From the outset my journey with PebblePad has primarily been one of emotions; beginning with frustration, then cautious familiarity and leading to what I believe is the start of a long and enduring partnership.

Background

I proudly turned 50 in 2009, returning to tertiary study for the first time in 24 years. My computer skills were above average and I had enjoyed teaching computer to primary-aged students. When introduced to Pebble Pad, I was in my second semester of a Graduate Certificate in Information Communication Technology Education by distance at Charles Sturt University. The subject was EMT501 (Educational applications of educational technology).

Our second assessment item involved creating an eportfolio to evidence the achievement of our own learning goals. We were able to use any electronic application, but PebblePad was just being rolled out at CSU as its personal learning system, so that was given as an option. Reflection on our learning was encouraged.
**Initial challenges**

My first challenge was just to get my head around the concepts I was being asked to engage with. What was PebblePad? Wasn’t a portfolio something that an artist, not a teacher put together? A webfolio, I assumed, was a collection of ‘things’ that was put together on the web, and reflection meant thoughts that went around in my head when I had done something wrong and was trying to sort out what had happened. At this stage, with so many unanswered questions, I was considering pulling out of university and forgetting further study, but I persevered and, although I could have used other applications, I decided to give PebblePad a try. Little did I know what I’d started…

**Meeting my foe**

*On first logging in, I was overwhelmed. Although I had read about eportfolios and watched some of the PebblePad videos I was still unsure about the end product.*

The task and the tools made me feel inadequate…as if there was just too much to learn. I had been assured by the subject tutor that PebblePad was quite intuitive, but that was not happening for this intuitive introvert.

My next challenge was to conquer new concepts and resources. The CSU resources for PebblePad were not set up at this stage; had they been available, my journey would have been easier. One of the problems was that I initially thought that PebblePad was only an eportfolio tool. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

**Getting to know each other**

*I started by uploading some assets. I sought help from both Carole Hunter and the subject co-ordinator, and had two sessions where I was linked into their computers to follow what was happening. They also sent me an example webfolio, so I had a better idea about the final product. It was only then that I finally realised that a webfolio was one part of PebblePad which I could use to complete the assessment, along with the support of its other tools.*

As it appealed to my creative side, I decided to set up PebblePad to suit myself using the ‘Tools’ menu and going to ‘My Settings’. I experimented with using the blog tool, created an achievement, an action plan and a thought as well as learning how to personalise PebblePad and my own webfolio by inserting pictures and designing the format of new pages. By this stage, I was able to help other students in my course who were also having difficulties with aspects of PebblePad.

As the semester rolled on, I started to realise that I was spending so much time learning about PebblePad that it was impacting on my other work, so I made learning PebblePad my **“PebblePad had given me places to reflect and I was learning to reflect not only on the negative but also on what I had achieved.”**
third learning goal. I think this was one of my main strengths – that I didn’t give up. I completed my assessment webfolio with a sigh of relief. PebblePad had given me places to reflect and I was learning to reflect not only on the negative but also on what I had achieved. In the end, I’d achieved something, but what’s more, I now understood (and really believe in) PebblePad’s potential to be a powerful personal learning resource. I have put together a video on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-afi6yG-Kec) in which I talk a bit more about why I now believe in it so much.

The end (or so I thought...)

Extremely grateful that my journey with PebblePad was over, I fondly said good-bye and looked forward to a PebblePad-free life. I was yet to realise that PebblePad and I were merely having a break in our relationship.

For 10 years I had been trying to complete my Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing, a two year vocational course. My notes, assignments, workplace records were scattered over several hard drives and piles of paper on the floor. I started thinking about the possibilities of using PebblePad to organise myself.

I began uploading assets and placed 10 years worth of veterinary nursing theory and practical experiences into one area. As if by magic, a story was unfolding and, with it, the realisation of both the amount and quality of the work I had completed.

Initially, this ‘working portfolio’ had an audience of one – me. Yet as I went along, I could see how much work I had done and that it was an achievable goal to complete my certificate this year. I later chose to submit my webfolio via PebblePad to the coordinator of the vet nursing course so that she could assess my recognition for prior learning. This gave her a better understanding of my knowledge and skills, as she could see examples of my work rather than just a list of marks. As a result, my prior learning has been recognised.

For my veterinary nursing, I am now using the Action Plan tool as if for the first time, perhaps how it is meant to be utilised. I add comments and build on the resources as I journey towards the goal. I use the activities tool to record my workplace experiences and I have just been taught how to use an activity log.

PebblePad for me now is a platform for learning and reflection in both my personal and academic life. It has introduced me to and taught me how to set up an action plan and SWOT analysis. I use it several times a week for my personal journal, my veterinary nursing, a blog for several animals in my care at our Wildlife Refuge, working portfolios for my subjects this semester and other ongoing projects. This means I have records of the various journeys and commitments in my life, and I feel much more organised and on top of things. I also now know that I can refer back to past events and achievements when I need to, rather than them becoming lost on a random piece of paper somewhere, or just in my memory.
Helping others on their journey

I’d like to see teachers and subject co-ordinators using PebblePad more widely than just as an assessment tool. Students need to use it more widely for managing all aspects of their learning.

It’s also essential that, before introducing PebblePad, the students have access to information to help them understand the concepts behind webfolios and reflective learning. For some students, this type of learning will be foreign and PebblePad will not feel natural at first.

First time learners should be guided in some of the essential tools before encouraging them to ‘play’. It’s tempting to just ‘add on’ PebblePad as an option, and therefore not provide the same support as if it was compulsory, but that just makes things hard for students. It would have been helpful to have contact with more advanced PebblePad users to share my efforts for discussion, suggestions and co-operative learning. Unfortunately only three people in our course shared their final products, and I believe that this was a lost opportunity for us all. It should be encouraged! I do not know of any other students that have continued to use PebblePad, but I hope that they do.

The relationship today

I have learned that PebblePad was worth the tears and perseverance, but that with a better introduction much of the negative emotions could have been avoided. PebblePad has become part of my life’s journey, and I’m still learning, having barely tapped its potential. Only the other day in passing it was mentioned to me that when you are using a webpage you want to do things with as few clicks as possible.

“ This was another ‘ding dong’ moment for me; yes, I was creating a webpage! ”

I currently only use what I have become comfortable with, but there are other tools that I wish to learn about and make part of my learning.

PebblePad gives me a place to reflect. I would love it to give me a few more cues with the type of questions and thoughts I should try to answer when reflecting. My reflections have helped me understand how I learn. A big picture can overwhelm me and I need to chunk it into manageable parts. PebblePad helps me to do this.

Even today, my journey with Pebble Pad is more about feelings than academia. I know that I have a private place for my records. I have a purpose for being there and the knowledge that it is my choice what I share with others through PebblePad. I see our relationship as ongoing. PebblePad is no longer a foe, my greatest nightmare. It is a friend and, like all true friendships, my learning and understanding about PebblePad will continue to grow as I work with its various tools.

References


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Case study by Sandra Stewart
All images courtesy of Charles Sturt University, YouTube and Sandra Stewart

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