

ROOM 13 – A CASE STUDY

A SUMMARY OF THE REPORT
COMMISSIONED BY NESTA IN 2006



"Room 13 is the most important model for artistic teaching in school we have in the UK."

Nicholas Serota

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What is Room 13?

Here the young artists and artists in residence explain.

Room 13 is a democratically run studio that works along normal business lines. The unusual thing is that its management team is aged between 8 and 11. The project has been running for 10 years (in Caol Primary School, Fort William) and has grown organically from being a one-day a week thing to now having its own room and two artists in residence open from 8.30am until 6pm Monday to Friday. It has also grown from one studio in the Scottish Highlands to a network of 11 studios in 5 different countries.



Every Room 13 studio is slightly different – they are run differently by their individual management teams, have different artists, keep different business hours and all have slightly different ways of working. It really depends on what works best for the students, educators, artists and the community they are working in. One thing we have found though is that every Room 13 “feels” the same, and it is easy for us to feel at home in one another’s studios.

Room 13 is a meritocracy (though our idea of merit might well be different from yours) and we organise everything ourselves. It is quite possible to walk out of class and go to the studio at any point in the day...the only rule is that we must keep our class work up to date.

We take all well thought out ideas seriously and we are constantly on the look out for new ways of expressing serious ideas. We are a group of artists working together, with the only difference being that one or two of us are technically (and arguably emotionally – though this is dangerous territory) more experienced. Room 13 aims to support its artists for as long as they wish it. It is, above all things, for everyone involved, both extraordinarily serious and quite excellent fun.



What happens in a Room 13 Studio?

Mary Jane Drummond, the report writer and specialist in early childhood care and education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, recounts what she witnessed during three visits to Room 13 Hareclive in March and May 2006.

'There was a rich variety in the range of groupings that I observed: children work in pairs, or in solitude, or in groups of different sizes. Groups form and reform as someone passes by, drops in to lend a hand, then returns to his or her own project. They work peacefully around one another in the floor space which is none too big for them, and amicably share materials. These artistic activities are embedded in the language of authentic studio practice. There was talk of the young artists' sketch books, portfolios and canvases. The children are familiar with the terms used by their two resident artists, Shani Ali and Paul Bradley, and use their professional vocabulary: piece, image, print, ideas.



The range of activities is richer still; there is more to see than the art works the children were creating. The young people's understanding of what needs doing in Room 13 is extraordinarily wide, as the list below suggests.

Activities observed (in addition to the art works in progress)

- counting the money from the sale of pencils, rulers etc in the Room 13 shop.
- paying in cheques, checking them against invoices
- googling a topic that has arisen in conversation (eg Frida Kahlo, pyramids, eclipses)
- preparing a spoken/written presentation
- preparing a powerpoint presentation
- writing real letters for real purposes (eg to the Arts Council)
- going off to the school office (unaccompanied) to use the school photocopier
- writing messages about a top secret forthcoming committee meeting
- ordering pencil sharpeners for the shop
- phoning a mail-order firm to enquire about the price and quality of some materials
- looking at the monthly diary on the computer to check dates for filming
- using the Borders website to order a book/spend a book token
- taking part in a management meeting
- meeting the architect/designer to discuss their needs for proposed new Room 13
- filming the meeting
- wiring up professional radio mikes and trying them out
- using the resident artist's mobile to phone the adult from the film crew who is running late
- phoning the school kitchen to check the day's menu, and order a school dinner for the observer (and later, collecting it from the kitchen)
- eating their packed lunches, lounging on the pale blue sofa or wandering around the room, through the throngs of active children
- making an announcement to the whole room about a forthcoming event.



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To an experienced classroom teacher, and a researcher with many hours of classroom observation under her belt, this is a magnificent list – not just for its scope but for the degree of autonomy exhibited by the children, who are genuinely running their own lives, socially, intellectually, responsibly. The work of Room 13, if that term does not demean what goes on there, is complex, multiple, demanding, engaging and authentic.

