



LIFE'S LEARNING JOURNEY

Founder and Chief Mischief Maker, Shane Sutherland, charts the epic journey of PebblePad from fledging eportfolio platform to enterprise-wide Learning Journey Platform. Grab hold of your buoyancy aid because this deeply personal reflection is going to be quite the ride.





We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot

About the author



CEO and founder of PebblePad, Shane Sutherland, has been a big presence in the world of portfolios and personal learning ever since the company's inception in 2004. It's not just his boundless enthusiasm and towering capacity for innovation that keeps PebblePad at the top of its game ... when you're 6' 10" having a list of great ideas 'as long as your arm' is somewhat of a competitive advantage!

CHAPTER 1

THE UNDRUNK SHERRY AND THE ABANDONED PORTFOLIO

Somewhere near the start of this story I'm sat in my office at the School of Education at the University of Wolverhampton. On the shelf is a bottle of sherry I took along on my first day, somehow imagining that I'd sip it with colleagues during our academic conversations, or with my favourite students during tutorials. When I left the School of Education for a promotion to the Centre for Learning and Teaching the sherry was left behind. I was a little more grounded, the sherry remained unopened! Sadly, I also left behind – despite the protestations of my great friend (and exceptional PebblePaddler) Julie Hughes – my teaching portfolio. A weighty lever-arch binder into which I had, in earlier years, poured so much of myself, reflecting on my learning and experience. On this particular day I decided it had no further value; I couldn't be bothered to transport it on the next stage of my journey and so, along with many other artefacts of my journey from fire-fighter to principle lecturer in education, out of the window it went, into a wheelie bin sitting one floor below. I guess that's a story I should return to at some point!

This telling of the story really starts with one of the few things I did take with me. One of those sage, life-enriching quotes you encounter on the walls of teachers' offices around the world. This well-known quote from T.S. Eliot read:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

The words spoke to me. They had always resonated with my curiosity about living, learning and journeying. Interestingly it occurs to me now, even as I write, that I was once able to recite all 92 lines of Tolkien's 'Errantry' – another poem about journeying and one upon which I based my keynote at the 3rd Telling Stories Conference (a precursor to our PebbleBashes):

There was a merry passenger,
a messenger, a mariner:
he built a gilded gondola
to wander in, and had in her
a load of yellow oranges
and porridge for his provender;
he perfumed her with marjoram
and cardamom and lavender.

The belief that life is a journey is a commonly held one. We make plans, consider them as they unfold, react to unexpected twists and turns, accrue memories and memorabilia and recount various stories of our journey to anyone willing to listen. Many of you will know where I'm going with this. Right from its very beginning, PebblePad was designed to help learners plan for, make sense of, evidence and tell their stories of learning and achievement. In the early days we referred to PebblePad as 'a portfolio'. That seemed to be the camp we were joining.

At the 2004 EIfEL ePortfolio conference in La Rochelle we eagerly learned all we could about the world we were entering. Three years later at the same conference in Maastricht we were absolutely clear that PebblePad was an eportfolio and so, by extension, an eportfolio was:

A system which allows users to record abilities, events or plans which are personally significant; allows these records to be linked, augmented or evidenced by other data sources; and promotes reflection on these entries. It allows users to integrate institutional data with personal data that are recorded and reviewed over time, and have been enriched by commentary and feedback from the recipients of shared assets.

It is a system with tools for aggregating assets in multiple forms; for telling myriad stories to diverse audiences and provides absolute user-control over what is shared, with whom, for what purpose and for how long. It is a personal repository; a personal diary; a feedback and collaboration system; and a digital theatre – where the audience is by invitation only.

Of course, different people held different views and I recall lengthy conversations with the very wise and thoughtful Barbara Cambridge and the brilliant Kathy Yancy who would not yield to my view – no matter how passionate or demonstrative I became! Of course they were right. The definition I held so dear was not in fact a definition of a portfolio, it was a definition of PebblePad which was not, after all, a portfolio, rather it was a tool where, amongst other things, portfolios could be created.



