

## **The power of pixels**

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Heather McLean discovers how ICT is able to give pupils at a special school a means of artistic expression.

Mere Oaks Special School in Wigan is taking the world of digital video and art by storm. Under the innovative guidance of Bob Overton, the upper school's arts co-ordinator, pupils at Mere Oaks have opened an ICT treasure box of artistic talents that many students were previously unable to express, due to their varied physical disabilities.

Over the past year, one student has showcased his digitally-created art at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and a short digital video film created by a class for the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency's (Becta) 2002 nationwide digital video pilot has attracted the attention of British Film Institute (BFI) members.

Digital video is crucial at Mere Oaks because, for the majority of pupils, communication and expression are not simple tasks. Many use computerised devices to speak and move. Putting one of these children in the end of term school play and asking them to say a simple line such as "Aye, aye, Captain!" is not possible.

Bob, who heads expressive arts, a combination of art and drama, explains:

"Some areas of the curriculum are almost out of bounds for many of the children. We've got a lot of kids with muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy. Most of them can't handle a saw or paintbrush. Because we have such a wide variety of different handicaps here, we have to have a wide variety of ways of communicating with each other."

Bob's imaginative use of digital video came into its own through Becta's recent national pilot for the medium, involving 50 schools. Mere Oaks' Year 7 entry - about a time-travelling spaceship - sparked the interest of Mark Reid, a teacher training officer at the BFI, which was invited to help evaluate the final short films.

Mark says: "Bob's entry was the best piece we saw by a long way. The kids at Mere Oaks showed a very subtle, off-the-wall sense of humour, which isn't what you'd expect from the average 14-year-old."

"Digital video almost customises ways of learning for individuals," Mark adds. "Its potential is to include kids that have a wider range of learning styles, and that goes double for a special school, where you need as many different ways to access the curriculum as possible."

One of the young actors in Mere Oak's Becta pilot film was Ian Anderson-Stuart, who played an alien. Ian has no physical functionality from the neck down. He drives around the school in a large wheelchair, steering with a computerised panel attached to his chin and equipped with his life support system. Even his voice is controlled by the rhythm of the breathing apparatus.

Bob says digital video enabled Ian to take control: "Ian can't perform live, but

this medium gives him access to performing because we can take and take again to get one clip.

"This film made Ian see himself as part of a team," Bob adds. "When he doesn't concentrate, his eyes wander to one side but as soon as the clapperboard clapped and he heard the word 'Action!', his eyes came straight to the camera and didn't waver. You wouldn't see effort like this unless you used the digital editing process."

Joe Major, a Year 11 student, is known as Bob's shadow. Before school and at every break time, Joe can be found waiting outside Bob's art room, itching to get his hands on the interactive whiteboard inside.

Bob says: "Joe has cerebral palsy. He has limited fine motor control, which makes it very difficult for him to paint using traditional methods - his muscular spasms make it very haphazard. For Joe, it's not learning which is his disability, it's his access to learning."

The interactive whiteboard enables Joe to make art of such a high and individual standard, that it has been compared with Andy Warhol's. He has been to London to showcase his digital photography art at the V&A, as part of the DfES's museums and galleries education programme.

Joe takes digital pictures of other students and loads these stills into the computer, which is connected to the interactive whiteboard. On the whiteboard, Joe has the space to paint over the pictures, using them as his template. Using a pointing stick and his hands, he can manipulate the original picture, paint using bright blocks of contrasting colours or express himself with fine swirling brushwork that gives his self-portraits a resemblance to Van Gogh's.

Bob says: "Twelve months ago, before we got the interactive whiteboard, art as such was not an option for Joe, but now he can paint. The art software has given him the opportunity to engage in a really creative form."

Mark praises Bob's use of the whiteboard: "I've never seen an interactive whiteboard used interactively before. They're always used as a teaching device, not as a learning device."

"He has made brilliant pieces of art work," Bob enthuses about the blushing Joe, who is perched protectively over his art folder. "He's become so motivated. He struggles to access learning generally, but his art has added to his communication skills. When we took him to the V&A, his dad said he had never seen Joseph speak so much in his life. He's vociferous with this new impetus."

Jenny Cotton also has cerebral palsy. She has no fine motor control and limited major motor control, making it hard to command her movements, but she loves dancing to music. Bob used the digital video camera to film her dancing. Wearing a bright netting tutu over her uniform, Jenny was able to roll over from lying on her back and get into a kneeling position, pushing herself up with her head.

Bob framed her dance for her as, he says, "any responsible teacher would". He downloaded the film on to the computer and used the editing software to slow Jenny's sudden movements into a graceful flow. He then added music, Camille Saint-Saens's "The Dying Swan" from Carnival of the Animals. The result is

brehtaking and presents Jenny's efforts in a beautiful frame.

Mere Oaks headteacher Janice Leach applauds her staff: "Sometimes it's hard to find access routes for young people to be able to communicate in any way, shape or form. The strength of this school is the creativity of our staff in finding these access routes."

Bob's use of digital video to empower children with special needs continues to evolve. Currently, one Year 10 class is using the digital film and editing facilities to create a magazine TV show in Richard and Judy style, complete with cookery slots and adverts, which will take them a year to complete.

James Finch is one of the class participants. From critiquing TV clips in class, he has learned to view programmes as a director: "I criticise soaps mostly - I don't do it on purpose, though. I enjoy this class, especially the editing."

Bob has used his imagination to make the most of his ICT resources and unlock doors for pupils. Describing his methodology, he says: "This is all about using technology and what's in your head to get a child to express himself in whatever form of communication is necessary. The question is how to get that expression, in whatever form, out."