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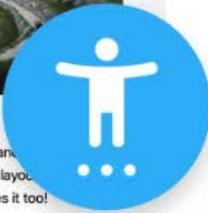


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Understanding how one large council is encouraging its schools to harness technology in a unique way – by using the innovative software tool, 'ThingLink'



The background

"Innovation Innovation Innovation". Not the misquoted words of a former Prime Minister, but a phrase you could imagine being spoken within the Education Resources Team at South Lanarkshire Council. Representing one of the largest and most diverse areas of Scotland, South Lanarkshire is at the heart of Scotland's economic powerhouse, with a broad mix of urban and rural communities stretching from central Glasgow to (almost) the Scottish borders. Supporting a population of over 320,000 people, including 68,000 children and young people under the age of 18, with 124 primary, 17 secondary and 7 additional support needs schools.

Given the region's long-established reputation for entrepreneurship – pioneering the industrial revolution via coal, steel manufacturing and heavy engineering – it is no surprise that its attitudes to the use of technology within education are equally innovative and ground-breaking.

For these reasons, South Lanarkshire Council is one of the more advanced local authorities when it comes to the use of technology in their schools. With a small – but dedicated – central team, they work with their schools to identify ways that technology can help them in their goals.



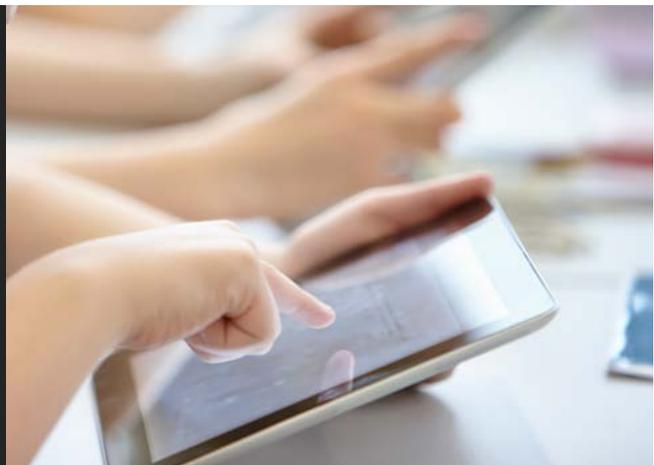
Since 1998, RM – the leading education technology company – has been supporting the council and all of their schools on this digital journey. As a purpose-driven organisation, fostered on enriching the lives of learners, RM's mission (within its Technology division) is to "help educators harness technology to improve the learning environment". Against this background, RM has been supporting the council in its adoption of the software product, ThingLink, seeing it is a catalyst to a greater role for technology in ways to enhance how our children engage and learn.

The technology vision

Most schools in South Lanarkshire recognise the value that technology can bring – almost all staff have a laptop that can connect to some form of audio-visual device in each classroom, which they can use to share information with students, showing them how computers can support them in developing the skills they need to be technologically able. All schools having a provision of Chromebooks and many choosing to invest further to increase numbers in their schools, with Learning Support generally done with these devices to access specific software that aids their development.

"We had a vested interest in technology pre-pandemic – pushing our children, parents and staff to embrace it – via all the necessary tools and dedicated CPD. Post-COVID we are seeing much of that continuing, with plans to do more".

Allan Campbell, Principal Teacher of Pupil Support,
Lanark Grammar School



But what holds many schools back is simply knowing the "art of the possible". With technology advancing at the speed it does, having a partner – such as RM – that is close to these innovations – as well as seeing best practice from other education establishments – can bridge this gap.

“At South Lanarkshire we try to ensure that staff and learners in our schools have access to the most up to date, most relevant and innovative digital tools that we can provide to enhance their high quality learning and teaching”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council

Sometimes it is a seismic shift that is needed to establish a new way of looking at things, and the single biggest catalyst for change came with the pandemic, with – like most organisations – the schools in South Lanarkshire having to evolve almost overnight:

“The pandemic was a steep learning curve for everyone. We already used technology to support teaching and learning in the classroom but when Covid hit, everything had to be delivered online, which quickly made us more aware of the excellent learning resources that were available to support our learners”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

ThingLink

Against this backdrop, there is an acceptance that everyone learns in different ways. Some pupils believe video driven content is a way of life for them – where results are instantaneous, and where they do not need too much guesswork to get what they need. This is an interesting perspective providing an insight into how some young people think and a pointer to what we need to do to engage with this generation.

South Lanarkshire Council first came across ThingLink in 2015. Best described as a tool that can bring to life things that start off very static – such as a slide or a document – very quickly making them come alive with the introduction of pulsing icons, videos, forms, quizzes, spreadsheets or pieces of coding. Put another way, it can turn something quite dull into something engaging and interactive, and hence appeal to an audience with a short attention span. The team at South Lanarkshire quickly saw how this could be brought it into their educational resources portfolio.



