

# Welcome...



Welcome to issue 19 of our Newsletter, and to a wonderful opportunity for readers to take stock of the emerging evidence base to support our work.

This comes from the work of Cohort IV of the Inter/national Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, which – with support from the Higher Education Academy - we have been jointly facilitating with US colleagues; from the work of the National Action Research Network on Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio here in the UK (see <http://www.recordingachievement.org/research/narn-tree.html> ), and – in one case – from a colleague from the Southern Hemisphere. All were shared with colleagues at the Second International Residential Seminar ‘Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio’ at the National College for School Leadership, Nottingham, UK 26-28th April 2010 which, volcanic ash apart, was a deeply valuable and productive experience...

Collectively they begin to help us to answer questions about the evidence base for our work and – equally if not more importantly – provide testimony to the growing ability of members of our community of practice to operate as ‘practitioner-researchers’. Given the emerging economic scenario our ability to deploy such evidence and - potentially – to relate it both to the enhancement of the learner experience and to the relevance of the processes involved to ‘core’ institutional concerns, including student retention and graduate employability. Before we get to that stage though, make the most of the sunshine!

Happy reading.

**Rob Ward,**

**Director.**

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# Diachronic identity and development: A threshold concept for e-portfolio learning?

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## Introduction

For e-portfolios to be effective, recording and using them has to take place over time. Hartnell-Young et al (2007) describe a set of e-portfolio processes that support learning. These processes imply a time component to learning with e-portfolios. Capturing evidence or reflecting are examples of such processes that occur over time.

What is the relationship of these e-portfolio processes that take place over time and the individual's sense of identity and change over time? Is it a threshold concept (Meyer & Land 2003) of e-portfolio use to understand that we change over time and that e-portfolios can capture and give us a sense of change in order to develop?

As part of the Fourth cohort of the I/NCEPR, research at the University of Bradford has investigated the use of e-portfolios within three first year and two final year undergraduate modules. We conducted surveys, staff and student interviews and analyses of student portfolios. The aim was to explore the role of tutors in introducing portfolio learning to students.

This article will introduce the concept of diachronicity, especially narrative diachronicity, and how this concept plays a part in learners' understanding of e-portfolio processes. It will explore the extent to which this concept and understanding is a threshold for engagement with e-portfolios.

## Findings

Cambridge (2008) talks about a 'living document' stage of e-portfolio use and Bruner (1991:6) describes the notion of narrative diachronicity as a "mental model whose defining property is its unique pattern of events over time."

Our research has found that students start our modules and courses with either a sense of this diachronicity (D) and how it applies to them and their learning or it is something of which they are unaware. From this starting point, the use of an e-portfolio can either

develop this sense (or develop it further) or lead to no change in a student's sense and understanding of how they learn and change over time. This leads to four possibilities: 1) Those who neither start with D nor develop D through their use of e-portfolios, this can be typified in a lack of engagement with the portfolio, "*I didn't really see the point... I didn't really understand why we have to use that (e-portfolio)*" (student A). 2) Those students who are aware of the importance of D, perhaps through previous learning or a natural disposition but do not develop it through engagement with the e-portfolio. 3) Those students who develop a sense of D as a result of e-portfolio engagement, "*I didn't realise how much you've actually learnt... You don't appreciate until you look back*" (Student B). 4) Those students who start with a sense of D but also develop it, "*[The e-portfolio] made me actually... write down what I did, which is often a process which is in my head... a little bit more stays in your brain when you have to write it formally.*" (student C).

For those who developed D and felt the benefits of the e-portfolio, the common themes were:

- the importance of looking back,
- the importance of emotion and emotional engagement,
- a sense of achievement and
- reflective writing.



For students who didn't engage there was a lack of clarity in the task and the very thought of it being 'over time' was seen as extra work. The opportunity to develop over time was replaced with summative engagement before the assessment deadline. In other words; If you don't 'get it' (the concept of recording over time) the e-portfolio is a burden. So D does become a threshold concept in that it is fundamentally important in understanding the

type of learning promoted by e-portfolios and thus *transformative* and *irreversible*. It is *troublesome* in nature because it challenges many learners' conceptions of how they learn and develop. If we also view the notion of 'learning to learn' and 'metacognition' as subjects, then D is *integrative* in that an understanding of D brings together a range of related concepts that enables the learner to learn 'better'.

