

Mahara: More Than An ePortfolio

value for the student and potential employers

By Jon Curwin

The value of some kind of portfolio has been long accepted, and a folder of certificates seen as a record of achievement. Whether the outcome is a demonstration of artistic talent or technical ability, the process can be engaging for the author and insightful for the reader. Electronic alternatives were always going to happen although some text on paper may remain significant for the individual, like receiving a degree award with a handshake. As evidence of skills can range from a simple pdf file, to a complex spreadsheet to a video link, some form of ePortfolio will offer the benefits of archiving material, tools to work with and formats to share and present selectively.

There are differing definitions or views about what an ePortfolio should be or should contain. JISC (Effective Practise with e-Portfolio 2008 www.jisc.ac.uk/effectivepracticeeportfolios) acknowledge that it is both a product and a process - "created by the learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning."

The value for the student is not only the final product, a Mahara page that showcases their skills for example, but also the learning that has taken place to get that far. A variety of platforms can be used ranging from those that require the completion of a structured template, a blog structure like Wordpress or the empty page (blank canvas) of Mahara. The lack of predetermined page structure can be seen as one of the major strengths. It is this that gives both the tutor and

student choice. As the screenshot below illustrates, a student (B.A. Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations, year 1) can exceed expectations when asked to present their skills for a tutor or potential employer.

“ how can a student evidence being effective or having a positive, can do attitude? ”

It is easy to focus on the final outcome, but behind the scenes there is the learning to work with a new system, the choice about what is evidence of skill and an articulation of skills, knowledge and experience. In constructing a Mahara page the student is likely to meet intended learning outcomes and also, on route, achieve unintended learning outcomes like being able to tell a story or discriminate between the significant and insignificant. The reward for the student may be a good mark but the value may lie in the process. If asked 'will Mahara get me a job' the answer could be 'yes if you are very lucky' and there are examples of where a Mahara page has made a difference. However, the reality faced by most students is that employers will use their own systems and show little interest in the outcomes of an ePortfolio. An employer will probably be looking for the "set of attributes, skills and

Student ePortfolio Space
An example of a Mahara page produced by a student to showcase their employability skills.

Software Skills

- Microsoft Word (5 stars)
- Microsoft Excel (5 stars)
- Microsoft Publisher (5 stars)
- Microsoft Power Point (5 stars)
- Microsoft Outlook (5 stars)
- Microsoft OneNote (5 stars)
- Microsoft Access (5 stars)
- Adobe Photoshop (5 stars)
- Adobe Illustrator (5 stars)
- Adobe PremierePro (5 stars)
- Adobe InDesign (5 stars)
- Adobe DreamWeaver (5 stars)

Education History

Start date	End date	Qualification
2011	2015	Marketing, PR & Advertising (BA (Hons)) at Birmingham City University
2006	2011	speciality Mathematics & IT (GCSE) at Friendly Appeal Cesis State Grammar School
2003	2008	faculty of Leather Fashion Design at Cesis Art School

Business skills

Wise people say that the greatest people in business have certain attributes in common. Several personal qualities are important. I would say vital, to survive and grow in business environment.

I believe that the most important one is the belief in you. If it is combined with an ability to stick with your goals and not giving up by the first failure, the future will be bright.

See below, which of them I have developed during the past years.

Communication

business writing
(During my studies at the University, I have become aware of formal English and I continue to establish my understanding and the word-power to succeed.)

social networking
(I have been a member of different social sites since 2004. Basically I have grown up with such networks like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, StumbleUpon, Draugiem.lv etc. I use them every day for personal purposes and have used them as a main marketing tool for Cesis City Youth Council and EU projects.)

Employment History

Start date	End date	Position
2011		Crew Member: McDonalds (Star City)
2010		Personal Consultant & Direct Sales: Amway Inc.
2010	2011	Student Council President: Friendly Appeal Cesis State Grammar School
2009		Freelance Designer: Kristiana Briede
2009	2011	Volunteer, Design Manager, Event Staff: Cesis Youth Council

Personal Qualities

- Creative
- Communicative
- Confident
- Determined
- Accurate
- Committed
- Energetic
- Full of wonder

Experience as a volunteer

I see volunteering as a great way to establish personal values such as tolerance, gender equality, healthy lifestyle, and a respect for elderly and poor people. I have been a member of the non-profit organization Cesis City Youth Council - it is a youth organisation which is a part of the City's Municipality and operates within the City's borders.

