Student ePortfolios: Phil McGuinness

How do you engage students with ePortfolios?

So when we are looking at how to engage students, mainly in colleges, that's, at least most of my work is how to engage students in colleges. A lot of this work revolves around training up the class representatives. So if the class representative is able to give feedback on what students value about their ePortfolio, and what they value about the benefits that they get from it, I think that's quite a good way to start moving the discussion on. By engaging with the class reps who have already stepped forward and they have already said, you know, we are willing to take a lead and you know they tend to be confident individuals who are going into it with the mindset that they want to improve theirs and classmates' education. I think by training them and making them as effective as possible, that's how we can start to get the best results for finding out what students really value in ePortfolios.

What impact is social media having on students' college experience?

I think one of the things that's really interesting about that is that we are seeing increasingly the amount of social media that's being used in e-assessment. So for example, there's a great deal more flexibility now as opposed to a few years ago with regards to students being able to use photos; they have uploaded to Facebook or they have uploaded to Instagram, and actually to use these in assessment. And I think that's quite a challenge for some people in the sector, I mean including myself. I'm only three or four years out of education. I think you have students who are comfortable interacting with the lecturers on Facebook or Twitter or something like that. And then there's plenty of students who wouldn't be too keen to be Facebook friends with their lecturer and have the lecturer see what they are doing. You see some lecturers who are so able and so competent with using something like Facebook to interact with their students, especially looking at the creative industries, or the courses that go in the creative industries. So if we are looking at music production or creative drawing or even technical drawing, I think there we are able to see really quite closely the fruits of that collaboration. Because you will have lecturers who are working, who may be working in the field as well as teaching it. And then I think that's really really good for the students, to be able to see the kind of work that their lecturer might be uploading on Facebook or uploading

on Soundcloud or something like that. And so if their lecturer has got this forum to demonstrate their professional practice, I think that's really really good for students to be able to get a hold of.

The difficulty that you get is when you have this fantastic lecturer who is able to use Facebook or Twitter to communicate with their students and get the best results from it and then a lecturer next door, you know there's no problem with them not being comfortable with it, saying, I actually don't particularly want my students to have my Facebook details, I don't want them to have my Twitter details. Maybe they don't think it's appropriate. Maybe they don't even have a profile. And then there's a real difficulty there, because is that lecturer then a worse lecturer?

What do students and academics need to consider when interacting online?

Well I think there's the obvious questions of appropriateness. I think if you are Facebook friends, it's obviously going to change the output of the personal things that you put up. And the very nature of social media is you can't or it's very difficult to divide your output into what is personal and what is private.

I think one of the best examples I have seen of lecturers interacting with students in this way, is lecturers who have essentially a teaching profile. If we are looking at something like music production, they have a Soundcloud which doesn't give any personal information away, but allows them to upload and share everything that they are producing. I think it's less important for the students. I think it's more important for the lecturer to be able to control their profile and their privacy. I mean there's even more questions about, you know, should you, do you then feel under pressure about responding to things outside of work time? And I think there's maybe more to think about there.

The future of social media in academia

I mean it's just the world. This is just the way that students interact, it's the way that people interact. I think people will gradually maybe professionalise their social output. And I think especially in a learning context, I can see in the future people having a lot of interaction based around a student profile they create. And I think you are seeing the beginnings of this in some ePortfolios at the moment. I think at the moment you have a semi-productive tension between teaching staff who feel completely comfortable interacting socially with students on social media, and teaching staff who say that this is just a no, straight away. But I think that with new generations of teaching staff coming through, I think that's going to be the way they have worked, and the way they have studied. And so I think that that's probably going to become the norm for better or worse. And maybe it's time that we had a conversation about how to make the best out of it.