Coursework with a Copilot: Replacing Group Work with AI Collaboration

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Introduction & Need for Innovation

Team-based assignments are a staple of communication and marketing coursework, yet they can be challenging to implement effectively in asynchronous online environments. Students often report difficulties coordinating schedules, uneven group participation, and unclear expectations in virtual settings (Jony & Hamim, 2024). At the same time, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced new tools with the potential to mitigate these barriers (Holmes et al., 2023). This innovation explores the use of Microsoft Copilot to simulate peer collaboration by creating a customizable AI "team member" that supports students through project development. This approach aims to preserve the pedagogical benefits of teamwork, such as feedback, ideation, and shared workload, while reducing logistical obstacles that are especially prevalent in online learning environments (Kumar & Sharma, 2024).

How It Works

Instead of placing students into traditional peer groups, each student in an asynchronous undergraduate digital promotions course was paired with a designated "AI team member" built using Microsoft Copilot. Copilot was selected due to its integration with Microsoft 365 tools, which is accessible for students enrolled in the course, and its ability to maintain context and continuity across tasks (Microsoft, 2024). Faculty created pre-configured prompts and agent guidance that encouraged students to use the AI as a collaborator, not a shortcut, to support their learning. During the creation of the AI team member, course objectives and assignment specifics were given to Copilot. Also, specific instructions on how to interact with students were added, including restricting AI abilities to fully complete course assignments. Students interacted with Copilot by posing questions, seeking clarification, and brainstorming ideas. As part of their assignments, they were asked to reflect on how the AI assisted their process and provide a transcript of their interactions. In the first implementation, students used their AI team member to develop a business branding plan, a foundational project that informed all subsequent course work. At the end of the course, August 2025, students will be asked to reflect on their overall experiences with the AI team member.

Results to Date & Implications

Two course assignments have been completed using the AI team member model thus far. While formal student reflections are forthcoming, initial observations and Copilot interaction transcripts suggest that students are engaging with the AI in ways that closely mirror the expectations of peer collaboration. Students are prompting the AI for feedback on branding strategies, asking for help brainstorming, and requesting clarification on assignment steps. These behaviors are consistent with effective team participation (Fiorella 2023).

One of the most noticeable shifts has been in student adherence to assignment guidelines. Compared to prior semesters using traditional student groups, this cohort has demonstrated stronger alignment with project expectations and clearer individual accountability. Nearly all students completed their first two assignments on time, and students were more likely to follow detailed instructions when working alongside the AI team member. Since each student works independently with their AI team member, it is easier to evaluate individual contributions and ensure equitable grading which has been an ongoing challenge in traditional group-based assessments (Jony & Hamim, 2024).

The transcripts also indicate that students are using AI for real-time problem-solving and creative input, including testing brand names and campaign slogans, refining messaging, and

mapping out brand elements. This suggests that students are not outsourcing their thinking to the AI but using it as a scaffold to deepen their learning and clarify their strategies (Luckin, 2022). These early results point to the potential for structured AI collaboration to enhance learning outcomes and student ownership in online coursework.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Moving forward, the AI team member model will be expanded to support additional course assignments, including inbound marketing campaigns and digital promotions. Before implementation, faculty must create and provide prompts consistent with individual course objectives and expectations. Guidelines for ethical use will also need to be established to help students use AI responsibly. Similar models in agricultural education emphasize the importance of transparent AI use policies and professional skill training (Lengyel et al., 2025). Educators implementing a similar model should ensure access to a capable AI platform that supports contextual interaction and user customization (Holmes et al., 2023). Structured reflection and transparency about AI's role are crucial to helping students use these tools meaningfully, without displacing critical thinking or independent effort (Kumar & Sharma, 2024). An extensive syllabus statement outlining appropriate use of AI for course assignments helps to maintain transparency and course expectations.

Resources Needed

Successful implementation requires access to Microsoft Copilot or a comparable AI agent tool. Institutional or student licensing may be necessary, though many higher education institutions already offer Microsoft 365 access. In addition to technical access, implementation requires institutional acceptance of AI usage in coursework. Faculty should ensure the use of AI aligns with university policies on academic integrity, student data privacy, and responsible technology use. Clear guidelines must be developed and communicated to students to distinguish between acceptable collaboration and academic dishonesty. Faculty time is also needed to design AI usage prompts, scaffold interactions, and monitor student engagement with the tool. No additional equipment or software beyond standard online course tools was needed for this innovation.

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