ePortfolio Implementation Case Study
Tai Poutini Polytechnic

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Introduction

Rather than an evaluation of the ePortfolio system Mahara, the eCDF ePortfolio project case study reports are designed to provide other organisations a guide to the lessons learnt and challenges faced during the implementation of a typical ePortfolio system.

It should also be noted that during the pilot period, case study partners were working on a pre v1.0 release of Mahara where development and refinements to functionality was continuing.

In order to ensure relevance to other ePortfolio systems and ongoing accuracy of the case studies, where possible references to functionality or technical issues specific to the ePortfolio system Mahara and the pilot site (MyPortfolio) have been removed. Development suggestions made within the case study reports have however been captured by the eCDF project team and documented within the Mahara Development Roadmap (http://www.mahara.org/roadmap)

1 Case Study Overview

1.1 Organisational details

Tai Poutini Polytechnic is a Greymouth based tertiary institution with campuses throughout New Zealand. Late in 2006 Tai Poutini Polytechnic's eLearning group, after consultation with campus directors Samuel Blight and Derek Keene, opted to trial the eCDF ePortfolio project over a small number of courses. The group decided on joining the ePortfolio project so they could evaluate the effectiveness of an ePortfolio system in our environment as well as directly contribute to the development of an eLearning system.

1.2 Programmes

Certificate in Audio Engineering (Level 4/5)
Diploma in Audio Engineering (Level 6)

The Certificate and Diploma in Audio Engineering courses are designed to introduce students into the fields of music recording, mixing and production. Formative tasks for this course include completing questionnaires based on the content of the course (for instance, the principles of speaker design or how to use various functions in audio engineering software) and summative tasks include developing music mixes on a computer.

These courses were chosen for the ePortfolio case study because it was decided that Mahara could be a useful tool for submitting and sharing recordings and mixes.

Diploma in Contemporary Music (Level 5/6)

The Diploma in Contemporary Music course involves the study of popular music and extensive training for live music performance. Formative tasks for this course include the monitoring of student performances over the year, and an example of a summative task is a 30 second radio commercial that each student has to produce.

This course was chosen for the ePortfolio case study because the tutors of this programme actively encourage their students to use the Internet as a tool for feedback, collaboration and forming social networks; and it was felt that Mahara would be a useful tool to aid this.

Diploma in Information Communications Technology (Level 5)

DipICT5 is the first year of the three year National Diploma in Business Computing qualification. The content covered in the 18 modules is designed to give a broad knowledge of the Information Technology industry.

Graduates are trained to be productive and adaptable employees, capable of specialisation with further training. This qualification recognises readiness for further study in computing and related fields at higher diploma level, as well as for initial employment in the computer industry.

Diploma in Information Communications Technology (Level 6)

DipICT6 is the second year of the National Diploma in Business Computing qualification.

This programmes' 18 modules provide more depth and some specialisation in consultation with local industry requirements. Graduating students are proficient in selected areas of business computing such as user support, computer operation, computer programming, systems analysis and design, project management, database design and administration, graphics and multimedia.

This qualification recognises readiness for further study in computing and related fields at higher diploma level, as well as for employment in the computer industry.

The Computing Industry is hard to define and students may find employment in a wide range of businesses, Local Bodies or Government Departments in a variety of computing positions that may or may not require on-the-job training and/or further upskilling.

To break into the "Computing Industry" students will most likely need to commit themselves to both DipICT levels 5 & 6.

To gain a position in a specialised area, students would need to commit to further level(s) of study covering technologies such as; web page design, object orientated programming, networking administration, specialised and specific database administration, intensive work in multimedia etc.

Ultimately Mahara was not implemented in two of the four programmes originally chosen for the trial; this is elaborated on in the following sections.

The reasons all of these particular courses were chosen for the ePortfolio case study reflects the perceived need to develop ICT capability to support student learning on many levels. They include the recognition that Mahara can be used as a tool for uploading assignment work (amongst other types of task-based student learning material) and for sharing students' multimedia productions with others including prospective employers.

1.3   Participants

Course	Staff	Students
Certificate in Audio Engineering (Level 4/5)	3	45
Diploma in Audio Engineering (Level 6)	3	21
Diploma in Contemporary Music (Level 5/6)	2	15

Diploma in Information Communications Technology (Level 5)	2	0
Diploma in Information Communications Technology (Level 6)	2	0

Most, if not all of the students involved are full time students.

