

Using Slack as a Class Communication Tool

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1. Introduction

The university seminar class poses a different challenge to other classes. Working with a small group of students for two years, culminating in a graduation thesis, is essentially a project. While the ultimate goal is for students to present their graduation thesis, there are a number of smaller tasks that need to be managed during the course, such as research proposals, presentations, group work and writing assignments. One 90-minute class each week limits what can be achieved, so having somewhere for extra work and interaction to take place is very important.

Email has been the default communication resource for academics for many years now, but students have started to drift away from that medium in favour of social media. A tool called Slack, primarily designed to be used by companies, offers many social media-like functions, within a closed group. In this paper I will present an overview of Slack, outline how I have used with my students and summarise the various benefits that I have found for both teachers and students.

2. What is Slack?

Slack is a business communication tool designed for modern work environments. Many companies today exist across multiple locations, yet extensive collaboration may be required for certain projects. Arranging face-to-face meetings to discuss ideas may be challenging, but Slack allows information to be shared and organised so that the people who need the information have access to it. Slack enables work to be done faster and in a way that is smoother and more transparent than email as all the members of the group can see what is happening in other areas of the company. Slack is a powerful communication tool, but its basic plan is completely free and suitable for small enterprises or groups; paid plans are aimed at large organisations include advanced, business-oriented functions and extra storage. Organisations that currently use Slack include Samsung, Dropbox, Harvard University, Airbnb, and LinkedIn (Stackshare, 2019). I will now give an overview of the key components of Slack before going on to explain how I have been using it with my seminar students.

The workspace

All communication in Slack takes place in a *Workspace*. In the current context, the teacher would create the workspace and become the owner. He or she then invites students to join the workspace, and they become *members* of the workspace. The workspace is where all communication

and collaboration takes place; it replaces email and incorporates stylistic elements of social networking sites. However, the workspace is entirely private. Within the workspace there are channels, messages, the ability to search, and notifications. Figure 1 shows an example workspace in Slack (Slack, 2019).

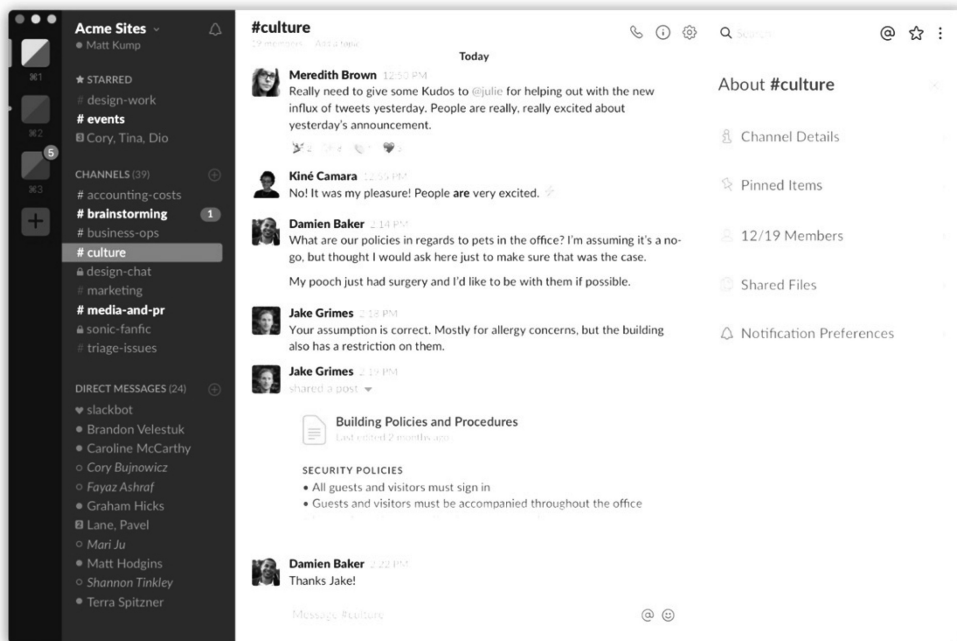


Figure 1: The Slack workspace

Channels

Within a workspace there are *Channels*. Each channel has a topic; for example, a business might have a marketing channel, a sales channel, an accounting channel, etc. All messages and communication about these topics would happen within each channel, helping to keep information organized. Also, only the members who need to be part of that channel are invited to join that channel, so unnecessary communication (such as group emails) can be avoided. I will detail the different channels that I use with my class later.

