

chapter
3

The Principles of PebblePad

This chapter outlines the pedagogical principles that have informed the design and development of PebblePad. We have provided a summary at the end of the chapter for quick reference.

Whether you are a practitioner, curriculum designer or professional course developer, understanding the underpinning principles of PebblePad will help you to harness its potential when you design learning activities. Learners too will benefit from understanding these principles when they start to use the personal learning space.

1 PebblePad supports personal learning

A group of people can share a common experience but may learn different things from it. A group of students may follow the same course of study, but each will make sense of their learning in a different way – as we know, what is taught is not always what is learned. Personal learning, then, is the sense that each learner makes of their own experiences.

PebblePad is a personal learning space whose prime purpose is to provide a place and a process to record learning experiences and achievements, encouraging learners to become accountable for themselves and their learning. It is about recording things learners do, things they are planning to do or things that they are proud of. The reason for recording is to make better sense of experiences, so that a learner can make links between one experience and another and so form new learning.

By recording learning events and experiences at, or close to, the time they happened it is easier to build an authentic record which allows learners to look back and see what they have learned, how they have changed and how they have developed. The narratives that a learner constructs later can then explain how the events relate to each other *over time* rather than just their moment by moment significance. Without this evolving record, it is hard to avoid interpreting past events through today's lens – where we are now and how we think today. Using PebblePad over time, learners can revisit and review past experiences for many different purposes and, like a kaleidoscope, new patterns will emerge.

Personal learning is not to be confused with ‘personalised learning’ when that term is used to describe an educational strategy to modify and adapt teaching according to the needs of individuals: for example, making podcasts available to learners who prefer auditory learning. It is possible to use PebblePad to personalise learning experiences for different learning preferences, but when we talk about personal learning we are referring to the idea that users of PebblePad are managing their own learning in a personal space where learning is ‘done by me’ not ‘done to me’ (de Freitas and Yapp, 2005). To support this kind of learning, tutors and course designers tailor the curriculum to meet the individual needs of students but, perhaps more importantly, they shift the focus from curriculum and planned learning outcomes to a focus on the learner and the experience and interpretation of their learning. Personalised learning, in this sense of the term, is an internalising process where learning is connected to personal lived experience and each learner constructs their own meaning through reflection in their PebblePad and through dialogue with their tutor or mentor. There can still be meaningful and valuable learning activities that take place elsewhere online (in a Learning Management System, for example) or face-to-face, but PebblePad can help learners prepare for, record and capture, and reflect on, the learning.

2 PebblePad offers a safe and private place which is owned and controlled by the user

PebblePad is owned by the learner. It is a fundamental principle of PebblePad that nobody else can enter another’s PebblePad. There is no interface for an administrator to log into learners’ accounts because that would contradict the core principle of personal ownership. Users may choose, at any time, to allow others to view and interact with one or more of their assets but no-one ever has access to their entire PebblePad.

Each user of PebblePad can experiment, record, plan, reflect and play with ideas, secure in the knowledge that their work is private. In an institutional context, whether this is a university or a professional association, what this means is that the institution maintains ownership of the system and controls who has access to the system as a whole, but the individual user owns all the assets within their PebblePad and has absolute control over who has access to their work.

This is more than a privacy issue, it is about where the locus of control is situated within the learning relationship. The PebblePad personal learning approach can, and does, work well alongside institutional learning systems but they differ in two key dimensions: control and ownership.

- *Control*: In a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS), whether it is Moodle, Blackboard or other system, the course is managed and owned by the tutor and administrator. A typical activity might be that the tutor requires students to post and respond to a forum a minimum number of times. The forum belongs to the course and everything that the student does on the LMS course can be seen by the tutor, who may also control what permissions students have to view other people's work. In a LMS, the student is the 'guest' in the learning space and the tutor is the 'owner'. In PebblePad, the roles are reversed: the student is the owner and the tutor is the guest (see Figure 3.1).

