
Lifting the Lid and Mucking about with Minds: the example and challenge of Room 13

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ABSTRACT Nicholas Serota calls Room 13 ‘the most important model for artistic teaching in school that we have in the UK.’ This article describes and considers aspects of the Room 13 initiative. Begun more than a decade ago in Scotland and now spreading internationally, Room 13 treats pupils as artists and business-people. By working alongside adult professional artists-in-residence, pupils grow as artists and improve their visual literacy while taking charge of all aspects of the Room’s management and devising ways to meet its running-costs. Impelled by pupils, Room 13 provides a venue where flourish vital elements of education which current state policy represses or neglects.

I arrive at lunchtime, late as usual, and sit in Hareclive Primary School’s reception area figuring out how to make the plastic clasp of my visitor’s badge actually clasp. My escorts appear: a brace of Year 3 girls. Usually I’m led through the dining hall, stuffy with school-dinner smells and clattery with trays, where a crowd of the youngest students eating together at their miniature tables look up and watch me pass through the big glass doors. Across the tarmac is the door to Room 13, propped open by a chunk of rock. In the grip of the rock, a fossil. Today my guides turn right and take me up one corridor and down another, then out through a side door where three steps lead down to an expanse of playground. One after another we poise at the top of the steps, then jump off to the side as though jumping off a wall. We cut round a corner and along the narrow alley between two buildings and here is another aspect of Room 13, its long window revealing shelves for art books, the model ship, the dragon and the owl. We have taken a short-cut (longer than my usual route) and I realise I have been accorded honorary Year 3 status.

‘Room 13’ exists in several incarnations. The door to the first Room 13 opened in 1994 at Caol Primary School, Fort William. Rob Fairley was artist-

in-residence at the West Highlands Museum there and worked with a small number of pupils at the school. When their project came to an end the pupils wanted to keep on working with Rob. 'Pay me and I'll stay!' he said, offering the reality of a contract, a business deal. The pupils found ways to pay him and he stayed for several years, helping to establish on the top floor of Caol Primary School 'a democratically-run studio that works along normal business lines' according to Room 13 users or, in the words of libertarian educator and writer David Gribble, who is alive to the contradictions: 'an independent art-room ... within the state system'. Pupils come to Room 13 to make art, research, read and discuss things. They organise and manage the space, mainly through the work of a Management Team whose members are all Room 13 users. They fill in applications to fund-holders and give presentations at conferences. They win contracts, commissions and competitions. They mount exhibitions. They write cheques and manage accounts, for without resources the door to Room 13 will shut and stay shut. There are many other features of Room 13, but as Rob wrote to me, 'Room 13's big step forward has been in ... the business that each studio must run ... The business is real ... if it does not make a profit the studio fails. It is also a business that works term on term, year on year.'

Making or finding enough money to replace materials and settle bills and pay the artist-in-residence enables the other business of Room 13. Like any room in a school, Room 13 is also about making people. It does this in ways which have been increasingly denied or thwarted in state schools, certainly those in England. Users of Room 13 arrive when they choose and because they choose, to work in the ways they choose, on their own projects, by themselves or with friends, at their own pace. 'Here we can just do what we want,' one of them told me. Another, who has left Hareclive Primary School but returns to Room 13, said, 'In secondary school you're told what to do and sometimes you feel under pressure if you can't do something, like if we have to make a drawing and you feel "ooh I can't draw that." But in here you can just keep practising. You're free to keep doing it and doing it until you feel you can do it.' It's not only her testimony to the provision of freedom which strikes me as important: it is her embodiment of the tenacity that freedom invites. In Room 13 she can keep failing until she succeeds. Instead of external pressure, the mobilisation of intrinsic desire.

Working Generosity

The Scottish artist and educator William Johnstone, who died in 1981, considered 'the amount of curiosity and self-effort aroused' to be the gauge of true teaching. Self-effort: the desire to 'keep doing it until ... you can do it'. Involved with surrealism and the modernist movement, Johnstone also taught art in secondary schools before becoming principal of the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts and later of London's Central School of Art. His ideas have been one of the influences on the development of Room 13. Here curiosity and self-effort, energy which is purposive and creates, is set free and nurtured. Room

13 offers a space for possibilities, for its users to realise work already in mind or that comes to mind, or to spark new ideas through encountering old ones. One user told me about making a model car out of metal and plaster. 'We were looking at things to try to do and Paul [one of the artists-in-residence] gave us a book on Leonardo da Vinci and we went through that and we found UFOs and then we saw the car and thought it would be an appropriate challenge to try and do that.' Today he is making animal screen-prints as part of a project commissioned by Bristol's Royal Hospital for Children. This is work for the public world, a contribution to the public space, and it brings its own responsibilities and excitement. He talks me through the process of making his first-ever screen-print, and mimes the physical work while he talks.

