



CASE STUDY

Reimagining assessment through PebblePad

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

**STORIES OF INNOVATION TOLD BY THOSE CHARTING NEW
COURSES IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT.**

THE CONTEXT

This case study is set within the context of Harper Adams University, a small specialist University located in Shropshire, England. The university's discipline base includes agri-food, agriculture, animal sciences (including veterinary provision), engineering, land management, entomology, zoology and business. The curriculum has a significant focus on applied elements. The university has around 3000 students working across undergraduate and postgraduate provision. Unusually, all undergraduate provision contains a compulsory placement year which students report as hugely significant for their professional and personal development. The university's curriculum is periodically reviewed in its entirety to refresh and develop provision. An institutional curriculum review occurred in 2017. During this process the potential of eportfolios for assessment was widely discussed and course teams, as well as individual module leaders, reflected on their curricula and the role that eportfolios might play. During the three years prior to this significant curriculum review PebblePad had been tried by individuals but the institution did not have PebblePad at scale; through the major review process more colleagues were able to utilise this assessment and learning tool to drive learning.

THE PROBLEM

The curriculum review had multiple objectives but two key areas of focus were to (a) make assessment even more authentic, and (b) to facilitate more opportunities for formative assessment feedback.

‘Authentic’ is used to mean assessments such as a performance or a product, which are recognisable by key stakeholders (e.g. professional bodies or employers) and which include ‘real world’ elements in their creation e.g. discussion and feedback (for a full consideration of the nature of authentic assessment see Ashford-Rowe, Herrington and Brown, 2014). Authentic learning is not just used as a proxy for real world assessment; the term also encompasses the idea that assessment can be personally relevant and therefore may involve choice (Stein, Isaacs, & Andrews, 2004). Authentic assessment is deemed especially important in the given context because it aligns with the applied nature of the institutional curriculum and because of the enormous power the authentic approaches have to motivate engagement with the learning process (Mcdowell, Sambell & Davison, 2009).

The second key focus area was around feedback. The curriculum review sought to give new opportunities for the creation and use of feedback, including tutor, peer and self- feedback. It is well known that the higher education sector has battled over decades to improve the feedback ecosystem (Arnold, 2017). The review paid particular attention to assessment schedules, assessment types and the subtleties of the task requirements.

As the curriculum review advanced, teams and individuals reflected on their own practices, and the university's eLearning team acted to facilitate a consideration of how an eportfolio, specifically PebblePad, may offer an opportunity to enable authentic assessment, richly supported by feedback. Colleagues were asking and being asked ‘How can PebblePad help improve the assessment within my programme or module?’. Sometimes colleagues began with the technology, to see if it would help. Other times, they would present a challenge, to which technology provided a solution. This case study describes how a community engaged with PebblePad at the point of curriculum review.

THE APPROACH

Through various means we had an institutional conversation about PebblePad. We had used it, tried it, and got to know it. We needed to decide how it could serve and support our curriculum. The conversations happened in teams, but more often on a one-to-one basis. Through dialogue and then reflection, individuals decided their best way forward.

To ensure planning was possible at an institutional level, the use of eportfolio was written into the formal curriculum documentation. This helped establish the scale of use, the places of use, and it allowed scrutiny of the student experience as students moved between modules. Embedding PebblePad in course documentation essentially provided a blueprint for where it would be used.

While we could look back over this period and recognise things that worked well and things that could have been done differently, it was especially interesting to look closely at individual stories and to see how PebblePad went from being a side-line activity to a more significant, documented, curriculum feature.

After the curriculum review and following the (now two-thirds complete) roll-out of the new curriculum across all undergraduate levels, the community of practice around PebblePad have shared their stories at 'show and tell' sessions. We have been able to look back, explain what curriculum choices were made and why, and consider how effective these choices were. By sharing stories, it was clear that decisions were made in the review for a host of different reasons, and with different degrees of success.

THE RESULTS

Through individual user group stories told within the context of our PebblePad community, it is possible to see that colleagues who chose to use eportfolio assessment engage in an internal negotiation between the technology, their initial intended assessment design, their pedagogy, operational constraints, and their historic assessment practices and preferences.

Table 1 shows the different factors cited by users as being influential in their choice of PebblePad in the institutional curriculum review.

