How can educators across Wales gain knowledge and confidence to use Minecraft: Education Edition to support learning across the curriculum?

Our school, Ysgol Llanrhaeadr Ym Mochnant, has been using Minecraft: Education Edition for a few years now. We use it in numerous lessons to develop a range of skills. We have seen so many benefits from using it in the classroom, and I especially enjoy seeing the engagement and enjoyment from the learners. We started out with a pilot project with Hwb, Wales's digital learning platform, in 2017. Since then momentum has grown and I was thrilled when the Welsh Government announced they were investing £1.2 million to give educators and 467,000 young people across Wales access to Office 365 and Minecraft: Education Edition. I was delighted that Wales was to become one of the first countries in the world to offer learners free access to these fantastic tools.

As we shared our experiences of using Minecraft: Education Edition with fellow educators, school clusters and across Wales, through platforms such as Twitter, we got engaged in many conversations about the use of Minecraft: Education Edition in the classroom. In these conversations, educators expressed concerns such as *'it's just a game'*, *'I don't have a clue how to use it'*, *'I'm not sure my head teacher would approve'* and some had quite strong views against *'gaming'* in the classroom. These conversations would often frustrate me, but I noticed that the recurring themes in these conversations were lack of knowledge and lack of confidence. When I started out using Minecraft: Education Edition I had neither the knowledge or the confidence, and I am definitely still developing both to this day. I'm still learning – the learners are my educators! Technology can be daunting for many people and I realised that myself, a person with an interest in tech, telling them to 'just have a go' would not be so helpful and they would need more guidance.

Therefore, I was very excited when our school was identified by Hwb to become a Hwb Minecraft Learning Centre (MLC) in 2019. This was part of the Welsh Government's latest project to help schools and colleges across the country use Minecraft: Education Edition effectively. I was extremely hopeful that educators across Wales could overcome two of the main problems we came across; opportunities to gain knowledge and develop confidence.

It was really exciting to host the MLC at our school in Llanrhaeadr. Having educators from the different areas around us visit the school was a really rewarding part of the journey and we were able to provide support and help them develop in a relaxed environment.

The training we were to provid, as an MLC, was to be delivered over two days, with a gap of approx. 5 weeks between the sessions to allow educators time to implement and reflect on the use of Minecraft: Education Edition within the classroom. We had three different cohorts to run the two-day training programme for.

Obviously, this didn't come without its problems. The first issue that arose for us was location to deliver the training. The only large rooms we had in our school were the classrooms, but we didn't want to disrupt the pupils' learning. We decided to use our school hall, which meant some planning around lunch time and providing necessary equipment such as a large screen and extension cables for devices in order to facilitate the Minecraft: Education Edition workshops.

The feedback we received from the first day of the training was encouraging. Many educators noting the training was informative, enjoyed collaborating and having hands on time. The only issue raised in the feedback was that there was *'a lot to take in'*.

Following the second day of training I compared the feedback from the delegates that mentioned the above concern. I was pleased to see that their feedback following the full two days of training was very positive indeed and they felt much more confident, having had time to have a go using Minecraft Education Edition with their learners in-between the training workshops.

In March 2020, we had to overcome an even bigger hurdle, the Covid-19 pandemic. Day 2 of Cohort 2's training was scheduled for 17th March. Due to the ongoing developments of the virus at that time we decided to postpone. As the world dramatically changed, our way of teaching changed, and we had to consider delivering the training in a very different way to that was originally planned.

We delivered the rest of the planned training days through Microsoft Teams. This was very daunting to me. What I really enjoyed and found to be beneficial during the pre Covid19 sessions was the interaction and the hands-on experimental aspect of the training. I was anxious that educators would miss out on these elements during the online sessions, aspects I believe are key to developing knowledge and confidence.