## Conclusion

Our research highlighted a number of key points for tutors to bear in mind when introducing e-portfolios. Like all good educational practice, tutors need to be explicit in the 'over time' element of portfolio work; many students do not have this diachronic view of their learning. Encouraging longitudinal engagement with e-portfolio processes through formative activity is important. (Students can't look back at something that wasn't recorded in the first place!) Also linked to this is the need for an activity that encourages the 'looking back' element such as a summative reflective statement. It needs to be personal and involve emotions. This means that our assessment practices and learning outcomes need to align. This could be by assessing criteria such as reflection or creativity. E-portfolios have to be holistic, encompassing the whole curriculum and beyond (i.e. the formal and informal) if they are to encompass the personal narrative. "*Use it in your own life...record things personally...when you draw back on it, it means something. An action plan about an essay means nothing*" (Student D).

"Even our own homely accounts of happenings in our own lives are eventually converted into more or less coherent autobiographies centred round a Self acting more or less purposefully in a social world." Bruner (1991:18). This is the role of an e-portfolio; to help students create their learning narrative.



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## Engaging graduates, employers and faculty in employability in the Web 2.0 world\*

**Professor Beverley Oliver**  
Curtin University, Australia

\*These ideas were shared with colleagues at The Second International Residential Seminar 'Researching and Evaluating Personal Development Planning and e-Portfolio' at the National College for School Leadership, Nottingham, UK 26-28th April 2010. See the slides of that presentation here.

### Two problems:

Universities review curricula using evidence like student feedback, retention rates, and so on. A competitive grant from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council is currently developing the Graduate Employability Indicators (GEI), surveys that gather graduate, employer and faculty perspectives on the capabilities that count. A continuing challenge is response rates: for specific degrees in each university, these are frequently low.

University students often need incentives to engage in ePortfolio approaches to personal development, sometimes because the 'real world' voice of the future employer is inaccessible.

### Potential solutions:

1. Focus on capabilities that count for early professional success

Use the GEI surveys (or similar) to gather perceptions of employers, faculty and new graduates (of up to five years) about the 'capabilities that count'--to what extent do new graduates demonstrate these capabilities, and how important is each for early success in a specific profession?

2. Go global

Open access to these web surveys, possibly

promoted through Facebook, LinkedIn, iPhone/iPad app or similar, might attract greater critical mass. Including broad demographic data collection would mean the results could be interrogated by level of location (US versus Europe, for example) level of degree (undergraduate, postgraduate) discipline (using international broad and narrow fields of education), and so on.

### 3. Make results available directly to stakeholders

*Students Filter* the results so that the information is available directly within the student ePortfolio, possibly mapped to graduate attributes or professional competencies. Students could discover what employers (specifically for their intended professional location) say are the capabilities that count for early professional success most, and use this information to self-assess achievements, using the ePortfolio to build on strengths and address gaps.

- New graduates: Graduates in the first five years of professional practice could interrogate open access results, and use it to guide their continuing professional development
- Faculty : Teaching teams could draw on the data and use for evidence-based curriculum review;
- Employers : Employers and professional and or accrediting bodies could draw on the data and compare course accreditation and competency requirements.

Is it worth doing? What would it take? Keen to be involved?  
Share your thoughts!

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ALTC Fellowship: Benchmarking partnerships for graduate employability

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## Using an e-portfolio based pedagogy for work-based learners: Action research and emerging practice

**Alison Felce, Co-ordinator of Work-based Learning, University of Wolverhampton**

### Emma Purnell, Blended Learning Advisor, University of Wolverhampton

An innovative approach to work-based learning is being developed at the University of Wolverhampton through a project funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). The project is developing an e-portfolio based pedagogy to support negotiated and personalised learning to address performance needs identified through market research with local small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) i.e. those with less than 250 employees. Work-based learners study a range of five credit units, equivalent to 50 notional learning hours, over approximately 10 weeks, and can build the five credit units into 20 credit modules.

An action research method has been adopted and includes the use of three curriculum development retreats and five consecutive pilot units in different subject areas through which the emerging pedagogy is being designed, developed and evaluated.



