

Case Study

Introducing PebblePad: Eight stories from tutors.

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Eight different case studies, University of Edinburgh, UK

The background context

The University of Edinburgh is an old and large institution with over 22,000 students. It has 22 Schools and offers over 600 first degree programmes.

As part of a pilot study, 14 course organisers decided to use the eportfolio package PebblePad during the 2008/2009 academic year.

The course sizes and study subjects varied from over 200 students (Career Development Planning, Business Studies) to 12 students (MSc International Animal Health). Different as-

pects of PebblePad's functionality appealed to the different course organisers for different reasons and purposes.

At the end of that academic year the course organisers who decided to use PebblePad were asked to summarise their experiences with this new system (new to them and their students). Therefore, instead of focusing on just one case, this document will include 8 stories of PebblePad implementations. Each story is different, each case was different and each time students produced different types of assets.

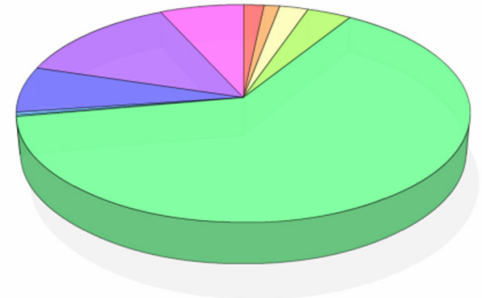
1. MSc Management Research & Development and Lean Business MBA (Dr Tony Kinder) [80 accounts]

“80 of my students (MBA and MSc) have used PebblePad during this year; all for formally assessed work. They were submitting subject related presentations as webfolios. The webfolios contained blogs, pictures, subpages and even built-in YouTube videos.

The overwhelming reaction from students is positive. Pedagogically, the students prefer a modality that allows them to express themselves, indeed, if there is a danger it is that students enjoy PebblePad so much that they spend more time on these assessments than the credits (often 35 credits) warrant.

Two groups particularly benefitted. Firstly, MBAs are able to include detailed examples and references to experience using PebblePad that are more difficult to capture in normal essays or reports. Secondly, students using English as

Ability
Action plan
Blog
Activity
File
Meeting
Profile
Thought
CV
Webfolio



a foreign language (the majority of Business School students) are able to overcome limitations in expression using multimedia. **Some of the best assignments I have ever experienced have been in PebblePad format.** We recommend and will continue its use. Already, other lecturers in the School are adopting it.”

2. Career Development Planning, Business Studies (Dr Wendy Loretto, Ruth Saville) [214 accounts]

“PebblePad was used as part of a professional development course, led by the Careers Office, but embedded within the year 2 Business Studies course. Students had to create a CV and a personal action plan.

Here is a selection of student responses:

“...for second and third years it should be given like at the beginning of the course. They should have an introduction to PebblePad along with the introduction to the course.”

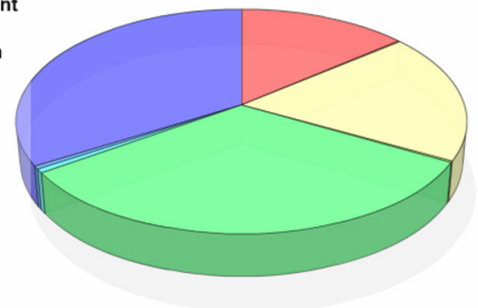
“ When we had shared with friends, other students about the PebblePad based course - our friends had envied us, wishing they too had something like that, which is to do with real life and what to do when you finish school. ”

“It’s a good way to get all your ideas together”

“It’s actually not as popular now, but I think it will get more and more popular with time”

Most of the students responding said they would use PebblePad again. Over 85% said they would use it for creating an action plan and/or a CV.”

