



CASE STUDY

Supporting the degree apprentice's learning journey with PebblePad and Blackboard Ultra

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

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

THE CONTEXT

Newcastle Business School (NBS) has a global reputation for delivering some of the best business management education in the UK. NBS has been awarded double accreditation from the Association of Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB international) placing it in the top 1% of business schools worldwide. NBS won the prestigious Times Higher Education (THE) Business School of the Year award in 2015.

In 2017 NBS introduced the BA(hons) Business Leadership and Management Practice Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship (CMDA) initially with three cohorts. In 2018 an increase in the number of apprentices was accompanied by the introduction of the MBA Senior Leader Master's Degree Apprenticeship (SLMDA) and the Solicitor Apprenticeship Degree. In 2019 another increase in apprentice numbers was accompanied by an expansion in the SLMDA offerings which now include the MSc in Strategic Leadership and the MSc in Strategic Leadership (Public Services). Further expansion is anticipated for 2020 with several additional CMDA options becoming available.

THE PROBLEM

PebblePad was introduced at the commencement of all Degree Apprenticeships within NBS. The apprentice was required to maintain a number of records including:

- Reflections on workplace learning
- Off the-job training
- Mentor meetings
- Tripartite meetings

Custom PebblePad templates were used for these records. These were then drawn into a PebblePad workbook by adding cascading tags to each template and creating a series of collections in the workbook that would search the asset store for all assets containing the relevant tag.

In order to complete the apprenticeship post-graduation, the apprentice is required to submit an End Point Assessment (EPA) portfolio. A second PebblePad workbook was designed to meet EPA requirements of each particular apprenticeship. The EPA portfolio had been developed at an early stage and had received positive comments following a review by the Chartered Management Institute, which is the end point assessor for management and leadership apprenticeships.

Towards the end of the 2018/19 academic year the PebblePad workbook had been used over a two-year period and the first cohort had just been introduced to their EPA workbook. It was an ideal time to reflect upon the progress so far and make any changes that were necessary to improve the way that PebblePad was being used. Whilst the reflection process was informal, there was consultation across the full range of users.

The overall picture was positive; however, some problems were identified in relation to apprenticeship engagement with the process. In many cases the apprentices' records were incomplete and it appeared that for some apprentices the completion of the workbook was an unwelcome or misunderstood addition to their workload. There was an emphasis on reflective practice rather than the collection of evidence. Initial indications were that there was a significant work requirement to complete the EPA portfolio post-graduation. The apprenticeship funding rules dictated that 20% of the funding is withheld by the Education and Skills Funding Agency until the apprenticeship is completed. It was considered possible that due to the additional work involved in completing the EPA workbook that some apprentices would choose to leave having graduated but without undergoing EPA. This in turn would lead to a loss in revenue for the University.

The overall aim of the redevelopment was to increase engagement and to reduce the workload required to complete the EPA process.

THE APPROACH: MAPPING THE LEARNER'S JOURNEY

What was initially expected to be a few minor changes to the workbook developed into a complete philosophical shift in the way in which PebblePad is used. In early 2019 PebblePad began to describe itself as a learning journey platform rather than a portfolio platform and this change in thinking is echoed in that description.

The apprentice's journey was mapped out from day one until the submission of the EPA portfolio. The journey focuses on the structured development of the range of knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSB's). KSB's are written into an apprenticeship 'standard' and must be demonstrated and evidenced in the workplace rather than in academic writing.

It was easy to identify the final destination in an apprentice's journey as it is the same for all apprentices; the completion of the End Point Assessment process including the submission of their EPA portfolio. However, the starting point and the journey to EPA will be different for each apprentice.

At the beginning of their programme each apprentice will have an individual profile of KSB's and different opportunities available to them for workplace development. For example, it is possible to have an apprentice who is a school leaver in the same cohort as a person who has many years work experience. It followed that the starting point for each apprentice would be to assess their individual KSB profile and identify the workplace opportunities available to develop the required KSBs. It was necessary for each apprentice to answer questions such as:

- What knowledge, skills and behaviours do I already have?
- What evidence can I gain from my current role?
- How do I gather and record that evidence?
- What gaps are there in my evidence?
- What can I do to fill the gaps in my evidence?

The answers to these key questions began to define each stage of the apprentice's journey from day one to the time they submitted their portfolio for their EPA.

Each year of the programme has a workplace development module and once the journey had been mapped out it started to inform the taught content of these modules. The focus had changed from the completion of a PebblePad workbook to a logical sequence of self-analysis, personal development and evidence gathering marked by supportive workshops and individual meetings. PebblePad was chosen to record the individual journey and the evidence. Throughout the apprenticeship there are scheduled 'tripartite' meetings and these meetings between the apprentice, employer and university are key stages within the journey. The mapped-out journey also suggested the agenda for the tripartite meetings.

