PURPOSEFUL PLAY – EDUCATING WITH MINECRAFT

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Teachers read Dewey, Montessori, Piaget, Bruner, and Vygotsky, and we know that play is the work of children. Even so, it can feel hard to trust that real learning occurs during play. Given the chance, our students will invent and inquire all day long. They have no shortage of ideas. We do, however, have a shortage of minutes in school to dedicate to play.

When we find those minutes and follow our students' natural tendencies to play together in Minecraft: Education Edition, the experience is reliably successful. Students come up with a wide variety of questions to ask and engaging problems to solve in purposeful play. Their answers and their work are inventive; they demonstrate ingenuity and creative strengths. The class time together feels like "hard fun," a balance of pushing the mind and learning in context, while staying entertained.

With a random spin of the wheel, the students drop into a new Minecraft world together. That snowy mountain top, that desert plain, that forest nook, that ocean cave: something grabs their attention, and they form natural, small groups to go explore and build. These groups easily change membership as the collaborative chatter in the classroom grows and students ask one another for help.

Students' intuitions guide them to find attractive geo-locations, and from there, they imagine and invent together. When given the freedom to discover and compose this way, students seem most creative and engaged, and a story emerges. Their story. From there, meaning is built, and work begins. It's a story in motion, a story in progress. A story they can make, walk around in, and change. Through that process, they have opportunities to learn lessons from all the subject areas. On their own, at relevant moments, students ask the questions and teachers can facilitate learning with ongoing guidance, information, lessons, and questions of their own.

Students and *Teacher:*

Students: How about a city right here?

Teacher: *Why?*

Students: Because it is near the water and the mountains. We can have a fishing dock for food and cabins up in the hills. Down here on the flat land we can have our streets and buildings.

Teacher: *How will we power the buildings? We need lights at night in the city.*

Students: We also need to run our machines during the day. Let's make an electric company. How do we do that?

Teacher: *Can we use redstone?*

Students: I don't know how to use redstone. Can we make a main building for electricity and run wires to all the buildings in the city?

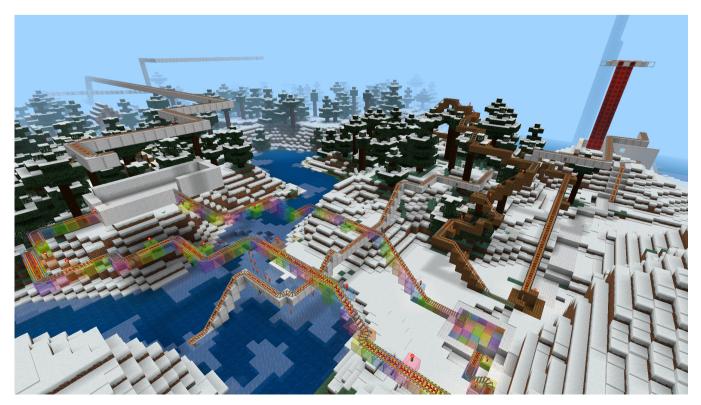Teacher: *We can learn how to use redstone and connect all the buildings.*

Students: How do we make it so you can turn lights on and off at each building?

Teacher: *How about each floor? Each room?*

Students: Yeah, that too. Oh, and food. I'm getting hungry. We need food. We need to work on collecting fish for dinner.

Teacher: *How do we transport the fish from the dock to the restaurants?*

Students: How do we keep the fish population alive and not eat all of them?

Kids have tons of questions like these. They happen quickly. And just as they ask them, they start to work on solving them with their collective mind power. These worthwhile inquiries serve as pathways to learning and instruction inside of Minecraft: Education Edition as well as outside the game. Students and teachers enter a dialogue and co-construct the class curriculum.

We can celebrate this diversity of thought in the classroom, engage students in critical thinking and creativity, and center our work on the students themselves. When students authentically work together within Minecraft: Education Edition, and teachers sit down in that sandbox with them and engage in a dialogue about that play, we can rebuild learning.

DR. BRYAN P. SANDERS

https://about.me/nayrbgo

https://education.minecraft.net/en-us/user/bryan-sanders2

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