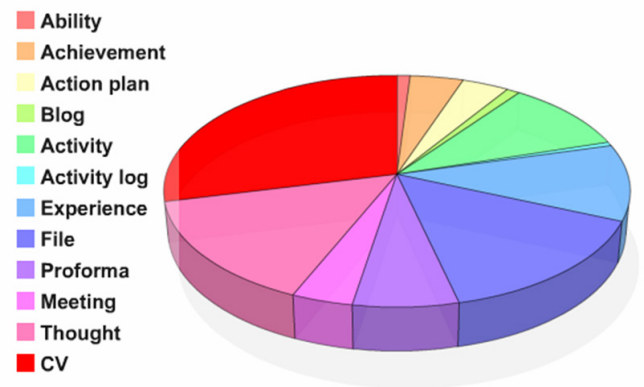
Ability
Achievement
Action plan
Activity
File
Profile
Thought
CV



3. Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice and MSc in Equine Science (Sharon Boyd) [52 accounts]

“Qualified vets wishing to be assessed for the CertAVP are required to provide effective evidence of their personal experience as a practising veterinary surgeon. The majority require reflection through a learning diary and cases in a specific format. PebblePad also allows the participants to store their CV and any additional file evidence.

We use PebblePad to assist with activities for the new online MSc in Equine Science. Our first activity involves the students recording, through video and/or photos, various feed types that they use in their professional work with horses. These will be accompanied by explanatory texts.

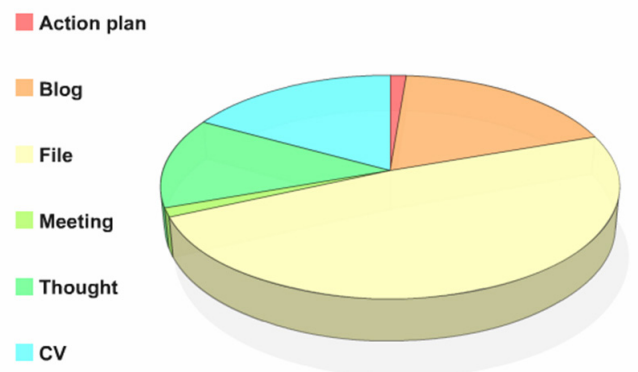


So far, **everyone has received the system very favourably**. There is so much that can be done in PebblePad. Support is fantastic, which always helps! I can see our use increasing as we become more familiar with the product.”

4. MSc International Animal Health (Dr Kim Picozzi) [12 accounts]

“Each third year student on the International Animal Health online MSc programme has been given login details for a PebblePad account. Once their supervisory support has been confirmed we suggest that they provide these named individuals with access to PebblePad in order to enhance the collaboration between them and their supervisors. We recommend that they use the blog tool to record their thoughts and progress and encourage their supervisors to support them via this approach.

It seems to have produced quite a marmite response from both the students and supporting academics. Some have been very happy and have used it with regularity throughout the year while others have found access to be very

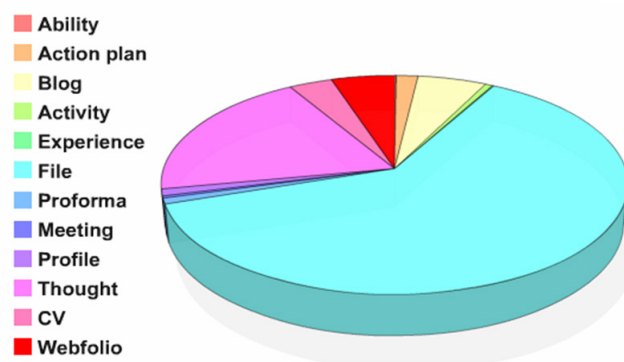


difficult and quickly gave up, preferring to use email. As many of our students are based in developing countries I had thought that connectivity might be an issue, but surprisingly this has not been the case.”

5. MSc Advanced Nursing Practice (Dr Anne Robertson) [19 accounts]

“PebblePad was used here as a tool to enable us to operationalise our philosophy of education. It helped support the development of professional and personal growth of our students. Students used the system to share their work experiences. Moreover, PebblePad allowed them to define their own needs, and to work at their own pace. The system has allowed us to put all of the above in one place – that’s a big advantage.