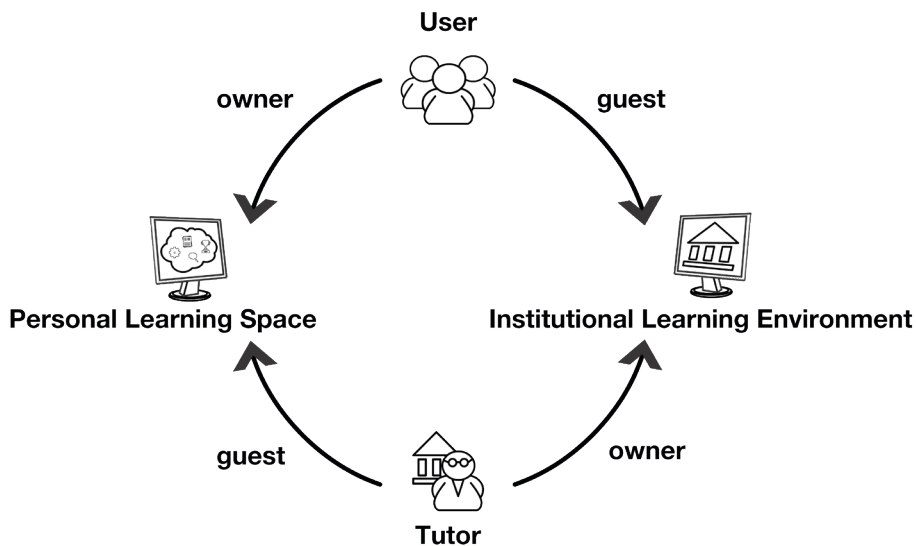


Figure 3.1: *The locus of control in the Personal Learning Space and the Institutional Learning Environment*

- *Authorship and ownership*: During the time that students are enrolled in a LMS course they might, for example, engage with the forums and add to the resources – but once the course is over, their evidence of engagement is no longer available to them. They are normally taken off the enrolment to allow new students to access the course. Unless they have made some external record of what they achieved, the students' evidence of learning has gone too. By contrast, there is no end point of 'un-enrolment' within the personal learning space. Everything that the students creates in PebblePad continues to be owned by them (see Figure 3.2).

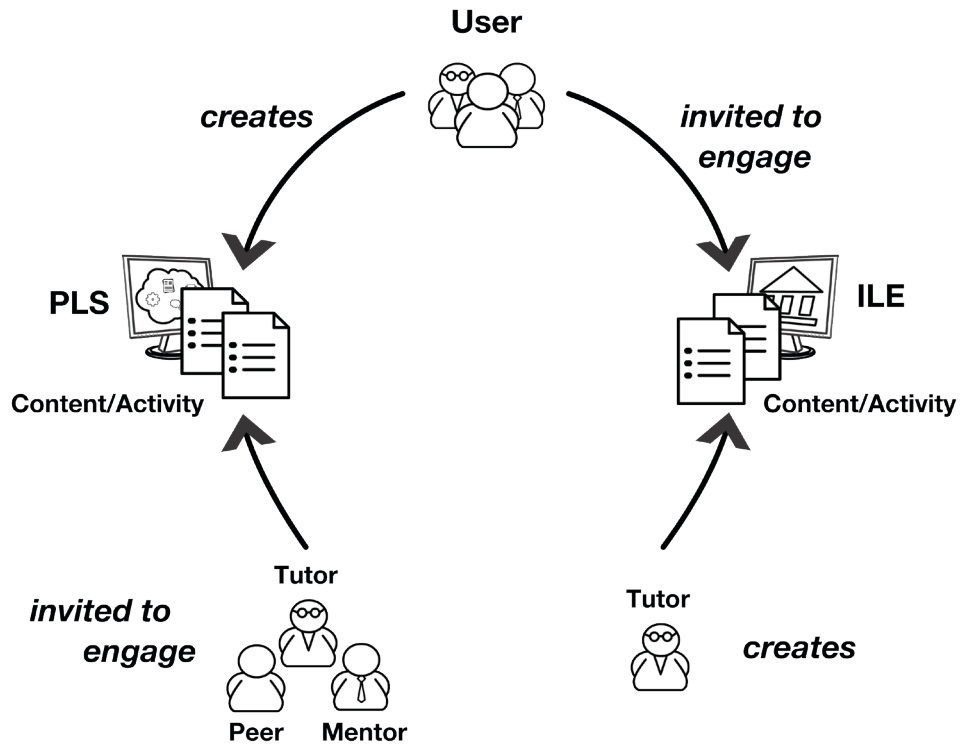


Figure 3.2: Ownership of work in the Personal Learning Space and the Institutional Learning Environment

