

JON BOWEN:

SECONDARY SENIOR MANAGER SABBATICAL REPORT 2012

At the beginning of Term 3, 2012 I began my SM sabbatical: an opportunity to embark on some research and professional learning into areas of interest and areas of significant work for me.

I planned a range of focus areas throughout my sabbatical and this report will deal with each area individually. They are

- participate in the Mahara UK conference (planned to be the ICIE international conference, but a great opportunity at the Mahara e-portfolio conference caused a change of direction)
- visit schools with significant initiatives in areas of personal work focus
- undertake a research programme
- establish and engage in two online communities

The Mahara 2012 Conference, Lancaster University, UK

Mahara is the e-portfolio software used by the MoE to provide the [MyPortfolio](#) e-portfolio platform. As a committed, and several-year user of MyPortfolio I was most interested to attend the conference at Lancaster university following the move of the International Conference for Education from Durham University UK to Jerusalem, making attendance impractical.

Following the submission of a paper for conference consideration I was invited to give a keynote address. This is the synopsis of my presentation:

Keynote: Using Mahara to integrate, enable and enhance learning

Jon Bowen - St Peter's College, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Part of the [vision for eLearning at St Peter's College](#) is "to enable self managing, lifelong learners".

Access to Mahara (MyPortfolio), and other applications, has been provided to support learning throughout the College.

Students are aware that others will view their portfolio at some point; sharing learning, alongside receiving and giving feedback, is at the core of St Peter's MyPortfolio development. As students become more confident they are also responding to the increased opportunities to connect with others. This has resulted in improved outcomes for students. Students have been able to:

- build a portfolio of evidence and reflections in response to relevant learning opportunities in and out of school
- share a portfolio of creative ideas, in order to receive feedback on how those ideas could be used and extended
- confidently adapt and respond to challenges of managing learning in a digital environment, including accessing and organising content and maintaining evidence of learning

The St Peter's journey has highlighted the importance of:

- developing a school wide strategy for integrating an ePortfolio approach
- planning professional development that includes time for effective integration of e-learning
- recognising the value of student voice when selecting digital tools and recommending uses that are relevant for learning
- developing good organisational relationships with technical/network staff and a shared understanding of the school's vision for e-Learning

Following the keynote presentation there was opportunity to discuss how the use of e-portfolios for evidence gathering in a range of professions is becoming widespread. City Councils, health service organisations, and other large and smaller organisations were represented. There were education representatives in attendance but, with the large investment of government money into IT infrastructure and software provision in the UK, it seems many schools have opted for an out of the box package rather than build their own Mahara installation.

There was particular interest in MyPortfolio as a product; how it works, how is it administered, and how problems are dealt with locally and nationally were all discussed broadly. Richard Wyles (Totara Learning Solutions, Wellington) added depth to the discussion – it was great to meet him half way around the world.

It was particularly good to highlight the excellent work of Paul Seiler and his MLE team at the MoE, who led the development and introduction of MyPortfolio. There is a legacy of excellent creativity and collaboration from the team's efforts. It was also great to highlight the significant investment into the services offered by Catalyst IT, and particularly the work of Kristina Hoepfner as she has

developed a user-friendly operating manual (Mahara Cookbook) for all users of Mahara and MyPortfolio.

There are implications for schools in the use of any eportfolio system. There must be a vision in place that includes a plan for widespread access to reasonable internet connectivity. Some would say that UFB is essential but I'd argue that, from direct experience, it is possible to establish and maintain excellent connectivity using speeds of 10-15Mbps (unlicensed radio connection). St Peter's have established and grown the vibrant use of web and cloud resources (Google, MyPortfolio etc) prior to the UFB roll-out. At the time of writing this report (Dec 2012) our UFB connection is not live, as we wait for a sustainable price point to reach the Palmerston North marketplace! The second implication is that the vision should, I believe, include a plan for a shift in responsibility with regard to evidence gathering. The nature of an e-portfolio is that the content belongs to the user. For schools, this can be a significant shift in ownership of learning material, work-in-progress and outcomes.

In conclusion, my time at the conference highlighted how far New Zealand schools are along the 21st Century Education track. The Values, Key Competencies, Pedagogical foci, and general go-forward feel of the NZ Curriculum set a great potential platform for learning in the physical and digital realms, if schools choose the challenge of change. Part of the challenge as I've already mentioned is to "give it away" – to develop student competency in owning their own work and progress. However, another significant issue is the training of teachers and other staff in digital competencies that will allow them to integrate MyPortfolio, and other elearning opportunities into their existing and developing pedagogies. [Here is another perspective on the conference from "Moodlefairy"](#).

