Microsoft Teams

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What it is

Microsoft Teams is a collaboration platform that offers an online space for working on projects, facilitating events, workshops, or classes, and communicating with peers, colleagues, or students. It is highly integrated with other Microsoft Office applications making it convenient when working on documents in its shared space. Teams can act as the place where files can be shared, stored, or collaboratively worked on.

While there are many practical applications for its use in business, Teams also has education related features. A Class Team allows the instructors to create assignments, manage class discussions, review student performance statistics, to name a few. The additional tools provided in a Class Team can make it a viable alternative or supplemental tool to the university's learning management system.

Why it was made

Over the last several years, collaboration applications such as Slack had grown in popularity for business and project communication. Since then, Microsoft developed a similar platform with Microsoft Teams and included videoconferencing features and integrations with Office applications to expand its collaborative work capabilities. These integrations, with Microsoft's vast array of well-known office applications, helped to make Teams a popular choice for online collaborative work among business, government, and academic audiences. For the latter, whether a part of a class or not, Microsoft Teams can be used in a variety of contexts ranging from a book club to a scientific lab to an engineering project.

Why it matters

In 2020, many higher education institutions had to shift their teaching online during the pandemic. One of the more challenging aspects of remote teaching was maintaining student engagement. Many instructors used Microsoft Teams to foster asynchronous engagement and facilitate synchronous discussions and activities. This allowed for more connection with their students in ways the learning management system didn't permit. Beyond its role in remote teaching, it continues to be useful in courses that incorporate group projects utilizing the application's collaboration tools, such as coediting a document.

How it can be used

Microsoft Teams has many benefits for student interaction in higher education class settings, whether meeting face-to-face or virtually

Announcements & Discussions

A Class Team can be a place where you post class announcements. You can alert the entire class, a specific group, or an individual student by typing the @ symbol and writing the name. Posts can include headlines, graphics, and rich text formatting. Each post offers an opportunity for replies to further a discussion or provide constructive feedback. Students can utilize emojis and reactions to express whether they liked, loved, or was confused by something. It is also easy to share images, videos, and links to websites in posts, which are all searchable if you need to find a specific post or reply.

Polls, Quizzes, & Assignments

You can use the built-in Forms app to post a prompting question as an in-class poll. These short questions can be set to receive submissions anonymously or not. For more elaborate questions and class activities, instructors can create graded Quizzes and Assignments in a Class Team. You can construct quizzes containing multiple
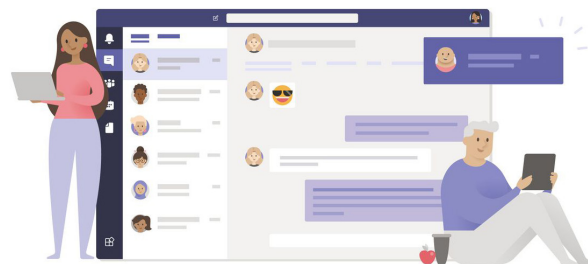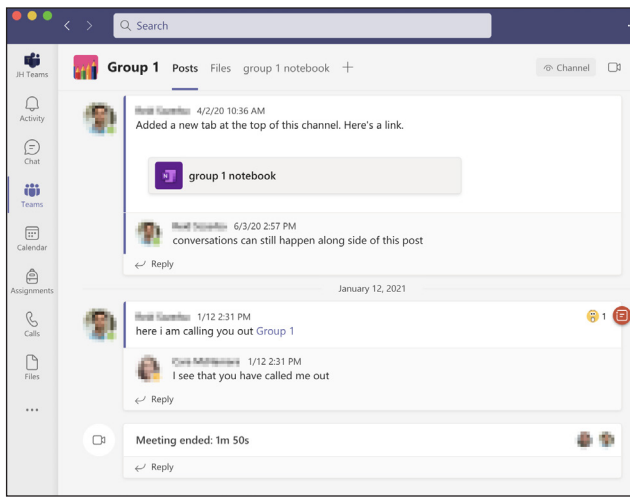
Screenshot of posts and replies in a Team channel

choice, short/long answer, and file upload questions. Assignments can also be created and assigned to students in a Class Team. Assignments can prompt students to perform a specific task and upload their work to the assignment for grading. Instructors can provide feedback as well as point values for grades and make use of the rubric feature built into Teams to ensure consistency in grading. Grades in a Class Team functions similar to a grade center in a learning management system where instructors and students can keep track of progress in the course.