ThingLink is an unusual name for a product, but one that once said is never forgotten. Interestingly, users find it hard to describe what it is in just a few words:

“It’s an interactive board that you can populate with text, images, sound, videos, external links and gather feedback via surveys. It’s a one-stop shop for sharing information. I first thought it would be great as an interactive classroom, but the more I used it, the more I realised how versatile it could be”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

As well as the use cases, the way it is used makes it a winner:

“It is easy to navigate. There aren’t many buttons to get the hang of. Adding text, videos, sound and weblinks are quick and easy to load”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School



It was this sort of feedback that got the team at the council excited about the potential:

“Above everything else, ThingLink is very intuitive to use for the first time. Staff are busy and they need to be able to pick things up and run with quickly”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council

In a very short space of time, teachers were showing powerful results and outcomes...

“Creativity is so important in education – to help develop thinking and problem-solving skills in children, and the reason I think this has taken off so quickly is that ThingLink is rooted in creativity”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council



...that were repeated time and again across the region...

“This is another tool in a teacher’s toolbox to engage learners when other approaches have not had the desired effect. Words on a page can be challenging for some students, but a video can change their whole perspective. We have many Ukrainians joining our schools – translation is built into this tool’s core”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council

...with positive feedback from those who were embracing it:

“We have many pupils with Additional Support Needs and we were keen to use technology as a way to be accessible and to make our offer as attractive as possible to all pupils. Technology undoubtedly makes education more engaging”.

Aline Wilson, Deputy Head Teacher, Lanark Grammar School

Part of the success appears to be with the product itself. Quite often new technology can come with a challenging training period and/or the need for a support mechanism for people who are using it the first time. That does not appear to be the case with ThingLink:

“We just send out a ThingLink code to our teaching staff, and off they go. I don’t get many enquiries about how to use it – and that is the ultimate proof of how easy it is to use”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council



Use cases

Because of the versatility of the product, it is no surprise that every school has found a different way to use it, with ever more creative ways to do things that in the past may have proved less engaging:

From a virtual tour for transition...

“When COVID hit, we were unable to offer transition visits for Primary Year 7s to come to see our school, so we created a ThingLink to provide a virtual 360° tour – for children and their parents to go to the website and click on the different icons to take them around the school, finding out what a classroom and a canteen looks like, whilst ‘meeting’ different teachers via video messages who would pop up as they went around the school. Post pandemic we are continuing this”.

Allan Campbell, Principal Teacher of Pupil Support, Lanark Grammar School

...especially those with additional support needs...

“I created a visual map of the school as children with additional support needs often struggle with transition (Early Years to Primary and from Primary to Secondary). We did interviews with dinner ladies, with janitors, support staff, headteachers, so that children could click on the map at any time – during the holidays or before school – just to accustom themselves for what they were about to encounter”.

Caroline Rice, Specialist Support Teacher, Hamilton Area

...to a more engaging way to study, for younger children...