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CHAPTER 2

PEBBLEPAD

THE EPORTFOLIO PLATFORM

Presumably I reflected on those conversations. I certainly tested new ideas out on one of the popular mail lists of the time and, abetted by other contributors, by October of that same year had arrived at a better understanding of what a portfolio was. It must have been a reasonable definition as JISC adopted it in their excellent publications of the time:

An e-portfolio is a purposeful aggregation of digital items – ideas, evidence, reflections, feedback etc, which ‘presents’ a selected audience with evidence of a person’s learning and/or ability. SUTHERLAND AND POWELL (2007)

Having settled on a widely agreed definition of eportfolio, one which existed in similar guises both before and after our version, it was time to find ways to better describe PebblePad.

At this point I’m reminded of our very first Telling Stories conference in 2004. It was called “Defining and Describing ePortfolios” and it seems to me that it’s perhaps worth just pausing a moment and clarifying the difference between definitions and descriptions. I’m sure there are more erudite explanations, but for the purposes of this story I’m using a definition to refer to what a thing is, and a description to explain what it does.

I have always been very happy with the comprehensive definition we used at Maastricht and elsewhere. We were just clearer now that it referred to the platform and not to one of its outputs. What’s less clear is whether it is in fact a definition or actually a description. A further problem with this defi-scription is its length. At 128 words long it’s hardly snappy, memorable or digestible. Yet another problem is that it talks about both inputs and multiple forms of aggregated outputs. With the increasing sophistication of templates, and the emergence of workbooks in 2013, defining PebblePad as a portfolio platform was starting to become problematic – if only because it failed to do justice to the depth and richness of the ways in which the platform was starting to be used.



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CHAPTER 3

PEBBLEPAD

NOT JUST AN EPORTFOLIO

In 2009 I contributed a chapter to a book called *Personalizing Learning in the 21st Century* by Sara de Freitas and Chris Yapp. My chapter was called *ePortfolios: a personal space for learning and the learner voice*. Whether it was through writing the chapter, or subsequently thinking and talking about it, the idea emerged that PebblePad was this personal learning space. The more I talked about it the more the idea seemed to catch on, to the point that some institutions formally refer to PebblePad as the personal learning space. It's a nice definition, and one which sits very comfortably with the description above. Perhaps that's where the story should end – but where's the fun (or learning) in that!

The image shows a screenshot of the PebblePad user interface. On the left, there is a sidebar with a menu icon and the PebblePad logo. Below the logo, the section is titled "My Assets". A search bar contains the text "Please enter a keyword e.g. placement...". Below the search bar, there is a list of assets:

- Design studio - Placement 1** (Wb icon) Modified by Brad Rushton at 15:14 on 30-Sep-2016
- Design studio - Placement 2** (Wb icon) Modified by Brad Rushton at 18:24 on 29-Sep-2016
- Design studio - Placement 3** (Wb icon) Modified by Brad Rushton at 19:11 on 26-Sep-2016
- Chancellors award** (Wb icon) Modified by Brad Rushton at 19:55 on 26-Sep-2016
- Careers portfolio** (Po icon) Modified by Brad Rushton at 11:11 on 19-Sep-2016
- Street art animation** (Video icon) Modified by Brad Rushton at 15:17 on 13-Sep-2016
- Scrapbook blog** (B icon) Modified by Brad Rushton at 13:30 on 09-Sep-2016

On the right, there is a "My image gallery" section with a search bar containing "Search images..." and a "Search" button. Below the search bar, there are three images:

- A colorful street art portrait of a woman wearing large, pink and yellow sunglasses.
- A stylized, abstract street art image featuring a face with a blue and yellow color palette.
- A colorful, abstract street art image featuring a face with a pink and blue color palette.

Overlaid on the bottom right of the image gallery is a user profile card for Brad Rushton, London Design Academy. The card features a circular profile picture of Brad Rushton wearing sunglasses. Below the profile picture, the name "Brad Rushton" and the affiliation "London Design Academy" are displayed. At the bottom of the card, there are two buttons: "My Assets" and "Resources".

We're proud that the PebblePad of today (as illustrated above) remains true to the guiding principles around personal learning and the learner voice that we first pondered a decade ago.

