Swindon College
Getting the most from e-portfolios (May 2016)

Summary
Students of art, computing, business, media, sports therapy and education from levels 1 to degree level are among those benefitting from Swindon’s College’s introduction of the e-portfolio tool, Mahara, which has provided learners with greater choice and flexibility over how evidence is presented for assessment.

Organisation
Swindon College is a large general further education college in Wiltshire providing education and training for 2000 full-time FE students aged 16-18, over 300 full time 19+ adult FE students, 7000 part-time 19+ students and 350 14-16 year olds, making it the major provider of vocational and technical education and training in the Swindon area. Higher level courses offered at Swindon College include HND/C, foundation degree, degree and postgraduate masters’ courses. In 2013, the college was rated outstanding by Ofsted.

Challenge
Swindon College recognised the need to provide all learners, whatever their level of study, with a flexible, online personal space, capable of supporting a range of activity: from evidence gathering for assessment and reflection on personal learning and development to presentations of achievement for future employers. Although some awarding organisations supply their own bespoke e-portfolio system, there was still room for a cross-college system capable of supporting this broad base of assessment-related activities that was compatible with the college’s virtual learning environment, Moodle.

Making it happen
A strategic aim of Swindon College is to improve access to learning technologies in order to enhance teaching and learning and improve the flexible delivery of the curriculum. To this end, the college has invested in IT and campus infrastructure and a learning technologies team to support staff and learners in making best use of e-learning technologies. There is no separate e-assessment strategy; the use of learning technologies is part of the broader vision for quality in teaching and learning.
Outcomes

Learners at all levels at Swindon College have found benefits in using e-portfolios in assessment. Especially valuable has been the integrated digital environment, and the choice and control over the format used – a benefit of equal value to learners on a level 3 media course as it is for foundation and honours degree students. The ability to upload videos, images, screencasts and audio commentaries, and to illustrate how ideas developed in blog and journal postings, is enabling learners at all levels to extend the boundaries of evidence gathering to provide assessors with a richer picture of their achievements.

In addition, an online personal learning space such as Mahara brings evaluative and digital literacy skills to the fore. No longer restricted to a choice between the written word and a PowerPoint presentation, learners working in the e-portfolio system can demonstrate their decision-making and digital literacies by selecting the most effective and efficient format in which to present their evidence. This becomes particularly important when charting a personal learning journey over a longer span of study as part of a CV, or as evidence for employment or university admission.

Receiving and giving feedback is also a key part of working in Mahara. Learners can share their developing work with others, such as peers and tutors – a feedback button is built into the system – before refining and extending their work. The technology places the learner in control; they can even see at a glance how far they have travelled since the start of their studies, especially useful when self-assessment is a required element of the course.

Once ready for summative assessment, the URL of a learner’s personal choice of Mahara pages is copied and pasted into Moodle, where the work is accessed and graded by assessors, internal and external verifiers. This simple use of hyperlinking avoids duplication of effort and maintains the personal quality of a carefully chosen portfolio of evidence.

Freed of the constraints of paper folders, yet with all their evidence in one place, learners can feel empowered to take a more creative approach, such as combining with others to record evidence on a video call via Google Hangouts, something that provided their assessor with efficiency gains as well.

Impact

Swindon College has found that Mahara, if used effectively, can transform learners’ sense of ownership of their work, and consequently their standard of achievement:

"Mahara is changing the way people view assessment. Learners own their e-portfolios so make personal choices over how they present themselves and their work. This in
itself increases their responsibility, broadens their horizons and encourages thoughtful innovation.”

Beckie Dunsby, learning technologies manager, Swindon College

Mahara-based evidence also adds a professional touch to learners’ presentation of evidence; whatever their level of study or technical skills, the tool provides a level playing field on which learners can demonstrate their achievements to best effect:

“Another advantage is that Mahara provides all student e-portfolios with a professional wrapper – not everyone is able to design web pages nor should they need to,”

Beckie Dunsby, learning technologies manager, Swindon College

Despite these advantages, learners do not always see the value of e-portfolios at the outset. The learning technologies team at Swindon College emphasise that building an e-portfolio demands consistent effort and the end result can be difficult to visualise. Exemplars of completed portfolios can prove valuable when convincing learners and staff that this approach to assessment and feedback can save time and effort in the long run – and can be instrumental in getting them where they want to be.

Benefits of the technology

» Increased learner independence and responsibility for assessment and feedback
» Opportunities for sharing work under development with individuals and groups for formative feedback
» Professional presentation of evidence for assessors, verifiers and employers and/or university admissions tutors
» Development of learners’ digital literacy, reflective and evaluative skills
» The security of a college-managed online space for learning, assessment and feedback
» Ability to integrate with other college systems to provide efficient data handling, storage and retrieval
Tips for effective practice

» Demonstrate to learners how e-portfolios save time in the long run; content can be re-selected to support CVs and applications for jobs and universities

» Explain the link between e-portfolios and skills required by employers such as digital literacy

» Help learners present their evidence in the best way; this can mean using audio commentaries over video clips, digital images and Google Hangouts as well as text

» Provide drop-in support for teachers and learners unfamiliar with technologies such as e-portfolios

Further information

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