Direct messages

For transparency, it is desirable to have as much communication as possible flowing through channels, there may be times when private communication between individuals is required. In this case, there is the option of sending a *direct message*. Slack's use of direct messages and channels means that it is as easy to share information with one person as it is to share information with many people.

It is also possible to format messages (and channel posts) so that the ideas that you are sharing are displayed appropriately. For example, key information such as deadlines can be underlined,

important names can be put in bold text, questions can be written in italics, etc. It is also possible to add bulleted and numbered lists and quote what someone else has written. Following the social media style of communication, *emoji* can add a more personal form of communication. Emoji are ideograms used in electronic messaging and webpages, which were popularised in Japan in the early 2010 s (Danesi, 2016). Direct messages or posts within a channel can be responded to with likes, a thumbs-up, or a smiley face. This helps to create an informal style of communication.

Notifications

Notifications alert a user that a message or post has been made in Slack. To call the attention of a user, you can write a message in a channel and then type @ followed by their username. This is called an @-mention and sends them a notification. It is also possible to @-mention a channel, notifying all members of that channel. While notifications are important, it is also essential for teachers and students to be able to control how and when they receive a notification. You can choose how you receive notifications on your different devices, by channel, and also to snooze notifications for a period of time (such as through the night or during a class) to avoid unnecessary disruption.

3. Communication

In the following sections, I will outline key benefits of Slack with regards to each of the following topics: communication, organisation and administration, student relations and student support, and using Slack for course content both in and outside of the classroom. At its core, Slack is a hub for group communication, allowing communication and collaboration online as might be done in person. Below are some of the key elements which distinguish Slack from conventional email.

A dedicated place for communication

In the past, my students have created Line groups as a way of communicating with each other about class issues. Students would send messages to the Line group to ask about homework or deadlines, for example. While this was very convenient, there were some issues. First of all, the teacher is not part of the conversation, which means that the students were only communicating with each other. Of course, they were able to support each other, but they risked misinforming each other, and that misinformation might spread through the class, resulting in mistakes being made by many students. In some cases it is necessary to check information with the teacher and it is also important that they feel comfortable and confident in communicating with the teacher directly.

Another problem is that many of the students use Line as their primary form of personal communication. If university-related messages are also being sent through Line, they will be mixed in with personal communication. It is important that there is a clear distinction between university and private life, for both teachers and students. Slack was used exclusively for the seminar class, and none of the students use Slack for any other purpose. Therefore, a message received on

Slack is immediately recognised as being related to the seminar class and not confused with a personal message.

Replacing email

A survey of my seminar students revealed that more than half of them (16 out of 27) checked their university email less than once a month, and only four students checked their email once a week. Students who have grown up using smartphones are moving away from email in favour of messaging applications (App Annie, 2016). There are learning management systems such as Canvas, Blackboard and Moodle, but they take time to learn and are only used in academia. The Slack interface feels instantly familiar to young users, so there is less of a learning curve (Holmes, 2017).

Enabling student–student communication and collaboration

Slack also provides a place for students to easily communicate with each other, not just the teacher. For example, if students need to collaborate on a group project, they can set up a small discussion group using direct messaging. The fact that Slack is a closed network means that students are already connected and they do not need to use their personal email or social media accounts to communicate with each other. Again, all communication in Slack is work-related, so they do not have to mix their private and academic lives. It is a safe place for students to practice English and share ideas.

