

making the case

Evaluation of the student experience of using PebblePad as a tool to support the Professional Development Portfolio (PDP)

Kim Stuart, Leonie Siddons, and Robert Farmer

Division of Occupational Therapy, The University of Northampton, UK

Theme(s)

Learning: Reflection, Employability

Teaching/Professional practice: Programme/Course Development, Continuing Professional Development

The background context

Increasingly, employers in Health and Social Care look for specific examples which provide evidence of the qualities, skills and competencies they are seeking when they read application forms and CVs, and during interviews. The Health Professions Council (HPC) requires practitioners to demonstrate a commitment to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) through the use of a portfolio. The Professional Development Portfolio (PDP) process within the University of Northampton enables students to develop the skills needed to maintain and produce a portfolio of their learning and development within the field of Occupational Therapy.

The PDP pilot is being undertaken across Level 4 Occupational Therapy undergraduate students commencing September 2011. All Level 4 students and personal academic tutors were provided with a PebblePad account (7 staff and 66 students). The PDP has been developed for use with PebblePad across all undergraduate levels and is designed to reflect the progression of personal, academic and professional skills required for their first professional post. The PDP documentation to support this process reflects the current standards within the university and moves forwards, recognising the unique position of health students requiring registration and evidence of engagement with CPD. The content of the PDP is based upon research and meets the requirements of the university and professional bodies. With the support of the Learning Technologist for eportfolios, the material was developed within the University of Northampton undergraduate modular framework.

It is envisaged that the pilot will contribute to the:

- university e-strategy by providing access to online interactive learning and teaching media;

- enhancement of the student experience through the use of a creative and innovative tool for professional development;
- wider development of the PDP within the university;
- wider development of blended learning experiences for staff and students;
- broader adoption of PebblePad within the university, particularly the School of Health, though dissemination of the project outcomes at in-house technology enhanced learning events.

The pilot will be fully evaluated to consider the impact of PebblePad for the students and staff involved, in order to develop strategies to provide opportunities for eportfolios within the university.

Why PebblePad?

At the beginning of the Occupational Therapy PDP eportfolio project PebblePad was identified as the most appropriate and accessible tool for both the students and staff. The use of PebblePad enables students and personal academic tutors to collaborate in a timely manner whilst encouraging the students' independent learning and their personal, academic and professional development.

PebblePad offers the opportunity for PDP to be experienced interactively between student and tutor through the creation and completion of tasks within the eportfolio. One of the most prominent features of PebblePad that encouraged its adoption for this project is the intuitive and creative nature of the eportfolios which allows the students to produce unique portfolios.

The purpose

The overall aim of the e-PDP project is to provide the students with access to current and developing technology to enhance the learning experience and to facilitate the students' transition to being independent learners capable of fulfilling the CPD requirements when in professional practice.

The specific project aims are:

- To provide the students with a tool that enhances their engagement with the PDP process.
- To consider how PebblePad facilitates the student to develop independent learning skills.
- To explore the experience of PebblePad for staff and students.
- To embed the PDP within the BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy programme.

Therefore an evaluation of the student engagement and experience of PDP is necessary to inform future provision and development of the eportfolio.

It is a pre-requisite of registration with the HPC that Occupational Therapists engage in CPD. The introduction of the eportfolio for PDP with students, on entry to Higher Education, develops an ethos of self-management, independent learning, reflection and development of skills. PebblePad provides the vehicle for this and is a tool that can be continued once in professional practice.

The approach

The previous paper-based PDP system was reviewed to establish how student and staff engagement could be enhanced. The review identified that the approach to PDP required a more interactive and responsive format which enabled personal tutors and students to collaborate in a more efficient manner. The use of PebblePad to deliver PDP offered the opportunity to engage both staff and students within a virtual environment in which structured reflection could be engaged in by students and monitored by staff, and in which students could begin to make the transition to being more autonomous learners and learn reflective skills that would be invaluable in professional practice.

At the start of the development process academic staff and learning technologists met to discuss the requirements of the project and to decide how the resources that academic staff wanted to develop could best be constructed within PebblePad. Academic staff then conducted a thorough review and re-write of the resources, and passed these to the Learning Technology Team for creation within PebblePad. In some cases, existing asset types could be used, and in other cases custom forms and profiles were used. It was also felt that it would be useful if the Learning Technology Team provided training, both face-to-face and online, for staff and students new to PebblePad, to ensure that everyone involved in the project would be familiar with the PebblePad environment and the PDP resources.

Initially the students involved with the Occupational Therapy PDP were enrolled on a PDP gateway in PebblePad, and from there could access and copy a Webfolio which contained full instructions and information about PDP, and about the tasks for the year. Students then worked their way through the tasks set out in the Webfolio and submitted these back to the PDP gateway at appropriate points in order to share them with their personal tutor. This allowed personal tutors to view and con-

sider assets ahead of meetings with their tutees and, where placement commitments meant that it was difficult for students to attend meetings, to keep in touch and feedback to their students electronically.

