingertips. To first attract students to the work in hand, then to interest them, then progressively to engage, involve, make them concerned to become committed and hopefully engage with productive obsession. A tall order as every practising teacher with appreciate.
Now for the second style of learning. That of acquiring professional expertise.

To enter this system, people compete for places, and their previous test results play a part in this. At this stage – the study stage involving personal choice – they will be considering learning matters relevant to a career. Choices of career arise from cultural influences to some extent. Personal models with careers in medicine, law, church, the higher fields of academia often influence as do encounters through hobby interests, meeting people through sport, or clubs, or theatre and often the influence of an unusual teacher who may have mentored them. The narrow fields of professionalism are as widening now as technology, sciences and humanity careers require specific skills and ongoing study, as discoveries and improvements are found.

In this paradigm, careful sequencing of study is important, attention to detail and moral obligations emerge. Testing by practice is mandatory because professional careers involved expertise and clients who require their skills. Professional people must be constantly validated and recognised in their fields. This also imposes responsibility. Such study demands that students understand the importance of when to think. They do not use only their textbook which is specific and detailed but the main resource is all the similar case studies relevant to the present practitioner. Technology and the internet is now providing enormous examples of case studies, not always reliable, in addition to the written forms which may have been recorded by many generations of earlier practitioners’ working practice.

During their own working lives such people become models for their juniors and in “retirement” they often are regarded as mentors. The danger of such veneration is that when things are changing at a fast rate these older professionals can hold back change. Morality and responsibility remain central to professional education style of learning and each generation faces challenges in these aspects.

The third paradigm is that of the leadership type of education. Learning for leadership. The leadership system involves fostering productive selective obsession to a high degree. “Selective” does not indicate narrowness, indeed your leader is a search engine using all avenues to achieve their developing concerns. They make connections which at times others may find incongruous. The leadership way of learning involves developing the inner curriculum of the personality, shaping the soul, which, never ceases to be central to the persona. Leaders share their understanding freely with their peers. Often they are misunderstood by the more conventional of their colleagues. Leaders constantly refine, reassemble and review their knowledge. They seek the most original and first sources and study their chosen field by testing their understanding in praxis, “The flux between the act and the thought, and because of this leaders own their knowledge – it burns like a flame within them and they can tolerate their ideas being challenged so they are often accused of ‘changing their minds’”.

The leadership style of teaching demands mentoring of individuals, working alongside them, servicing their needs without testing and assessing in conventional ways. Mentoring permits the mentor to develop their own creative abilities and widens their skills of negotiating and observing their students. Leadership style of educating brings learning to discover and permission to fail and seek further opportunities of understanding. Leaders learn how to think.
So our three paradigms give us three thinking models – what, when and how to think and learning to own knowledge. The three are not mutually exclusive; to some extent they overlap as necessity arises.

The reason I am especially interested in the above is its relevance to a fourth paradigm – Mantle of the Expert style of learning which harnesses drama directly into academic study processes.

Students make a contract with the teacher to be in charge of an enterprise. They look after it, and do all the necessary tasks needed to keep it functioning. It may be a factory, a hospital, a store, a garage, or any enterprise where all those who work in it become responsible for all aspects of the work needed. The teacher and class work as partners – the teacher as manager – but not the chief authority, and all decisions are taken between the participants. The enterprise is chosen to involve all participants with the curriculum subject areas the class teacher wishes them to study. All the research, reading, writing, calculating are at the heart of the enterprise. The drama element lies in the way each student sustains their personal work in the enterprise and serves the “clients in their head” who need to work off the enterprise.

In one way, it is simplicity itself. It uses the natural inclination of children to pretend and create imaginary circumstances in which they can assume any role they wish, carrying out behaviours not available to them in their social relationships with adults. The difference used for learning, is that the teacher joins this imaginary circumstance and sustains and abets a corporate endeavour with the whole class endowed by the contract to sustain the enterprise over any period of time, in order that skills may be learned under the umbrella of the imagined enterprise which provides a context.

It requires subtlety of negotiation by the teacher who takes responsibility for sustaining the belief in the enterprise by the drama means, and introducing in colleague style the curriculum study skills. These two aspects are fused symbiotically by the employment of theatre sign – the constant creation of significance related with immediate concerns. Apart from the invented enterprise all the learning and doing of tasks operates as it does in the culture outside school. All participants function in the now immediate time of action, and with a dedicated point of view to sustain and function from within the enterprise demands. There is one important difference from children’s pretend play where they may adapt different points of view required by the story line. This differentiation of parts and roles is essential in the theatre where tension between different characters is necessary. In Mantle of the Expert, difference in characters is irrelevant. The persona the participants assume is that of people with all the power to administer a complex enterprise and fulfil all the responsibilities of sustaining it for clients who need it. The clients have to be “signed” into the work, but the students never take the client position. They understand it, serve it and respect the clients’ requirements. It is this latter element which shifts the teacher’s position as holder of the knowledge, and changes the means they must employ in initiating, sustaining and developing the work.

