

Using Teams and SharePoint for Class Website

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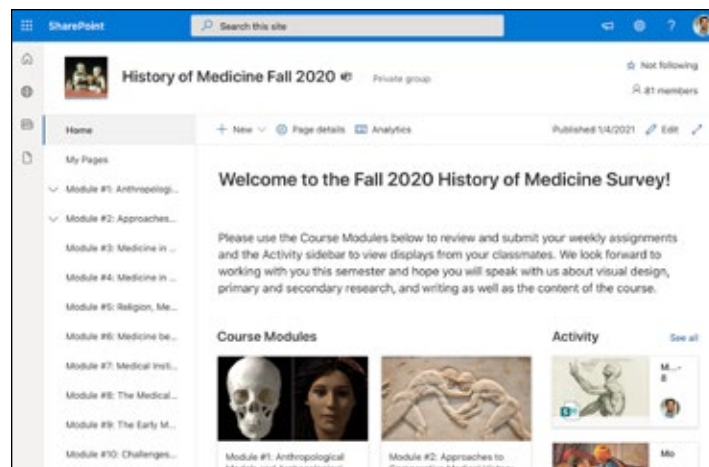
The Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation partners with faculty, postdocs, and graduate students to extend instructional impact by connecting innovative teaching strategies and instructional technologies

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The issue

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching humanities is how to balance conveying content while promoting students' critical thinking and writing skills in a way that fosters student-to-student interaction. The fall-semester 2020 course, "History of Medicine: Antiquity to the Scientific Revolution" had to be taught online during the pandemic with over 50 students, making class interaction even more difficult.



Homepage to the History of Medicine site

Building the right environment that would foster peer-learning meant finding an online platform that would allow students to review each other's writing while also offering the possibility of feedback from their peers as well as professor. To meet this challenge, I sought a means for students to create online exhibition webpages on the history of medicine. To my knowledge a reasonable Hopkins-supported solution available for implementing a class-focused collaborative course website did not yet exist.

Why did it matter

Students often become more invested in their class work when it allows them to have creative agency. Creating a webpage requires higher orders of thinking such as, choosing an organized layout, writing in a clear structure, forming an explicit argument, using relevant images and primary sources, selecting appropriate quotations, and demonstrating good citation practices. By contributing webpages to a class website, students also learn how to appeal to a broader audience of their peers. Furthermore, students can consider how their writings might communicate to an imagined public audience beyond the University.

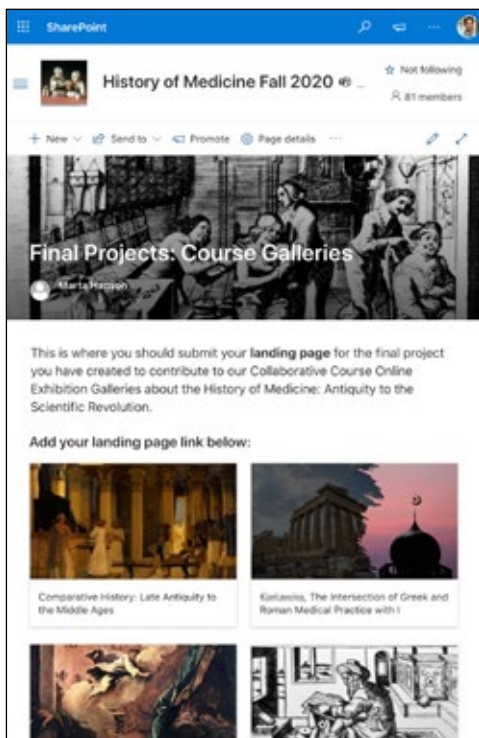
The pandemic had shifted my thinking about how best to implement course learning objectives online. While teaching remotely cannot replace the energy of the physical classroom, setting up an online dimension provided more opportunities for students to engage with each other asynchronously by commenting on how to improve each other's work. This form of peer review had

positive benefits on students' writing since they had to think critically both to evaluate their peer's work and respond to comments on their webpages

Faculty solution

In the synchronous online version of "History of Medicine: Antiquity to the Scientific Revolution," I wanted students to communicate key course themes with a general audience in mind. To accomplish this, I changed from the idea of having students create focused inserts for a textbook that did not yet exist (as done earlier for the "History of Public Health in East Asia") to weekly webpages that helped build skills toward a collaborative online exhibition. This proved to be a good medium through which students could submit weekly assignments for all to see that were aligned with the course's themes.

