**Creating and Teaching Art Online with John Casey and Chris Follows of ALTO and Process Arts**

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*Education-Portal.com recently attended the OpenCourseWare Consortium (OCWC), a gathering of educators and professionals interested in the availability and application of free online college course materials known as OpenCourseWare (OCW). We had a chance to speak with several industry leaders, including Chris Follows and John Casey, the innovators behind ALTO (Arts, Learning and Teaching Online) and Process Arts, which aim to provide OCW for teaching art and design via the Internet.*

***Education-Portal.com:*** *Can you talk a little bit about how you got the idea of teaching arts online?*

**Chris Follows:** For myself that goes back to when I was a student. You documented your practice. That was for part of your portfolio, and eventually formed part of your assessment. So I was interested in the documentation side of practice from that stage.

When I eventually worked in a university, I started documenting students as well. I tried to encourage them to talk on camera, which is quite difficult for anyone, especially for a student who's still trying to work things out and explore ideas. I was surprised by how well students could articulate their practice. I thought it could potentially be useful for other students. The environment of an art school is one where ideas are shared and people feed off each other.

I started doing small videos. The university began using them for promotion purposes, and I thought there must be more use for that information. It developed into the Process Arts website.

**John Casey:** The ALTO project came along through recent government funding from [**JISC**](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/) and the [**HEA**](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/) to help U.K. colleges and universities to join the OER (open educational resources) movement. We concentrated initially on setting up a repository of learning resources to emulate the work already done by members of the OCWC - which is a good place to start. The OCWC been going ten years. It puts entire courses online in a format that faculty and students are familiar with: course outlines, syllabi, assessments, learning outcomes, lectures and notes and stuff like that.

Now it's regarded as old-school by the online learning community. But it's a solid foundation for what's coming next. We're looking at combining the foundation of large-scale educational resources with the work Chris has been doing with Process Arts. It's got some interesting twists for the open community. We think the arts community has got a lot to offer to the development of the next stage of OERs. The area Chris has been exploring is highly relevant because it's smack-bang in the middle of social networking. We're creating a workshop, a studio space to enhance OCW.

***E-P:*** *How has the arts community responded to ALTO and Process Arts?*

**JC:** They're very excited about it.

**CF:** The majority's positive; they want to be involved. Some will get involved. Some would like to but there are time constraints and some technical issues. But Process Arts was developed to be as simple as possible so people could get onto it. There's been success in that people have actually commented saying they're (terrified) technophobes, but they got to grips with Process Arts really quick, which is a positive.

There are other areas of growth that are naturally forming throughout universities. You've got online portfolios. You've got wikis and people setting up their own websites. The ALTO project actually formalizes it and makes it official. We're proposing to use ALTO branding to extend out into what people are doing at the university. They can choose to expose part of their work and brand it with ALTO. If someone has already got a wiki or a website out there, they can formalize that a little more by adopting ALTO's brand by using our logo and using creative commons licensing on it. What already exists is forming ALTO, rather than the other way around. We're blending old-style OCW with newer social networking and linking them together. It's still under development. We're not claiming to have the answers. It's a quickly moving project at the moment.

***E-P:*** *As ALTO grows, do you have any plans to expand to other types of art, like music?*

**CF:** It's been important to keep it small because it's been low-funded. We try and get it right before it gets too out-of-control. It would be nice to expand. The first stage would be to create a good, substantial in-house repository and ecosystem, build a good body of resources. We've got that already, but we're going to have lots more. We'll then open that up to other institutions to see how it can be used and reused.

There are lots of options in regard to including industry in the whole process as well. Especially with university fees, there's very much a push for universities to make clear to students how they can make money, how they can make a career from the arts. So I think including the industries with this could be really good. Potentially, you could follow a student through their education and into their career path as well. It's good for students because they're starting to think about how to communicate their practice through media. That's the future. That's where they're going to be communicating to new artists.

**JC:** I think that's a repeatable model we're in the process of developing with others. Collaboration is a big aspect of our work. We've possibly got a repeatable model for art and design institutions everywhere. It's a mixture of informal social media with more traditional formal media. It gives the opportunity for students and staff to have their stuff placed in an official university storage facility for reference later in their careers.

That mixture of formal long-term repository with the more memorable social network element is probably an ideal mix. You can develop your stuff, then choose what you want to migrate out of the social layer into long-term university storage. That way the university and the student benefit.

***E-P:*** *Chris, is there anything else you'd like to say about your projects?*

**CF:** **No InterWiki reference defined in properties for Wiki called "Process Arts\http"!** is open to students and staff. I think that's the uniqueness of it. We're an institution that's made up of six colleges. This is one of the biggest art schools in Europe, if not the biggest. And what I found back in 2007 is that no one was talking to each other. There was no cross-college communication. Process Arts was developed with the idea that students and staff across colleges can communicate and share practice.

Students have a lot of content. Staff members are creating these nicely made instructional videos that help communicate techniques and process. They receive huge hits, around 20,000-30,000 per video. And the comments on there are amazing. Across the country people say they've been trying to work these things out through textbooks. They can't do it. They watch the videos of the whole process and they've got it.

**JC:** We're beginning to answer some of the questions that were in the open community about granularity. We're going to be exploring the relationship between big objects like coursework with granular objects. In my opinion, you need both together. My experience is that teachers can be quite ruthless when they want something. They'll dive into some OCW and strip out the bit they need. What we've got to do is make it easy for them to do that.

Etienne Wenger, the guy that came up with the communities of practice concept, believes that sharable objects, whether digital or physical, actually mediate between those communities. You've got different cultures, different ways of working, and Chris' videos mediate between them. They can use an object found in ALTO to communicate with each other. It's like a translation portal between communities of practice, which is quite exciting. It's the same with larger resources we're producing. We're aiming to produce an entire undergraduate degree in ceramics. That's going to be able to put communities of practice around the world in touch with each other.

The important thing about this is it's accessible both in terms of being on the open Web but also accessible to make. You don't have to have fancy kits to make useful stuff. That's a concern in the open community: is my stuff good enough? As long as the basic idea and production are good enough, it doesn't have to be Hollywood production values to be useful. That's important for sustainability going forward. Educational quality isn't the same as media quality.