On the Pebble Road: The first 80 days
An auto-ethnographic account

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The Context

My history with Pebble goes back quite some time. I first saw PebblePad demonstrated by the UK team in Brisbane in 2008 and I immediately connected with the approach being promoted to support students to collect evidence and reflect on their learning. I think this may have been the first time I had considered software that was actually designed for my intended purpose! The team knew about portfolios in education, had clear ideas on how to scaffold portfolio construction and had built PebblePad as a tool to support students to build artefacts as tangible representations of their learning.

My university was one of the first Australian universities to invest in PebblePad and I progressively implemented it in the teacher education programs that I coordinated. In particular, I used PebblePad as a platform to deliver an online, work-based degree qualification for early childhood educators. The program was highly successful, and we managed to implement the early learning course on a shoe-string budget with a small support team mostly because PebblePad suited our purpose so well. I considered that PebblePad was my secret weapon!

In 2015 I moved to the University of Tasmania to work as an e-learning focused academic. Although my pedagogy still incorporated a portfolio approach, at that stage UTAS didn't have a PebblePad license and so I tried to 'make do' with a variety of digital tools. I mostly avoided endorsing any particular tool for the students to use, as I didn't feel confident with any of the options we had. In 2017, however, UTAS responded to the growing demand for a portfolio platform across the University and convened an ePortfolio Advisory Team with the purpose of procuring a portfolio solution. PebblePad was the successful vendor and in the first week of February 2018, PebblePad was available to all staff and students at UTAS. I was back in business!

As the 'e-learning pedagogue' in the School of Education, I am responsible for supporting students and staff to engage with the Portfolio of Evidence approach (TEMAG, 2014) that is now obligatory for pre-service teacher education. My brief includes conceptualising how we might use portfolios and PebblePad in our programs. Further, I teach a foundation unit called Academic Literacies, where I introduce students to the concept of a portfolio and the use of PebblePad. I provide quite a bit of the PebblePad training and support for both on-campus and online students and staff in the School. In my spare time, I moonlight as a Pebble advocate at UTAS and I talk to anyone who is interested about using PebblePad and the benefits of using portfolios for teaching and learning.

This report takes an auto-ethnographic approach and draws on a blog that I kept from when PebblePad was first available for us to use at UTAS. 'The first 80 days' is somewhat arbitrary, but roughly it covers preparation before the first semester began and a large chunk of Semester 1. This period included thinking through how we might go about incorporating a portfolio approach and the introduction of PebblePad as our portfolio platform, as well as providing early professional development for staff and information and support for students. It also covers the early implementation of PebblePad for assessment in early adopter units.

The Problem

The problem I had was not a problem as such, but an opportunity. In 2014, the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG, 2014) specified that all pre-service teachers should develop a 'portfolio of evidence' during their initial teacher education program to demonstrate their achievement of the Graduate level of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2016). It was clear that this directive was not just for the students, as the TEMAG report recommended that:

> *Higher education providers and schools work together to assist pre-service teachers to develop and collect sophisticated evidence of their teaching ability and their impact on student learning for their Portfolio of Evidence.*

> (TEMAG Recommendation 28)

Now, a Federal Government mandate is a really useful driver to justify change. The School of Education at UTAS offers nine initial teacher education courses and these all should include portfolios as an integral part of the curriculum. Further, this integration will need to be evidenced in each course when it is next reviewed for accreditation purposes. Although the TEMAG report was published late in 2014, the move towards a portfolio approach has been slow at UTAS. Apart from one ground-breaking course (The Bachelor of Applied Learning), our initial teacher education programs have had quite a traditional approach to course progression with a lock-step structure based on discreet units of work. The lack of an integrated portfolio approach could be

attributed, at least in part, to the absence of a university endorsed portfolio platform and this was certainly the argument that we used to lobby for a system in 2017. The establishment of the UTAS ePortfolio Advisory Team and the subsequent provision of PebblePad for portfolio implementation was a watershed. We had obtained the portfolio option that we had asked for and now was the time to use it to transform the ways in which we prepared our pre-service teachers for the profession.

The Approach

Looking back, this moment was tricky for me. On one hand, I was delighted that I could use PebblePad in my own teaching again and I knew that it would facilitate stronger and more authentic teaching and learning experiences for my students. On the other hand, I recognised that my job was to ensure that all of the initial teacher education courses benefitted from this approach and that the whole of Education would need to embrace this concept. I was convinced of the power of PebblePad, but I knew that many of my colleagues were dubious, especially as an earlier use of PebblePad at UTAS hadn't been overly successful or transformative.

I have always maintained that using a designated portfolio system should not be an optional extra for students or academics. A portfolio transcends individual units and for it to be successful, every component of a course needs to contribute to its development. In our situation, however, I tried to ensure that the focus remained firmly on the notion of a Portfolio of Evidence rather than on using PebblePad per se. My argument was that every unit coordinator needed to adopt the Portfolio of Evidence concept and include some aspect of portfolio work in order to 'normalise' the practice for our students. Of course, this meant that they were required to use PebblePad because this would be the ongoing environment for evidence collection and reflection.