Project Based Work

A Class Team can be organized using Channels, designated areas where students can discuss or collaborate on a particular unit, topic, assignment, or project. Channels have their own space to post content and share files so that all related content for that channel can be found in the same place. You can create Channels to be available to all students in the class or make them private so that select students can access their private channel and no one else except the instructors. Creating private channels for student project groups can be a great way for instructors to offer a space for students to collaborate, such as editing a shared document or presentation. Another convenient aspect of Channels is that students can hold virtual meetings using them, whether it's a private channel or not.

Where it is going

Over the past couple of years, Teams became an environment where work can happen online. With the University's Microsoft license, Teams and many other Microsoft applications are available for free to instructors. Microsoft also continues to develop and improve on Teams further expand on the communication and classroom management possibilities in the digital environment. In addition to new features, Teams also has a healthy 3rd party app ecosystem. If there is a feature you can't find in the application's core features, such as rendering math equations in a post, there may be a 3rd party app for that.

How to get started

Hopkins affiliates have access to Microsoft Teams through the University's institutional license for Microsoft 365. To log into the web client for Teams at JHU, go to the Teams link found in the Messaging section of the myJH Portal. A link to Teams can also be found in the list of Microsoft applications at the Microsoft Office Portal when you sign in using your Hopkins email account (using your JHED ID @jh.edu, not jhu.edu).

You have the option to use the web client of Microsoft Teams or download the desktop application. The functionality between the web and desktop apps are similar but the latter can be more reliable and offers a few additional features such as video background blur and breakout rooms in meetings. The web client has a convenient button located in the lower left corner for downloading the desktop client. There are mobile apps for Teams as well, available for both iOS and Android devices.

Once logged into Teams, you can view and participate in any Team you have been invited to, find a public (to Hopkins affiliates) Team you would like to join, or create your own Team. If you are choosing to create your own Team, you are given four different templates to choose from. Each have a different assortment of apps enabled by default, such as Assignments for a "Class" template, and can have different phrasing such as "Teachers" instead of "Owners" and "Students" instead of "Members". It can be a good idea to try each template out as a separate test before choosing one to use.

Other thoughts

If you are an instructor, prior to each semester in which you're teaching, a Class Team will automatically be created for you. These Class Teams are synchronized with the enrollments for the course and uses the "Class" template features. When these Teams are created, they lay dormant until activated by the instructor. Instructors who wish to use the Class Team can activate it when they are ready to use it and the students will be notified immediately.

Courses that have multiple sections will have a Class Team created for each. If you would prefer to manage only one Class Team for all your sections, there is a way to do this. While you can't merge the Class Teams like can be done with Blackboard course sections, you can create a Class Team manually and add the enrollments from each section into the one Team. This is a multi-step process and has some caveats. If you are interested in learning more, contact your division's instructional support group before "activating" the Class Teams that were created for each section.

Additional Resources

- Access JH Teams: https://teams.microsoft.com
- Getting started guide: https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/get-started-in-your-class-team-6b5fd708-35b9-4caf-b66e-d8f2468e4fd5
- CER Teams Information Page: https://cer.jhu.edu/tools-and-tech/teams

Author's Background

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Reid Sczerba is a multimedia developer at the Center for Educational Resources. He provides training on a variety of educational applications, aids in educational resources development, and shares expertise on information and graphic design with faculty at the Homewood campus. He also teaches as a part-time instructor at WSE's Center for Leadership Education. Reid holds a BFA in Illustration and a MA in Digital Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art.