

How do you turn a Minecraft cynic into a Minecraft Global Mentor?

In the Summer Term of 2019, Eln Rhanbarth ar Waith (ERW) Wales launched a Minecraft: Education Edition competition, inviting learners to manufacture a futuristic school! I understood our learners loved Minecraft and the competitive edge in me was drawn to the competition element of the challenge. I gathered the interested learners into my classroom (40% of the KS2 cohort!) and explained the challenge to them, with the caveat that I had no knowledge of Minecraft whatsoever and would not be able to help them with any aspect of the build. Over a number of weeks, the various groups built some impressive and remarkable creations during their break times and we eventually chose a winning group to present to other schools across Wales via Microsoft Teams. The quality and thought that went into the children's designs really impressed me! However, I still didn't really understand how I could use, or crucially, justify using Minecraft: Education Edition in a class setting, particularly when thinking about making it meaningful to our curriculum.

ERW called a few weeks later to tell us that they had nominated Pontlliw Primary School to Welsh Government to become a Hwb Minecraft Learning Centre and roll the programme out to schools across South West Wales. A famous Richard Branson quote instantly came into my mind – "If somebody offers you an amazing opportunity but you are not sure you can do it, say yes – then learn how to do it later!" The Headteacher decided our Reception teacher, Catrin, was to accompany me on the Minecraft journey and we set off on our exploration!

The first stage was to complete a vigorous online training course to help us understand the game and more importantly how to play it. We hated it! It was not like anything we had encountered before, and we really struggled to get to grips with the idea of it all- it felt like learning a new language! We completed the course but were not convinced. At this point, the prospect of having to confidently and effectively train other educators in a couple of months felt extremely daunting.

Nervously, we set off to Cardiff to not only learn what Minecraft: Education Edition really was, but also to show other educators how to use it. As an introduction to the two-day course, we were informed that Welsh Government invested £1.2 million to give educators and nearly half a million young people across Wales access to Office 365 and Minecraft: Education Edition via the country's Hwb digital learning platform. Now educators needed guidance and support on how to use Minecraft: Education Edition to teach subjects such as Science, Mathematics, History, Coding and enrich the new curriculum for Wales. With only 5 years of teaching experience between us, we thought *'Richard Branson had better be right!'*

Day one in Cardiff sat in the Train the Trainer workshop, our early attempts at getting to grips with the game were stuttered at best, *how were we ever going to be able to teach others to implement Minecraft: Education Edition in their classroom if we were novices ourselves?* However, as the day went on, we both became more fluent with the game and actually started to enjoy the building process. We left Day one, far more confident about our understanding of the game, however we were still sceptical about how we could 'shoehorn' this into to our current curriculum. Then came day two...

We were given the challenge to recreate a scene from our favourite childhood novel. The rest, as they say, is history! We were hooked! I chose the caravan from Danny the Champion of the World and Catrin chose Hogwarts from Harry Potter. There was complete silence in the room for over 45 minutes as everybody eagerly set about to create a 'masterpiece'. After being prised away from our laptops, Sarah, the trainer explained that we had completed a book review – our own take of a setting from the text we had read! *Were our builds 'masterpieces'?* Absolutely not! However, we soon realised this was not important and that rather the process behind the build, and the opportunities to write setting descriptions or indeed a book review, made for fantastic learning opportunities. We were sold! Across the rest of the day, we were shown how the platform could not only be used in lessons but also greatly enhance each Area of Learning and Experience across the new curriculum for Wales. The transformation was complete – we were enthused and confident to roll out Minecraft Education Edition to our school and subsequently schools across South West Wales.

We incorporated some Minecraft: Education Edition builds into our scheme for Autumn Term to test how the learners reacted in a more disciplined class situation. We also had the benefit of trialling on two contrasting age groups – Reception and Year 5. The reaction from the learners in both classes was unprecedented and the excitement levels were at fever pitch. We explained that Minecraft: Education Edition would be the culmination of our work so we can put our learning into practice, and this enthused them during the various lessons we provided throughout the scheme. Needless to say, the Minecraft: Education Edition build phase of the scheme saw the highest engagement – with wonderful discussions between the learners about ideas they had of how to overcome the problems they faced during the build.

The final part of our journey was to hold three, two-day training courses across the year for up to 90 fellow professionals. This was to be the most daunting as we understood that others may be as sceptical as we had been, prior to the course in Cardiff. *Could we convince them that this programme was beneficial in the same way we were?* We had a fantastic uptake for all three training sessions. The first of the Hwb Minecraft Learning Centre across Wales to have all 90 delegate spaces booked for the year filled! We started Day One in Pontlliw Primary but quickly realised that space was an issue, therefore moved to an external venue for the remainder of the courses.

We were extremely pleased with the feedback that we received from the course attendees and were delighted that we managed to pass on our newfound enthusiasm for this superb platform. Some highlight comments from the delegates were:

- *"Thank you for a very informative day - as a complete novice I have a lot to learn but I've been given confidence today that the children will be able to develop my skills and there is a professional learning community to support me! I look forward to experimenting more!"*
- *"In regard to classroom practice, it was one of the most useful courses I have been on for about 10 years."*
- *"Great course. I'm completely new to Minecraft and I left feeling empowered to have a go with my learners. My concern was how it would link to the curriculum, but it really does. Thank you."*

The Summer Term training session had to be completed via Microsoft Teams due to the Covid-19 outbreak. This brought its own challenges as we realised it would be much more difficult to help people who were stuck, remotely. Whilst there were some initial issues with people accessing the relevant areas in Minecraft: Education Edition, we were pleased to see that everyone that attended played a full part in the course and again, gained confidence and understanding from our training. Once again, we were delighted that the feedback we received:

- *"Excellent delivery despite the change to distance training. A fantastic resource to enhance rich tasks and consolidate learning in a fun, engaging way. Can't wait to get started!"*
- *"In the current environment, I thought the speakers did an amazing job. It was fascinating and I can see how much the children will enjoy learning through Minecraft."*
- *"I'd just like to once again thank everyone involved for delivering such an effective day of training in challenging circumstances. It was incredibly informative and all three responded quickly to any queries or issues raised."*

One of the most pleasing things to have received feedback on was the engagement and participation of children with Special Educational Needs when using the Minecraft: Education Edition programme. We witnessed this in our own school setting when a child with Autism who does not engage with any area of exposure to others, including recognition in assembly, spoke confidently and enthusiastically for over an hour to different sets of parents in an after school ICT showcase presentation about the use of Minecraft: Education Edition in class.

So how do you turn a Minecraft cynic into a Minecraft Global mentor? Let the platform speak for itself. From one simple task of creating a setting from our favourite book, our imaginations were captured, and we have never looked back!



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