The first pilot unit used a scaffolded web-folio format to act as a virtual learning environment and to support learners in developing their skills in reflection (Figure 1). However, the method used meant that learners had to work within the e-portfolio tool to include their responses and comments and this caused difficulties and concerns for the majority who did not consider themselves sufficiently competent in the use of IT. As a result of this first experience we looked at alternatives to what was, effectively, a method that required the learners to re-write the web-folio pages, whilst retaining the idea of the scaffolded template. A paramount consideration was the need to enable the learner to record thoughts, reflections, comments, dialogue etc as individual entities within the e-portfolio so that they would be able to build on these in future weeks and in other units of study whilst making the interface with the tool as easy as possible. The solution we came up with was to build a series of blogging tools into the

web-portfolio which meant that the learners can complete all their engagement with the learning on a unit through the equivalent of a web-page without having to navigate the intricacies of the tool “behind” the interface (Figure 2). The weekly activity blogs provide scaffolded learning activities, the personal blog is used for critical reflection and dialogue with the tutor (rather than via e-mail or other media) and the group blog is used for bi-weekly collaborative activities to encourage the group to share their learning and experiences.

The second and third pilots have further developed the pedagogy and introduced a wider range of multi-media interactions to meet diverse learning styles. The action research method adopted means that the pilot schools are building their capacity in this new curriculum development as well as that of the support departments such as the Learning Information Services where subject resource librarians are working with the school academics to source and create on-line content and resources. Learning from one pilot is shared with developers of subsequent pilots with an overview taken by the Institute for Learning Enhancement. Use of the e-portfolio will be extended in the subsequent units in a series building towards 20 credit modules to introduce other functionality within the e-portfolio to enable the learners to build a rich repository of personal learning that can feed into summative assessment and future learning.

Initial evaluation from the pilot units has been very positive with learners reporting that “*getting started can be a bit tricky*” and that “*using blogs for learning is new territory*” but “*the different types of blogs allow you to interact in different ways*”, “*enjoyed the e-portfolio eventually*” and “*felt a sense of achievement*”. Learners have also identified potential changes to their current practices as a result of studying a 5-credit unit “*I discovered issues about myself and my organisation*” and one who has put forward a proposal to her line manager to invest in a one to one visual long distance communication tool to improve communication within the organisation.

If you'd like to share your experiences or find out more about this project please contact Alison Felce: [a.e.felce@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:a.e.felce@wlv.ac.uk) or Emma Purnell: [e.purnell@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:e.purnell@wlv.ac.uk)

The project website can be viewed at: <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/eppsmc>

Figure 1. Web-portfolio template for pilot 1

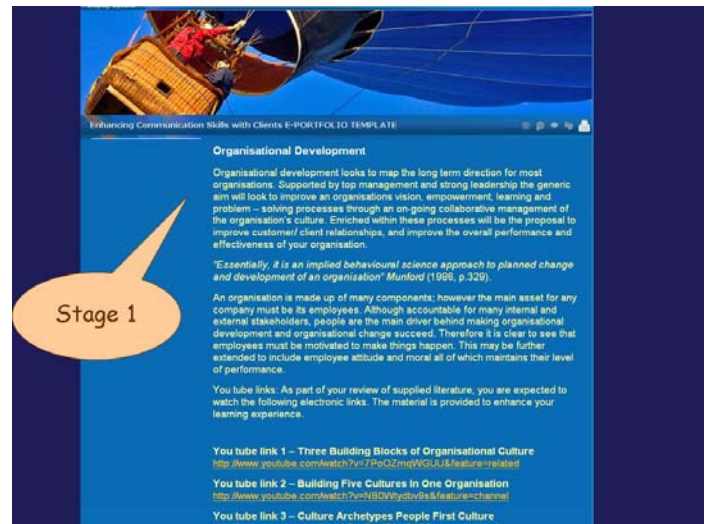
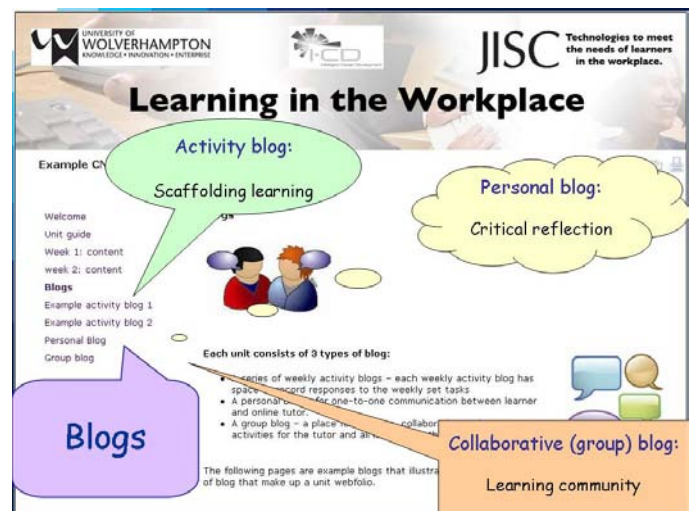


