



## Using Mahara ePortfolio System in Creative Industries Courses @ Cumbernauld College

**Grainne:** Hello my name is Grainne Hamilton and I am the from the JISC RSC Scotland South & West I am with Alan Moffat who is a lecturer within the creative industries at Cumbernauld College. Alan has been using Mahara the ePortfolio system for creative industries courses particularly for formative but also for summative assessments. Alan, could you tell me why you decided to use Mahara within the college?

**Alan:** It was more to do with trying to find a way of centralising a process where the students could bring together all their work, What I found was that 2008/2009 where I was in charge of the graded unit for the HNC I had real difficulty trying to bring together all the different elements of the students practice under one place, I was finding that paper work was getting scattered and other lecturers had other elements of their works so I felt that the practice lended it self to having some thing online. We had done something similar to this informally in terms of user space but we felt that the students could not see anything there. There was nothing in terms of media, audio video that they produce so I wanted to have an ePortfolio for them to upload their work to. It would be something I could see and they could see and view progress as they go along.

**Grainne:** So the ePortfolio system allows them to upload videos, images files, and a whole range of stuff which is presumably perfect for creative industries?

**Alan:** Yes perfect because the very nature of the work they produce is either video or audio and although there is written work, you really need some sort of context to put the written work against and that is the link to you tube or vimeo etc.

**Grainne:** So what kind of student groups and learning scenarios were involved?

**Alan:** Again the pilot itself 2009 and 2010 focused on HNC Creative Industries Television students but this year we decided to involve all the Creative Industries students. We have media, we have elements of photography, we have sound productions students there is a mixture of written work, theory etc. So there is really a mixture of levels from NC right through to degree level now. Specifically looking at the life of the learner where their work follows them from NC, through HNC HND and eventually through to degree so there are routes that show progress and also they have an archive too. What we found was they were very quick to lose their work come June; the students were very quick to dismiss their work. I don't know if it is the types of students we have in place or it is not something they are used to, finding a place where they can keep/showcase their work. So this is something that has been an ideal platform for that.

**Grainne:** So they could actually see their progress?

**Alan:** Yes, they could see their progress not just in terms of self development but in some cases they could see where they were in terms of their outcomes. So we set their outcomes and they can look at the timetable in terms of what we put down and they can see where they are in terms of what they need to do to progress and to complete outcomes as well. That has become a very handy element of this as well.

**Grainne:** Immersion within Mahara, is that the only system they are using?

**Alan:** Yes, the way I sold it to them, I think sitting in education we are aware of the issues of opening access to the web – the use and abuse of Facebook etc. We are trying to sell Mahara as Facebook for education. There are many elements of Mahara that lend itself to being used in a way where students are used to the interface, for example sending messages to each others' walls etc link RSS feeds, linking up to you tube, students using Twitter, Facebook you tube and they link these external resources into Mahara and it provides a duality of the platforms, producing

stuff in college but linking to life out with college which is something that is also very interesting

**Grainne:** Do you find that students are quite happy to mix these two elements?

**Alan:** Yes one of the things I always say to them is that their learning does not stop at 4pm. It is really good for me to go on to Mahara on a Sunday night and see 5 or 6 students working away and on their profile page or their views or whatever, but they are there and you have a document of them being online and working on stuff on a Sunday night.

**Grainne:** Did you encounter any challenges in introducing this.

**Alan:** Yes when you introduce a new system, it does take some people time to get round to a new way of working. Some of the difficulties have been trying to involve some of the staff. To make this work involves getting staff to work at a high level. 4 or 5 members actively involved and 4/5 not actively involved creates a disparity of what is placed online based on who teaches what. The students I teach are actively involved because I am actively involved and I selling them the idea of this being a good place to upload your work whereas if staff are not actively involved then the students that they teach or are responsible for tend not to upload work and use on a regular basis. So this has been a real challenge and it is short term I realize that, we are still early days in terms of where the project is and it might take a few years to be properly embedded into the system and for people to see the actual benefits.

**Grainne:** If these are the challenges, what have been the main benefits?

**Alan:** The biggest benefit has been the ability to centralize work. Prior to this initiative I would have had 16 A4 box files full of students work, and it became my responsibility to look after that work. Students would hand me this work and I would be responsible for archiving and storing and I was really unhappy because it put too much onus on me so it has put the responsibility back onto the student for their own work. I also think that it has freed up quite a lot of people in terms of that responsibility and they have relished the idea that they are responsible for their work.

Some of the elements of Mahara that really work include the feedback elements. I do it in a way that is quite transparent, I open up a view and I make the feedback public which I like to do, and other lecturers can go in and look at the feedback that I have added and they can augment that feedback so it becomes a conversation, e.g. *Yes I agree with that, or have you thought of that.* The student can also feedback on my feedback and there are some really fantastic examples where students have come back and disagreed with me. This is what it is all about.

Peer to peer feedback where you can open views up to your peers and they can provide feedback and it is all documented coz I think some of the time we miss that idea where feedback can be quite formal and students can miss or forget what was said. Whereas Mahara can be left with links to external websites or resources for students to look at and it becomes part of the research and development and it is all combined.

Forums have been good too because it adds to the research you can provide external links to forums and you can engage in dialogues about general practice or specific elements of their practice.

**Grainne:** so as far as creating a view how does the student submit that from a formative or summative point of view?

**Alan:** When they create a view what I have tried to do is to link that with the individual module that is being taught. For example, creative industries the students do a script writing unit and they would create a view and call it script writing. They would put all of their work into that view and they can share access across the class and to all the staff and they decide who gets to see this work that they have put up. What I have tried to say is that a big part of creative industries is getting feedback and not taking it personally and to try to engage in a mature debate about their work and not to shy away from taking criticism. You really have to manage that process because it could become more of a slagging match if it is done in a more informal way. The good thing about Mahara is that people are a bit more wary of putting

something in print and so they take a bit more time before they reply rather than in an informal discussion group.

With written work people tend to take a wee bit more time before they commit to something.

**Grainne:** and that is a very important skill for them to take on into their careers.

**Alan:** Yes because a lot of students who come into creative industries courses don't always realize that evaluation is an important part of the process, it is that continuous reflection in getting them through their views. I have also encouraged the HN students to keep a Blog and this could be centered on their practice. But it could encompass elements that are totally unrelated and I'm getting them used the idea that it could be about anything. I am trying to pull it back to how it works for their current work, some really good examples of some blogs about all sorts of media, photography, document media productions that have taken place, evaluating work as they go along so it is really quite invaluable to them as well.

**Grainne:** Fantastic. If anyone else was looking to use Mahara in this immersive way have you got any advice?

**Alan:** Sell it in a good way, for me it has saved me a lot of work and saved me a lot of administration. It has freed me to do a lot of the more creative stuff e.g. give feedback. I could go in and look at someone's profile and know right away if they are up to speed with their projects and from that point of view that really frees you to think about the quality of their projects. Again selling it to your colleagues, how you sell it to your learners. Introduce it in a way that they don't feel that they are doing any extra work because learners are at this stage where if they get a whiff of something that feels 'why am I doing this' and '*this seems to be over and above*' then they won't do it. So helping them see the benefits and most importantly your peers and your colleagues can see the benefits.

It is not for everyone, because it is a very transparent thing, everything is up there, everyone can see it. It works for me I don't mind people looking at my notes but I know that that might be a potential for other practitioners who might not want to

put their stuff up there, they might be a bit fearful but we are all professionals and you should not have anything you would want to hide.