Instant and informal

Speed is an important aspect of Slack. For a teacher, Slack is a very convenient way to quickly get information or replies from students. For example, students in my class were asked complete an online reading level check and I asked them to take a screen shot of their score and send that to me as a direct message. In just a couple of minutes I had received the scores from all the students in my Slack account.

Most questions from students can be answered in just a couple of sentences or even just a few words, so a quickly reply is all that is needed. From a student's point of view, an email involves a certain level of formality and structure. By contrast, in Slack there is no need for subject lines, formal greetings, or even full sentences, so it is perfect for quick and direct communication. Also, a short, simple question might seem inappropriate for an email sometimes, so students might feel uncomfortable about troubling the teacher by email. However, the little questions can often be the difference between a student feeling confident about a homework assignment, or being baffled and frustrated. Slack removes the barrier to communication with the teacher and it has a social network feel to it that students are comfortable with.

Visual communication

Something that I had not considered when I started using Slack was the fact that it can be a much more visual way to communicate. Online communication has become highly visual in re-

cent years (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). The use of emoji in social media such as Line, Facebook, and Instagram has become prevalent (Tang & Hew, 2018). Text speak, such as *cu l 8 r* or *lol*, is now seen as outdated, and has been replaced by colourful emoji covering a wide array of meanings. Beyond emoji there are gifs, video and audio, which can all be easily shared with the students. They seem to be comfortable with these styles of communication and they are able to integrate them into English sentences to convey complex ideas. Once again, we can see that the barrier to communication is being lowered.

As a teacher from the United Kingdom, I am used to a relatively informal relationship between teachers and students. Using gifs and emoji allow the teacher and the students to share a little of their personality, helping to reduce the distance between them. I also ask students to upload a profile picture, in Slack, which not only helps me to learn their names, but it also allows them to show a little of reveal their personality. It reminds the students that they are messaging a *person*, not just an email address, replicating a key aspect of social media.

Polls

A simple, yet powerful feature of Slack is the ability to conduct polls to gather opinions from students. A plug-in called *Simple Poll* allows you to type a line of text and that is converted into a poll for the students to answer (see figure 2). By asking students to give their opinions, a teacher can help students feel invested and engaged in the class (Chen & Denoyelles, 2013). For example, a teacher could poll students about topics of upcoming classes to decide what areas to focus on. Trying to gather this information by email would be time-consuming and students are reluctant to share their thoughts in person.

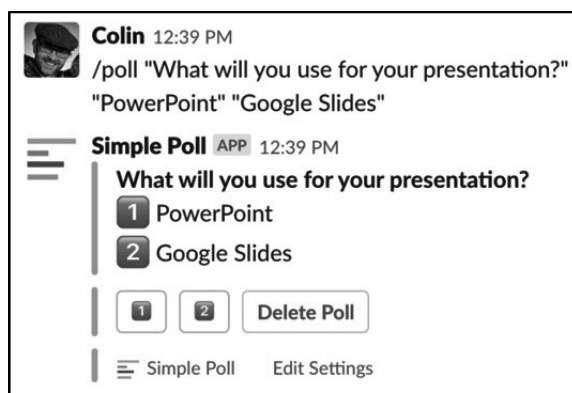


Figure 2: An example of a poll created within Slack

Also, polls can be anonymous, allowing students more freedom to respond honestly. Real time polls can be conducted in class, which is a powerful way to gather thoughts and help the students engage in a topic. It also provides a powerful tool for debate as students can vote to show which argument they support most.

4. Organisation and Class Administration

Channels

A problem with email and a group on a social media platform such as Line is that there is only one flow of information. Anyone can add a comment or a link to that flow, but it is quickly lost amongst all the other pieces of information being added. Slack allows for different flows of information, which it calls *channels*. Any number of different channels can be created depending on the needs of the group. The channels that I currently use with my seminar class can be seen in figure 3.