At least as remarkable as the children's active, practical engagement in Room 13 is their talk. Classroom talk has been the focus of a number of recent observation studies, in which researchers have recorded students' use of spoken language during the Literacy Hour, a DfEE initiative in English primary schools with the aims of 'high quality oral work' and 'interactive teaching (where) pupils' contributions are encouraged, expected and extended.' (DfEE 1998). In one such study, English et al (2002) examined the length of pupil utterances during the Literacy Hour in a sample of 30 classrooms in 15 schools; two Literacy Hours were observed in each class. They found that only 10% of the observations included children's responses of more than three words; only 5% were longer than 10 words. Or, put it another way, "nine out of ten pupil contributions are of less than three words" (English et al 2002:24), and, indeed, 19 out of 20 utterances are less than 10 words long.



In Room 13, there are conversations going on all the time, in every corner of the room; the children's talk is complex, spontaneous, elaborated, extended. The sheer volume of talk ("these children talk in paragraphs" I wrote in my notebook) the breath and depth of their talk, are characteristics of Room 13 Hareclive that are completely at odds with the findings of empirical studies of classroom talk reaching back over many years, to the work of the ORACLE project in 1976, for example, (Galton et al 1980) and, more recently, the seminal cross-cultural study of Alexander (2000); in all these studies, children's talk is restricted, limited, constrained by the teacher's directives and choice of topic.'



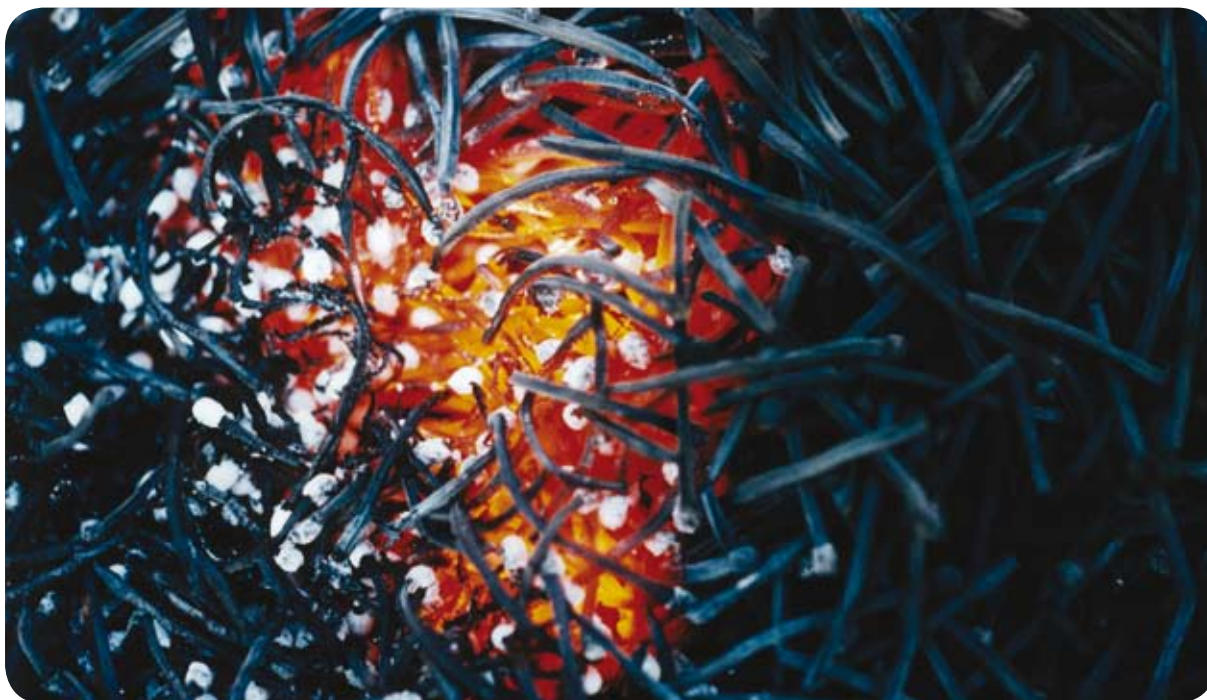
In Room 13, young people are learning both identity and solidarity. They are learning to be themselves, unique individuals with ideas of their own, which can be expressed in a variety of ways, in a rich variety of media. At the same time they are learning the practice of solidarity: the management group works as a team, on behalf of the community of Room 13. They allocate roles and responsibilities (Chair, Managing Director, Treasurer, Materials Manager, and so on), and divide up their tasks accordingly. They collaboratively manage their finances, fundraising, strategic planning, responding to emails, commissions and invitations from the outside world.