Through excellent leadership from Sarah Snowdon, the project's lead, we were able to deliver the training in what I believe was an effective way. We followed a similar structure to the face-to-face training, ensured there was plenty of time for hands on experiences and a variety in voices heard presenting. It was very strange during the 'offline time' where delegates had opportunities to have a go and we were on hand to answer any questions. It was frustrating to not be able to be there with the ones who were having difficulties but the screen sharing feature in Teams was a big help with this aspect. I was pleased with the positive feedback we received from our online delivery. Many noting it was useful, informative and well-delivered. A delegate noted that she was feeling apprehensive beforehand, as it was online, *'but course leaders made it very easy to follow and were very supportive.'*

One of the things I missed about school life during lockdown was using Minecraft: Education Edition with my own learners. When I found out I could host a world from my home and have learners collaborate from their homes, I was overjoyed. Over the period of the lockdown, myself and the acting head teacher, Mr Jonathan Richards, set distance learning Minecraft: Education Edition tasks for our learners. We had them collaborating on zoos, gardens, rockets and more! We found that engagement was one of the big concerns with distance learning, but we saw many more pupils engaging with these tasks and with the research and planning that it encompassed. We also heard from parents who gained more understanding of Minecraft: Education Edition and how we are using it in our school.

In addition to the training workshops we delivered webinars explaining how Minecraft: Education Edition could be used to design learning experiences to support distance learning. I shared how to use education features, how to plan and design an activity, how to set-up a world and how to share worlds with students. I really enjoyed presenting this task with colleagues and sharing the lesson plans and the world we created. I was thrilled with the feedback we received, and I believe these webinars have provided useful information and improved educators' knowledge of how to use Minecraft: Education Edition in their classrooms - *'I didn't realise how useful Minecraft could be and the scope for its use in the classroom. This has been hugely beneficial!'* Educators were grateful for the guidance and the support networks that are in place. They were impressed that they could have access to the world we created. Some realised you don't have to reinvent the wheel when designing a task – *'it was nice to see that your world doesn't have to be overly complicated, this makes it less daunting to start!'*

What this project has taught me is that if educators have the right mindset, guidance and support they will be able to use Minecraft: Education Edition to support learning in a range of contexts. The feedback from the training has shown that time to experiment and have a go with pupils has a positive impact on educators' confidence. The feedback from the webinars has shown that educators have a greater understanding of its use in the classroom. Distance learning has been a learning curve for us all, but I am hopeful that mindsets of learners, educators and parents towards technology will develop for the better. With greater knowledge and improved confidence, educators in Wales can use Minecraft: Education Edition across the curriculum in exciting, creative and innovative ways.

Manon Watkins

Foundation Phase Class Teacher - Ysgol Gynradd Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant

I would like to add: I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience and feel very privileged to have been a part of it all. Working with Sarah Snowdon, the project lead, and all the other MLCs team has been a pleasure and we have been able to meet some really lovely people along the way. To host the MLC in our school in Llanrhaeadr was a real highlight for me and by having people into the school and showing the work we have done we have been able to promote the school in a very positive way.

My confidence using Minecraft: Education Edition has a grown significantly as we have gone along. I started with zero knowledge of Minecraft: Education Edition 18 months ago and feel that I have learnt a great deal about how a tool such as Minecraft: Education Edition can be used effectively in the classroom and I look forward to using it more in the future.

I am very proud of Manon. She will tell you that she is not a confident person but to see how she has flourished during the past 12 months, travelling around and presenting to so many different people has been rewarding to witness. It has given her a great opportunity to overcome her worries about speaking in front of people and the skills she has developed will help her a great deal in the future. She has led the school brilliantly on this and has worked tremendously hard the whole way. She has an experience that she can be very proud of under her belt.

A lot of Manon's growth is down to the support from Sarah Snowdon. Sarah has been an excellent mentor to Manon and myself and I can't thank her enough for her support along the way. Furthermore, I would like to thank Hwb and the Minecraft: Education Edition team for allowing Ysgol Gynradd Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant to be a part of what has been a very enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Diolch yn fawr iawn!

Jonathan Richards

Acting Head Teacher - Ysgol Gynradd Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant