

Minecraft: Education Edition - Our Journey (Ein Taith)

Here in Wales we are very fortunate to have access to the Hwb digital platform, which gives us access to so many different teaching and learning resources without cost to the school or learners. Welsh Government invested £1.2 million to provide educators and 467,000 young people access to Office 365 and Minecraft: Education Edition via the Hwb national digital platform for Wales. In order to harness this potential, educators needed guidance and support on how to use these amazing tools to enhance the learning experiences for learners in the classroom.

Risca Comprehensive School was approached by the Hwb team to take part in a training program to create a group of Hwb Minecraft Learning Centres across Wales. The Head teacher asked us to be involved, we were obviously very excited about the idea and the excellent opportunity for professional learning. My name is Coran, I'm a newly qualified teacher of ICT and Computer Science. My colleagues name is Barri, he is the Lead Teacher of Welsh. We are both full time educators at Risca Community Comprehensive School, with a passion for technology and how it can be used in the classroom to enhance teaching and learning experiences.

As intrigued as we were, we did have our reservations. Both of us being Welsh speakers, we were intrigued as to how Minecraft: Education Edition could help us develop the new curriculum for Wales and the Welsh Dimension in particular. We attended the Train the Trainer workshop in Cardiff, both nervous and excited to begin this journey. Barri was sceptical about how this might work in an educational setting and was cautious as experience has taught him to be critical of new approaches and ensure that learning is at the heart of using any technology in class. I had just started my role as an educator in the school, and was worried that I may be overwhelmed, the classic new job worries – Can I do this?

Clwb Minecraft Rhisga (Risca Minecraft Club)

We began our Minecraft: Education Edition journey by setting up an after-school enrichment club – **Clwb Minecraft Rhisga** (#RCCSCLwbMinecraft). As the school bell rang at 3:15, we were pleasantly surprised to see a good number of learners at the door! They ranged from year 7 to year 9 and were a mix of boys and girls. We were initially quite surprised, but it was important for us to remember that the learners are the experts and they were always going to know more than us. We set them their first build challenge, **Gardd Cymru (Garden of Wales)**. We wanted to know what Wales looked like to them. What does being Welsh mean to them! They took the lead and divided themselves into groups, and straight away you could see the ideas, creativity and knowledge burst out them! We had learners naturally stepping into the team manager roles, researchers and builders etc. We stood back and watched their ideas come to life through Minecraft: Education Edition, it was clear they were fully engaged in creating and exploring their thinking.

It wasn't until the following week that we realised just how powerful this educational tool was. Whilst sitting in my classroom at break time, there was a knock at the door. It was a learner from the club who is usually very quiet and reserved. *"Miss, do you mind if I take some pictures of your classroom?"* Initially I was a little confused until he explained he was conducting research for his **Gardd Cymru** build. They had decided independently to recreate their school in Minecraft: Education Edition and were researching!

Minecraft: Education Edition in the classroom

A turning point for us as educators was when we implemented the use of a commercial produced Minecraft: Education Edition adventure challenge. The resource was all about refugees, and rather than showing learners videos and articles about the topic, through Minecraft: Education Edition they were able to live the life of a refugee. As they explored the world (excited by the fact that we had allowed them to change the settings to "Survival" mode) we could see them attempt each task with caution – they were instantly immersed in the world and the issues faced by refugees. The learners were asked to make decisions that their (Minecraft characters') life depended on. From boarding tiny boats in the hope, they would arrive in a safer country to trading their treasured belongings for food to survive. These decisions



added to the experience and really helped them to see things in the real world from a different perspective. When discussing with the learners how they found the experience, one learner expressed how she instantly felt like she was a refugee, and that it was a real-life experience including the stresses and consequences of decisions. She even exclaimed, *“Ah, now I know why it’s called Minecraft **EDUCATION** Edition!”*

As a school we have now created a new group to Digital Leaders – Risca Minecraft Digital Leaders. We have witnessed first-hand how Minecraft: Education Edition not only engages learners in tasks and lessons, but it has encouraged learners to showcase their ideas, and even becoming more vocal in exploring their thinking. We awarded two learners with the first ‘Minecraft Digital Leader Badges’, because in the short time we had been using the tool within the classroom, we witnessed them grow in confidence whilst improving their literacy and numeracy skills in a different way.

Sometimes staying after school can be the last thing you want to do after you’ve had a tough day teaching, but Clwb Minecraft really does have the power to lift your spirits and unlock creativity. We are constantly learning new things from our learners, and we have found ourselves sitting for hours after the sessions, reflecting on the thoughts and amazing ideas of the learners and the huge potential for enhancing learning experiences. We have always focused on educational goals regardless of the club being run after school. This has not put the learners off in any way and we now have year 10 pupils attending the club to work on their coding skills, with the help of the Code Builder feature, and developing new strands of the Digital Competency Framework such as computational thinking.

Educator Training sessions and feedback

Perhaps the most daunting part of our journey has been hosting the two-day training sessions for our fellow educational professionals. As mentioned previously, we as educators were sceptical about using Minecraft: Education Edition to begin with and we worried we’d have to convince them that they would benefit from this.

The uptake for all three training sessions has been brilliant with participants from both primary and secondary schools attending. It was great to have a mix from complete beginners to those who had started using it in the classroom. As with any technological events that take place, they have their issues. We as a school do not have a public WIFI resource, so we were very reliant on the local educational authority to ensure it was switched on ready for the event. As the sessions went on, we became more prepared and confident to address anything that could go wrong, so we were able to plan for these situations. We have been really pleased with how the training sessions have gone, and have received some great feedback:

- *“I have a selective mute pupil who will talk during Minecraft Club”*
- *“A well paced and informative day, which has helped to improve my knowledge and confidence in using Minecraft Education.”*
- *“Loved every second. So informative and gave us time to explore and play which massively helped understanding. We were all able to ask questions throughout.”*

Training during lockdown

As the Summer term began, we conducted our training sessions via Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19. We found ourselves in a completely different situation now, and realised it would be difficult to help the participants as we moved onto the “hands on” part of the workshop. Despite our concerns the training went ahead without too many glitches, and we received fantastic feedback:

- *“Thank you. I’m inspired to use Minecraft Education as soon as possible!”*
- *I do have a greater understanding of Minecraft and have been encouraged by the excellent trainers to “play with it” which I will do. I can see loads of potential for my work with schools here.”*

- *“Course providers co-operated very well together considering the circumstances. Very well organised, no-one panicked when the lagging happened. Adapted well to these new circumstances, nice to see examples and listen to previous experiences with the world you have participated in with learners. Valuable information shared, enthusiastic to set up a Minecraft club when school returns.”*

Conclusion

We have had the opportunity to develop relationships with both learners and educators. Through the workshops we have had the pleasure of working alongside James Protheroe, MLC Project Support, who has played an important role in our Minecraft: Educational Edition journey.



Coran Jones

Teacher of ICT and Computer Science – Risca Comprehensive School

“As stated previously, this has been my newly qualified year, and having the opportunity to use Minecraft: Education Edition as a tool has changed the way I have approached so many topics within the curriculum. My form class has discussed topics such as wellbeing and mindfulness whilst using Minecraft: Education Edition, an environment they’re so familiar with. Minecraft: Education Edition has allowed us to collaborate with educators from different schools and countries – educators that we can now proudly call friends. Being able to work alongside each other to train others, create schemes of work, we have now officially become a double act!”



Barri Mock

Lead Teacher of Welsh - Risca Comprehensive School

“Our journey has been very enlightening, and I’ve moved from being very sceptical to being super passionate about the huge potential that Minecraft: Education Edition offers in terms of providing quality educational experiences for learning. Through taking part in this project and pursuing additional training opportunities, I am convinced that Minecraft: Education Edition is a powerful tool for all ages and many subject and cross-curricular themes can be addressed in an engaging and powerful way. I have become part of the Minecraft: Education Edition community and enjoy sharing this passion through creating lessons, blogging and building a community to share resources within Wales and globally and I’m only just beginning.”