The students in Room 13 are able to take on these responsibilities (and deliver the goods) because they have developed a remarkable degree of confidence, based on the emotional security that is offered in Room 13.



They feel safe and positive about their participation in the particular kinds of learning that go on there; they accept the challenges and the risk-taking that are part of the Room 13 concept.

The young artists are adamant that they are not especially talented or exceptional in any way; the adult artists who work alongside them agree. But the young people are happy to admit that in Room 13 they are learning to think about things, and act on the world, in a different way from people in ordinary classrooms. Everything they do in Room 13 is focussed and purposeful: their learning has personal purpose and direction.

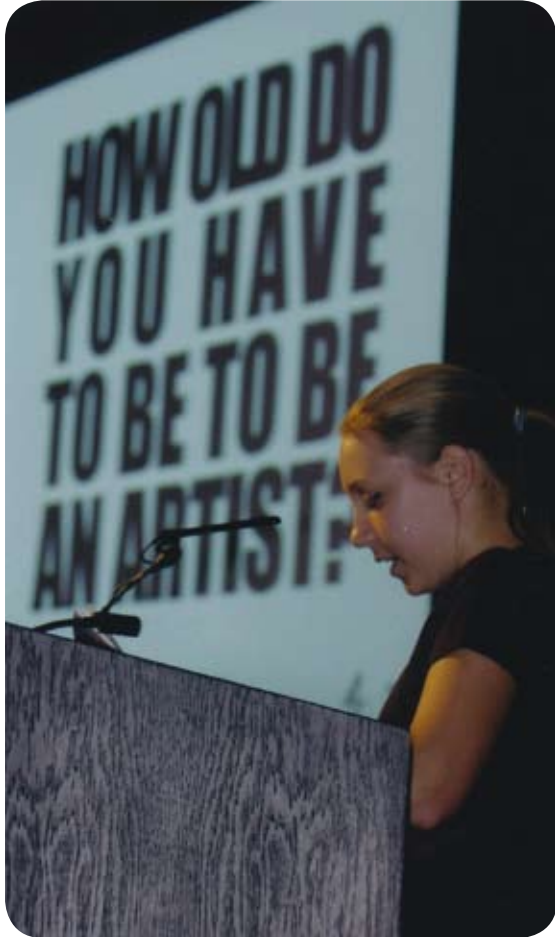


'Above all, Room 13 students are learning to think for themselves, to reflect on the big, difficult and philosophical ideas they encounter in their lives; they are learning to reflect, to discuss and debate any and every thing that touches them' says David Gribble, a writer, teacher and leading authority on democratic education.

'If I were asked to describe the Room 13 approach in a single phrase, I would say it was a profound manifestation of trust'. He concludes 'Children are trusted to do real things, to administer their own studio affairs, to negotiate with adults from outside the school, to weigh up the significance of world events, to face physical difficulties, to formulate and express their own philosophical ideas'.

What does Room 13 mean to the young artists?

The following extract is from a chapter by Danielle Souness, *Managing Director Caol Room.13* during the academic year 2002/3, published in *Social and Critical Practices in Art Education* (2005) Atkinson, D. and Dash, P. (eds).