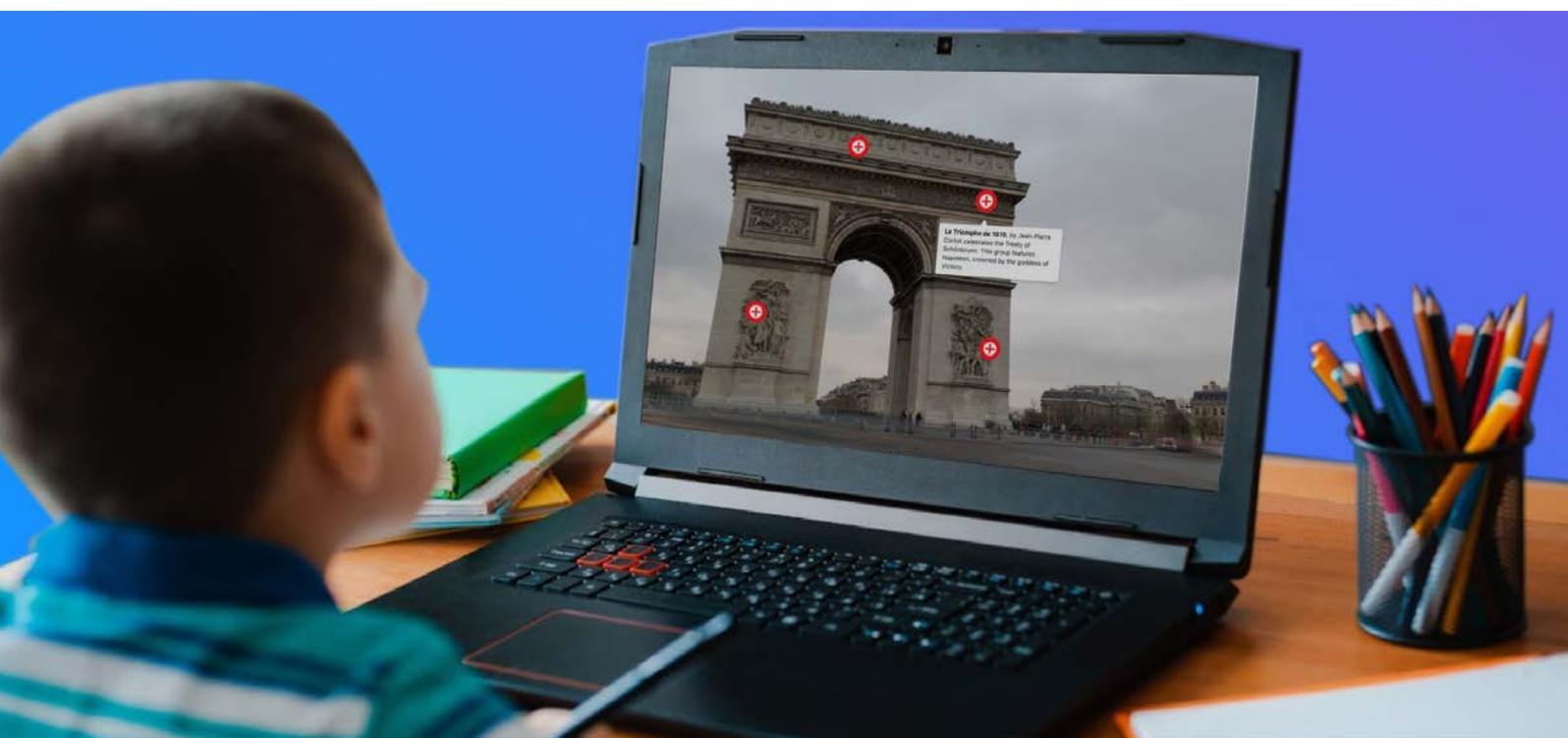
“Whilst not one of our schools, but I saw someone using ThingLink to film their cat, and through the augmented reality tool, made its mouth move to the teacher speaking, to share lessons with her really young children – they clicked on the link, clicked on the image of the cat, and it would tell them what to do that day. Not surprisingly the children want to see the cat each day, and you have repeat engagement. This is a brilliant example by a very creative teacher”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council

...and older too...

“We have a theme of detectives, encouraging pupils to explore the site – with magnifying glass icons and clues to keep them interested whilst imparting key knowledge”.

Aline Wilson, Deputy Head Teacher, Lanark Grammar School





...by using technology to make even the mundane more enticing...

“During the pandemic I used ThingLink to create a virtual classroom to engage the children by making it more appealing whilst they were learning at home. I knew that what I sent out was something they would want to see – it wasn’t a dull list of things to do in a Google Classroom assignment list – but I used icons for the different pieces of work. That’s what’s clever about it – it doesn’t look like work”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

...with innovative alternatives to the tried and trusted approaches...

“The children were doing a project about Scotland, which they completed using PowerPoint. I was able to create a ThingLink to showcase their learning by using a map of Scotland as the backdrop with markers for each city to link interactively to each PowerPoint. It was a great way to share the learning with the whole class”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

...and reach out to those who may be struggling...

“I created ThingLinks for some learners who were struggling with learning at home. I would take a picture of their workbook page as the base, and then put markers on it that would take them to examples on YouTube of how to do it, or a video of me saying ‘Good morning boys and girls, today we are going to learn about...’ which made the whole thing much more engaging”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

...whilst aiding communication with colleagues...

“I have used ThingLink to communicate information to staff – I organised a COP26 learning project on ThingLink, with all the information staff needed in one place by clicking on different parts of the image – they could go back to re-read things or simply move around it – and I was able to collate all the information needed including documents, weblinks and videos to support learning”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

...and engaging parents too...

“I send a ThingLink home to parents each week sharing learning that has taken place that week in class and homework to support learning. I can add weblinks to support phonemes being taught and interactive games. I can also add links to Jamboards which I use with my learners to share and gather their ideas. I have created a Book Club Thinglink which is linked to the homework page which provides children with the opportunities to share stories, add to book reviews and complete written tasks. Thinglink allows me to track engagement and it has definitely improved as parents and children become more confident in using it”.

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

...whilst encouraging the take-up of certain things like reading...

“I created a ThingLink for a Book Club based on the author, with the ThingLink showing other books by that author and other activities they could do to make the book come alive for them”.