Understanding the differences between the LMS and PebblePad, rather than viewing them as competing technologies, allows us to make the most of both and to offer users a unified learning experience. Both can be used as complementary systems and PebblePad has plugins available for popular LMS's. These bring the two systems together by making a range of PebblePad facilities available within the LMS: for example, one option is for learners to create PebblePad assets directly from the LMS without having to log onto PebblePad. So, if learners are working through some content in the LMS, they can create a reflective thought about the subject area they are working on. Unlike posting to a discussion forum in the LMS, this thought is personal and private unless the user chooses to share it.

3 PebblePad is multi-purpose – but purposeful

You will get the best value from PebblePad when you use it, and encourage others to use it, for multiple purposes. The purposes will change over time in a learner's lifecycle, perhaps first as a student and then as a developing professional; they can be seen as a series of 'touch points' which continue throughout formal education and professional development.

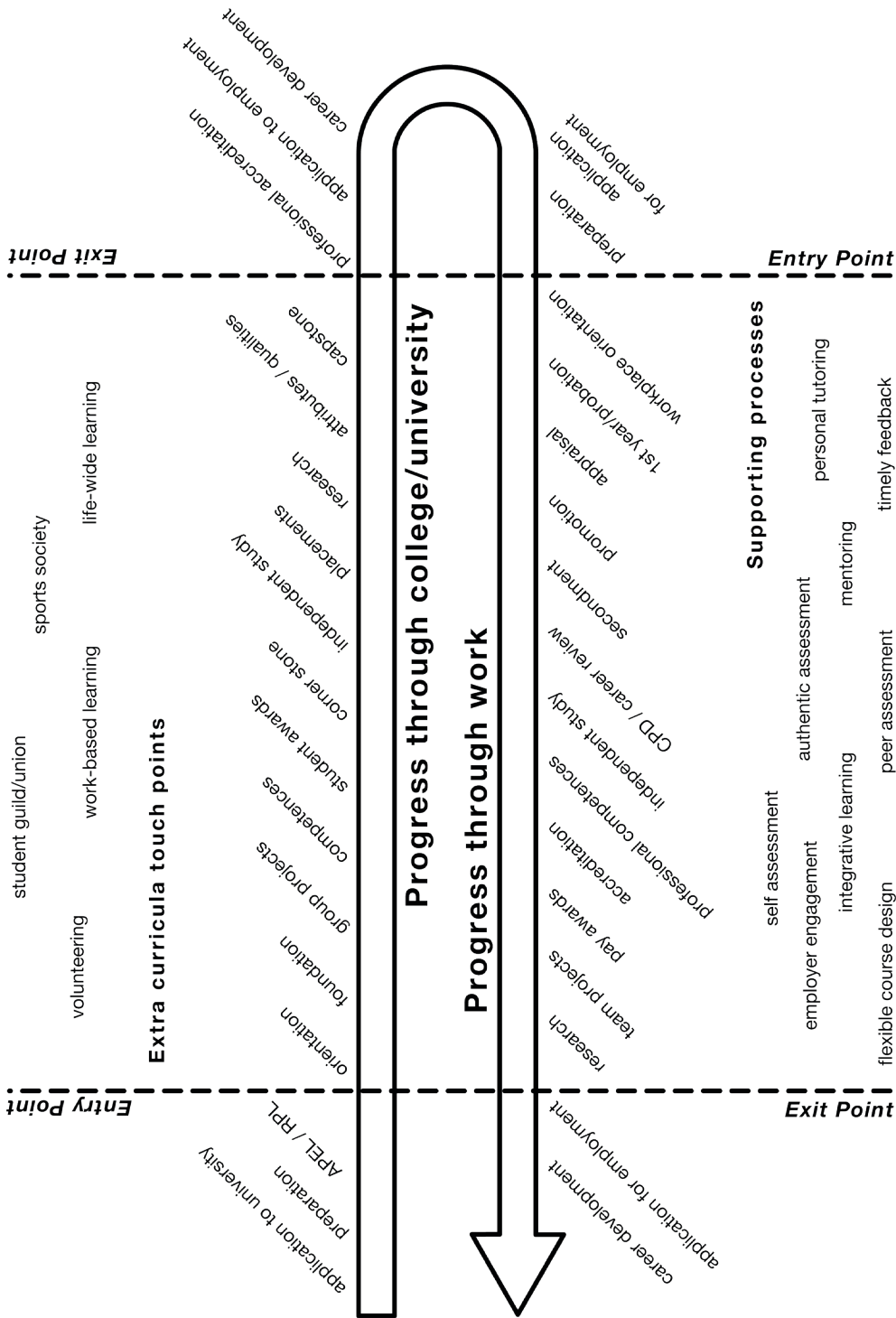


Figure 3.3: Educational and professional touch points

PebblePad can be used for personal and professional development planning, continuing professional development, recognition of prior learning, tracking of graduate skills, plus any number of other educational and professional processes. Tutors might use it to help students learn, to demonstrate their own professional development or record experiences and ongoing research. PebblePad can be used to write a CV and to make a job application. It can be used for appraisal, accreditation or for managing projects. It can do all this and more. As the use of PebblePad grows, people add new ways of using it every day, as the learning designs later in the book illustrate.

Regardless of who you are or what you are using PebblePad for, the structure and scaffolding within the system makes its use purposeful. Far from being a 'file dump', PebblePad helps you make sense of experience and create a record of that experience that you can draw upon for all sorts of reasons, for all kinds of audiences.

4 PebblePad supports learning wherever it happens, whenever it happens

Any experience offers opportunities for learning. Most institutional tools are typically designed to capture learning that takes place in formal places in structured ways. PebblePad supports the idea that learning is 'context-free': it takes place all the time, not only in the subject groupings that we divide learning into in educational settings. A chance conversation with a child might help an apprentice understand a work problem. A television programme might help a student make sense of something they've read or heard in the classroom. A walk in the mountains might spark a discovery that helps a scientist with a research problem. By making these links across contexts, we continue to learn and develop. One problem with ideas and insights is that they are often fleeting, nebulous or half-formed. PebblePad helps learners capture these thoughts, develop them over time, and make sense of them, perhaps through sharing them with relevant others.

