eTools: Using Slack in the Classroom

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Introduction

Many classes involve group projects that are designed to simulate "real world" projects and, thus, help students hone skills that are essential to such projects (e.g., daily communication, division of labor, adherence to deadlines). Yet sometimes it can be challenging for groups to stay in touch and organized. This is further complicated by a lack of access to software systems that are often used in the workplace to aid in project management. Slack can help remedy this situation and serve as both a communication and project management tool.

What is Slack?

Slack is a free application that can be used on smartphones and computers. It allows student work groups to engage in instant messaging, document their communication and decision-making, and file or organize their documents. In essence, Slack is a communication tool that has built-in project management features.

How can I get Slack for use in the classroom?

Instructors and students can download Slack for free on iOS or Android smartphones from their App Store. Slack can also be downloaded to laptops and desktop computers by visiting https://slack.com, and a person's account can be linked on both a phone and computer so they have access to the same account (and thus material) on each device.

How can I use Slack in the Classroom?

Slack is primarily designed as a communication tool but also includes novice project management tools (e.g., file storage) that make it ideal for group projects. Each student work group can use the app features that best apply to their workscope and needs, some of which likely include:

1. *an instant messaging tool for student work groups.* Users can send messages to their entire group (e.g., sms/@marketinggroup) or individual members of their group (e.g., sms/@janedoe). Other users will then receive an instant notification on their phone (or computer) and be able to reply immediately. Users can also opt out of receiving instant messages, pending that they check the app often. Messages that are sent to the entire group will appear on the project page, and other users can respond to those messages as they would on a traditional discussion board. Users can also tag specific group members (e.g., @janedoe) and use a variety of emoticons. Additionally, classes can decide if they would like a main page for general class communication that might apply to all student work groups.

2. *a channel for users to call each other.* Users can also use the app to call each other and discuss items that are timely or complex. Users can place calls on their phones or computers, although computer calls require the use of the Google Chrome browser. When users call (or Instant Message) each other, their profile name and picture appears but their phone number does not. Therefore, both students and instructors can use the app but keep their phone number private.

3. *a record of all written communication and decision-making.* Slack also allows student work groups to document their discussions and decisions so that everyone is on the same page. Instructors might underscore the importance of such documentation and/or consider including

this communication as a graded component of a group project. Thorough documentation may also help students engage in participant observation (i.e., to learn about group dynamics through self-observation) and assist students (and instructors) complete final assessments of the project.

4. *a document storage system*. Slack also allows users to upload and store documents within specific project channels (for group access) and within individual user accounts (for personal access). Workspaces receive 5 GB of free storage. As such, students can create documents on their own computers and upload them to Slack for the entire group to access. Having quick access to group documents, especially on phones, can help students stay informed and organized.

5. *an integration to other applications.* Users can also add other applications to their Slack workspace by visiting the Slack App Directory. Students might be interested in linking their Dropbox and/or Microsoft OneDrive file storage account to their personal Slack account, from which they can share select documents with their group. Additionally, instructors may choose to upload project documents (e.g., grading rubrics, work samples, templates) at the beginning of a project so that students can access this information from one centralized location.

6. *a way for instructors to monitor group progress.* Slack can also assist instructors monitor group progress on their overall project and specific features of a project. Having access to this type of information can help alert instructors to potential challenges such as social loafers or group conflict and allow them to extend help should they choose to do so.

Conclusion

Slack is a communication tool that can help student work groups stay

connected and organized. Groups can use the elements of the app that most apply to their needs and tailor the app to their liking (e.g., through the integration of other apps). Additionally, Slack can help prepare students for the multitude of workplaces that use communication and/or project management software. As such, Slack can be a valuable asset for students and instructors to classes that involve different types of group projects.