'Room 13 is, it seems, unique... The fact that we are in charge is very important. I think that ever since I was quite wee I knew that there was a difference between learning and learning in school. The first was easy but in school you have to, and I do mean have to, learn things that a teacher thinks you have to learn. I don't have any real problems with this – after all the idea of learning is to get knowledge from people who are knowledgeable. But in school you are only allowed to learn things up to a standard that a teacher thinks you can understand and you have to go at roughly the same speed as the rest of the class. In Caol we are extremely lucky because we have a brilliant headteacher called Miss Cattanach and the best class teacher in the world called Mrs Smith. And we have Room 13.

Every teacher and every pupil knows that in any class there are people with different skills and interests. We (the students) know that we are all good at something but all we are judged on is our ability to fill in workbooks. Some people are really good at it, some even buy similar sorts of things to fill in time on the bus and train journeys – quiz and game books and that sort of thing. Some people are really bad at it. Some people find it very boring. But we all have to do it. However I don't think it really helps you to learn. Anybody can look at the examples given on each page and work out the answer required, and those who struggle are often just bored by the whole idea. It teaches you how to think about how to answer questions but it doesn't tell you why the question exists.

Most people my age want to learn. We want to do things. (OK there are one or two who don't but most of us do.) What Room 13 does is allow us to take control of our learning. We can use the studio whenever we want with the only rule being that we must never fall behind with our class work – in our workbooks.

Until you, our readers, consider people my age (I am 11) as artists you can never support us. You can give us what you think we want, or more likely what you think we need, but at best all you provide is patronising praise.

Do you remember what it was like to be 11 or 12? Think!





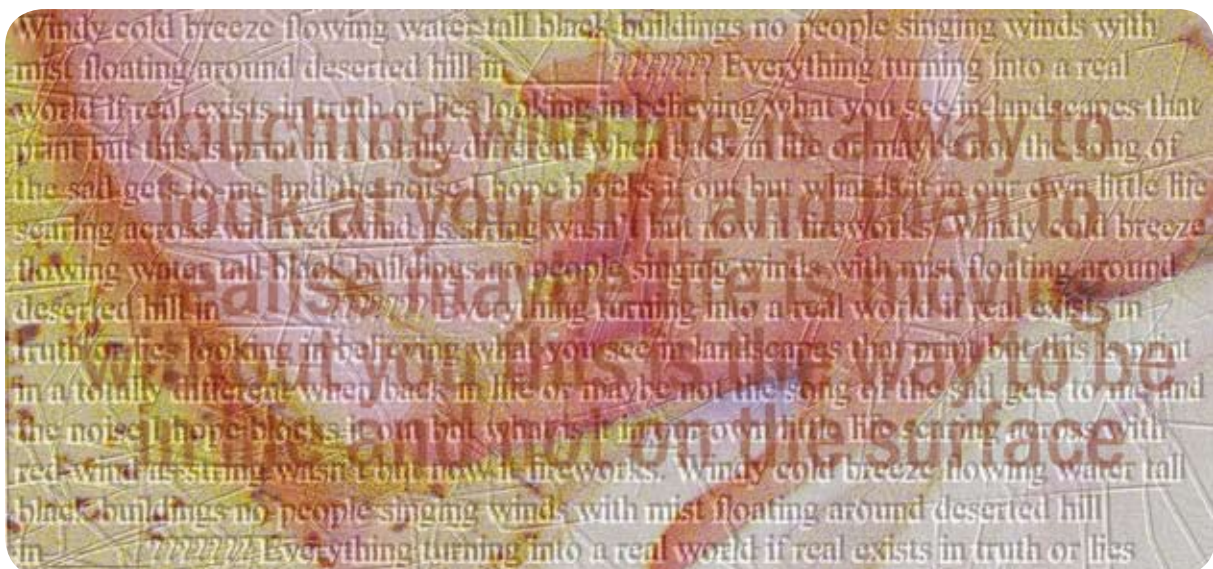
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You knew what was going on, you knew about war and sex, you didn't believe in Santa and the Tooth Fairy. You could think for yourselves. You occasionally got things wrong because you did not understand something – but even trained adult doctors and scientists do that. Can you remember what it was like for adults to treat you as if you were something slightly different from a human being? It was horrible, wasn't it? It still is.

