

Room with a view

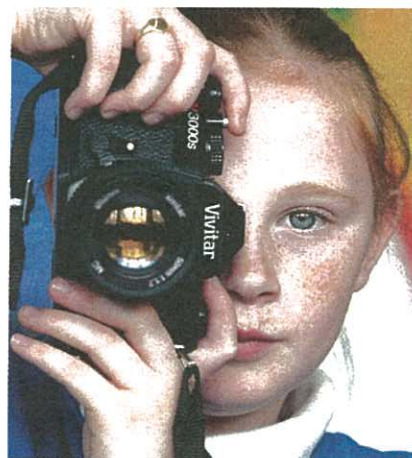
The astonishing success of a remote primary's arts project, giving its pupils unparalleled freedom, is helping children as far afield as Nepal, writes **Reva Klein**

Just as I think I'm getting to grips with what the project is all about, Jennifer Cattnach, head of the school where it all began, declares: "If you think you understand Room 13, you're a fortnight behind." This is the story of a small primary in a far corner of Scotland that developed a project so creative that it is being replicated not only in other schools in Britain but, surprisingly, as far away as Asia.

Caol primary is a former sink school in Fort William in the Scottish highlands beneath Ben Nevis. Eleven years ago Rob Fairley, a local artist, started working there and created with pupils the special ethos that is being copied in two British schools as well as the Helpless Children's Mother Centre, an orphanage in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Room 13 is an idiosyncratic blend of pupil autonomy, artistic freedom and curriculum enhancement. It defies easy definition. It is an arts project that is not just about making art. Rather, it is a way of working that gives pupils a level of freedom — artistic, practical and intellectual — not usually found in schools. Pupils take responsibility for their own learning and for the running of their arts studio, to the extent of writing out cheques, making funding applications and attending meetings with potential sponsors. There is a special needs teacher, Joe French, whose sole responsibility it is to integrate his pupils into Room 13 as much as possible. Older pupils can go at any time during the day to work or to discuss things with Mr Fairley. The only condition is that they are up to speed on their classwork.

While pupils, all of whom attend voluntarily, get guidance on their art projects, they are not taught in the conventional sense. "I'm the thorn in the pad of their feet they can't get rid of," jokes



Mr Fairley. "I give them critical feedback every step of the way, asking them difficult questions to make them think analytically about what they're doing. I treat the work here like any other piece and give it the analysis that I would of *Guernica*. It is the integrity of the work that I'm looking for."

Part of the Room 13 approach is giving pupils the intellectual skills they need to fulfil their potential in years to come. So as well as creating their own artwork, they carry out research projects weekly based on a list of eminent scientists, artists and writers. While the research assignments relate to curricular requirements, their main purpose is to teach pupils how to research, use footnotes and reference data: skills, says Mr Fairley, which they would not be taught in the primary curriculum.

Hareclive primary in Hartcliffe, Bristol, started the first Room 13 in England last September in a Creative Partnerships project. A core group of eight Year 6 children have been working with artist in residence Shani Ali to create their version of the Caol project in a disused computer site in the school. They have been helped by visits to and from Caol and have established an email exchange system, or "digital conversations", which consist of electronic postcards featuring paintings, photographs or videos that the pupils have created.

One of the themes that the Caol and Hareclive pupils have chosen to explore on

Visionary: Rob Fairley (left), artist-in-residence at Caol primary school; pupils involve themselves in all forms of art from painting (above) to photography (right)

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Watch me write

The internet means pupils can follow an author's progress stage by stage.

Stewart Ross recounts his experiences emailing from Kent to a school in Swansea

The first time I met face to face the pupils who were studying my writing we started a discussion about what noise —precisely— an arrow makes when it hits the wall of a mud hut. John Kelly, who designs my books, had pencilled in a “Thwaack!” in his word balloons but, after some discussion, we decided on a more sonorous “Thud!”

I had asked them to compose their own story boards — 20 frames of words and pictures — that would be their smaller versions of the book I was preparing professionally for the publishers Dorling Kindersley.

My title was *Tales of the Dead: Ancient Rome*, which combines a graphic novel within a non-fiction framework. It was what Derek Copley, co-ordinator of the Swansea Wordplay Festival, wanted for our project, which aimed to give children an insight into the way professional writers operate. “For many children, especially boys,” he explained, “facts are what they want to read. I want the project to show that non-fiction writing needs to be just as creative as fiction or poetry.”

I was asked to work with Year 6 at St Illtyd's Roman Catholic primary, Swansea, which is a long way from my home in Kent. I had wondered whether I should set up a camera in my garden hut workplace and stream video down to South Wales, but the pupils would either have had to endure mind-numbing hours of me typing or I would have had to stop every five minutes and explain what I was doing. Impractical.

Instead, I sent them copies of a similar book I had

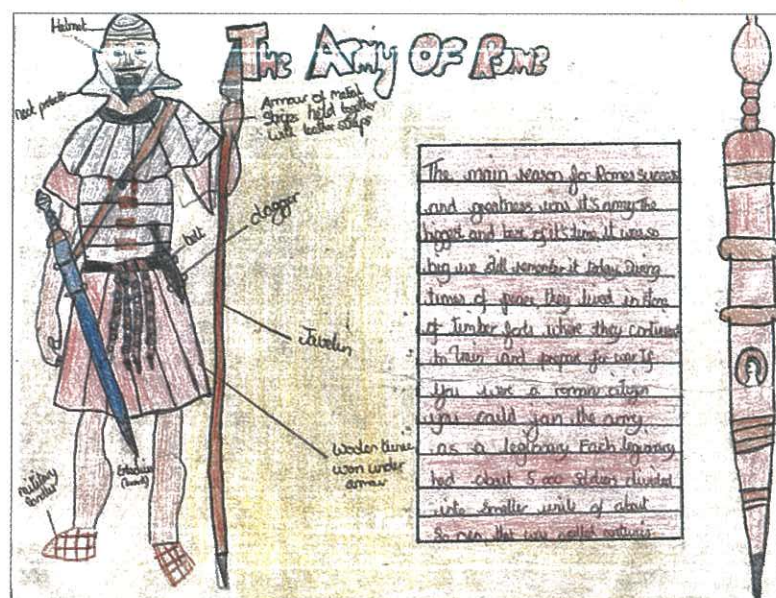
written on Egypt to show how the innovative design worked and give an impression of what *Ancient Rome* would look like when finished.

