

Pompeii by PebblePad

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A case study from PebblePad's 2016 'Future Ready' conference on preparing and equipping learners for their journey.

The Context

'Pompeii and the Cities of Vesuvius' is a module in the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Egyptology at the University of Swansea. In 2015, the student body was a mixture of second and third years, with different levels of experience and attainment. The main element of their assessment was to work in groups of four to research a particular topic and, using PebblePad, to create a website that could be used to teach their peers about that topic.

The Problem

I wanted to find a non-traditional means of assessment that allowed students to express themselves as creatively as possible, while still encouraging research and presentation skills, and team work. In particular, I wanted them to find ways of teaching their fellow students, because I hoped that the process of deciding how to present a topic in a way that would be useful to other students would cement their own understanding of that topic. I also wanted to encourage the students to reflect independently on their work as we progressed through the semester.

The Approach

I asked the students to create websites on specific topics relevant to the wider module. Their remit was to identify the most important issues about their topic and the relevant primary evidence, and to think about how they could transmit this information to other students. They were told to avoid the traditional essay format and to find other ways to communicate ideas.

PebblePad provided the tools for the students to both create their websites AND keep a reflective journal/blog about their efforts (their blogs were integral parts of their websites). In groups, students were able to design and format their websites, import images, and link to other

websites and videos. As individuals, they had to write a minimum of four blog entries (250-500 words) which discussed their individual contributions and reflected on their learning experiences. These were 'open' reflections (they were not guided by PebblePad templates) because I wanted to give them the freedom to document their own interests and experiences. They were able to include thoughts about the wider course, or about using PebblePad, or both. The blogs were not formally assessed but were intended to create an additional layer of reflection. There were certain minimum requirements for all the webfolios. They had to include the following:

- A bibliography
- Links to other sources of information (e.g. websites, articles, image galleries)
- A brief bio and photo of each student in the group
- A blog by each student

Although they worked in groups on these webfolios, each student was responsible for a particular set of pages and the grades they received were partly based on these. This meant that each team member had to contribute equally in order to receive a good grade. This, and the blog, also meant that ALL students had to learn how to use PebblePad and the basics of web design and presentation. At the end of the project, all students had to peer-review the contributions of their fellow team members. This did not have a formal impact on their final grades, but was intended to highlight any problems within particular groups.

Finally, in order to teach the students how to use PebblePad, and to support their ongoing efforts, I organized regular 'PebblePad sessions' with the E-Learning Co-ordinator at Swansea University. The students used these sessions to ask questions and experiment with different features of PebblePad.

The Results

The students were mostly very excited about this new assessment. The majority worked well in their groups and the final results were often impressive (which was reflected in their grades, confirmed by internal and external examiners). The websites themselves demonstrated how the majority of students had been able to use PebblePad to express their ideas, to learn a new skill, and to work effectively as part of a group. In addition, student feedback for the module revealed that the students saw the benefits of participating in a more flexible and dynamic form of assessment.

One of the best efforts can be seen here: <https://v3.pebblepad.co.uk/v3portfolio/swansea/Asset/View/j5btWMjdM7ccm7tywxmwr38csM> on the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. This webfolio addressed the reader well and presented information in a fun and engaging way. The use of questions and answers was particularly effective, as were the 'interesting facts' found throughout. Overall the webfolio was attractive and accessible, and based on thorough research.

Student feedback on the module included the following comments:

"The blogs were fun to write for the webfolio. It allowed us to give our opinions on the whole project."

"Webfolio design was a great assessment that challenges students in different ways than an essay would."

"I enjoyed the coursework of creating a webfolio, it was an interesting way of translating what I learned in lectures into a piece of assessable work."

"I really liked the way in which this module was assessed. The Web project is a very effective way to get the student to learn a topic in great detail and is something different to writing an essay."

"The blog element of the module was great because it allows you to reflect on what you've actually learned and keep up to date with deadlines."

Lessons Learnt

Initially I learned that students are very reluctant to try new things, which was very surprising! None had ever created websites or kept reflective journals before, and they were horrified at the start. But I also discovered that with appropriate support and guidance, they were able to recognize the value of this new type of assessment because it was so clear that they were learning new skills.

One problem we encountered was that once they embraced the idea of creating a website, many students wanted to do more formatting than PebblePad allowed. They wanted more freedom in creating their pages and presenting their information. Ultimately they had to be a little less ambitious – which I think was a good thing because it meant they had to focus more on content. They needed to balance creativity with academic content.

I think the most important lesson to be learnt from this experiment is that students can do well when you force them to think outside the box and attempt new things. PebblePad provided the opportunity for this to happen in a structured and controlled way that allowed students to be creative, but also to reflect regularly on their work and achievements. It is clear from both the student blogs and from their end-of-module feedback that they really recognized the value of doing this.

In Brief – Showcasing ‘Future Readiness’ with PebblePad

- Students were able to learn transferable skills – research, web design, presentation skills, team work, and team management – that will help them transition to the world of employment.
- Students will be able to show these websites to future employers, thus highlighting the skills that they have learned and are ready to apply outside of university.
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- In their blogs, students were able to reflect on the development of these skills throughout the module, as well as assess their academic progress. Many have said that they intend to continue keeping a reflective journal for future modules because it helped them to keep up with deadlines, formulate their own opinions, and reflect on their learning. This is an important step in their development as independent lifelong learners.
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- The assessment for this module required students to step outside of their comfort zones and attempt something completely new. By acquiring the necessary skills to complete the assessment students gained confidence in their ability to face new challenges in a positive and constructive manner.