

Western Isles – Making Maths Count

The Western Isles has licensed Alta Maths for Schools for all the schools in their Authority. In this interview Alasdair Graham, Quality Improvement Officer, Eilean Siar (Western Isles) Education Authority explains their decision.

The Western Isles presents a number of particular challenges – scattered population, small schools, competition for scarce resources – but what it does not lack is committed teachers prepared to push new boundaries for their pupils.

With Alta maths for Schools it was not just the appropriateness, the “user-friendliness” and the manageability of the system which teachers and pupils found engaging– **it was the information the system provided** – information that both teacher and pupil could use to reflect on what had been learnt, what was still a difficulty and why. In addition, the teachers were able to use the class records to evaluate the success and style of their own teaching as well as identifying individuals or groups who continued to have difficulties.

What teachers have noticed is that pupils are motivated to learn from their mistakes - they go back to the assessment task, replay the items they got wrong and look at the model response provided by the computer. Sometimes on their own or with another pupil, most often with the teacher, they discuss what they have done, where they went wrong and why and, most importantly, how to fix it. Frequently, acting on their new understanding, they will go back into the system and set themselves new “tests” to see whether they have indeed mastered the concept. They can work at their own pace and level. One teacher commented on the big “YES!” that comes with such success.

All the information provided up-skills the teacher in planning, reflecting, communicating with pupils and parents and improving practice. Good quality information makes for good decisions by teachers and pupils.

While there is no doubt that the teachers like the system, they find it manageable and user-friendly – their main complaint is that they do not have enough time to make full use of system - but what about the pupils? In a survey, we asked over a hundred pupils what they thought. The feedback was very positive – they found it easy and enjoyable to use; they liked the way questions were asked onscreen and the opportunities to do practice assessments, the replay facility and the model answers. However some pupils did not like timed mental maths questions. They found the ticking of the clock a big distraction and a major source of anxiety!

Teachers have observed that their pupils are more engaged, more attentive to what they were being asked to do, more motivated to progress and become more autonomous learners. Some pupils, having watched their teachers use items as teaching aids, use the practice area as a means of learning – they try an item or concept they have not yet met in class and if they get it wrong use the model answer in the replay facility to see what they should have done.

All in all we think that it doesn't just tick the boxes of the Assessment is for Learning and of a Curriculum for Excellence agenda but that it actually delivers. It is an informative assessment system that does support learning and the pupils find it engaging, motivating and enjoyable.