2 Implementation

2.1 Implementation Issues

There were multiple problems from our end with implementing Mahara. We were not able to collect all of the student email addresses and email them to the eCDF ePortfolio manager until around the end of Term 1, by then some of the tutors felt that they had already taught their students an acceptable method of sharing their work and felt that it would be unfair to force them to learn another method at this time. As a result of this difficulty we have learned that we should collect student email addresses at the start of the year or make this part of the enrollment process.

Tutors had difficulty finding time to implement Mahara within their courses, particularly since Mahara was not already available to them by the beginning of the academic year. Some tutors had eventually decided against making Mahara a component of their courses because doing so may disrupt the assessment procedures that had already been implemented during the first term of the year.

There were also a number of issues not directly related to the Mahara software but the hosting. The 60 megabytes of storage space allocated per student during the trial is not seen as large enough for hosting media files (especially video and audio) and also our limited bandwidth allocation per student makes it more difficult to upload large media files to an off site server.

There were also concerns that the Mahara servers (along with uploaded work) would be brought down after the trial was over. Although this was not the case, it was never the less off putting for some tutors because they believed that it would not be worthwhile for students to invest time uploading their work to a system that would only be available temporarily.

2.2 Documentation

There were no problems with the documentation, which was easy to follow and frequently updated as more guides were added to the system.

The ePortfolio implementation guidelines document contained useful information. In particular, information from Section 1.1.2 "Benefits and examples" helped sell the case study project to the eLearning group. However the implementation guidelines document was not closely followed.

3 Technical

3.1 Technical Support

There was only one technical problem that we encountered with Mahara, one of the students had complained that the image size and quality was very poor compared to Myspace.

As far as we are aware, no site changes were requested and no reporting tools were used. The eCDF Project Manager has been extremely helpful for answering various technical queries.

3.2 Reporting

As far as we are aware none of Mahara's reporting tools were used.

4 Tutor Feedback

4.1 Teaching with ePortfolio

Tutor feedback on teaching with Mahara has unfortunately been very limited. The amount of tutor feedback we have received reflects the implementation issues noted in section two.

Mahara has several features (in particular, blogs and feedback) which tutors find useful for interacting with students outside of classroom hours. With Mahara they are able to share examples of their work and give constructive criticism on students work.

However, tutors also feel that using an ePortfolio system is not suitable for classroom delivery, particularly for units that require class interactivity. They also felt that the learning curve associated with an eLearning system is also restrictive.

Tutors would like to see various features added to Mahara, such as a built in media player, more customability with individual's pages, and higher quality and resolution of uploaded images.

4.2 Student learning experience

Tutors felt that potentially, ePortfolio systems could assist students with learning and help to cultivate collaboration and open discussion between students. They also thought that an ePortfolio system could be extremely useful for helping students present a collection of their work to potential employers.

However tutors felt that using an ePorfolio system as part of the curriculum would also have some disadvantages. The learning curve associated with using an ePortfolio system,

particularly since student time is so limited, became problematic when we couldn't begin to use Mahara until later in the year.

Tutors felt that generally, students quickly lost interest in Mahara. This is believed to be because they were already using similar social networking software (Bebo, Myspace etc) that they thought met this need or were using our existing implementations of Moodle. Tutors also felt that students lost interest because Mahara was not being used by them as a teaching tool or as part of the course curriculum.

5 Continued use of Mahara

5.1 System quality

Poor   Satisfactory   Excellent

☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

We do not feel that we have gathered enough feedback or used it extensively enough to be able to accurately appraise it at this time.

5.2 Intention of continued use

Tai Poutini Polytechnic's eLearning group has expressed interest in continuing to use Mahara, since tutors involved in the case study here state that they see it has potential.

Near the end of 2007 the eLearning group will consider running a second trial of Mahara. Since Mahara will be more complete by this time then it was at the start of 2007, and since we have learned several lessons about deploying a new eLearning system we are confident that our second trial will be more successful.

There are several changes we should consider when investigating our second trial, including if we can or should integrate Mahara into our existing Moodle installations, and if an in-house installation of Mahara (which would alleviate our bandwidth issues) would suit us better.

6 Success of pilot

6.1 Staff response

Very Negative   Neither positive   Very Positive
            or negative

1   2   3   4   5

☐   ☐   ☒   ☐   ☐

Staff response to the pilot has been mixed. Generally it has been seen as having good potential but tutors have not been enthusiastic to include this technology into their

curriculum during 2007 due to the mix-match between the academic year and the implementation of the pilot cycle.

6.2 Overall success

Unsuccessful		Satisfactory		Highly Successful
1	2	3	4	5
⊠	☐	☐	☐	☐

We do not feel this pilot has been successful since none of our programmes have used it as a teaching tool and it was not implemented at all in some of our programmes.