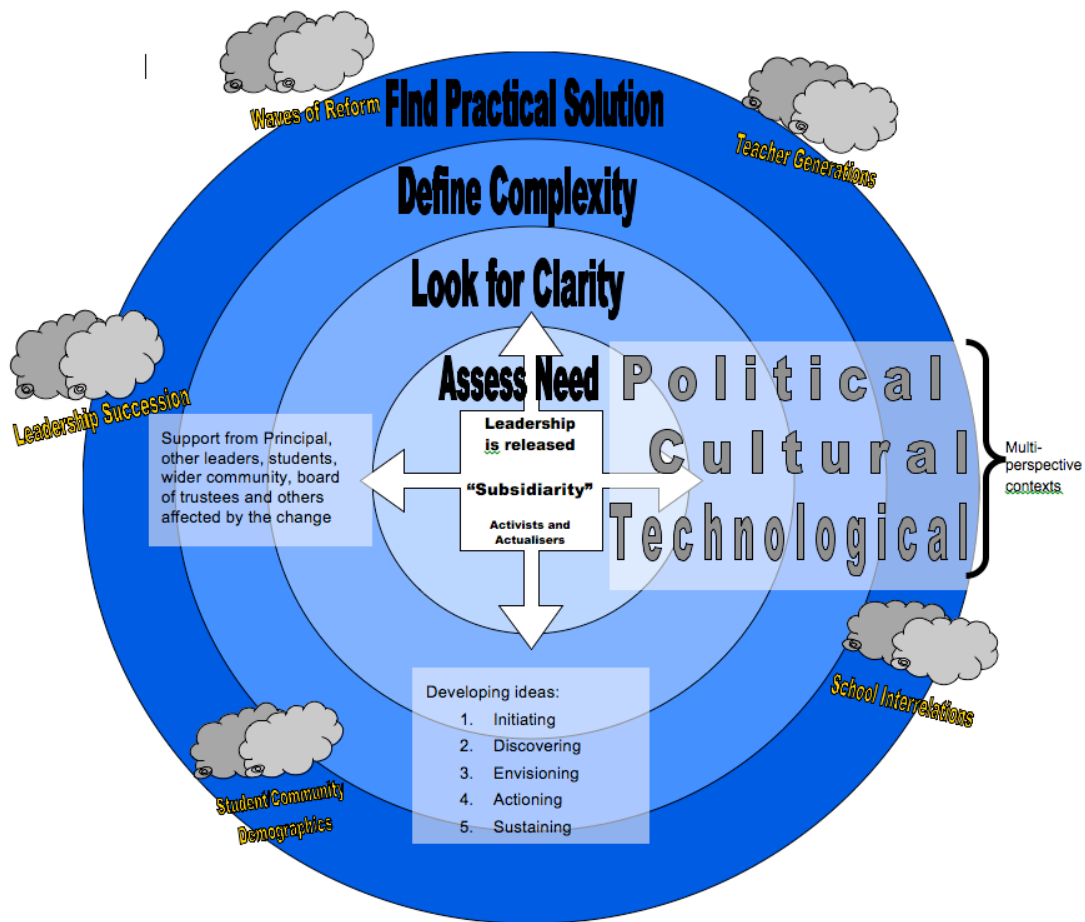
Leading Curriculum Change

My current portfolio, as Deputy Principal at St Peter's, includes the leadership of a significant Junior School Curriculum area (Year 7-9). This area of school – Projects – replaced our modules and options in Year 7, 8 and 9 at the beginning of 2011. Projects is a development in our curriculum in direct response to the New Zealand Curriculum (2007), seeking to provide teaching and learning environments that foster and encourage the learning of a wide range of Project Core Skills and competencies. It continues to develop, morph and change as we learn and some significant discussion, thinking and planning time was warranted as part of my sabbatical time.

The plan/scheme/outline for Project teaching and learning at St Peter's can be viewed or downloaded here - [The planning/scheme for Projects](#).

The Projects area requires considerable commitment from staff and the College continue to provide an additional hour of planning time for each of the 11 Project teachers. This time is utilised as time for team meetings, individual planning and collaborative development.

My experience and discussions with other teachers and leaders shows that the leading of educational change is complex. My model below is a visual example of some of the leadership journey that I have taken in the Projects area and some of the issues that other change-leaders face. Change starts in the middle and, I believe, can only really move to the outside if the route of the change is collaboration, community and leadership subsidiarity (the people most affected by change taking the lead).



During my UK trip I visited schools in Middlesbrough (Trinity College), Nottingham (Blue Coat Academy) and Derby (Merrell College).

The conversation was vibrant and straight to the point. In discussing technology as part of a 21st Century Education solution, there was clear agreement – technology may need to be present but it IS NOT *the* answer.

