

Team(s)work Makes the Dream Work: Using MS Teams in an Agricultural Communications
Block Course Structure

Dr. Lindsay Kennedy
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409-2131
806-742-2816
Lindsay.Kennedy@ttu.edu

Dr. Courtney Meyers
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409-2131
806-742-2816
Courtney.Meyers@ttu.edu

Dr. Courtney Gibson
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409-2131
806-742-2816
Courtney.D.Gibson@ttu.edu

Dr. Erica Irlbeck
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409-2131
806-742-2816
Erica.Irlbeck@ttu.edu

Grace Vehige
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409-2131
806-742-2816
grvehige@ttu.edu

Team(s)work Makes the Dream Work: Using MS Teams in an Agricultural Communications Block Course Structure

Introduction/Need for Idea or Research

As new technologies emerge, the communications network among agriculturalists alters, which allows for the introduction of new communication hubs (Doerfert & Miller, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the role of online communication tools as professionals collaborated on projects remotely (Moster et al, 2021). One such tool, Microsoft Teams, provides a platform for collaboration, file sharing, chat threads, and video conferencing and is also available to all Texas Tech University students and faculty. At Texas Tech, the agricultural communications (ACOM) undergraduate program uses a “block” classroom structure to teach four of its senior-level core courses. From 2017-2020, Basecamp was the web-based project management program used in the ACOM Block to streamline communication between students and faculty and to reinforce learning objectives. Kennedy et al. (2017) evaluated the use of this platform and found students appreciated the organized hub for communication, file access, and scheduling. Although this platform was well-received, in 2020, Microsoft Teams began to support integration with Adobe Creative Cloud applications, which are important tools used in the ACOM Block. The university also encouraged the use of Microsoft Teams for collaborative work. As a result, the ACOM Block faculty decided to use Microsoft Teams during the spring 2021 semester instead of Basecamp for project collaboration and communications among students and faculty.

How It Works

Microsoft Teams is an app designed to encourage collaboration and team organization. The program offers the use of “channels” to separate projects and conversations, call and message board features, a calendar, file folders, assignment deadlines, automatic notifications, and synchronization with Zoom and Outlook Calendar (Microsoft, 2021). In the spring 2021 semester, the ACOM Block used MS Teams to create a collaborative work environment and assist with organizational and communication challenges. The 45 students enrolled in the ACOM Block were added to the “2021 ACOM Block” team within MS Teams. Five channels were created for all students and faculty: General, ACOM 4305, ACOM 4311, ACOM 4312, ACOM 4410. Two additional channels – one for the *student publication’s* Editorial Team and one for Faculty Resources – were private so access to the materials and discussion boards could be controlled. Within each of the four course channels, students could access message boards, file sharing, and assignment features. The message board served as an open line of communication between students and instructors. The document sharing feature provided quick access to course files, including the course syllabus, schedule, and assignment rubrics. The activity feature provided updates and notifications to students. The assignments feature offered a chronological list of assignment deadlines for each of the four courses with links to rubrics. However, assignments had to be submitted on Blackboard, the learning management system used by the university. To determine student perceptions of using MS Teams, an eight-question Qualtrics questionnaire was sent to all 45 ACOM Block students at the conclusion of the Spring 2021 semester. Twenty-six students completed the survey.

Results to Date/Implications

Prior to the start of the spring 2021 semester and the use of MS Teams in the ACOM Block, nearly 58% ($n = 15$) of students did not have exposure to MS Teams. However, students did

express an overall satisfaction with the use of MS Teams in their learning environment. Of the 26 respondents, 80.8% ($n = 21$) said MS Teams helped keep them organized; 73.1% ($n = 19$) said they used MS Teams to communicate with other students in the ACOM Block; 96.2% ($n = 25$) said communication from ACOM Block instructors through MS Teams was helpful; and 84.6% ($n = 22$) said MS Teams was helpful in finding course documents and other materials related to assignments. In reference to the MS Teams tools, students shared high levels of satisfaction with the following features: file storage and sharing, separation of courses in channels, posts (message board), and notifications. File sharing was especially helpful when students worked together in designated groups as one student wrote: “It was good for my campaign group to store all our documents [in one place]. I liked that all the course documents were there too.” Other students noted MS Teams was easy to navigate and its availability on mobile devices was a positive attribute as one student commented: “It was downloadable on my phone, so I stayed updated on everything and never missed a post or update.” Regarding collaboration, a student wrote: “I loved being able to collaborate with my team virtually this way. It was great to have it connect to OneDrive as well.”

One drawback was the inability to submit assignments on MS Teams. Instead, students had to submit all course assignments in the ACOM Block through Blackboard. While students said they understood the different uses and functions of Blackboard and MS Teams, they expressed their displeasure with the overlapping functions of each hub. One student wrote, “I did not like that we had to look on Blackboard and Teams to find assignments.” Students also said the influx of notifications from MS Teams was often overwhelming. While having easy access to files in each course channel, students mentioned the importance of consistency in how files were named and organized within each of the four course channels to avoid confusion. Students noted, “Sometimes files were hard to find,” and “It was sometimes confusing to find specific things.”

Future Plans/Advice to Others

MS Teams provided an easily accessible online collaborative hub that provided tools for file storage, scheduling, and team communication among students and faculty in the ACOM Block. MS Teams’ integration with OneDrive cloud storage and other Microsoft 365 applications (e.g., Word, Excel, and PowerPoint) made it easy for students to effectively work together within groups. This was especially important during the 2021 spring semester because the courses were taught in a hybrid format with student students joining class both in-person and online. As Kennedy et al. (2017) found, it is vital for all four block courses to use the same file organization scheme for assignment files, rubrics, examples, etc. Although the courses were taught using video conferencing technology, Zoom was used instead of MS Teams’ online meeting platform. Few students had any experience with MS Teams’ video conferencing, but all of them had used Zoom to join virtual meetings. If MS Teams improves its video conferencing tool, this would make utilization of the platform’s calendars and meeting organization much more seamless.

Costs/Resources Needed

The MS Teams app was available to students for free through their university Microsoft 365 account. When students log in through their Microsoft 365 account, they can access all the features available on MS Teams, including the integration of other regularly used Microsoft apps. With access to the internet, students can sync files and participate in virtual class activities, such as discussion boards. The app is also free to download on mobile devices.

References

- Kennedy, L., Meyer, C., Irlbeck, E., Gibson, C. (2017). *Using basecamp in an agricultural communications block course structure*. Research poster presented at the annual meeting of the Western Region American Association for Agricultural Education, Fort Collins, CO.
- Doerfert, D. L., & Miller, R. P. (2006). What are agriculture industry professionals trying to tell us? Implications for university-level agricultural communications curricula. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 90(3), 17-31.
- Microsoft. (2021). *Welcome to Microsoft Teams*. Microsoft. Retrieved from: Welcome to Microsoft Teams - Office Support.
- Moster, M., Ford, D., & Rodeghero, P. (2021, May). "Is my mic on?" *Preparing SE students for collaborative remote work and hybrid team communication* [pp. 89-94]. 2021 IEEE/ACM 43rd International Conference on Software Engineering: Software Engineering Education and Training (ICSE-SEET). IEEE.