Figure 2. Revised web-portfolio template format using blogs



## Weight or Float? Perspectives on using eportfolio as a self development tool in an undergraduate Midwifery programme.

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**Introduction:** this presentation reported on data from first year student midwife interviews and assessed portfolios as part of a broader study (Currant et al 2010) investigating the link between learner autonomy and tutor activities with eportfolios. The metaphor

'weight or float' comes from a student interview as she describes her perception of the ePortfolio activities changing from a burden causing her stress to a useful tool to facilitate her learning through the course.



### **Context:**

The e-portfolio in the programme in question started life as a progress file in response to QAAHE guidelines (2001). Since then it has developed through feedback from the students, the reflective practice of the module leader and the potential provided by the eportfolio system (PebblePad) into a personal development eportfolio that is well integrated into the midwifery curriculum. Despite this commitment to the process of personal development planning there is little research evidence to support its claim to help develop an autonomous learner. What evidence there is uses such a wide definition of PDP that it fails to provide satisfactory reassurance (Gough, Kiwan, et al. 2003). Clegg (2004) argues that the search for generalised evidence of effectiveness is misplaced; rather we should seek to understand how student learning is improved in specific contexts. This report seeks to contribute to an informed debate about why PDP activities work in some circumstances for some students and not others.

### **Research question:**

What factors impact on the perception of ePortfolio activities as weight or float?

These are analysed in terms of:

- Personal agency of the Student
- Structure and Activities of the module
- Capabilities of the tool

### **Discussion:**

Analysis of the interviews highlighted three aspects relating to the personal agency of the student which made the tool a 'float'. These were: first the importance of the student taking personal responsibility for learning so they understood the purpose of the tool in helping them do this. Second they had to be willing to engage with the tool in order to 'get to grips' with the new techniques involved.

Third they need to get beyond using the tool because they have been told to or to find out how it works i.e. they need to find personal motivation for using it, this could be as a satisfying product to look back on or as a meaningful tool for learning.

The activities of the module helped in this process by: being assessed and so ensuring initial engagement and 'getting to grips' with the tool; by being collaborative so that there was peer pressure to take responsibility for learning and use the tool effectively; by being meaningful, this was especially the case when using action plans for clinical placement, students value placement learning very highly so improvements to the way this was recorded (electronically rather than paper based) were welcomed. The capabilities of the tool which made this particular eportfolio system a float for most students by the end of the first year were: the formatted assets to guide thinking – particularly the bespoke ones for clinical placement. Also the capability to build up a picture of learning over time gave students a sense of their own achievement and built confidence. Finally the ability to share with others is a capability that was beginning to be appreciated by students as a safe way to work collaboratively and also to get feedback from tutors and peers.

Analysis of the assessed eportfolios in terms of evidence of autonomous learning corresponded with interview data in that the students demonstrating most autonomy were those who were most proactive in getting to grips with and finding benefit in the tool.

Implications for practice: i.e. how to facilitate a shift from weight to float. Relevant factors include: understanding the starting point of the student and their personal motivations – students may need help to recognise their personal responsibility for learning; structuring activity to build competence with the tool so that its potential is realized through effective and creative use particularly for collaborative working and gaining feedback; and making sure that the activity is authentic and relevant for the student.

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## The experience of making an e-portfolio work for students and staff: the use of Mahara at Birmingham City Business School

Jon Curwin, Jo Powell, Michael Schmidt  
Alan Staley.