As well as space Room 13 also offers time, and in a manner almost impossible to replicate now in the mainstream. In a case study she wrote about R13H (as Hareclive's Room 13 is known) Mary Jane Drummond noted the generosity of provision. This sense of generosity working extends beyond a recognition of the unstinting commitment of the two artists-in-residence, Shani Ali and Paul Bradley, an acknowledgement of the variety of resources available and the way encouragement and confidence is materialised in the built facilities, to encompass the passing time. Across the tarmac disposition of time in lessons is not in the hands of the teacher, far less of pupils. Government policy renames, re-assigns and subdivides the hours in the school day, and requires that each lesson have 'pace'. But the pace of the metronome, or the pace of the performer in tune with the piece? Lesson-time shall be time on-task: time used efficiently for the end decreed by the Learning Objective. Inventive and sophisticated methods help pupils stay on-task. Teachers model and scaffold, organise a series of short tasks rather than a long one, differentiate tasks according to a notion of the 'ability' of those who are tasked, employ a variety of aids and frames to structure and support the completion of work, and sustain all by constant and subtle overseeing. What may have begun as a means to intensify the pupil's innate interest now threatens to substitute for it. Policy loses sight of the pupil as ready and willing to learn, well-practised already in self-directed learning, and replaces faith in the pupil with faith in the application of approved pedagogical routines.

Users of Room 13 do without such things. Which is not to say that each of the twenty or so young people in the studio this lunchtime is intent on creating a masterpiece. As I make my way to the blue sofa I can see someone flicking paint at his paper, someone else daubing randomly, a third person mixing liquid paints in a tin apparently just for the fun of it. Not so. She brings for my inspection the marbled green of her mix, intending to paint it along the bottom of her picture. Something vital may be contained in acts which seem idle, even wasteful. Allowed, in fact expected, to find their own ways into that self-effort fuelled by creative purpose, these pupils are resetting body and mind, limbering up, collecting themselves, making ready, trying out. This takes time and materials as well as activity easily labelled 'unproductive': doodles, dabs, scribbles, splodges, false starts, attempts abandoned half-begun, standard tropes

and hackneyed formulas rehashed. Play, and play-work. However defined, this seems to me part of the long act of creation, and highly individual. What appears wasteful and vacant turns out to have been the requisite preliminaries, the tinder-gathering, the groping towards, the preparation without which the work cannot arrive or be attempted which will be the opposite of vacant and wasteful.

And if this is so, it makes for one of the challenges which Room 13 presents to mainstream education.

Evidence that it is indeed so might be derived from Danielle MacEachan's comments in Room 13 Caol's Annual Report 2006, where she explains how her piece 'Dotty Space' came into being. 'I was just sitting on the floor with a paintbrush and a pot of paint and I put my paintbrush in the paint then it dripped on my board and I thought it looked cool so I kept doing it over and over again.' She cites prize-winning Japanese artist and writer Yayoi Kusama as her favourite artist 'because she likes doing lots of dots on her pictures.' Happenstance, and alertness to what might be made of happenstance, and then a readiness indeed to make it, a readiness which is also informed by awareness of what else is being done in the domain one is working in, combine to generate creation.

The Real Job

Room 13 at Hareclive used to be housed in a classroom in the main school building. In 2007 a purpose-built stand-alone studio part-funded by a European Union grant was formally opened in the school grounds. While excavating its foundations, workers had turned up an ordinary treasure: the rock which from time to time is used to hold open the door. The rock the ammonite coils within. The studio itself is a large, high space with unpainted wooden roof-beams. It gives back a slight echo. Its floor is concrete. Canvases of various sizes stand in queues against one wall. There's a step-ladder, and large built-in cupboards for storing materials and artworks. A truncated central wall set at an angle helps divide the space, as does the planned fall of light from the big blue blunted pyramids on the roof. This sunny afternoon the quadrant of the studio farthest from the door has become a light-well. Walls show posters: Holbein's 'Ambassadors', works by Turner and Caro, a blueprint of Norman Foster's 'Gherkin', and newspaper and magazine articles, some about Room 13. Sited low enough for the smallest here to use is a steel sink with elbow-taps. There's a dustbin, a fire-extinguisher, deep tubby bins. On the wall and floor handprints and streaks of paint. Near the shelving in the window is an old blue sofa and a clutch of plastic chairs rustled from a classroom. Along the dividing wall is a table, some filing cabinets and a computer. Two girls are laying up the regular R13H newsletter on-screen. They let me watch a film showing how the elements of the studio were transported here from the old room. In the film time speeds up: people jerk and rush to stack boxes, swipe furniture, cart the sofa. The dragon which now stands in the window is displaced in turn from