Things that our students particularly like are the interface, the blogging tool (also used for communication) and the built-in word processor. When using the system, students showed lots of their own initiative. However, some learners with different learning styles found this way of presenting assets (as a website) more difficult. Those particular students were advised to cre-



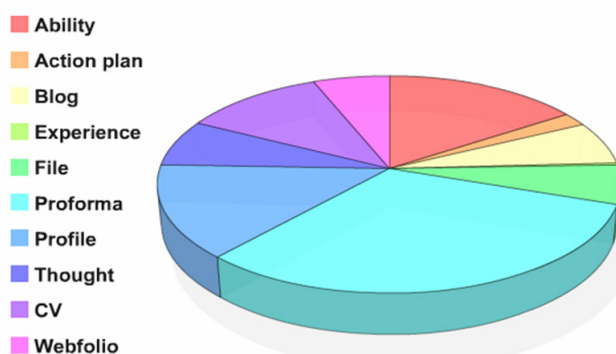
ate their portfolio structures on paper and then move them to the digital domain.

The potential of the tool is bigger than just a Personal Development Planning tool. **It would not have been possible to run the programme without it.**”

6. MSc Community Education (Dr John Bamber) [28 accounts]

“Students used the PebblePad system as part of their MSc Community Education coursework. The tutor created online forms within PebblePad, which were grouped according to subjects and published in separate ‘gateways’. **Gateways act as the channel between the individual account owner and the institution** or institutional space. Students off campus were asked to copy and fill in the forms and then return them back to the tutor through the gateways for comment and assessment. The use of the facility has been very impressive. The students returned over 160 assets to gateways where interaction between them and the tutor resulted in an exchange of over 30 comments.

Apart from the use of gateways, various PebblePad assets were shared privately between the users in the group on more than 40 occasions.”

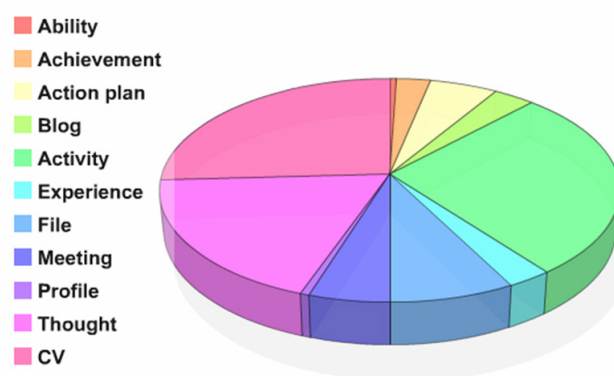


7. MSc Management of Training & Development (Dr Rory Ewins) [46 accounts]

“We used PebblePad as an optional way for students to keep a personal development portfolio (alternatively, they could maintain and submit a paper portfolio). We had a one-hour session introducing them to the tool and the concept of a PDP, and let them loose. I asked them to get back to me if they had any technical problems, but very few did.

We experienced some problems around submission time, when they were unsure how to share their PebblePad items, and with whom.

We have to clarify with students how best to use the tool. Most students created separate portfolio items for what were essentially a series of separate posts better suited to a blog format; only one actually used the PebblePad blog tool.”