I know that some adults think that teaching children to think is wrong and that it does not prepare them for the real world where all they will have to do is to do as they are told. So at what age are we allowed to think? At what age are we allowed to be artists? Because it is the same thing.

Picasso made some of the greatest works of the last century. They are beautiful and tell me a lot about what it is like to be an old man but even Picasso could never paint what it is like to be an eleven-year-old girl. I am not comparing myself to Picasso, but I can make art about being an eleven-year-old girl. Your problem as an adult is that you look at my work in a different way to the way you look at late Picasso. This I think is the biggest difference between Room 13 and other ways of working. It teaches us how to think, it treats our ideas, our dreams and thoughts seriously and, perhaps even more importantly, it allows us to find ways of expressing them.

Without Caol Primary School and Room 13 and working together I would have never seen the Matisse/Picasso exhibition, the Eva Hesse exhibition. I might have discovered Barnett Newman as his work is very important to me but I would never have had the chance to see his work for real. I wouldn't even have been allowed into the gallery to see Fiona Banner's work in the Tate, let alone been taken round it by one of the Turner Prize curators. Even secondary school students needed permission... How patronising is that? I wouldn't have discovered Norman MacCraig or James Joyce. I wouldn't have discovered myself. Surely that is what education is meant to be?'



The following excerpt is from a speech by Conor Gillies, Managing Director of Room 13 Lochside Primary School, at the Creative Heads Conference, November 2003.

I think the most important thing for me is that in Room 13 everything is real. Lots of children enjoy playing "Office", but because we are running a business for real, the lessons we are learning will stay with us for life. I think that it is much easier to learn and remember things if you are having fun doing it and that should be what going to school is all about. At the end of this year, I will be leaving Lochside Primary to go to the High School and management of the Room 13 studio will be passed to the new team that will have been voted in.

I will find it hard to leave because Room 13 has become very important to me but I am proud of what we have achieved and I'm glad that I was part of the making of Lochyside Room 13. I know that the studio will be passed into good hands because the Primary 6 people in the management team have been learning about how to take charge of the business. After leaving primary school I will still be able to return to the studio after school hours, and take part in activities and trips such as this one.

So you see ladies and gentlemen, working in Room 13 when you are my age is like opening a door that lets you change the way you see things and the way you think about things. If you are eleven and running a successful business before you have even left Primary School, it gives you a huge boost and you can just imagine what you can achieve with the rest of your life!



"Without Room 13, the world would be a place of work and sadness, not a place of thinking and expression, and I'd really miss it."*

*Voices of Lochyside students taken from the sound track of "Where Are They Now?"
a 3 Minute Wonder Series about the whole Room 13 network broadcast by
Channel 4 in March 2006

What does Room 13 mean to the parents of the young artists?

The following excerpt is from an interview with Debbie Hazell, Mother of Shannon Coombs, Managing Director of Room 13, Hareclive.

"Since Shannon has been going to Room 13 she has become more of an outgoing person who likes to air her opinions about art and all of her speeches. She used to be a shy, quiet child. I think Room 13 has improved Shannon 100% and her outlook on life in general. She has got so much confidence in herself and feels she can achieve anything with hard work and determination. I have attended Room 13 on several occasions to see Shannon at work, sending emails and talking on the phone. I am very proud of all the work she has achieved and the speeches she has attended. Shannon wouldn't have been able to do all of this without the help and support of Shani and Paul who help the children in Room 13.



I attended one of Shannon's speeches recently as this was the first one which wasn't too far away. To see Shannon actually speaking on behalf of Room 13 made me feel like the proudest person at the seminar. I am so proud of her achievement as Managing Director of Room 13."