Although organisations try to separate out formal curricula-based learning, individual learners are engaged in sense-making and new learning all the time and PebblePad provides the thread that binds together all these contexts. This idea of transferable learning holds true for tutors and for students as they use PebblePad for professional development or a course of study. For students, the concepts and ideas they learn in one module may have a huge impact on things they learn in another module. Similarly, students who are working to support their studies may find their workplace learning helps them to develop skills of relevance to their studies.

The fact that it is context-free doesn't preclude a manager, mentor or tutor saying: 'For this particular module, project or placement, I want you to do these particular things in PebblePad...'. In other words, context will *inform* how you use PebblePad but it does not *constrain* what you do in PebblePad.

5 PebblePad helps to surface and scaffold the process of learning

Traditionally, in formal education, assessment has tended to concentrate on the *product* of learning and has put too little value on the *process* of learning. Whether the outcome is a piece of academic writing, a piece of design, a drawing or a dance performance – if all the tutor sees is the 'thing' at the end, it is very difficult to judge the individual effort and development that has taken place to get to this point.

PebblePad offers powerful presentational tools such as its webfolio which can showcase both the *products* of learning and the plans, comments, reflections and other assets that chart the *process* of learning. Whilst the presentation tools are powerful, and for many users highly motivating, the input wizards (action planning, meeting, thought, activity etc.) are designed to support the process of learning. In combination, then, PebblePad supports learning through surfacing and exposing learning processes and by providing frameworks and scaffolding that actively generate learning and understanding.

Surfacing learning

Educational institutions that focus on 'products' sometimes find they become evermore concerned with the originality of student work, which means investment in mechanisms to 'police' this. That becomes less of a problem if you can see the process the student went through – where the challenges were, how the student overcame them, what sparked moments of insight, how well the work was planned and executed. With PebblePad, this can all be documented for external evaluators to view. Additionally, tutors can monitor, support and, if necessary, intervene in the process when they can see how the student is developing.