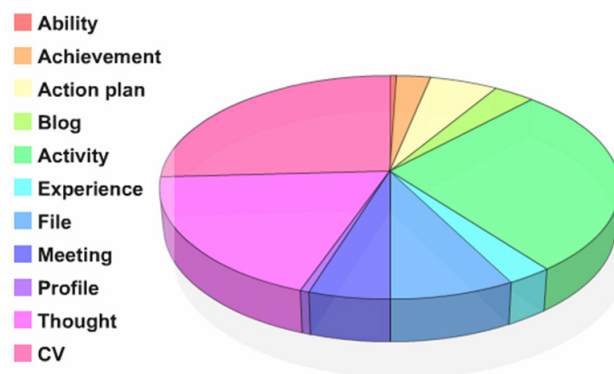


8. MSc E-Learning (Jen Ross) [28 accounts]

“Students on the core course for the MSc in e-learning, “An Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning”, spend two weeks reading about, exploring, and discussing eportfolios. Each eportfolio block starts with students exploring a set of exemplar eportfolios from around the web, getting access to their own eportfolio space, and completing core readings. This year their eportfolio space was provided within PebblePad, and the response to it was generally positive (this has not always been the case in previous years). Here are some specific comments about PebblePad:”

“I really like PebblePad, especially how user friendly it is”

“The PebblePad is the only one I have seen and that clearly isn’t very flexible as you can’t create your own forms (although it is lovely anyway!)” (Tutor’s note: Actually you can create your own forms!)



“ I tried PebblePad.
Didn’t really like it.
Posted a moan about all the
endless form filling.
Then... **it struck me that PebblePad’s forms were the scaffolding** you were talking about.”
(in response to another student’s posting about how to support reflection)

Conclusions

There are two main things which should be learnt from the PebblePad pilots:

- It is necessary for course organisers to know beforehand what they want to achieve through PebblePad.

Key amongst the lessons learned was the importance of knowing beforehand what is to be achieved through the use of the eportfolio. Regardless of how attractive PebblePad may look or sound – it is just a collection of tools. As with everything, specific tools are suited to specific tasks.

Therefore, if a course does not contain tasks that can realistically be completed with PebblePad then PebblePad should not be introduced.

- Students need to realise and visualise what PebblePad is (and what it is not) and how to use it.

In most of the cases, students took part in introductory sessions where PebblePad and its selected tools (relevant to the course) were discussed and explained.

PebblePad was not presented to students as an eportfolio system. In order to help students realise and visualise what PebblePad is (and what it is not) it was helpful to characterise PebblePad as an educational equivalent of MySpace or Facebook. Students are already familiar with using these social networking tools to share personal information, and they are comfortable with online collaborative behaviours. Users of social websites also learn how to prioritise when publishing new information about themselves. This can help when creating assets in PebblePad which sometimes relies on the process of online self-reinvention.

Although these tools can be used in an educational context they were not designed for this and many students are reluctant to allow their private world of Facebook to overlap with their academic life. That is where the PebblePad system comes in.

The result

The majority of the tutors that participated in the pilot are already eager to use the system in future years. During the first year, students were mainly using the built-in PebblePad tools. PebblePad's suite of built in tools is extensive, and initially may appear too generic.

However, almost all the tools can be tailored to local contexts, and training and support will be available to allow users to realise their vision. Amongst the customisable tools that are being deployed are Profiles and Forms.

With more and more PebblePad forms and profiles being offered to students, eportfolio tasks may become too complicated. Therefore, new solutions (including training sessions and 'taster' sessions about gateways for tutors throughout 2010/11) are being developed to make the submission process quicker and more efficient.



Another feature likely to be of particular interest to simplify the process is the webfolio. Tutors have also started creating blank webfolios consisting of a collection of empty forms/profiles, blogs and action plans. These are then shared or published for students to download from a gateway, populate and resubmit to the gateway.

In 2009, PebblePad was used during the first year mainly to support students' learning activities. From the 2010/11 the usage will expand as the system will also be deployed to support staff development initiatives - initially on a pilot

basis within Information Services (skills framework; managers' development programme and annual development reviews).

The overall feeling about the system around the University is very encouraging. The number of people who want to utilise it is advancing rapidly.

We hope that by 2012, the PebblePad system will become as familiar and recognisable amongst our community as the current VLE.

Acknowledgements

Case study by Robert Chmielewski
All images courtesy of University of Edinburgh