The PDP comprised four sections, each of which included various tasks to complete within PebblePad, and was set out as follows:

Part 1: Creating Your Personal Profile

- Creating your profile and CV (About Me and CV)
- Reflecting on your skills (Profile)

Part 2: Developing Your Skills

- Creating an action plan (Action Plan)
- Personal reflection (Blog)
- Aspirational profile (Form)

Part 3: Practice Placement

- Reflection on practice (Form)

Part 4: Independent Learning

- Update your CV and profile (About Me and CV)
- Transition to Level 5 (Form)

The result

The use of PebblePad as part of the PDP process will be fully evaluated at the end of the academic year. Funding has been approved from the University as part of our Undergraduate Research Bursaries at Northampton (URB@N) scheme to assist with the review and evaluation. More information about the URB@N scheme, including links to project outcomes, is available at: <http://www.northampton.ac.uk/urban>.

Some of the identifiable short term achievements are:

- Each student has an individual eportfolio and have identified that they would retain this in their professional career. Several tutors have remarked on the importance of student ownership of the eportfolio.
- Embedding lifelong learning into the students' professional career.
- Facilitates on-going interaction between student and personal tutor.
- Facilitates the development of independent learning skills of the student.
- Online learning and support on use of PebblePad.
- Embedded PDP within the Occupational Therapy undergraduate programme.
- Some initial data provides evidence of an effective transition to delivering PDP through PebblePad.

Feedback from staff involved with the project has been overwhelmingly positive, as the following comments illustrate:

- PebblePad *"is something they can take with them into professional life at a relatively small cost. There are so many elements that are useful, particularly the reflective logs."* (Occupational Therapy Tutor 1)
- PebblePad *"is easy to navigate around and use. It is attractive and simple in design keeping the students interested"* (Occupational Therapy Tutor 2)
- PebblePad enables students to develop the key skill areas of *"reflection through an electronic element that could be delivered flexibly"* (Occupational Therapy Tutor 3)

- PebblePad “is accessible in a technological age of online learning” (Occupational Therapy Tutor 3)
- With PebblePad “more information can be obtained about how the student thinks, feels and is managing and engaging than with the previous [paper based] PDP method as students variably did not complete the paperwork.” (Occupational Therapy Tutor 1)
- “I had expected to spend more time training students and to have received more emails from students requesting support. However, the PebblePad Help Movies and own bespoke online support materials [created using Adobe Captivate] seem to have provided the majority of students with all the technical guidance they need to successfully engage with PebblePad.” (Learning Technologist)

The impact

As part of the PDP the students are required to become independent learners, responsible for managing their eportfolio. This has provided the opportunity for the students to develop the following skills:

- Higher Education Key Skills
- Personal, academic and professional skills
- Reflection
- Employability

This can be evidenced through the continued use of PebblePad by students and staff engaging with the PDP process. As the PDP is an integral component of the programme, student engagement is monitored and from initial consultation it is evident that there is growth in personal and professional development skills. This is reflected in progression in academic and practice components of the programme during allocated PDP tasks.

Lessons learnt

- Timing of introduction/training to PebblePad is crucial in enabling the student to become familiar with the format of the eportfolio and its functions.
- Creating online materials provides a very efficient and cost-effective way of assisting students who want to engage with PebblePad.
- Content of training needs to reflect the actual tasks required of the student in order to embed learning in action thereby contributing to the development of independent learning skills.
- Skill development of staff and students is recognised as a blended learning opportunity and engaging staff and students together in the initial process of using PebblePad may contribute to greater collaboration within the PDP process.
- Maintaining engagement with the PDP through PebblePad needs to be explored in more detail to highlight how to best facilitate continued use by the student whilst encourage independent learning.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

Learning (Reflection) & Teaching (Programme/Course Development)

PebblePad has allowed us to create a set of documents and activities which explain the PDP processes and which engage students directly in the process of reflection. Because contact with personal academic tutors is limited, the use of gateways to engage staff and students has allowed much closer monitoring

of, and feedback on, the PDP than was possible with the previous paper-based version. This has led to greater engagement with the PDP and to higher quality PDPs being produced by the students. However, it is important to note that the greater levels of engagement are not simply a result of moving from paper-based to electronic resources; rather, the intuitive, creative and pedagogically focused nature of PebblePad, combined with the carefully planned development of support materials and activities (which could not have been easily developed in any other systems), were crucial to the success of the project.

Learning (Employability) & Teaching (Continuing Professional Development)

The PDP closely mirrors the CPD which students need to evidence in order to find work in their chosen field. Because the use of PebblePad has contributed to the increased quality and engagement with the PDPs, this is improving students’ employability prospects by helping them to become independent, autonomous learners and to clearly evidence and articulate their skills and competencies. As students can use their PebblePad account in professional practice they will benefit greatly from a more seamless move from the academic to the professional environment.