

Chapter 7: Running a Group Assessment in Mahara

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Summary

*Mahara*¹⁸ is an e-portfolio platform with an educational focus. With support, Mahara works as a flexible, multimodal platform for group assessment. As a multimedia-enabled platform for student work, it is particularly valuable where there is need for a level playing field. It is important to be clear up front that students are conscious of the education-specific nature of Mahara and may well raise *Wordpress*,¹⁹ with its huge global usage, as a better platform in employability terms. However, if you do not have an institutional Wordpress installation, Mahara serves well.

Groups of students were required to produce digital exhibitions for assessment. The exhibitions needed to include a range of different audio-visual and social media, and students needed to be able to control how these were organised and encountered by their viewers. Staff needed to get students into groups with minimal fuss and confusion, apply a deadline fairly and give access to assessors.

Implementation

The pioneering department's teaching committee made a decision about platforms. After looking at a comparison of different possibilities (<https://goo.gl/m0etXI>), they chose Mahara because it was flexible and would be supported by a responsive team with an educational remit.

There are a few things to flag up about using Mahara for group work:

Support students to work as a group — Unlike a wiki, Mahara can only give very patchy information about who did what in a group. If you want students to cooperate and influence each other rather than simply dividing the work into individual territories, you will need to explicitly guide them to do this. Mahara's *Page Comments* are one way that students can influence without directly editing each other's work. The *Group Forum* (which needs to be set up by an *Administrator*) is a possible site for a group to externalise decision-making, although third-party platforms dedicated to consensus building, such as *Loomio*,²⁰ may work better.

Choose the best time to induct students — Do this hands on and in groups, and not too early so they have an idea of what they would like to do and are ready to make and enact some decisions together. We provided an online worksheet which was easy to navigate out of order, and encouraged the students to start on their projects rather than slavishly working through the exercises. A couple of experienced Mahara users were on hand to answer questions.

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18 <https://mahara.org/>

19 <https://wordpress.org/>

20 <https://www.loomio.org/>

Get students into groups on Mahara in advance — This saves precious time and avoids disorientation. Where there are many groups, a Mahara administrator can do this with three separate CSV uploads: the first establishes students and colleagues as users (if they have never logged in previously); the second establishes the groups; the third populates those groups with those users in their respective roles. See <https://wiki.ucl.ac.uk/x/3YCKAw> for guidance.

Give all students the same Group role – Member is probably best — Originally the Group ‘About’ page seemed a logical choice of home page since this is the landing page when you click a link to the *Group*. However, in order to edit that ‘About’ page, *Group Members* need to have a *Group Administrator* role – but this in turn creates hassle since *Administrators* retain editing rights after the deadline. It is far better for students to have a *Member* role, and giving them all the same role is more equitable.

Keep two members of staff as Administrators in the Group — Groups need at least one *Administrator*, and two is safest. Be aware that the presence of staff may inhibit students from drafting and experimenting there, unless steps are taken to reassure them and set out expectations.

Let students know how they can contribute work — Students can contribute to a group in two contexts. They can either work within the *Group* context, in which case the work becomes editable by all other *Members*; or they can *Share* work created within their own *Portfolio*. Assuming they have made this copiable, this latter way allows them to retain their original while also allowing the *Group* to work on the copy. However, the former way is more usual, because it is more obvious.

Applying a deadline — Assuming students have a *Member* role, then in the Group’s *Settings* a *Group Administrator* can set the *Editability* to the required deadline.

Making an assessor-friendly space — *Group Members* gather all *Pages* into one *Collection*. The *Collection* allows a *Navigation* block (menu of pages) to be generated, and this can be placed on each *Page* in the *Collection*. *Collections* also allow *Members* to share all the *Pages* at once, which is another way to give access to others. The first *Page* of any *Collection* is the landing page for that *Collection*, and students should be supported to make that effective as an orientating, inviting first impression.

Make sure that assessors can easily find the work — The failsafe way is for a *Group Administrator* to add the assessors to the groups whose work they are assessing. Mahara does not let groups submit work for assessment – only individuals can do that – so an alternative approach is needed. If the assessors are not added to the groups, then permissions management is required (because students and staff are usually reluctant to make pages public before assessment). This requires students to follow a further set of instructions and staff to check to make sure they have followed these correctly. So you can see why, if assessors are part of the *Group*, things become much easier.

We have guidance on all the above aspects in our *Guides for Particular Modules* section of our *MyPortfolio Resource Centre* released under a Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike licence: <https://wiki.ucl.ac.uk/x/DwXxAQ>.

Evaluation

We have evaluated this use of MyPortfolio in two contexts using questionnaires and focus groups, observation during induction, and opportunistically asking students.

Benefits and Challenges

Mahara is a highly flexible environment – staff are often delighted with what students produce there and award high marks. Students with less technical experience appreciate Mahara.

However, students were split on whether or not Mahara allowed them to present their materials as they wished, and tended to disagree over whether Mahara allowed them to express themselves more meaningfully than in an essay (unsurprising since these students had gained admittance to their course of study on the strength of their essays). To address this we would recommend making your best case to students for multimodal work. On the technical front we would recommend stripping down the theme to as close to a blank canvas as possible, and ensuring that students are inducted to the full range of possibilities in Mahara and have a range of examples to refer to.

Mahara is not widely used outside education, and you need to be prepared to justify its use to students. It is also felt to be quite constraining for technically advanced students, so be clear about the assessment criteria and emphasise the importance of a level playing field for a fair assessment. If you want to reward technical acumen, allow students to depart from Mahara. You may need to repeat these justifications for the duration of the projects.

Out of the box, Mahara is not primarily a collaborative environment, although it is an effective cooperative one. In other words, students can contribute their bit, discuss in a forum and comment on each element, but Mahara does not store versions for comparison, nor does it record contributions in a fine-grained way. So if you want to find out more about who contributed and influenced the work, you will need to rely on students' own accounts of what they did.

Students were more likely to resolve their Mahara difficulties on their own or by asking fellow students, rather than with staff guidance. Because (left to themselves) only a small number of students in each group did the Mahara work, and this tended to be last minute, we expect this caused frustration and anxiety. To alleviate this, we recommend offering drop-in sessions in the run-up to the deadline and/or assessing draft work.

Take-Aways

Do induct students, ideally in person and in their groups, and ideally once they have begun to think about how to present their work. Do be available to support them in the run-up to the deadline. Do explain and repeat why you decided they should work in Mahara. Do make a range of examples of successful work available, and point students to a Mahara features demo (making one yourself will get you acquainted with Mahara). Please do make use of our guidance at <https://wiki.ucl.ac.uk/x/DwXxAQ>.