Just as a student can get credit for including their workings-out in a maths exam, when PebblePad is used within an appropriate learning design, it can expose the processes of learning. For example, an individual's contribution to a group outcome may be hard to establish through traditional teaching processes but PebblePad offers the tools that can capture individual and group effort. This is valuable for the learners themselves because they can review how they have approached the task and what they have learned. It is also valuable for those who are evaluating the task because they can gain insight into how the

group process evolved. This might reveal, for example, that there is a common breakdown in one part of the process and the tutor can plan more support for later cohorts of students to develop the skills needed.

Scaffolding learning

An essay, a presentation, a performance or a project report can be a daunting prospect for many students. Tools in PebblePad – such as the action planning, activity and meeting wizards – are designed to lead the students through a process that builds up to the final product in managed stages. The student then goes through a scaffolded set of activities that lead to a particular purpose. The hope is that the experience of using these prompts and frameworks will encourage learners to return to them to help with any further study, research or work projects in the future, helping to develop lifelong habits of learning.

6 PebblePad is underpinned, and informed, by a reflective structure

At every step of the way PebblePad users are prompted to consider ‘Why?’, ‘So what?’, ‘What if?’ and ‘What now?’ This inbuilt reflective structure is what transforms PebblePad into a space where learning is generated rather than simply collected and evidenced.

PebblePad regularly challenges the user with questions: ‘What did this mean to me?’, ‘What will I do with this learning?’. The underpinning design of the personal learning space calls into question what the learner knew before and makes explicit their tacit knowledge, whilst guiding the learner to new understandings of their experience. How the learner chooses to engage with this process is in their hands – the wizard tools allow the user to skip questions if they are not meaningful or relevant to a particular situation.

Encouraging learners to move beyond descriptive reflection can be difficult and most reflective frameworks propose a series of prompts that guide the learner through different levels of reflection (Moon, 2004). The reflective prompts within PebblePad are particularly helpful for those who are still learning how to record, reflect and to make sense of their experience. For these learners, who may not yet have developed the necessary mental frameworks to support the reflective process, the tools provide a structure that nudges the user to move beyond simple description of events and activities to a deeper level of analysis or forward projection. But it is not only novices in reflective practice that find this structure useful; skilled reflective thinkers tell us they find the scaffolding helpful because it allows them to concentrate on making sense of the experience rather than having to think about ways to frame the experience.

PebblePad tools are technically easy to learn and use, but what they ask of the learner can be intellectually demanding. Learning to think and practise reflectively is not an easy option, it demands some rigour which some learners might resist. In time, though, with repeated use of PebblePad tools, learners come to recognise the personal and professional benefits.

7 PebblePad gets people talking and helps users construct their narratives

The reflective structure is conversational, prompting further thought and exploration. Since anything created in PebblePad can be shared with one or more others in both private and group spaces, the capacity for comments, feedback and collaboration facilitates dialogue between users in these spaces. This sharing and dialogue contributes to the creation of much richer, more meaningful records of learning.

Many reflective models suggest that reflection is best done with a mentor or ‘critical friend’ (Titchen, 2003) through ‘reflective conversation’ (Ghaye, 2010). A dialogue and continuing feedback between a tutor and student, or a mentor and mentee, can be stored in PebblePad and can then provide another record of learning. In addition, users can collaborate within their personal learning space as well as peer review each other’s work.

This conversational approach supports a narrative style of presentation, a style that has been described as story-telling or patchwork writing (Winter and colleagues, 1999). The webfolios, for example, encourage more than a listing of achievements or actions. The way that they are created encourages learners to move beyond a ‘tick box, done that’ approach and move towards talking about what they have done, why they did it, how one experience led to another and how they made discoveries along the way. The learner can give links to assets created in their learning journey – blogs, action plans, meetings, achievements – as well as link to examples of work and final outcomes, using images, video or other means that suit their story.

A webfolio can be read for its ‘top-level’ narrative, the story of the learning that has taken place. But if you want to dig deeper into how the learner has reached these conclusions or formed this story, you can follow the links to assets and further evidence to different levels of depth. The viewer or reader can engage with the webfolio in different ways, which makes it immediately more useful to a wider audience. For assessment or accreditation purposes you may need to dig deep into the webfolio for evidence of attainment, whereas an employer may be more interested in the personal learning journey, secure in the knowledge that the evidence is there to be checked.