CHAPTER 4

PEBBLEPAD

THE PERSONAL LEARNING SPACE

Sometime around 2010, I felt we were battling with two dilemmas. One was that almost all of the institutions seeking a tool like ours were looking for, and procuring, an eportfolio platform. The second was an issue which regularly raised its head concerning our claim to be 'personal'. How could this be so when the platform was owned and deployed by institutions and students were invariably required to use it. Our arguments that the end user owned and controlled their assets, could take them with them on graduation, and could use PebblePad for all sorts of extra-institutional learning only carried so much weight. The indefensible allegation cited the extent to which PebblePad was used for assessment purposes.

Personally, I'm happy that PebblePad is used so widely for assessing student learning. Even happier that it's used for providing iterative, dialogic feedback. PebblePad is a really good platform for thoughtful assessment designs and is already widely used for significant self and peer assessment, and provides opportunities for involving external assessors that other platforms can't begin to approach.

Cognisant of questions surrounding the use of the personal learning space, and depending on where we were and who we were speaking to, two new definitions emerged into use around this time. PebblePad: the personal learning and assessment space spoke to how the system was used, and PebblePad: the personal learning and portfolio platform allowed us to appear on the radar of those looking for a portfolio system.



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CHAPTER 5

PEBBLEPAD

THE PERSONAL LEARNING PORTFOLIO AND ASSESSMENT PLATFORM

If you're still with me 1500 words in, you'll note the use of platform replacing 'space' which, for those institutions deploying PebblePad purposefully, and at scale, seemed a little too playful for an enterprise solution! As use has scaled up, so too has its support for more meaningful integrations, both within the institutional ecology and with users' other tools and repositories. While 'space' has the potential to evoke a positive emotional reaction, the same is not true of 'platform', though it is objectively – and pragmatically – the correct terminology for a tool with as much depth, connections, flexibility and integrations as PebblePad, I would argue.

Fast forward to 2018 and I'm still wrestling with what PebblePad is. I know what it can do, I know how it's used, and I've got a pretty good idea of how it's evolving. But what is it?

2018 was a busy year for recruitment at PebblePad. We've always been blessed with a loyal and committed team with very little churn, but as use of PebblePad continues to grow so does our team. I tend to play an active role in recruitment, induction and onboarding and of course I'm often called upon to describe what PebblePad is. It's the same when I'm exhibiting at conferences around the world. Someone wanders by your stand and asks the seemingly simple question "What is PebblePad?". It's tricky to answer, even after 15 years of practice.

CHAPTER 6

PEBBLEPAD

A BIT LIKE A PORTFOLIO PLATFORM, ONLY ...

My own difficulty explaining, in simple and unambiguous terms, what PebblePad is, coupled with a number of requests from newer (or newly scaling-up) customers for help in promoting PebblePad led to a renewed attempt to define it.

I started with trying to simplify how PebblePad was used. If you support PebblePad in your institution you'll appreciate that that's not easy. Nevertheless, I was able to distil my model down to four main processes:

- Planning and preparing for a learning experience
- Recording and reflecting on an experience
- Collecting and curating evidence of learning
- Sharing and showcasing stories of learning

Learning is prominent in the stages listed above, but so too is experience and it was this that made me start to think about PebblePad as a Learning Experience Platform. After all, much of the work that happens in the platform is the result of a physical learning experience, and much else is the result of actively engaging in a workbook activity – experiencing a learning design and responding to that experience.

I was convinced this was a big step forward. Something I could easily justify and defend. So I started to share this idea and received some great feedback, thoughtful questions and astute observations – for example, where does assessment and feedback fit into this?

It was clear that I had conceptualised (or idealized) PebblePad from the perspective of the individual learner and completely missed any representation of the institutional context in which PebblePad is typically experienced. So my updated model incorporated those parts of the platform where learning designs (templates and workbooks) are created and shared, and those parts where student work is made available for assessment and feedback. It also seemed essential to signal what was important about learning designs in this platform, and what kinds of learning they promoted.

