



CASE STUDY

ePortfolio assessment strategies enhance development of professional competencies

Alice Schmidt Hanbidge¹ & Katherine Lithgow², ¹Renison University College, ²University of Waterloo, CA



PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

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

THE CONTEXT

This case study describes our program-wide use of a PebblePad workbook to support formative and summative assessment in an online Master of Social Work (MSW) graduate program with 150 students and 150 external assessors. Program goals include cultivating habits of lifelong learning by enhancing students' communication skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities and preparing them for post-graduation employment. The workbook was designed with these goals in mind and facilitated effective mechanisms for authentic, direct measures of assessment by guiding students through the process of reflecting on their learning experiences (Reeves et al., 2002). It further facilitated indirect measures of assessment by building in self-assessment, peer, and faculty feedback processes.

Completing the workbook throughout the program helps students integrate their learning experiences from start to finish and allows them to track their growth and development in one place. Sections within the workbook have been designed to help students identify and articulate the required professional competencies they are developing as they progress through the program. In addition, the workbook facilitates the provision of feedback from instructors, external assessors and peers (Finley, 2019) and fosters their ability to take a holistic approach to their learning, culminating in a student created portfolio showcasing their final capstone project. Using the workbook to guide and assess learning has helped shift the program from a didactic model toward a more student-centered model.

Instructors hoped to facilitate a number of processes through PebblePad. They wanted to streamline the assessment process in a way that allowed students to easily identify, articulate and document with evidence their development of each of the nine required social work competencies as they were being attained throughout the program. Moreover, they wanted the ability to easily track each student's progress so that those who were having difficulty developing the competencies in a timely manner were identified quickly and were provided the proper support. In addition, they wanted to incorporate a peer feedback process enabling students to learn from, and provide constructive feedback to, each other.

For the capstone portion, each of the 150+ students are responsible for identifying an external assessor who would provide that student with feedback on their capstone project portfolio. Constructive connections with external assessors validated the assessment process, thereby facilitating frequent and timely peer review. This contributed to students' development of skills to help them in future careers (Kuh, O'Donnell & Reed, 2013; Rowley & Munday, 2018; Watson et al., 2016). In the past, this process had been extremely time consuming. Requests had to be made to provide each external assessor with credentials that would allow them restricted access to the capstone project through the learning management system. Coordinating the logistics had become unsustainable and instructors wanted a more efficient process to support the external assessor review process.

Prior to the introduction of PebblePad, four student cohorts had gone through the MSW program, creating an eportfolio and engaging in self-assessment, peer and external assessor review. These cohorts provided a base for comparing the use of PebblePad. Ease of use is essential for engaging instructors, students and professional practitioners in the field and the technological challenges associated with previously used platforms were rendering the portfolio unsustainable. Early uses of PebblePad suggested that students, instructors, teaching assistants, and external assessors found the technology easy to use. This is particularly important for our online MSW student population who may not have extensive digital literacy skills. Although these students have experience in their field, typically many have some trepidation about returning to school and learning in an online environment. Similarly, because the external assessors are practicing professionals from across Canada, they do not want to spend a lot of time learning a new technology in order to provide feedback to the students, thus having a system that is user friendly is crucial to the success of the capstone.

PebblePad allowed us to address several issues that earlier technologies did not. For example, because students are required to show how they have developed in three different competency areas each semester the Progress Tracking feature was invaluable and allowed instructors to quickly see which competencies had been completed and which required review. In the future, using the Scorecard may make this process even more efficient. Moreover, the ability to make minor adjustments to the workbook while in progress without having to provide a 'new' workbook to the students was very useful.

Assessment of student learning occurs via a rubric, where evaluators review students' depth of reflection and attention to issues of diversity and professional growth in the program, comprehensiveness of evidence of the competencies, and ability to connect theory to practice.

Prior to the use of PebblePad, the instructor had to arrange to get University of Waterloo credentials for each of the 150 practicing professionals who had agreed to act as external assessors for that specific cohort of students in the capstone. The instructor then had to manually match each student with the external assessor and ensure that the assessor had access to the student's capstone project. This time-consuming task was quickly becoming unsustainable. Using PebblePad's student-selected external assessor option allows students to easily provide their respective external assessor access to the capstone project for assessment. This has eliminated the steps the instructor had to take to obtain University credentials for each of the external assessors and manually match each assessor with each student. The instructor can simply contact the assessors to provide instructions and guidance for assessment, review and, if necessary, discuss the external assessor's feedback prior to releasing the feedback to the student. In addition to the use of external assessors, each student's capstone presentation is reviewed by a faculty member from the MSW program. To prevent potential bias, the instructor can use privacy features to ensure that the two assessors cannot see the other's feedback.

OUTCOMES

The use of the PebblePad workbook and portfolio made student learning more transparent and encouraged deeper, integrated learning (Thibodeaux, Cummings, & Harapnuik, 2017). It provided a means for capturing evidence of student learning for credit, auditing and accreditation requirements. It also provided a more cost-effective process by more easily facilitating online review and streamlining the feedback process.

Simplifying the external assessor review process came with additional benefits; external assessors found the process straightforward, which made them more willing to act as external assessors in the future. The student-selected external assessor process was much easier for the instructors, saving them time and energy, and making the process sustainable over time. Perhaps most important, the ease of use of PebblePad gave students more time to focus on the pedagogical and learning processes while creating their eportfolio rather than spending time addressing technical challenges. The workbook and portfolio allowed students to see their growth and development on an ongoing basis and allowed them to showcase their entire learning journey with evidence and associated assessments in an accessible format.

PebblePad enables our instructors to create and re-use templates, quickly assess work and provide timely feedback, all within one secure location. It also helped instructors and external assessors provide meaningful formative and summative feedback to students. But to do so, it was essential to provide all stakeholders clear instructions (including screenshots and short videos). We also had students complete a 'low-stakes' activity at the start of the program that introduced them to PebblePad and helped them become comfortable with the platform.

While there was substantial upfront preparation that required a commitment of time to develop the workbook, once the workbook was developed it could be used in subsequent years with minimal

updates. Having clearly documented processes in place for instructors including timing of permission changes, implementation of the student-selected assessor feature, feedback permissions etc. was essential. Working closely with the University's support team to help with the technical and pedagogical aspects was also important. Following a positive introduction of PebblePad for formative and summative assessment processes that successfully engages practitioners as external assessors in the learning process, students are simultaneously supported to develop reflective learning skills needed in the field.

IN BRIEF

- Upfront work is necessary to set up workbooks and assessment tools with clear instructions for completion.
- Detailed and structured guidance to students on how to provide better feedback is helpful for assessment.
- Utilizing student selected external assessors streamlined assessment processes and the use of the rubrics helped the external assessor provide students with constructive feedback.
- Technical, pedagogical, program and institutional support is essential.
- Ensure that the PebblePad workbook activities and assessment processes align with program goals and any professionally mandated competencies.
- Making explicit connections to professional practice helps students recognize how these activities will prepare them for their future.

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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.

PebblePad HQ (UK)

01952 288 300

PebblePad North America

(864) 650 5406

PebblePad Australasia

0400 899 820

✉ hello@pebblepad.com

🐦 <https://twitter.com/PebblePad>

in <https://www.linkedin.com/company/pebblepad>