

Showcasing Mahara: A new open source eportfolio



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This poster presents the outcomes of a collaborative project funded by the New Zealand Government to develop an open source electronic portfolio for use in the tertiary sector. The intention is to convey the core principles underpinning the design of the 'Mahara' eportfolio and to describe some of the unique features of this new open source system. In particular, the poster will showcase the different 'views' of Mahara and the social networking functions, along with illustrating how Massey University is planning to embed eportfolios in an initial teacher education programme.

Key words: eportfolio, e-learning, initial teacher education

Introduction

As part of the e-Learning Collaboration Development Fund (eCDF), staff from Massey University (lead provider), the Auckland University of Technology, the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand and Victoria University of Wellington were contracted to develop an eportfolio application for the New Zealand tertiary sector. The aim was to develop a new open source eportfolio application and to provide guidelines for its effective use based on the experience of a number of implementation case studies. A review of the literature on eportfolios was also conducted to inform the technical development and pedagogical design of the application (Butler, 2006).

What is an e-portfolio?

Portfolios are nothing new in education. Zeichner and Wray (2001) identify three different types of portfolio: a 'learning portfolio', which documents a student's learning over time; a 'credential portfolio', which is used for registration or certification purposes; and a 'showcase portfolio', which students can use when applying for employment positions (Butler, 2006). An eportfolio is essentially an online collection of reflections and digital artefacts that students can use to demonstrate their development over time to various audiences.

A review of literature revealed that teacher education is the field most advanced in thinking about the use of eportfolios. While research on eportfolios is relatively new, most studies so far have focused on their uses for the learning and development in initial teacher education (Milman & Kilbane, 2005; Sherry & Bartlett, 2005). The benefits of electronic portfolios are many and varied and Butler (2006) provides a summary of the major advantages. Rather than list these here, the literature is also full of the problems and issues of using eportfolios for educational purposes. Lorenzo and Ittleson (2005, pp. 4-5) provide a list of useful questions that need to be considered before an institution considers adopting electronic portfolios:

- Should an e-portfolio be an official record of a student's work?
- How long should an e-portfolio remain at an institution after the student graduates?
- Who owns the e-portfolio?
- How should an institution promote and support the use of e-portfolios?
- How are e-portfolios evaluated in a manner that is both valid and reliable?
- How can institutions encourage reflection in the design and use of e-portfolios?

Core principles

Mindful of these questions, the following principles underpinned the design of Mahara:

- *Student ownership* of their eportfolio.
- The ability to set *permissions of access* or authentication to various nominated groups.
- The ability to add *metadata* to all entries and artefacts, which could be customised by lecturers or programme teams.
- An *aggregating function* that would permit users with various permissions to access only what students permit them to access.
- The *flexibility* for formal or informal / social and personal or course-related areas.

A central tenet during the development of the ‘Mahara’ eportfolio was the belief that technology cannot be developed without thinking about the educational content and outside of considerations of pedagogy. The application developed by this project was designed to be cross-disciplinary in its application and flexible enough to be used for different purposes.

Description of Mahara

Mahara [<http://www.mahara.org>] is a fully featured open source electronic portfolio, weblog, résumé builder and social networking system, connecting users and creating online communities. Consistent with the literature, Mahara was designed to provide users with the tools to create a personal and professional learning, development and showcasing environment. Meaning ‘think’ or ‘thought’ in Te Reo Maori, the name Mahara reflects the intention to create a user-centred lifelong learning and development application, as well as the belief that ICT must be used to promote more collaborative, interactive, media-rich and personalised learning.

What makes Mahara different from other e-portfolios is that learners control which items and what information other users see. In order to facilitate this access control, all artefacts you wish to show to other users need to be bundled up and placed into one area. Within Mahara this compilation of selected artefacts is called a ‘view’. You can have as many views as you like, each with a different collection of artifacts. The audience you wish to give access to your view can be added as individuals or as a member of a group or community.



Summary

Eportfolios within a teacher education programme can place more ownership of growth in the hands of the student. In particular, the eportfolio offers more opportunity for students to highlight their strengths and growth over-time. They also offer potential for the student to document a broader range of attributes and dispositions than simply meeting learning outcomes. However, such use of eportfolios requires a cultural and philosophical shift in the mind of the student and the teacher to truly value reflective practice over a more traditional competitive and grade-oriented approach to performance.

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