The pre-visit work involved email interaction between DK editor Simon Beecroft, DK designer John Kelly, and the pupils, via their teacher Alison Howells, and myself.

I sent the school the original book plan and the revised version, in which the story moved from North Africa to a climax in the Colosseum, inviting the pupils to compare the two and suggest why the second was preferred to the first. This sophisticated exercise in comparison also meant thinking about the book's potential market.

I sent the school some of John Kelly's non-fiction roughs. The pupils used these as a guide for spreads of their own, choosing subjects from the agreed book map. This meant designing, drawing, planning and writing clear, concise and lively non-fiction text to accompany their artwork. The results were impressive.

The children saw their work as something “real”, linking to the world outside: this was how it was done in the writer's workshop, on the designer's



drawing board and on the editor's desk —and they were involved in it. Writing non-fiction took on a new purpose and meaning.

The final stage of our virtual relationship was writing the graphic novel. As with the non-fiction, I forwarded to the pupils the relevant sketches and emails that had passed between Simon, John and me, allowing the pupils to produce their own versions of the story in 20-frame spreads.

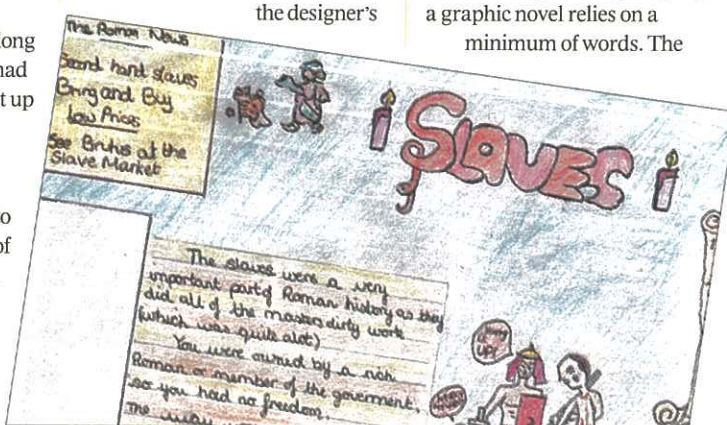
As each spread was a story complete within itself, the pupils had to write an attention-grabbing opening and then develop it towards a cliff-hanging ending, an exercise in planning that would benefit their own story-writing. Moreover, whereas writing for traditional exams can encourage flowery language, a graphic novel relies on a minimum of words. The

genre obliged pupils to produce good modern English: simple, clear, concise.

And then I went to Swansea so that finally we could meet up. Alison Howells, their teacher, was positive throughout. “It was great to see the children realising that writers are normal people,” she said, “living in the same world as them with deadlines and people to answer to, just like them.”

The Adopt an Author scheme, funded by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta) offers many of the benefits of a writer in residence at a fraction of the cost. The pupils looked at writing fiction and non-fiction in depth but they also made use of technology and came to understand the need for planning all academic work. The exercise also reinforced the confidence of a group of youngsters whose self-image can at times be less than positive.

Stewart Ross is chairman of the educational writers group of the Society of Authors. His *The Middle East Since 1945* has just been published by Hodder Arnold. *Pirates, Plants and Plunder* (Random House/Eden Project) is due out in spring 2005. Contact him at messages@stewartross.com



Roman roads to writing: a pupil's detailed description (top); a child and a professional illustrator confront the issue of slavery (right)



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what is now called Network 13 is a discussion on “what does Room 13 mean to you?” In two weeks alone, there were 60 messages. Partnering with Hareclive has been successful because the two schools, although hundreds of miles apart, have similarities. Like Caol, Hareclive is on a large estate in a disadvantaged area.

Exporting the concept to Kathmandu won't have quite the same echoes for either side, but already there is a great deal of goodwill and the desire to share ideas and practical applications. The idea is no stranger to Nepal. Through Rob's long-standing associations with the arts faculty at the University of Kathmandu, Room 13 children who have moved on to secondary school have been visiting the country for the past three years. The plan is to help the children at the orphanage, which caters for eight to 14-year-olds, to set up a similar art studio which they will run themselves.

It will be supervised by Parbati Pariyar, a craftswoman/street trader, who will come to Caol and train there next term, thanks to fundraising projects by the children. She will go back to Nepal for a couple of weeks with some former Caol Room 13 pupils now at Lochaber secondary who are still associated with the project. Parbati will establish the project at the orphanage and then take the methodology to local children's and youth clubs in Kathmandu.

Whether these offshoot Room 13s will follow the same trajectory as the original at Caol remains to be seen. Caol and its individual students have won Barbie Prizes for outstanding art and the attainment levels of the school have risen steadily as a result of greater collaboration between staff and more challenging and integrated work being introduced.

How to translate this to other schools and other cultural contexts is very much in the hands — and imaginations — of the children and the artists in residence working with them. The important thing is that it is fluid and constantly evolving.

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