Caroline Rice, Specialist Support Teacher, Hamilton Area





...or for after school activities...

"I created a ThingLink for the Girl's Brigade – showing all the things that you can do in Girl's Brigade, and the fun you can have being part of it. This one is all driven by QR Codes, which shows just how versatile the software is".

Caroline Rice, Specialist Support Teacher, Hamilton Area

...that can replace standard leaflets...

"We were asked to produce a "Meet the Teacher" leaflet, but instead of writing it on an A4 piece of paper, I set up a ThingLink with a picture of our classroom and used Bitmoji to engage families to explore information about our class".

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

...school handbooks...

"We are planning to use ThingLink to replace our school handbook – as a one-stop shop for all the information anyone may need. This will work well as a lot of the things we want to show are not paper-based – they may be videos, photographs, images and web links".

Christine Gray, Class Teacher, Muiredge Primary School

...and even support career advice...

"A class teacher is using a ThingLink to show where their subject can lead them – i.e. PE to sport science or teaching. It can link to university website courses, video interviews with people in those professions and the like".

Allan Campbell, Principal Teacher of Pupil Support, Lanark Grammar School

...and replace important internal reports

“I am aware that some headteachers are even looking to present their School Improvement Plan in the form of a ThingLink – that shows both the versatility of the tool, but also its acceptance”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council

Building momentum

South Lanarkshire already has 250 teaching staff using ThingLink regularly – despite minimal promotion. Their ambitions are to extend it much further – ultimately with pupils using it too.

“When it comes to new technologies, sometimes we just like to launch them and watch them grow organically. In the case of ThingLink we ran an initial, optional webinar for staff, put a page on our staff learning centre, and we talked to ICT coordinators about it, but it has really grown by word of mouth”.

Karen MacLeod, Education Support Officer – Digital, South Lanarkshire Council

Sadly, not everyone is there yet. To date, most schools have relied on individual evangelists within their school to spread the message about ThingLink, which has rarely been a problem – as people have been quickly impressed by what it can do, becoming keen to find out more.

For South Lanarkshire, that initial momentum developed during lockdown, as it gave teachers the time to experiment. It also gave an immediate use case with the growing gaps in engagement with pupils and parents who were missing the day-to-day of attending class. Given how easy it is to use, and the immediate pay-back in adaptability, any school can easily follow in these steps, and the expansion now things are returning to normal post-pandemic is encouraging.



“Some teachers are historically reluctant to try new things – especially when it comes to technology. But when they see others using it – either via a demonstration or watching a video – they will quickly leap on board”.

Caroline Rice, Specialist Support Teacher, Hamilton Area

Most importantly it was getting schools to experiment and become more comfortable in the use of technology. A digitally enabled school is one that is preparing its students for the future.

Sharing best practice

1. **Just do it!** The possibilities are endless, and only limited by your own imagination. You can use it for numeracy, for literacy, for health and well-being, engaging parents and sharing information with staff. But trial and error is the way to go – you can't mess things up if you just experiment.
2. **Don't be scared – it is great fun** – learning new things can often be threatening – but this is the opposite – as soon as people get sight of the software – and what it can do – you can't stop them. Start small and let your imagination take you where you want to go.
3. **Find a champion** – like with most things, human nature is such that people get excited by what stimulates others, and want to find out more when someone is "banging the drum".
4. **Don't be scared to copy others** – there are so many use cases for this software, but there is no harm in seeing what others have done, and then adapting it for your own situation. Spend time looking around at how other schools have used it.
5. **Technology is the future.** Whether ThingLink is for you or not is not really the issue. What it does do – however – is demonstrate yet another example of how technology can make education more engaging, more collaboration and ultimately more effective.

The future

We will only fully prepare our children for this future if they are exposed to real world situations early. Nowhere is this more true than in respects to technology, and a school that encourages its students to practice their digital skills is definitely where the future lies. That means access to modern hardware devices, operating reliable connectivity and using intuitive software that allows them to do what they need in ever more efficient ways.



“Our job as educators is to put young people in a place where they can be successful in society. As educators, we need to be able to prepare them, and technology plays a huge role in that. There isn't a job these days that doesn't demand digital skills of some sort”.

Allan Campbell, Principal Teacher of Pupil Support, Lanark Grammar School

“I think technology is the gateway to learning. Some children will always struggle to read, but technology opens their eyes and removes barriers – it constantly challenges them and can support them every step of the way”.

Caroline Rice, Specialist Support Teacher, Hamilton Area

Find out more about how South Lanarkshire Council are using ThingLink

Email: Karen.MacLeod@southlanarkshire.gov.uk

Find out more about our services

Visit: rm.com/services

Email: supportservices@rm.com

Call: 01235 645 317