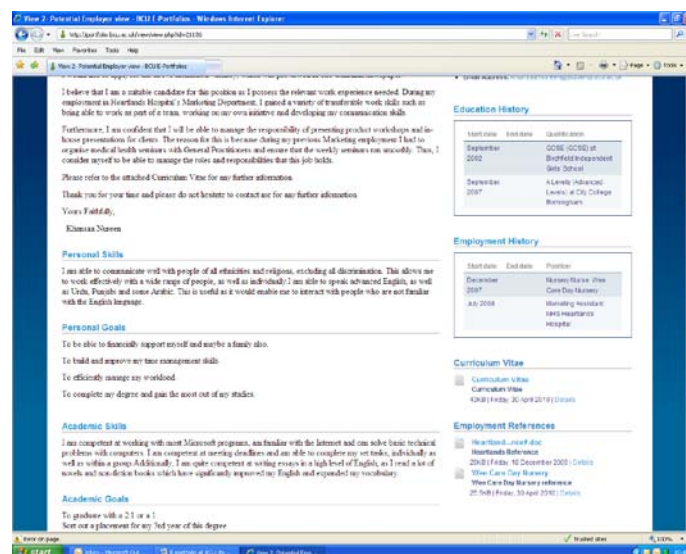
### Background

An e-portfolio allows users to store digitized evidence to aid personal development or to showcase their success to teachers or employers (Banks, 2004; Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). This provides the individual with an effective way of presenting themselves using the benefits of electronic representation. This requires skills that we would expect undergraduates to develop and evidence. In common with other similar institutions, Birmingham City Business School offers a business skills module to all first year students. Within this a range of skills are explored through a workshop format, to support students in managing the demands of a university education, preparing them for the challenges of the workplace. Assessment is clearly a critical element of engagement, with this module, assessment previously took the form of a paper-based portfolio of evidence including a reflective element. This form of assessment was seen as appropriate, requiring a process of collecting materials; presenting evidence of skills and their development; and some form of reflection and future planning. In many ways this was seen as the 'right' kind of assessment but in practice, had a number of drawbacks. Many students felt that they had done this type of evaluation before; with staff often finding workshop based exercises being submitted without any reflective or planning consideration.

### Module Design

The opportunity was taken to change this business skills module during course revalidation. The introduction of the open source e-portfolio software, Mahara in September 2009 was used with 500 new students. Essentially, students could save and add to a range of information in the form of text and images protected by their

password. To share selected information, they could create a view or views. A view can be seen as a 'blank canvas' or just an empty sheet of paper. Content can be dragged and dropped, making this a relatively easy process that produces an electronic self representation (see screenshot).



### Implementation

As part of this business skills module, students were required to submit 4 views for 4 different audiences; the Personal Tutor; the Placement Office; a potential employer; and a social view. Some guidance was needed, and students were told that for example a CV would be expected in the employer view. The views were expected to evidence a range of skills and plans for personal development demonstrating their reflective capacity and the action planning skills. Staff had the chance to attend a 3 hour workshop to learn and develop their own skills with Mahara. Students received one hour of Mahara training during scheduled lessons and 4 weeks of technical support offered in form of drop-in sessions. Although the support was quite limited the student results have been very positive.

### Findings so far (Outcomes)

The outcomes of the module still need to be fully evaluated but the early indications are encouraging. In practical terms, a transition was made to an e-portfolio involving 500 students, 19 workshop groups and 13 tutors with few operational problems. The e-portfolio format allowed students to produce exceptionally good work in a creative way. The use of 4 different views, allowed students to critically consider the information each of these stakeholders would require. Tutors, in particular commented on the value of the view created for them. How many first year tutors, at a glance, can see a photo of their student, see their educational or employment history and be aware of their interests? Students did make good use of images (we are talking

about the facebook generation) and often added Utube links or their own personal video clips which they uploaded.

What about your experience with international students? Would you not like to mention this?

### The Future

The introduction of an e-portfolio has prompted further discussion and a number of changes are being made. The tutor view will now be submitted mid-term for formative assessment offering the opportunity to give voice feedback (a further innovation for staff and students). In response to staff and student feedback, 3 views will be submitted at the end of term for assessment. The employer and social views will be kept but the placement office view will be replaced with a PDP view. The course team will need to revisit the assessment criteria to provide a clearer direction for students, and to build on the good work from this academic year. Students were able to evidence their skills more creatively which was not expected, in addition they also were prepared to address issues of family and cultural influence.