different locations around the old room, appearing and disappearing and re-appearing again as each of its dens and nests and perches is hustled out of the classroom door. What must have been an arduous and tedious reality is transformed for the record with wit and élan. Several films have been made by Room 13 users as the network has spread, from the trio in Scotland to England, Nepal, South Africa, Turkey, the USA and India. It is hoped over the next few years new studios will open doors in Australia, South America, the Middle East and Asia. Meantime Room 13 extends its reach through new technologies. Rob Fairley points out that 'the most constant and regular correspondence Room 13 HQ has is from a young artist from the Ukraine' whose only access to Room 13 is through the Internet.

At Hareclive most users arrive at break and lunchtime. In Scotland, where Room 13 has been longer established, pupils can visit any time provided they have their teacher's permission and are up-to-date with classwork. That Room 13, a place and time beyond the remit of the National Curriculum and without teachers, textbooks, or tests, can win a toehold inside the state system is in some ways remarkable. Room 13 testifies, against the general stance of the mainstream, that the process of learning is not teacher-dependent, nor understood adequately when likened to meeting a quota or climbing a ladder. Less predictable in its course and motion, learning is a continuous innate power quickened by the felt and anticipated needs of the individual, by interest, opportunity, surroundings. The moment when a pupil can opt for Room 13 instead of Literacy Hour or PE seems to me critical in the life of the Room and the school. This moment marks a full commitment to an expanded understanding of what learning is and how it takes place, and affords pupils in the state system a novel power. It is a paradigm shift.

To opt to leave the classroom and work in Room 13 also posts a challenge to the idea of the classroom as a place of common endeavour in which every pupil's participation is important and valuable, and hence required. On this view the community of the class together in the room is centrally important for learning. Maintaining that togetherness, that 'ethic of everybody', is crucial. If a pupil chooses to be elsewhere then something is lost to the group and to the way it attempts to enable learning. And yet a teacher holding this view of the classroom might support free access to Room 13 because of what the Room makes available to its users and can enable in them and from them. Not least, perhaps, because Room 13 opens the door on the surprising, the out-of-the-blue, the chance to make something out of yourself which otherwise would not be made, and to learn by making it. Even more: to become by making it, and by being let be to make it.

The project which brings me to Hareclive aims to develop ways which might reveal the varieties of learning which go on in R13H, and to track, if possible, some of the effects generated by regular use of the Room. Rob Fairley isn't sure this is possible, and he may be right. He is in no doubt that R13 'has a profound influence on any school that embraces the concept ... it is a very subtle thing ... it is not a quick fix' (Drummond, 2006, p. 9). But can that profound

and subtle influence be evaluated? And should it be? Attempting to do so might, as he puts it, 'get in the way of the real job' (Drummond, 2006, p. 9).

Children as Artists

Young people are still lining up to register their attendance. Signed-in, they head for a space to sit or squat or lie and get on with their artwork. Someone cuts out designs for tin badges. Someone squeezes paint bright as ketchup into a plastic cup. Carrying a palette someone steps gingerly among the crowd and stops to ask if she can borrow a colour. Refused, she moves on, leaving a fierce look and someone else repeating: 'You have to share'. Near the sofa where I sit, someone is painting pipe-cleaners green, to add as seaweed to her picture of the sea in its various shades of blue. 'I like blue' she tells me. Someone else, finishing a picture of a rocket, tells me he is coming next week to draw a dinosaur. A new user, overwhelmed by the openness of what could be, is trying to decide on his first artwork. 'What have I got to make it out of?' he inquires. That he won't be told, that he must decide for himself, is the first and fundamental lesson Room 13 teaches. He will start to learn it from Shani, who goes with him to point out what materials are to hand. Some students negotiate the next stage of their combined work. 'Shall we do dots ...?' one asks. A group of girls discuss heaven and hell, a picture of which they are hoping to paint. Later Paul will show them some of Blake's poems and engravings. Blake rather than Bosch, says Paul, connecting his current interest to theirs. This approach is echoed in an extended account of his visit to Room 13 in Scotland (available to read via his website) which David Gribble relates:

Joanne Kane told me that she liked to come to Room 13 to talk to Mr. Fairley, and to ask him what she could do on her canvas. He only tells her, she said, that she has to think of it for herself. I asked Rob himself what sort of guidance or stimulus he gives. 'Only my own curiosity,' he said. '... I would just ask the children questions about their work, and expect to get perfectly reasonable answers.'

Elsewhere Rob suggests the best way to answer children's questions about the work they are doing is to say what you know. That is, to come at the work honestly, and to treat its creator as an artist. This commitment is one of the rigours defining the ethos of Room 13. It is egalitarian while not disguising the differences which exist between adult and child. At the same time, it holds to the truth that art may be produced at any age. This is still a difficult idea, even a scandalous one, especially given the prevalence of what David Gribble terms 'adulthood' or a conviction of the inherent superiority of adults over children.

But it is not a new idea. In the middle of the last century William Johnstone won the confidence of the schoolchildren he taught 'and [kept] his own work alive by teaching them not as a teacher but as an artist, as though in his studio inviting them to paint, as artists, with him and on art of their own time and their own making' (Room 13 Cookbook 2006, p. 15). The first

exhibition of the Royal Drawing Society, held as far back as 1890, included the work of young people alongside adult artists. This year marks the centenary of the first exhibition in England of work by pupils of Franz Cizek, who taught art to primary-aged children in Vienna. Cizek regarded his pupils as artists. He insisted on allowing the children to develop their own art techniques. He offered them a range of choices, took what they produced seriously and let them develop at their own pace. The art his pupils produced was highly acclaimed by some, though it attracted derision from the political Right. Their press as ever was full of scorn: 'Vote Social-Democrat and you can cut up paper and splash about with paint. Vote Christian Democrat and you must learn to read, write and add up' (Malvern, 1995, p. 268). 'How do you do it?' Cizek was asked. 'But I don't do it,' he replied. 'I take off the lid.' At the end of World War I Roger Fry exhibited children's paintings at the Omega Workshop, helping to inspire the pioneering art-educationalist Marion Richardson. Seventy years ago, in 1938 at County Hall, the London Art Inspectorate organised an 'Exhibition of Children's Drawings and Paintings'. Over five hundred London schools were involved. Kenneth Clarke wrote in the exhibition's pamphlet that the hung works were 'in some measure little works of art ... the impression of an illumined state of mind' (Tomlinson & Mills, 1966, p. 20). The *Listener* magazine reproduced a sample of the drawings and paintings, igniting a month-long controversy in its Letters column over the status of what was on show. Many major modernist artists studied, valued and collected art by children (not least their own children) and were influenced by this work. Room 13 users have had their art displayed in galleries and other settings in London, Inverness, Fort William, Cornwall and Bristol. In 2009 their work will be hung in the National Gallery of Scotland.

The end of lunch-break approaches. 'Don't rush to finish your work,' calls Shani. 'You can come back.' Members of the Management Team declare it is time to pack up. As the studio empties, the person in charge of washing brushes is reminded of his job. A last tardy pupil is chivvied to lessons. In a while the regular Management Team meeting will convene. Ahead of it, Shani and I begin to talk about the idea of a Reflection Week as a way to collect information about how R13H affects its users. Some of the young people can photograph the Room in action, and annotate the pictures with their observations. The configuration of the Room can be altered to highlight the theme of Reflection. New materials – metals, mirrors, foil, veils, texts – can be made available to resource work users might choose to do on the theme. Giant cartoon-style think-bubbles can be produced and displayed to let people note what they think in Room 13 and of it. People can draw themselves being in Room 13. Parents, staff and pupils can be surveyed. Possibilities begin.