At the end of year School Forum in 2017, I presented a strategy for portfolio use in 2018 and suggested that every unit coordinator should nominate at least one of their assessment items as a 'designated portfolio task'. There were three possible levels for engagement:

1. Simply designate a task as being suited to the portfolio. The students upload it to PebblePad at the end of the semester.
2. Include a PebblePad asset as a 'type' for building an assessment item. The students choose what software they will use, and PebblePad can be listed as an option. The student uses the generic support and share the asset as a public link for marking.
3. Ask students to complete a PebblePad task as assessment. The students use PebblePad to complete the task and submit for marking in an ATLAS workspace.

I reiterated that this process was important because:

1. The TEMAG report specifies that each pre-service teacher needs a Portfolio of Evidence.
2. It supports students to value and keep assessment items as evidence of their learning.
3. The more students are asked to use a portfolio platform, the more familiar they will become with it.

As we moved towards implementation in 2018, I provided as much support for PebblePad as possible. This included scheduled workshops and drop in sessions, visits to classes and online web conferences for students, and a Portfolio portal in the LMS to share resources and give advice. I am fortunate to have a colleague on the Hobart campus who is also familiar with and enthusiastic about PebblePad and together we 'waved the PebblePad banner' and proudly displayed our 'Ask me about PebblePad' signs.

The Results

My blog clearly illustrates the peaks and troughs of our PebblePad journey so far. At times my posts are jubilant, as I witness an 'aha' moment with one of our users, but at other times it seems just too difficult to disrupt the status quo. I recruited 12 unit coordinators to use PebblePad for 15 units with ATLAS (Level 3 engagement) in Semester 1. We had 24 PebblePad based tasks and this meant that around 1500 pre-service teachers were asked to use PebblePad for assessment purposes.

I was initially disappointed that out of at least 60 potential participants, only 12 unit coordinators (20%) decided to incorporate a PebblePad task. The majority simply designated an existing assessment task (Level 1 engagement) or chose not to participate at all. Unfortunately, it appears that there is still a perception with staff and students that this initiative is on top of current workload, rather than a mechanism for improving engagement with curriculum and a way to meet the TEMAG mandate. As it turned out though, this modest participation was a blessing in disguise, as we were quite busy providing support for those who elected to use PebblePad in Semester 1.

Another complexity that I noted was that the word 'portfolio' means different things to different people. While I prefer to use the term as a verb and aim to teach students the practice of 'portfolioing' (see Figure 1), I realised that some of my colleagues considered the portfolio as a fixed entity, where students progressively add 'stuff'.
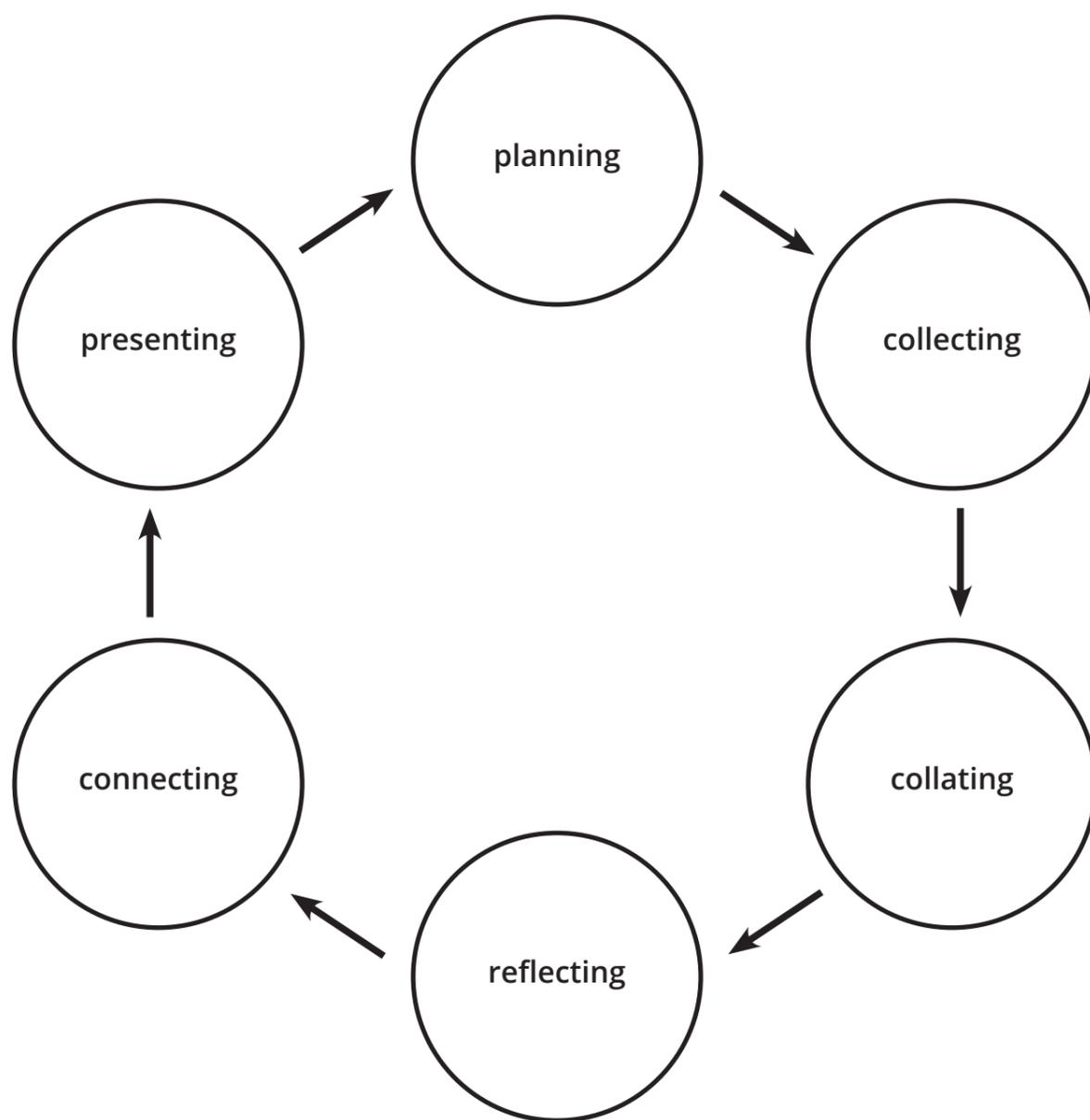
Figure 1: The process of 'portfolioing'.