Table 1: Factors influencing PebblePad usage choices within the context of curriculum review

Factor influencing technology choice and use	How it manifests
1. Pedagogic beliefs	A strong belief in assessment for or as learning was central to the adoption of PebblePad. All those adopting PebblePad in the community were aligned with this pedagogic philosophy.
2. Risk aversion levels	An attitude described as being prepared to 'give it a try', even though the technology may be unfamiliar and uses may not be fully tested, was associated with adoption. Anxiety about unfamiliar approaches was associated with some taking a more conservative approach to portfolio use.
3. Perception of quality management challenges	Understanding what is 'allowed' was important to enable use. Quality regulations were, in reality, more permissive than was often realised. Knowing that negotiated student submissions were possible was associated with enabling more student autonomy. Where regulations were perceived as impeding practice a more cautious approach was taken to adoption.
4. Perception of time involved	The users of PebblePad universally recognised the need to invest time in getting to know the platform and were prepared to accept this as part of their decision.

Factor influencing technology choice and use	How it manifests
5. Course team philosophy	Some users were seeking a course wide approach to eportfolio and were frustrated when this did not occur. Others were driven by the course team's desire to get a coherent approach.
6. Media confidence	Prior experience with media rich assessment, or a strong base of IT skills, was a factor evident in the stories of tutors using mixed media portfolios.
7. Perception of impact on feedback	Where feedback was a key driver this was prioritised in the design and use of PebblePad. Often this was more important than media, despite the range of other tools that are available to enhance feedback.
8. Necessity (solving a pressing problem)	Where tutors had a problem that needed to be solved, sometimes PebblePad was employed for a single purpose in the first instance e.g. journal writing, to provide evidence for a viva. This resulted in a limited use of the platform (sometimes with negative student feedback), unless and until a more significant commitment was made based on recognition of some of the other benefits of the platform.
9. Prior student experience (staff as students)	Those staff who had PebblePad experience as a student as part of their studies for their postgraduate teaching qualification appeared confident in their choices.
10. Fit with prior practices	Where staff had existing practices that fit with the 'values' and pedagogic beliefs made possible by PebblePad e.g. personalised learning, sustained development of assessment (assessment as learning), then the technology was a more natural choice. Where the drivers of assessment were more associated with notions of 'testing' and individual performance, the portfolio was not selected.
11. Perception of student feedback	The perceived student voice was very important in the formation of new practice. This is not the same as the actual student voice. Often there was a nervousness about what students would not like or work well with. Some believed students saw PebblePad as over complex, outside of the real-world of platforms used by business, and unusual in the context of a course where it was not embedded. Others were highly optimistic and felt that even when students were not necessarily positive, the experience was worthwhile.

Understanding the technology adoption process through the eyes of academic colleagues can shine a useful light on some of the difficulties in getting to grips with eportfolio assessment. Digging deeper, some of the seemingly simple dilemmas were underpinned by more fundamental concerns:

- What is permissible within quality 'rules'?
- How can I manage the feedback that I am encouraging?
- Will the institution maintain this technology for the time I need to use it?
- Am I limiting myself with templates? Will students cope with a blank portfolio as a starting point?
- Which parts should be assessed, and which elements should remain formative?
- How can I make sure my assessment is fully constructively aligned?

Understanding how and why colleagues engaged with PebblePad during a curriculum review has given an appreciative perspective on the issue of technology adoption. With this information, the support for PebblePad users can focus on some of the factors which seem to enable or constrain decision making. These issues are not technical – they are about values, workload, perception of quality regulations, perception of student experiences, and about a variety of different initial motivations.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the impact of the choices made. Here I have simply begun to identify the factors involved in developing assessment choices. More specific analysis of more stories would usefully shed light on the other enabling factors and barriers to practice.

LESSONS LEARNT

From sharing experiences and assessing the factors which shape the use of eportfolios, we have further confirmed that enabling discussions with colleagues need to focus on their specific context, experience, beliefs, and fears. Open, honest, and frank discussion is required to encourage lecturers and others who support learning to maximise the benefits of such a platform.

IN BRIEF

- Sharing stories around eportfolios creates instant learning amongst users and those who support users.
- When supporting use of PebblePad, ensure that the individual tutor's motivations and aims (and even their pedagogic philosophy) are clear and explicit. This can result in a more fruitful discussion about the potential of the tool to fit with their pedagogy.
- Identify the barriers which prevent engagement. These are often far deeper than technical issues (here they included concerns over risk, rules and resources, and might include, by inference, staff development and in-course team communication).

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AN EXPERT TEAM

YOU CAN DEPEND ON

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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