Rob Fairley points out that educationally Room 13 is very old-fashioned. He connects Room 13's educational stance to Plato's injunction: art should be the basis for all education, and play the best scheme of work. But Hareclive Primary exists in the new iron age of Frameworks and Ofsted and attainment targets and accountability. How does the work of Room 13 sit with the raising

of test scores? Which pupils benefit from Room 13 and in what precise ways? David Gribble calls Room 13 'a profound manifestation of trust', and trust is a tree whose leaves are stripped in the winds of accountability. I take David Gribble to be referring first and foremost to the trust reposed in young people, the users, by and through the network that is 'Room 13'. But there is also that trust the school places in what a Room 13 does, which for the school entails a risk. The Room 13 Cookbook 2006 puts it this way: '[T]he implementation of a "Room 13" within a school requires a blind leap of faith on behalf of a head teacher and his or her staff.' Without the sustained support of the head teacher and other staff the studio will fail, as it will if the impulse to set up a studio and the dedication to maintain it isn't forthcoming from pupils. Building the interface between all parties, and so partnering the independent art studio and the state system to best effect, requires enormous consideration, care and skill, over years. As with any gestation, there can be no guarantees.

The Waterhole

Uncertainty then, but not the uncertainty that saps resolve or petrifies intent. For Room 13 makes itself by making new things: new art, new films, new prints and cards, new contacts, new frames of reference. Several R13H users talked to me about how memorable and valuable it had been to step beyond their locality and attend exhibitions or conferences, to make speeches about the Room or experience new art. Room 13 in Scotland runs a Summer School which brings together users and artists from across the network. Expeditions have been organised to help integrate Room 13's international outposts. Another important strategy for widening horizons is the readiness in Room 13 to talk about whatever naturally arises, and at the highest possible intellectual level. In Caol this has been complemented by discussion time specifically given over to what might be termed philosophical content. Rob Fairley cites elements of Scotland's educational tradition in support of this approach, and gives examples of 'lessons' around ideas to do with perception, existence and thought. He must have had some success with these, for in the opinion of one pupil: 'Mr Fairley mucks about with people's minds'.

In doing all it does Room 13 constitutes young people beneficially as thinking, active, expressive and capable. It generates and regenerates human capacity, and the capacity to find new capacity within the situated and developing self. It receives people as they are and offers them the opportunity through their own work to be artists and business-people. It does so in grounded and real ways, confronting users with the truth of bills, invoices and contracts, and the ramifications of making art that will be taken as art. Room 13 has been likened to 'a watering-hole for children; a casual gathering-place ... to explore things socially or as individuals ... to assuage ... thirst for knowledge and self-expression' (Room 13 Cookbook 2006, p. 18). Cizek would have appreciated the metaphor. 'The tremendous danger,' he said, 'is that our civilisation hunts the children through their childhood and youth' (Viola,

1942/1944, p. 42). The expectation from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) that students progress by two National Curriculum levels across each Key Stage, and the plans to ensure such progress via 'testing-when-ready', are (and require) a kind of child-hunting, a way to keep children on-track, targeted. A turn at the waterhole can be a moment of respite. But R13H is much more than a sanctuary. It has its own drive and dynamism, fuelled by the activity of its users, and the energy of imagination. In this too it offers a challenge to the policy-talk of the mainstream.

As I leave Hareclive Primary to catch my train east I glimpse fields and hills beyond the local estate. Eight Rooms 13 in England and Scotland stand on their own feet, viable today as businesses. But if Nicholas Serota is right in his affirmation we should expect such provision to be supported far more readily, and made far more widely available. Every child matters, claim the policy mandarins, while remaining content to allow some people's children to go on mattering very much more than others. The public school I attended as a boy recently refurbished its Music and Art Block to the tune of £5 million through donations raised from ex-students. Five million pounds lavished by the rich on the sons of the rich. Generosity of provision, to summon the artist and musician in every pupil, and prompt who would to pursue the talents that provision calls forth. In the wards around Hareclive Primary the latest census records unemployment as higher than the national average, and the number of residents without qualifications as significantly higher. Room 13 can make a difference in the lives of children here. It can, I believe, change some lives profoundly. But the sons of the rich grow up and grow rich, far from the sons of the poor ... And unexpectedly what come to mind aren't the oft-rehearsed political tag-lines, the railing at class oppression's endurance and at all the damage done by our failure yet to have secured a properly comprehensive system of education in this country. Instead what flickers is the forked tongue *like a forked night on the air* of D.H. Lawrence's snake drinking at the water-trough in Taormina, gold and venomous and god-like, dangerous and powerful and unlooked-for. Like the impact a work of art can have, or the impulse to make one.

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