To me, the Portfolio of Evidence is a collection and the pre-service teacher builds an interface (also called a portfolio) that draws on this material to show a particular audience where and how they meet the standards. To others though, the Portfolio of Evidence is the product in its own right and it consists of a single large resource with evidence matched consecutively to each of the 37 teacher standards. This ambiguity may be problematic for future implementation and it will be important to continue discussions in order to clarify what we are asking our students to do.

Although 80 days is relatively early in our Pebble journey, there are already plenty of achievements to report. First of all, the introduction of PebblePad was remarkably smooth. Some of our IT managers were concerned when I proposed a full implementation in Education rather than a pilot or trial. My argument was that we were already behind on the TEMAG mandate and that I needed all students to use PebblePad as soon as they could. Fortunately, my faith in PebblePad was confirmed and within days of our soft launch, staff and students were using their accounts to build assets and resources. To my delight, the synch with our LMS worked effectively and the population of ATLAS workspaces occurred on the click of a link, replacing the complex process of uploading lists of students that I had used previously.

Most of the PebblePad assessment tasks in Semester 1 are located towards the end of the semester and so this reflection will not report on the final outcomes, however, PebblePad was introduced in my Academic Literacies unit from the beginning of semester and students are already very competent at using it for reflection and assessment purposes. One of my students wrote:

> *The more I use it, the more I understand how it works and how helpful it will be. It will be a great system to use to build my portfolio over the next 4 years here at UTAS.*

As the unit coordinator, I am again enjoying the power of PebblePad to scaffold the assessment tasks. My students completed a reflection on literacies for their first assessment and this was supported through steps presented in a workbook. The auto-submit option helped to ensure all work ended up in the right place and the use of sets, feedback comments and rubrics meant that my team of five markers managed the processing of over 300 submissions with very little fuss, in record time.

Lessons Learnt

As a compulsive early adopter, I tend to charge ahead without much consideration for the long-term viability of an innovation and in this scenario, I can't afford to do this. The Portfolio of Evidence is a required feature of all of our programs and it must be established as a core component. The responsibility here is huge. I have come to the realisation that if I don't persuade ALL of my colleagues to adopt this approach then my mission has largely failed. I also recognise, however, that it will take time to meet this goal and I need to be patient. The 12 participants in Semester 1 represent a good part of the teaching staff and if they are successful in using PebblePad to support the students to build portfolio resources then it is likely that others will follow their lead. Further, if students become confident in building portfolio content then they are more likely to encourage their unit coordinators to take this approach. True reform takes time and change needs to be comfortable and sustainable.

A further lesson that I have learnt through this venture is that when the stakes are high and failure is not an option, participants need to be provided with unconditional support. While I balance my role as a Portfolio champion with a number of other responsibilities, I have developed a 'never hesitate' response to requests for assistance. My aim is to ensure that we adopt a portfolio approach to transform our teaching and learning, I believe that using PebblePad is the way to do this and I am determined that I will facilitate this in whatever way I can.

Take home messages about 'Scaling up'

The metaphor of the 'Portfolio Road' is useful to summarise this discussion:

- The road to Portfolio Utopia is long and there will be bumps, obstacles and wrong turns as we go
- The role of driver is important, but so too is that of the navigator; it is important to know where you are going
- There isn't much point in reaching a destination if you lose your passengers along the way.
- It certainly helps to have a reliable vehicle to successfully negotiate the terrain

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