8 PebblePad can accompany learners throughout their lives and across all their activities

Over time, learners' needs change but the assets are always there in PebblePad to revisit and to use in different ways. PebblePad users take their records with them as they develop and learn, change direction, and take on new challenges throughout their study and working lives.

They are life-wide learners who continue to evidence learning in many different ways. One learner might, for example, be on a photography course using Flickr to showcase images, another might be creating 'how to' movies on YouTube or contributing to forums in an online community of practice. All around us outside PebblePad is evidence of our learning that can be linked to, or captured and stored in PebblePad. Some items of 'external' evidence may be more secure than others: those that are public can be easily linked; those that are more secure can be linked by allowing PebblePad to authenticate to another system; and those that are more sensitive, high-stake, or generated in a less stable Web 2.0 tool, can be imported to PebblePad using open standards.

Endnote: walking the talk

Although *Pebblegogy* will give you plenty of insight into how these principles are being put into practice, the best way is to use PebblePad yourself. Once you engage with the personal learning space you start to experience how it can support and develop your own personal and professional goals, as well as those you may teach, manage or mentor. Indeed, modelling good practice and using PebblePad yourself is probably the best way to build enthusiasm for those you teach, manage or support.

Summary of principles

PebblePad supports personal learning

A group of people can share a common experience but may learn different things from it, make sense of their learning in different ways, and want to document or evidence their learning differently. The flexibility of the PebblePad interface supports all of these individual differences and enables you to engage in personal learning in your own way.

PebblePad offers a safe and private place which is owned and controlled by you, the user

PebblePad is totally private. It is a fundamental principle of PebblePad that nobody else can enter your PebblePad. There is no interface for an administrator to log into your account because that would contradict the core principle of personal ownership. You can choose, at any time, to allow others to view and interact with one or more of your assets but no-one ever has access to your entire PebblePad.

PebblePad is multi-purpose – but purposeful

PebblePad can be used for any number of educational, professional and personal processes. It can be used by anyone who wants to record, reflect on and learn from experience. Regardless of who you are or what you are using PebblePad for, the structure and scaffolding within the system makes its use purposeful. Far from being a 'file dump', PebblePad helps you make sense of experience and create a record of that experience that you can draw upon for all sorts of reasons, for all kinds of audiences.

PebblePad supports learning wherever it happens, whenever it happens

Any experience offers opportunities for learning. Most institutional tools are typically designed to capture learning that takes place in formal places in structured ways. PebblePad supports the idea that learning is 'context-free': it takes place all the time, not only in the courses you study in educational settings. PebblePad helps you to identify, record, and create links between learning experiences wherever and whenever they occur.

PebblePad helps to scaffold and surface the process of learning

The wizards and forms in PebblePad support users through the process of creating meaningful records of experience and linking these records to develop rich understandings of learning. This scaffolding not only benefits users but also makes the process of learning evident for anyone with whom these records are shared. Supervisors, tutors and/or peers can assess not only the product of the learning

activity but more importantly the process of skill and knowledge acquisition. Together with the capacity for on-going formative feedback, PebblePad becomes a powerful tool for teaching and learning.

PebblePad is underpinned, and informed, by a reflective structure

At every step of the way PebblePad users are prompted to consider ‘Why?’, ‘So what?’, ‘What if?’ and ‘What now?’ This inbuilt reflective structure is what transforms PebblePad into a space where learning is generated rather than simply collected and evidenced.

PebblePad gets people talking and helps users construct their narratives

The reflective structure of PebblePad is conversational – it prompts further thought and exploration. Anything created in PebblePad can be shared with one or more others in both private and group spaces. The capacity for comments, feedback and collaboration facilitates dialogue between users in these spaces. This sharing and dialogue contributes to the creation of much richer, more meaningful records of learning.

PebblePad can accompany you throughout your life and across all your activities

Over time, your needs and interests will change but the assets you have stored in PebblePad are always there for you to revisit and to use in different ways. Because PebblePad is ‘context-free’ you can continue to evidence learning and experiences wherever you go and whatever you do. PebblePad has the flexibility to be of value to you in any environment and at any stage of your life. Ideally it is the place where you record, reflect on, and learn from your journey and share it with others.