

## ***JISC RSC Scotland iTech Case Study @ The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formerly the RSAMD)***

### **Using e-Portfolios to create a learning community and to support assessment and reflective practice at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formerly the RSAMD)**

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#### **Summary**

Creating a learning community and supporting assessment and reflective practice are key aims for those working in FE and HE. It is something staff at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (the RSAMD at the time of recording this case study) have been focusing on and using the ePortfolio tool, Mahara, to support. Staff and students have been making use of the opportunities to incorporate rich multi-media, to blog, upload videos of performances and more to enable reflection on practice, assess in more effective ways and foster inter-disciplinary engagement across the institution.

#### **About the Institution**

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland is based in Glasgow city centre and is made up of Schools of Music, Drama and Dance. The institution is a creative hub, delivering programmes on a variety of subjects from opera to digital media to modern ballet. It hosts numerous public performances by students as well as concerts and masterclasses by national and international artists.

#### **The Challenge**

The School of Music hosts numerous performances by students and masterclasses and concerts by national and international artists and were looking for a way to store these concerts, for use in teaching and to allow students to reflect on their practice. Many of the staff at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland are based at a distance, particularly London, where they have careers as performers as well as teachers. So a solution was also required to support distance learning and engagement.

The Digital Film and TV department in the School of Drama had a number of areas they wished to support more effectively. The faculty wished to encourage reflective practice but had encountered issues when asking students to complete written blogs. Given that the students are immersed in digital media, and tend to be visual thinkers, they wished to enable more creative, media-rich ways for the students to present their reflections. In the Critical and Contextual Studies module, students also have to develop skills in critical analysis. As well as this, the faculty wished to streamline the process for delivering and assessing collaborative research projects and host extra-curricular projects undertaken by the students.

Another desire for both Schools was to enable better cohesion between the various departments and Schools that make up the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and to better support inter-disciplinary awareness and understanding. They also wanted to support learning through the media and environments students are familiar with.

### **The Activity:**

The Schools recognized the potential to address the challenges they wished to overcome through using an ePortfolio tool. The institutionally supported ePortfolio was Mahara so they chose to run pilots with this. To enable students to reflect on their own performances and receive feedback from peers and tutors, the School of Music chose to record and upload videos of performances. This was set up to resemble YouTube, which the faculty believed students would be familiar with. Students responded positively to this as they were able to review their performances, identify areas requiring correction, benchmark themselves, receive feedback from staff and peers and so on. The teaching staff provided guidance on how to provide constructive criticism and were impressed by the creativity used by students in delivering feedback to their peers. Feedback included things like historical references and annotated transcripts – useful pointers for the musician to focus on for future performances. The School also harnessed the opportunities provided by using video for delivering teaching. Given that many staff are based away from the institution, they were able to deliver some of the teaching by video and tutors could respond online to videos of the students.

The Digital Film and TV department stipulated that students blog once a week using the blogging tool in Mahara. Mahara allowed students to easily incorporate visual, multi-media elements to express themselves and reflect on their practice in creative ways. The faculty also encouraged peer review of the blogs and of the students' own projects, so content was opened up for view by others in the department and across year groups. According to one student, this enabled a conversation to develop around each others work, where peers might suggest a resource another student might wish to refer to, feedback on a project and learn about each other's interests. The faculty found that this peer conversation contributed towards developing critical thinking and that the anytime access to the online resources helped foster greater continuity in the learning process. Students could also have a private space set up for them in the e-Portfolio, to work on projects without the pressure of having others accessing the material until they are ready to open up the space to others to view. Another benefit of using the blogs was identified when staff realized that blogs could be used for collaborative projects. Rather than students stopping blogging, doing the research project and then re-commencing their blog, they continued using the blogs throughout to document work on the collaborative project. The School intend to use the blog as the sole assessment tool for the projects.

### **The Outcomes**

Both Schools found that the use of the ePortfolio helped to foster a learner community. This was due to the opportunities afforded for recording material and sharing across year groups and disciplines, enabling reflection and review by peers and using online material to prompt ongoing discussion both on and offline. Students were able to access recordings of their own performances or projects they had filmed and take time to reflect on them, requesting feedback and suggestion from others who may not have been at the original performance / filming. One student commented that having the chance to hear and view her own performance from an 'audience seat' by watching a video of herself, helped her to identify areas for correction but also helped give her confidence in her playing.

Both Schools intend to continue using the e-Portfolio and increase use of it. They are enthusiastic about the opportunities for more cohesion across all Schools in the institution, through the use of the e-Portfolio. The digital resources allow, for example, a film student to watch a dance masterclass and a pianist to watch an acting masterclass, thereby gaining a greater awareness of other disciplines they may well engage with in their future careers. They also now have a permanent archive of concerts and masterclasses, which can be accessed at any time and used in different contexts.

Another benefit was that staff found they achieved efficiencies in assessing and feeding back to students. Mahara and the students' content could be accessed online via a computer or a mobile device which meant that feedback could be provided at times that suited the tutor and fitted into their own schedule.

### **Lessons Learnt**

Some time was spent in relation to optimising the video recordings of performances. The Keyboard and Collaborative Piano Studies department were generating seven hours of recorded material a week, which had to be optimized and uploaded to the e-Portfolio. It took a while to refine the process for this and so staff would recommend setting adequate time to understand workflows. It was also clear that it is vital for staff to fully engage with the work being undertaken in the e-Portfolio, to ensure that students feel it is worthwhile engaging with it. This does mean that regular feedback / pointers must be provided, which has implications for time management and scheduling time. One member of staff found that allocating some time each day was helpful in managing this.

### **Useful Links**

Aaron Shorr, Head of Keyboard and Collaborative Piano Studies

Andy Dougan, Lecturer in Digital Film and TV

Silviya Mihaylova, Keyboard and Collaborative Piano Studies student

Alicia Shaw, Digital Film and TV student

Related video footage of interview with the above participants: <http://www.rsc-sw-scotland.ac.uk/podcast/video/RSAMD.m4v>

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formerly RSAMD): <http://www.rcs.ac.uk/>

Mahara: <http://mahara.org/>

JISC RSC Scotland case studies: [http://www.rsc-scotland.ac.uk/case\\_studies/CaseStudies.htm](http://www.rsc-scotland.ac.uk/case_studies/CaseStudies.htm)

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