### Summary

An e-portfolio can be seen as a replacement of clumsy paper folders but in our experience an e-portfolio can do more than that. It can evidence skills in a more dynamic way with the inclusion of links to spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations and databases rather than printed outcomes. Students are willing to use a range of selected images and video that does say more about personal communication and teamwork than a few paragraphs of text. It is also clear that students are prepared to be more imaginative provided this is not seen as too risky a thing to do. The challenge now is to more fully evaluate the use of an e-portfolio (given that we see no going back) and find assessment criteria that more closely match what potentially the student can do.

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## Piloting, Informing, Embedding, Revisiting and Evaluating e PDP in a School of Arts, Media and Education at the University of Bolton

Barbara E Thomas and Maria Rodriguez-Yborra

The authors are involved in on-going research of the challenge and evaluation faced during the implementation of pilot studies of an ePDP exercise in the School of Arts, Media and Education (SAME), at the University of Bolton (UoB). The inclusion of personal development planning (PDP), is a University requirement for all programmes and was traditionally embedded through a text based/visual journal approach in Art and Design. With the emergence of new technologies that could support the traditional PDP the school explored a more flexible approach using an open source VLE (Moodle) to implement the existing PDP framework. The experience provided the school with data to inform full implementation of ePDP through Moodle and to further explore the optimum process, infrastructure and research that was needed to support future developments across the SAME more effectively.



In 1997 the Dearing Report recommended the introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) in Higher Education (HE). HEI's were expected to introduce 'progress files' which would be used to record achievement ('progress file') and also '...monitor, build and reflect upon the personal development'. As a result UK HE moved toward the development of a PDP approach for students. At the University of Bolton a framework was developed (Burkinshaw 2005) and this resulted in a validation process to embed PDP within modules. Key features of the framework were its student focused activities around a structured on-going

process involving - reviewing, reflecting, action planning, target setting and monitoring. Intended to be embedded within curricula at each level of study and different modes of learning (including external to the university) students were to be encouraged to reflect on their learning and career development holistically. The framework identified the use of technology to support the UoB PDP approach but identified that the potential application of technology in student PDP (WebCT) had resulted in issues which prevented progress at that time.



The recommendations from the Goodrich (2007) evaluation report stated that there was a need to *'revisit and review the implementation of PDP studying at the University of Bolton'*. To build on good practice in the report a recommendation was made that PDP should be foregrounded in Learning and Teaching and that this would *'involve investment in resources of staffing and staff time for both academic and academic professional services'*. A review of PDP in the Schools and its appropriateness was recommended and thus the e PDP (PIeR) project was developed in the SAME to attempt to respond to this need. .

Students, studying selected modules, were willing to engage in the new platform and minor adjustments were made based on their recommendations and tutor findings at the first pilot stage. The Interactive Poster will describe the process using Cowans' (2006) reflective diagram to underpin the action research approach (Kemmis based on Maclsaac 1995).

Based on the University of Bolton's PDP framework around a table of development activity against skills, knowledge and understanding (this had previously been simplified in Art and Design as students had found the text based approach insensitive to their creative practice) it was agreed that the revised table would be used by all students involved in the pilot as a basis for evaluation

and to create links to external websites, blogs etc.. if students wished to do this.

Preliminary outcomes show that while Moodle resulted in a more flexible VLE for ePDP, cross platform and cross browser issues were apparent particularly the compatibility with Apple Mac's used in Art & Design. In addition it became apparent that students and staff require more holistic support for understanding and applying PDP despite the technology and a more flexible approach to the use of the existing PDP framework to cater for the diverse range of disciplines in the SAME.

The culture of ePDP is slowly changing due to the greater involvement of students and staff with technology and the challenge is to ensure that the PDP concept is fully and holistically understood and embedded within the SAME and on the agreed VLE platform the university is progressing to. A new more interactive and integrating platform has been identified in AME for ePDP – Mahara Open source software, which, if supported by the UoB, might greatly enhance the UoB ePDP approach, experience and good practice, but this initiative is just in its very early stages, and future exploratory research will be required to assess its potential.

**KEYWORDS: ePDP, VLE, Art & Design, eLearning, flexibility, pilot**

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**CRA** CENTRE FOR  
RECORDING  
ACHIEVEMENT

## **CRA Annual Residential DIARY DATE!**

**Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> – Thursday 25<sup>th</sup>  
November 2010**

**Conference Aston, Birmingham**

Please contact **Cath Hewson**,  
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