PebblePad promotes learning design that is:

- Scaffolded
- Incremental
- Iterative
- Dialogic
- Collaborative
- Visible

PebblePad promotes learning that is:

- Developmental
- Authentic
- Purposeful
- Personal
- Evidenced
- Reflective

One of the other challenges levelled at the model was the suggestion that we were making claims for PebblePad which were not necessarily unique to this platform. Saying that PebblePad does this might imply that other platforms or tools do not. For example, reflection is a core claim of all portfolio platforms and here we were making it a major part of our model. The point of difference, though, is that reflection is often implicit in portfolio building, or is inferred in the reading of a portfolio. In PebblePad, through the remarkable templates and workbooks designed by educators using the platform, reflection is a purposeful, often deep and challenging, expectation. Further, reflection is typically on each recorded experience and not just in the creation of a reflective narrative that weaves together multiple experiences. At every level of use of PebblePad there is a prompt or process effectively asking Why? So what?

Related to this was the desire to recognise the importance of the learning process in the model. There is valuable learning to be had in producing great stories of learning, but what about the everyday learning experiences, and surfacing the 'routine' processes of planning for, and reflecting upon those experiences?

And so, with the model complete, a reasonable understanding of how the bits fitted together, of how various questions might be answered, and of how this description of the core processes of PebblePad could be distilled into a three-word definition, it was time to test this with our most knowledgeable critics – the PebblePad community, gathered for the first time in two years at PebbleBash '18.

With a captive audience, who themselves have to routinely explain what PebblePad is, I was hopeful for a rousing reception for this hard-thought-through model. Indeed, the model itself was well received. Clearly a simplified model cannot capture all of the nuanced uses that this audience is familiar with, but the broad representation largely stood up to their scrutiny. What seemed to split the audience, however, was the three-word definition Learning Experience Platform. I think people could see and understand the rationale for this choice, but it didn't speak to them of the broader purpose and use of PebblePad – and, perhaps, the reason they are so invested in the platform. The definition (or is it a tagline) seemed to focus attention on episodes of learning, which undoubtedly effective use of PebblePad enriches, but it didn't encompass the sense of a platform spanning lifelong and lifewide learning.

Passionate arguments were posited relating to the notion of PebblePad as a platform to support learning over time, a platform to support learning journeys – a Learning Journey Platform! One of the comments I remember referred to the learning journey posters we created back in 2014 (and loathed by our marketing guru for being 'not on brand!'). These, it seems, really did help people reframe conceptions about what PebblePad was. The notion embodied in these posters needed to be celebrated and amplified. The community had spoken. Obviously, not necessarily with a common voice, but with (at least according to my memory of events) enough enthusiasm for me (us) to reconsider – and indeed change – the name to **PebblePad –The Learning Journey Platform**.



At PebbleBash '18, passionate arguments were posited relating to the notion of PebblePad as a platform to support learning over time, a platform to support learning journeys – a Learning Journey Platform!

So here we are, the story now in the present. It's the start of 2019. The model below provides the simplest representation of the richness and complexity of PebblePad. Of course, nothing really has changed. PebblePad still does what PebblePad has always done. It is, and always will be PebblePad. The description first posited in Maastricht in 2007 stands up incredibly well to scrutiny 12 years later. We're more confident than ever about what we stand for, what the platform stands for and of the myriad innovative ways in which it's used.

PEBBLEPAD

THE LEARNING JOURNEY PLATFORM

THE INSTITUTIONAL (EDUCATOR) SPACE

Allows educators to make use of intuitive design tools for creating, sharing and distributing learning designs, along with a seamlessly integrated assessment engine.