Obviously the conveyor belt paradigm is now obsolete – the teacher who collaborates cannot function as setter of exercises and marker of work. The other two paradigms immediately come into service. These of supporting skill learning and collaborating in developing the moral and responsible attitudes, and the mentoring processes as the participants develop their power to operate. In Mantle of the Expert type of teaching /learning, the case study dominates.
because all enterprises share common concerns. All have a history, for the work starts now in immediate diachronic time, not clock time. All create tasks which must be carried out with responsibility. All demand social cooperation and discreet differentiation between many tasks. All are selected by the teacher to provide contexts from which all learning work will emerge so there is immediate release from doing exercises for the teacher to approve, judge and mark. In this sense the enterprise echoes theatre. Shakespeare at the start of the play Henry V invokes “This wooden O”, the theatre form of his time. Thus, he creates in the audience the present absence of the city life outside the theatre. The teacher in Mantle of the Expert must achieve the opposite in some ways. The classroom must lose its normal features and the culture of a grownup world inhabits it. The “city life” which falls away in Shakespeare’s theatre must actually enter the classroom space. So students are able to be ‘grownup,’ running the invented world they sustain. Teacher and class share in sustaining it. It is this which requires a shift in teacher education.

The advantages in using this paradigm offer the teacher:

1. a laboratory-type classroom in which trial and error are central to the mind set of participants.
2. It functions rather like a market place, a flowing river with tributaries all joining the main line of developing the enterprise. Discussion and consultation between participants changes the atmosphere of the learning space. No longer is the teacher the main focus of knowledge and resource.
3. There are no set exercises to be submitted and marked by the teacher. In place of this the students themselves constantly review, explain, demonstrate to each other, and decisions are made in the light of their moral and academic choices. Children tell me that “everything feels real now when we run a Mantle, Mrs. Heathcote”.
4. The teacher’s position is first that of empowering all the participants to operate in the enterprise to their fullest ability. Secondly, to observe them as individuals in the process of dealing with all the tasks required by the enterprise. These will be varied and often carried out simultaneously so the classroom may appear somewhat chaotic to a passer by. Thirdly the teacher must widen their task repertoire to service the many layered enterprise. Some tasks will involve detailed curriculum skill work, but others will be bedded in dramatic action which uses the skills in the context provided by the enterprise.
5. To accomplish these two aspects the teacher will use two skills in negotiating with the students and the enterprise employees. One involves creating selective signing in arranging the room space to feel like the place of work, and the other in mentoring the learning contextualised tasks. So in one mode the teacher negotiates from within the enterprise as a role/participant, and in the other, designs learning tasks the context makes necessary to be undertaken. No learning tasks will be designed as “doing exercises for me”. Context rules task possibilities not arbitrary teacher choices to fulfil a timetable.
6. The context offers a huge range of opportunities which the teacher can design in a variety of ways, but this imposes a requirement to find opportunities rather than follow a timetable scheme. Many teachers feel they lack the imagination to conceive the range of tasks required.
7. The perception teachers hold of their classes changes how they negotiate with them individually and as a group. The main paradigm which operates in Mantle of the Expert is that of negotiating with children as crucibles, already owning previously
learned knowledge, experience and understanding. The work stirs up their own relevant information and, as things progress, they bring this to meet the new experiences they become involved with as the drama and curriculum work proceeds.

8. If teachers can embrace these responsibilities, they become much more resourceful in finding materials and sources other than textbooks. They tap into their own imagination and information resources and begin to trust their own inventiveness instead of relying on traditional practices learning during their teacher education courses.

The above has implications for the preparation in learning to work comprehensively in Mantle enterprises.

They need to experience many examples of how to make “sign” operate in the way it is used in the work space. Some things cannot be changed. Size, architectural features and furniture form a permanent background. Within these “signing” can be introduced which helps the children feel they are operating within the enterprise work space. Some of these will be notices to indicate the work action. Some need to sign specific tools or territories which all participants need to share – signs of telephone or accident book locations, car parking plans and in/out charts for workers to operate. Some “signs” will be in writing, others require to be iconic so that the visual forms can be changed. These empower the children and emphasise the ‘play’ element paradoxically.

Planning for mantle enterprises requires a totally different approach than the normal system. First, a careful decision must be reached regarding which curriculum areas can naturally be inaugurated from within the context selected. In fact it will be easier to decide on the context when the curriculum areas (which also concern teachers who want to support their class in learning as much and as well as possible) have been selected. It clears the ground for choosing the enterprise, partly by eliminating those which would be seen at a glance to be unsuitable. Children will always be involved in language, work-taking, reading and writing – because all social events demand these. Likewise calculation of different kinds are mandatory even if the mantle is based in earlier times. The degree and complexity of these will be a factor in selecting the mantle, and this is the responsibility of the teacher.

