

# making the case

## Empowering PebblePad users through a University wide support forum

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### **Theme(s)**

**Organisation:** Student Satisfaction, Cost/Time Saving

### **The background context**

PebblePad and the PebblePad support forum are available for all students at CSU regardless of study mode or geographical location. Not all students will use PebblePad as part of their course or subject structure.

The PebblePad forum was set up within the Charles Sturt University (CSU) Interact online environment. Its creation was a joint staff and student initiative. Students who venture down the PebblePad stepping stones as part of a course, or through their own exploration, have the option of using the forum to access asynchronous online support in addition to that already provided by the university.

The PebblePad forum provides assistance and scaffolding for a diverse community of learners. The forum is a place where students can go to seek answers by reading the questions and the answers already provided by staff or student mentors. They may also choose to ask questions specific to their own PebblePad learning needs.

The forum provides support to students for the technical, practical and often emotional aspects of entering into a journey within a personal learning and eportfolio environment. The forum monitoring demonstrates collaboration between CSU staff and student mentors. Through utilising student mentors, the forum has taken some of the load off the PebblePad team by providing a place for students to seek answers to questions that may otherwise have required one-to-one help or extra instruction from a staff member.

If an answer is not available immediately an acknowledgement of the request and words of encouragement enable the learner

to feel that their appeal for assistance is being heard. Student mentors are able to base their support and encouragement on their own experiences as student users of PebblePad. PebblePad support staff and subject coordinators are able to provide answers beyond what the mentors can offer and their involvement, support and encouragement is vital to the forum's continuing success.

### **The purpose and approach**

New technology can be daunting and confusing, especially when an assessment is at stake. The PebblePad forum provides an 'off-course' area where questions can be asked about using PebblePad, as well as gaining support for the technical and practical issues that may arise for students new to the PebblePad environment.

The forum was created when a student (now a mentor) suggested to a staff member who had helped her with PebblePad that an online forum, away from a subject site, could provide a place for students to find help and direct answers to PebblePad questions during their initial use and application of the system.

After this initial suggestion it took little time for the PebblePad support staff member to arrange to have the forum placed on the CSU Interact website. The PebblePad forum has been in operation since 23rd February 2010 with the first post illustrating a curiosity for students not using PebblePad as part of their course.

*"Hello....a new forum...what is pebble pad exactly???"*

Initially staff alone monitored the forum with the student who suggested it posting numerous questions. The forum then

evolved in an organic, natural manner as students moved from being question askers to answering other student enquiries and providing encouragement to those daunted by the initial PebblePad experience. Student mentoring on the PebblePad forum had commenced.

*"I moved from a person who asks questions to a student who is able to provide support to others. In doing so I continually re-visit known skills and try new ideas so that I may help others. It is much easier to source information when you are not stressing about an assessment." (Student Mentor (SM))*

The forum mentors have built up an extensive list of PebblePad resources. They try to lead students to the resources that will support them rather than just providing the answers. This helps to encourage other students to build up their own PebblePad resources.

***"My learning has become more empowered and by mentoring others I support my own use of PebblePad through refreshing my knowledge, learning for myself and from other students."***

(SM)

### **The result and impact**

One student forum user described her introduction to PebblePad as overwhelming. She felt daunted by both the task and the subject requirement to use PebblePad as an assessment tool. As a distance education student with minimal IT skills she felt that she needed to acquire PebblePad skills quickly and with clear explanations. She recalled seeing the forum so "quietly entered" and read what other students were asking but

*"(t)hey were using unfamiliar terminology which perpetuated an even greater fear of the unknown." (Student User (SU))*

She returned to the forum many times for questions and support, even seeking answers to questions that she thought sounded ridiculous. Having a mentor available within a dedicated forum helped to ease her fears, and her PebblePad skills increased. She feels that the support not only scaffolds the individuals' learning, but that the learning of the community has also developed.

*The forum is "... an incredibly beneficial learning space outside the domains of the virtual classroom". (SU)*

Students asking similar questions and supporting each other creates a sense of empowerment as skills are acquired.

*"It is less intimidating and more constructive when students feel supported in their technological learning outside their subject classroom. I even called one of the mentors my PebblePad Goddess." (SU)*

Student mentors are able to see other students' confidence improve and can appreciate the sense of achievement when users post on the forum that a task has been completed.

*"As a student mentor I can truly empathise and state how worthwhile it is to persevere about the possibilities of PebblePad, for that is my lived experience."(SM)*

The sharing of webfolios that are not connected to the course being undertaken gives some students a better visual idea of the final product and how it will work.

### Organisation: Student Satisfaction:

The proof of student satisfaction is in the level of use and the comments made by students on the forum. There are more students viewing posts than asking questions, so it is appropriate to assume that some answers are being found by looking at questions previously asked by others. From the beginning of the forum in late February 2010 to April 4, 2012 there have been 1,112 posts with 250 distinct posters. There have been 233,585 distinct reads of posts on the forum with 4,863 users reading one message or more. The PebblePad forum has itself become an online resource for students.

### Organisation: Time (and cost) Saving for staff members

Educational designers (ED) work closely with academics using PebblePad within their teaching. The EDs are aware that often the academics are new to PebblePad and are learning about it alongside the students. Knowing that they can direct their students to a student-support resource such as the PebblePad forum provides a bit of a 'safety net'.

***"The PP forum has become an exemplar in terms of a CSU-wide Community of Learners."***

(ED)

Being able to direct students to the forum instead of relying upon one-on-one support also represents a considerable time (and cost) saving for staff.

The CSU ePortfolio Team member who is currently responsible for supporting PebblePad use across the University believes that it is clear from the postings and replies within the PebblePad forum that the support that student mentors provide has greatly benefitted the students. She believes that the mentors provide the type of support that is the most reassuring of all – that of a fellow student.

*"The PP forum has become an exemplar in terms of a CSU-wide Community of Learners." (ED)*

### **Lessons learnt**

Support offered outside of a subject or course through an online space can enhance the student experience of using PebblePad for assessment or personal learning. An online forum allows distance education and internal students to have convenient, easily accessible, anytime help with PebblePad. The opportunity for staff and students to work co-operatively on a project such as this provides a valuable environment of mutual respect.

### In brief – making the case for PebblePad

- Through an online, university-wide forum PebblePad users have a place to seek support and encouragement outside of subject or course participation.
- The dedicated learning space empowers a community of learners through supports and scaffolds.
- Students and staff working together in an online, asynchronous support forum can share the workload and support the different needs of students.
- Students acting as peer mentors learn again as they teach and extend their knowledge of PebblePad use.