It looks after Youth Entertainment without alcohol and drugs. Children in Need and other things that are actual in the particular moment by

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knowledge that all labour market participants should process to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace” (Working towards your future, 2011, CBI/NUS. In the joint report by the UUK and CBI (Future fit: preparing graduates for the world of work, 2009) a positive attitude was seen as the underpinning factor, exemplified by “a can do approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and drive to make these happen”. But how can a student evidence being effective or having a positive, can do attitude?

Keran has a positive attitude and was always going to be entrepreneurial. Mahara has allowed Keran to articulate what she has achieved, what she ‘can do’ in a variety of ways and provides a means for her to share this. Hosting an ePortfolio within the university provides a safe place to work with students. This should allow us to be more creative with our students. It might be the case that employers won’t look at particular Mahara page, the product; but by engaging with Mahara, students can be given the chance to play with text, images and voice. It is this learning through play and reflection that can build this ‘can do’ confidence.

“ Mahara allows the author to articulate achievement and provides a variety of ways in which to share ”

When asked whether she would be prepared to share her experience of setting up and running a business during her placement year, it was Keran (B.A. Business Studies, final year) that suggested a Mahara page (see screenshot below). This brings together examples of the menus she designed, an interview with a customer and her talking about being her business. This will now be used as a case-study on the new first year module New Business Creation.

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Evidencing

A Mahara page being used to capture the experience of a student setting up their own business.

Jon Curwin was supportive as a case was made that self employment was an acceptable placement, advised me how I could meet the assessment requirements and how this could be the basis of a final year project. He has now formed a Mahara group called the Business Enterprise Network and I am creating a Mahara page so that I can share my experience of running a business with you.

While studying I took a second job in a local bakery as I needed the extra money at the time. Over a period of time I began to notice the business slowly deteriorating. I wanted the business to do better and I did give my boss a few ideas on possible improvements, but I notice how he just didn't care anymore. As time went by we got fewer customers and I know the bills began mounting up.

I was still wondering what to do for my placement and by coincidence, my boss told me that he had had enough and wanted to sell his business. Having my own business has been a lifelong ambition, but I've always thought you need lots of money and experience. I knew it would be a big risk for me but was happy to take on the challenge. I had lots of ideas about the business and wanted a chance to try them.

front side of leaflet

shop. Every day I would be at the shop making sure the work was done the way I wanted it. I think I got on their nerves but I knew what I wanted and the way I wanted it so they had no choice but to put up with me! Within six weeks the paper work was completed and I was the proud owner of my own business. At this point the shop had been rewired, had a new floor and had been redecorated. There was so much to do that my diary was full of things that needed to be done. I don't think I saw my family for a whole month and my social life had slowly disappeared. If I wanted this to work then sacrifices had to be made but on the plus side I was enjoying the whole process.

Keran

back of leaflet

I had already set the opening day and I still had a list of things to do:

- Find the best and cost effective suppliers
- Find warehouses to compare the best price
- Create menu boards
- Create leaflets
- Paint shop
- Order equipment
- Get accounts books
- Hire an accountant

The list did go on and at this point I did wonder if I could do this. There was a lot of pressure and money going out. I did have a lot of support from lots people which kept me going and I really wanted this to work.

Then the day came the opening day. I had made a cake which said welcome to Ashley's Diner and I gave this out free. This was well received, even though customers expect something free all the time. I had paid my brothers and sisters to work the first week to give me time to find the right staff.

I had to make sure that my accounts were in order and that direct debits had been set up for the bills. I then looked at ways to advertise the business, that wouldn't cost me so much. I paid two local boys to post my leaflets door to door around the local area. I advertised in the doctors and I put the business in yell.com. This did seem to work and gave me a lot of new business.

My job involved doing the accounts, a warehouse run three times a week, dealing with suppliers, creating a weekly staff rota, and the operation of the diner. It was a big challenge but I enjoyed it so much. I was at the shop 7.30 in the morning to 7.00 at night seven days a week. It required real dedication, but I knew it would be worth it in the long run.

Customer view