CREATE & DISTRIBUTE
LEARNING DESIGNS

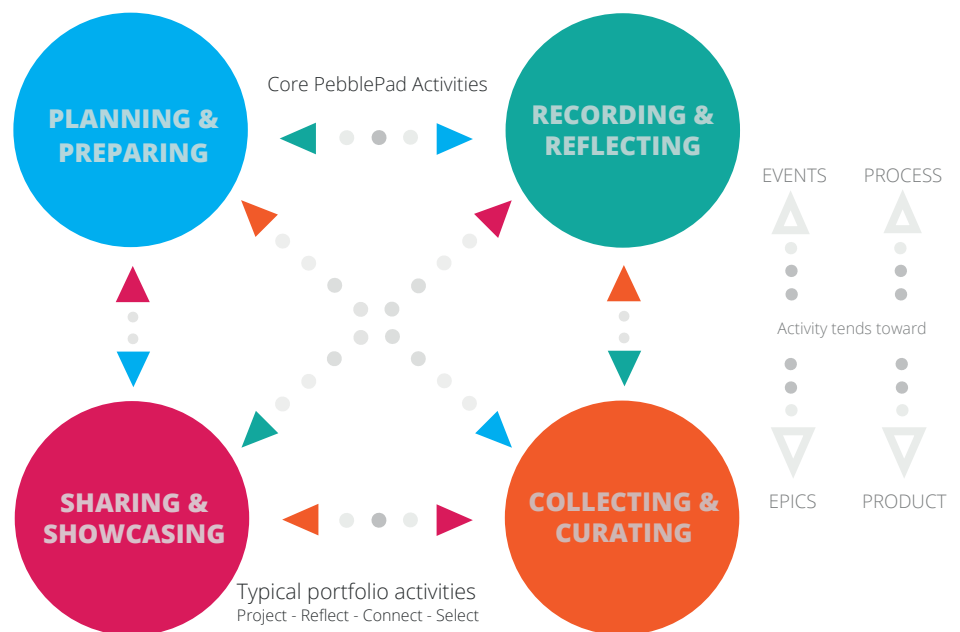
ASSESS & FEEDBACK

PROMOTES LEARNING DESIGN THAT IS ...

- Scaffolded
- Incremental
- Collaborative
- Iterative
- Dialogic
- Visible

THE PERSONAL (STUDENT) SPACE

Allows students to make use of inbuilt tools or resources built and customised by their university to capitalise on each and every step of their learning journey, both inside and outside of the classroom.



PROMOTES LEARNING THAT IS ...

- Developmental
- Authentic
- Purposeful
- Personal
- Evidenced
- Reflective



GET IN TOUCH

There are an awful lot of things that make PebblePad unique. Not least the fact that it's a platform designed by educators for educators. Indeed, the PebblePad team is bursting to the seams with innovators and practitioners, all of whom learnt their craft in teaching roles. If you want to talk to a team who really understands your world, get in touch.

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FREE RESOURCES FOR YOU AND YOUR TEAM

If you enjoyed this publication you'll be pleased to hear we've made more free resources available as part of our ambition to help universities develop learner-centred pedagogies articulated through thoughtful learning, assessment and curriculum design. Below you'll find a few examples of content we've recently shared. **Enjoy.**

WHY EVERY UNIVERSITY NEEDS A LEARNING JOURNEY PLATFORM

This paper offers twelve diverse examples of practice along with an overview of the evolution of eportfolio. It also describes the anatomy and purpose of our award-winning Learning Journey Platform and offers insight into why it is increasingly being viewed as a core component of the university learning ecology.

Get it here: <http://bit.ly/learningjourneyplatform>

GLOBAL TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIES

Following a detailed analysis of teaching and learning strategies from 50 universities across the globe, this paper identifies common trends and offers some insights on how institutions can position themselves to deliver against their strategic goals and ambitions.

Get it here: bit.ly/global-trends-report

PORTFOLIO FEATURES COMPARISON CHECKLIST

Our portfolio features and functionality checklist will help you compare and contrast portfolio capability across different platforms and providers. It provides more than 300 areas for consideration and covers portfolio features, tools for designing frameworks for learning, and functionality to support assessment, integration and mobile learning.

Get it here: bit.ly/eportfolio-checklist



About us

We are the creators of PebblePad – the award-winning **Learning Journey Platform**. As a company, we've spent the past 15 years blazing a trail in the learning, portfolio and assessment space, and we have absolutely no intention of stopping. Our mission is simple – to help learners shape and share their unique skills and attributes in an ever more competitive world.



We help universities support their students in every step, hop, skip and jump of their unique learning journey.