Certain mandatory preparations need to be made so that the context for the mantle exists outside teacher and class. Such preparations may seem onerous at first, but it is these preparations which free the teacher from having to be the owner of the knowledge and make class and teacher have reference points which are fixed. Sometimes a map may be needed – at other times objects – to represent or the actual objects may create the external mandatory reference points.

Around these initial preparations all the tasks can be initiated. Next there has to be a plan made so that all participants can build belief in the enterprise, in that the mantle selected provides the client basis. Shoemakers, whatever the period of their lives have shoe-needing clients, architects have those clients requiring or inhabiting shelters. The client needs provide the curriculum aspects specific to the working enterprise.

Teachers need to be comfortable working in role with the class. This involves behaving in different ways than the normal teacher stance. Changes of demeanour, language selected, occasional employment of properties or an additional sign to indicate “I’m an official”, or
“I’m a messenger” or even “I’m a portrait of someone”, and shifts in vocal power can “sign” very economically. The most important aspect of the role work is that the teacher never dominates the situation to either entertain the class or disempower them. This empowerment through a participating role is absolutely mandatory. Observers may not be aware of the subtlety of such discourse because, at a first glance, the teacher may appear to be dominating the situation because of tone, demeanour, or vocabulary. The empowerment through role must be experienced during teacher education courses.

Mantle of the Expert can avoid the tyranny of instant gratification and rushing to complete work because the context and the client needs, permit quality to be emphasised. Also, the time of engagement and purpose, the sacred time of experience, replaces the profane time of minutes allocated according to the clock. Mantles can be selected to work on a short-term basis as, for example when some specific skills practice may be needed. Alternatively, very lengthy enterprises can be selected so that a wide range of curriculum skills can be developed through the context, and deep commitment to client needs. This can open up reflection, debate and philosophical discourse about morality and about world and society responsibility with which the enterprise can engage students.

Mantle is therefore peculiarly suitable for dealing with emergent world dilemmas. It engages all the technological developments, the emerging moral issues in medicine, climate, national and international affairs, in fact any current matters, teacher and class find important to become engaged in. As with theatre, it explores matters of huge import via a compacted deliberately selected matter of human concern considered through a specific enterprise: a world in a grain of sand, a small social community reflecting huge affairs. The Greek plays of classical times understood this.

It is time those engaged in formal education accept these challenges. Shall our schools continue to be waiting places to keep our children occupied until we allow them to become full participants in shaping our culture, or shall we shape their schooling days so that they experience challenges of thinking, researching, collaborating, engaging with ideas, avoiding the unfortunate rift between arts, technology, sciences and humanities. If we choose the latter then teacher education must change and parents and business and all the enterprises existing in cultures must collaborate in affecting and supporting the change. We must give serious thought to priorities at different stages of children’s growth. Young children need experiences which help them appreciate qualities in humans, animals, plants and the amazing range of the corporeal world. They need discourse and stories regarding good and evil deeds, promises and aspirations, heroes and villains, the powerful and the oppressed, the humble and the proud. Stories have always opened up these fields but the oral traditions are giving way to a literate and technological society and many story events have been superseded by visual entertainment. Mantle of the Expert is eminently suitable for young children to engage with the stuff of stories in praxis. I do, to understand.

At the enquiry stage, when interests begin to emerge and differences in learning styles becomes apparent Mantles can provide collaborative peer learning, questioning and sharing ideas and tasks. At this level students enjoy taking the protected responsibility and moral dilemmas of being grownup and testing themselves. They appreciate the master/apprentice relationship within which mantles engage teacher and class as enquirers, rather than the usual teacher and taught. Teacher dependence atrophies, as confidence in opinion, trial and error develops.
The third stage – that of serious study of knowledge, skills, human behaviour and personal development regarding aspirations, relationships and responsibility – will involve mantles of more complex form. We can give actual experiences throughout the formal schooling years of art, music, dance, gardening, writing of poetry, story, and diary forms. We can cook, create rules of behaviour, make sculptures and use technology. We can do this because we can provide the necessary resources. But what of Gauguin’s three important questions which are becoming more imperative? “Where do we come from? What are we? and Where are we going?”

Ronald Wright\(^1\) considers issues which Mantle of the Expert style paradigm will open up for “engagement with” not merely thinking about. He addresses the cyclic patterns regarding how humanity and civilisation fall victim to their own success. Our young people deserve to be brought into the world’s work of immediate importance. Speed of travel, electronic money exchanges, genetics, cloning, medicine, shifts in bonding partnerships and child rearing, communications, entertainment, faith differences, news “in a flash” technology, internet, blogs, radio, the press, the world’s resources, distribution, poverty and trade. All these can be tempered for study at the stages of development from the very young to the mature student via Mantle of the expert enterprises which safely open up student considerations prior to being fully admitted to cultural responsibility and membership.

Schooling currently wastes the talent and potential of our young people, and we need feel some shame about this. It must be addressed for the good of all of us.

Footnotes