With the assistance from the Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation (CTEI, formerly CER), we decided to try SharePoint as the online platform for all of the class assignments and final projects.



Screenshot showing final project galleries

By the fall 2020, all Hopkins courses were set up with a Microsoft Teams class site, which surprisingly includes a SharePoint site by default. SharePoint had not been considered a tool for the classroom as it has been used primarily for business applications, such as collaborative document editing and communicating on business practices. Conveniently, the University's Microsoft license also gave access to SharePoint so there was no added cost for the class. Because its tied to a Teams class site, access was already restricted to the class roster.

The site's pages were aligned with the syllabus's weekly themes such that the navigation bar on the left replicated the course syllabus. For weekly writing assignments students created pages that addressed different topics related to each week's theme. Because students had to think about audience and

presentation as if writing for a history-of-medicine exhibition, they provided visual examples, quotations, and context to their contributions. Posting their pages in their section's partition on the week's theme page allowed their peers to read and comment on their work. For their final project, in addition to the research paper students had alternatives: expand upon anything they had already done, explore a topic of interest more in depth, or do a creative project as webpages in SharePoint that contributed to the final collaborative online exhibition.

Results

We were impressed with the ease of implementation, the quality of the students' work, and their engagement with each other through building the webpages. The resulting SharePoint website not only allowed students to read and contribute asynchronously via comments to their peers' writings, but also made it possible for some students to show their work on SharePoint pages during class time by sharing their screen using Zoom as another way to contribute to online course discussions.

SharePoint's modern page building tools made it easier to create webpages that were responsive to screen size, mobile-ready, and visually engaging. These tools also made it possible for the students to concentrate more on the content that they wanted to present, including images, video, and other media within a clear structure. Page comments provided more possibilities for students to engage laterally with each other as well as find common interests and synergy among themselves. This resulted in some students

“Doing a Sharepoint each week meant that I synthesized the main topics of the lectures of that week as we went. By the end of the course, I felt that I actually had gained a lot of knowledge and had a cohesive idea of what we had learned (much more in this course than in other courses this sem).”

deciding to collaborate together on their final projects.

Using SharePoint also included other benefits such as page revision history, lots of space for files and media, and the ability for the instructor to copy edit student work directly

on the webpage and via comments. Other convenient aspects were that students have access to the site using their JHED such that there was no need to remember additional accounts, and it was only accessible to the class, which absolved worry about public access and copyright concerns under fair use.

Other Thoughts

We found that this approach takes some work to set up before student work can begin. One of the main considerations is to set up the user permissions correctly. This will ensure that you can keep access to the site limited to the class and that the students can't change settings in the site.

Additionally, some of the other steps for setting up the site required general removal of functionality to increase the clarity of what the students could see and do in the site. This involved removing links to site pages and features they would never use and renaming links to include phrasing that makes sense in the context of a collaborative website such as “Your Webpages”.

Lastly, one of the most important aspects to setting up any custom solution for student activity is to align the site with one's syllabus. In the case of a course website, the site's structure could be aligned with the course's modules or weekly topics. Educators should provide examples of what the students will be expected to create within their assignments. We used an introductory page that required learning specific tools and layout approaches we wanted students to master to meet the criteria of later learning objectives. It proved very successful, for example, to have students in the first week introduce themselves and their interest in the course by creating a page. This provided a good means for them to both familiarize themselves with the new technology and start to connect online with other students.

Author's Background

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At Hopkins, Marta Hanson taught graduate-level courses on methods in the history of science, medicine, and technology as well as the history of medicine and public health in East Asia, and undergraduate-level courses on the history of medicine in China, the history of public health in East Asia, and the history of public health in East Asia through Film and Documentaries.