What does Room 13 mean to School?

"The self-confidence that children get from what they do there is unbelievable" says Jennifer Catternach, the Head of Caol Primary. "Kids who struggle in other areas no longer feel failures, and they feel able to have a go at difficult areas of the curriculum that they would otherwise decide were hard and boring. Through Room 13 we get to see the whole personality of the child, not just the bit that performs academically."





COLD NORTHERN WINTER THE SLOW SNOW DRIFTING SKY SILENTLY FILLED WITH
LY AN EAGLE DARKENED THE AIR ITS BRIGHT BLACK ALMOST VIOLET FEATHERS
Y IT PLUCKED A LARGE YELLOW ELEPHANT OUT OF A SNOWCLOUD AND FL

The following edited extracts are from a presentation made by the reception class teacher from Hareclive Primary School at the 5x5x5 research seminar in Bath, in March 2006.

'There is a sense of pride throughout the school. The artwork produced is displayed and everyone compliments us on it. Room 13 creates a chance for children to work on artwork for months at a time, not just one afternoon a week or month.

It's about real art. Individual art. Not displays of the same thing done 30 times. It's much more meaningful work. It represents the children's thoughts and experiences. Not that of a curriculum. It's the work of the children. It belongs to them and it shows what they really are capable of. Room 13 is not such a competitive environment. It's a place where the older children are able to comment on the younger children's work.



Room 13 has taught the children to perceive themselves as artists and now there is no stopping their motivation and enthusiasm for the room and their work. Room 13 is nothing but amazing achievement and goes beyond a primary school education. Why hasn't every school got one? In the words of Shannon Coombs, managing director of Room 13 2005, "can you imagine what you could have achieved if there was a Room 13 in your old school?"

It's easy for me. I don't do anything. None of the staff do anything. The children do it all'.

So, in summary...

Claire Gibb, artist-in-residence at Room 13 Lochyside Primary School concludes:

Can you articulate the philosophy of Room 13?

The philosophy is purely to... How do I put it into words? Prove the worth of the individual and to give the individual a chance to be an individual and learn as an individual.

What conditions are in place that fosters this process?

The conditions, the environment in here, the fact that the students who are working in the space, have ownership of the space, they have ownership of the materials they're using and the equipment that they're using.

What do you think is being developed?

I think what is being developed is a sense of yourself and your place within the world.



And the final words belong to the young artists. The following extracts are from an interview with the outgoing Managing Director, Room 13 Caol, 2003-4 (she was eleven years old when she gave the interview).



If you were going to try to explain to children your age why should they consider having a Room 13, what would you tell them?

I would tell them it's hard work but with the hard work comes fun as well. If you have Room 13, you get the chance... to think, to experience. It's nothing like the class work you get in school, because (in school) you are told that ok today we are going to paint a cow and we will use chalk... and you have to colour it black-white. Whereas in Room 13, you take your own ideas and express them as you please...

If you were trying to convince someone that having Room 13 is a good thing, what would you tell them?

It's where you can learn new things, there's lots of textures in your learning. You can know new things and then come back to that. There's one other good thing about Room 13 I think... you always, whenever you do a painting you always feel proud of yourself at the end and it's always so good.



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The Room 13 network at April 2007

Room13 Caol
Fort William, Scotland

Room 13 Lochyside
Fort William, Scotland

Room 13 Hareclive
Bristol, England

Studio 13 Lochaber High School
Fort William, Scotland

Room 13 Sacred Heart
Glasgow, Scotland

Room 13 Aragon
Surrey, England

Room 13 HCMC
Kathmandu, Nepal

Room 13 Sapebuso
Soweto, South Africa

Room 13 Mmulakgoro
Botshabelo, South Africa

Room 13 Aseema
Mumbai, India

Room 13 Shikshayatan
Tamil Nadu, India