THE APPROACH: THE INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLAN (ILP)

In September 2019, the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) was introduced on all new and existing degree apprenticeship programmes in NBS. The ILP is a PebblePad workbook supported by a number of templates that take the apprentice through the processes of:

- Self-assessment against the apprenticeship standard.
- Analysis of job role.
- Identification of evidence that can be gathered in existing role.
- Planning to gather evidence.
- Gathering and recording of evidence.
- Assessment and feedback.
- Further self-assessment against the standard.
- Identification of gaps in evidence.
- Planning changes to role to gather required evidence.
- Gathering and recording evidence.
- Assessment and feedback.

This process is repeated until all required evidence has been correctly recorded and assessed. Importantly this process is commenced at the beginning of the apprenticeship and will be completed before graduation. Thus, the gap between graduation and EPA is effectively minimised and the preparation of the EPA portfolio is a case of selecting the 'best' examples of evidence and cross-referencing them rather than identifying and recording evidence.

THE APPROACH: IMPROVING THE APPRENTICE EXPERIENCE WITH BLACKBOARD ULTRA, DEEP-LINKING AND CASCADING TAGS

The launch of the PebblePad ILP in September 2019 coincided with a University wide move to Blackboard Ultra. This gave the opportunity to combine the two technologies in a way that was not possible in previous incarnations of Blackboard thanks to Ultra documents and LTI deep-linking to specific templates.

Deep-linking allows an apprentice to gain access to a specific PebblePad template or workbook from a Blackboard module with a single click. For example, an early session in the workplace development module includes an exercise where the apprentice explores their existing role and identifies what evidence may be naturally generated from that role. A deep link to the 'Role Analysis' template in PebblePad is included on the Ultra document, enabling the apprentice to simply click the link and complete the template.

The ILP contains several collections that search the asset store for assets containing specific embedded tags. Relevant embedded tags were added to each of the templates, enabling any completed templates to automatically appear in the appropriate collection in the ILP as soon as they are saved. Thus, with one click from within Blackboard Ultra the apprentice can access the relevant template and once completed the template will automatically appear in the correct section of the ILP and is available via ATLAS for review.

THE APPROACH: SUPPORTING THE APPRENTICE AND STAFF

The launch of the ILP was supported by a range of guides, taught induction sessions and follow-up workshops. The use of deep-linking in Ultra and cascading tags in PebblePad significantly improved the user experience in relation to accessing and completing templates. The improved user experience impacted on the support requirements, in terms of reducing the incidence of problems experienced and the complexity of written guides. Two versions of written guides were produced:

- A range of 'quick' guides.
- A range of more detailed 'step by step' guides.

These gave the apprentice the choice of accessing the basics without missing the main points, and more detailed instructions where necessary. A single Ultra document was created that included links to the ILP, all the relevant templates and the quick guides. The document follows the logical steps in the journey:

- Getting started with the ILP and diagnostic.
- Role analysis and planning.
- Gathering and recording evidence.
- Record keeping and meetings.

All apprentices and staff were introduced to the ILP in an induction session focused around exploring the individual learning journey and the concept of the ILP. The 'P' (PebblePad) word was only introduced later in the session as the means to gather, record and categorise evidence. The emphasis of the induction sessions was to show the apprentices where to find the guides. The introductory session was reinforced by additional workshop support and activities conducted during the workplace development module that were planned to include the completion of the relevant template(s) in PebblePad.

THE RESULTS

Below is an extract from an email which is one of several pieces of very positive feedback that were received following an induction session:

"... I'm one of the level five Business Leadership DA students, and I was in your induction yesterday morning. I went home after your PebblePad demo and had a good look around the new templates and your new additions. I wanted to email to say that I think it is brilliant, and to say a big thank you! It's so much better than what we were working with last year, the fact that we can tag the standards and track them in PebblePad is going to be so helpful, and the new templates seem to be exactly what we need. So again, a huge thank you from me!"

LESSONS LEARNT

There is a subtle but distinct difference in approach between the development of the original PebblePad workbook and the ILP. That difference is that the former is focused around what the learner has to record during their programme and the latter focuses on recording what the learner has to do during their programme. In general, a learner tends to have one focus, that is what they need to do and record to reach their end-goal, in this case completing their apprenticeship. By designing the ILP around their learning journey the requirements at each stage made sense to them. A workbook designed around the institution's requirements may not make sense to the learner.

A second significant factor was the use of deep linking in Blackboard Ultra. This facility reduced the number of clicks required to access the relevant templates and in turn reduced the complexity of the supporting materials.

IN BRIEF

- Take time to listen to feedback and use it as an opportunity to review and build upon previous work.
- Align the use of PebblePad with the apprentice's requirements, their learning journey.
- The effort put into ensuring that the design of the workbook (ILP) and the various templates meet the needs of the apprentice is a significant factor in the success.
- The use of deep-linking from the Virtual Learning Environment (if available) significantly simplifies and improves the user experience.
- Support the apprentices; working in PebblePad is different and they do need support particularly in the early days. The use of both 'quick' and 'step-by-step' guides was well received with most initially opting for the 'quick' guides.

This Case Study is from PebblePad's 2020 'Charting New Courses in Learning and Teaching' conference. To download all of the Case Studies from this event, head to <https://hubs.ly/H0rFypx0>



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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