During discussion around curriculum leadership and decision-making and the key components for making good curriculum decisions toward 21st Century Education outcomes conversation centred around three key components:

- Great teaching
- Enabled learning
- Good relationships

Technology was identified as being important – something that could enhance in each area – but without great teaching, enabled learning and good relationships, even the best technology in the most exceptional school campus would do little to aid authentic learning.

In conclusion when looking at curriculum change and development ‘best practice’ is a great focus to have – that is moving forward with what is working well in our own and other organisations. It's great to learn from others, develop our vision, and make changes/move forward under that umbrella.

However, if we're already operating a 'best practice' environment, is there anything more?

I believe that there is and my discussions and observations suggest that curriculum innovation is looking for 'next practice' opportunities. That is being proactive in developing curriculum opportunities for students. Developing what we are able to do (our capacity) as a staff and as a school and looking at what it is students will need in the future, in order to succeed.

Working with online communities

This area of the sabbatical was the one area that I found most difficult to complete. Not least of the difficulties was the fact that, for much of the time I was based in the UK and trying to work online with people in New Zealand who were 12 hours time difference away. It was either going to be difficult time-wise for me or for them! As I was on sabbatical, the ‘short straw’ was with me! Class time and work time began at 9am so that was 9pm for me. The New Zealand afternoon, I decided, would not be a focus of the sabbatical study as this would have meant early hours of the morning for me. While written with an element of humour time difference is an issue to consider, when we're

connecting with learners and other educators around the world as part of learning programmes or professional development.

The online communities I chose to work with were set up and established in the weeks prior to my sabbatical beginning. They were Music classes, where students are required to gather and build examples of evidence of their musical development.

Using MyPortfolio students began a collection of pages as part of a 'group' (the name for community within MyPortfolio) that included pages for Solo Performance, Group Performance and Composition.

Most students taking part in the community were part of a physical music class of either Senior School Musicians (NCEA) or a Year 10 Music class. However, as part of the study I also included a Year 13 student studying music independently due to a timetable conflict.

Students were asked to gather specific pieces of evidence and include them on their 'pages' (the name in MyPortfolio for a page viewable by others) within their portfolio. Pages were then shared with their respective Group.

Students, after some initial learning within the MyPortfolio framework, were able to gather a great deal of useable evidence toward achievement of school-based assessments and toward achievement of NCEA Standards. The Level 3 student, working independently of a class gathered very high quality evidence and achieved toward excellence in his Solo Performance standard. You can browse copies of the Solo Performance Pages – [they are available here](#).

The Level 3 student in question was clearly very focused on achieving at a high level and put a great deal of effort into preparing pieces for performance and assessment. Having worked in previous years in the classroom with the same student I suggest that, in part, it was the digital nature of the evidence gathering activity that encouraged such a high level of achievement. Being forced to watch yourself as you post video evidence for formative teacher feedback is a humbling experience, and one that I know caused a few video retakes in several instances during the trial. This self-review, as a part of formative feedback, is a great potential use of portfolios. MyPortfolio works particularly well for this purpose, as there is a function to comment on any page multiple times.

The trial was a success. Students were engaged in gathering evidence and, while the quality of the page content varied greatly, all students gathered some evidence toward achievement in all areas of study. This is in direct contrast to previous years, working on paper and with clearly defined dates for

evidence gathering within the classroom – when not all students were able to have their pieces suitably prepared for recording during the time given in class. The result was that either the student did not submit their material for assessment or there was a great deal of running around and additional teaching time given to preparing a space for assessment preparation out of class. The use of MyPortfolio has given the responsibility for gathering work-in-progress evidence over to the students. While there are still classroom opportunities for assessment, there is now a great opportunity for students to receive formative feedback as soon as they feel they are ready. During the trial, this resulted in around 50% of the students achieving a grade higher than the indicated grade expected of them at the beginning of 2012, due to their previous experience and achievement. No students taking part in the trial achieved lower than expected.

Conclusion

I very much appreciated the opportunity to regather myself and take a look at the work that I do from outside of the context of actually doing that work. A very heartfelt thankyou to whoever was involved in the selection process. I feel revitalised, inspired (particularly by some of my school visits and interactions with other professional communities), and connected.

My initial sabbatical proposal was too broad and it was necessary to narrow the focus so each part of the proposal related more closely. It was through initial discussions at the Mahara conference that drew me toward making the use of portfolios my focus for each area of sabbatical. While this was not entirely possible due to my curriculum focus in the Projects area, I feel satisfied that my time was well spent and that I've developed deeper professional understanding of the use of eportfolios and the work that we need to do to ensure they are integrated meaningfully.

From an inquiry perspective the successful use of e-portfolios has generated the need for further investigation of their integration in broader contexts.

Jon Bowen. December 2012.