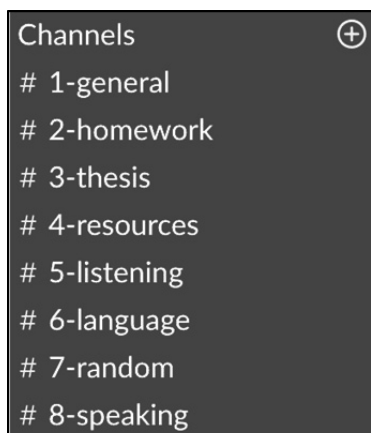


Figure 3: A list of channels used in my seminar class

The benefit of channels means that information and resources are being organised into appropriate channels as they are being posted and thus can be found more easily later. Furthermore, information can be pinned so that it is always available at the touch of a button. For example, you could pin the syllabus, regularly-used documents, or useful links. Students are free to post in any channel they want, so at the start of the semester I ask all of the students to post a short self-introduction in the *#1-general* channel. This was particularly useful when a new member joined the seminar for the spring semester as she could read the introductions by other students and also post her own introduction for others to read. In the future I plan to include an *#AMA* (ask me anything) channel where students can ask questions about the class or about English in general.

Class administration

In my seminar class, I allow students to borrow books from my small library of graded readers. In order to keep track of who is borrowing which book, I ask the students to send me a photo of the book that they have borrowed as a direct message. This is quick for them and I can take that information and input it into my record of books that the students are reading.

Slackbot

Slackbot is Slack's built-in self-service support system. You can ask the Slackbot questions about using Slack, but the main use that I would like to highlight here is setting reminders. For example, I used Slackbot to set up a reminder to be sent to students the day before each class telling them to bring their graded reader to class if they had finished it; once the reminder is set, it runs automatically each week until it is cancelled. This is very useful for repeating tasks. Reminders can be directed to channels or to individual students.

Keeping students engaged and accountable

With email, it is not always clear whether students have read a message. There are systems which notify you if someone has opened an email, but that does not guarantee that they have actually read and understood the content. With Slack, we can take advantage of emoji and require students to give a *thumbs-up* if they have read and understood the message (see figure 4). This helps to detect early on if students are having problems and becoming less engaged. A timely chat could be enough to help a student refocus.

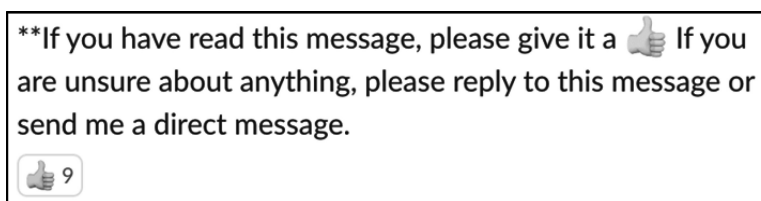


Figure 4: Students acknowledging that they have read and understood the content of a post in Slack

5. Student Relations and Student Support

Slack has enabled me to get to know some of my students better than I would have in the traditional format of class and email communication, and students are quicker to contact me if they have a problem. Ideally, students would communicate openly in channels most of the time, but there is still a fear about openly asking questions, making an English language mistake, or even just sticking out from the crowd. The benefit of having direct messages is that shy students are able to communicate with me better than if all we had was class time and email. A question asked in class is very different to a typed message in Slack; Slack again helps to lower the barrier to communication. Slack helps marginalised students to feel like group insiders, rather than outsiders (Wegerif, 1998). Questions received from students as direct messages can be re-posted by me in a channel without the name of the student who asked it and then I can answer it for the benefit of the whole class. A dedicated *#Questions* channel can be used for these questions.

Slack also provides a place to upload instructional videos, such as how to use Microsoft Word or Google Docs. Again, time in class is limited, but a screen recording can be made in a few minutes

and the students can view it repeatedly, if necessary. It is also possible to write “posts” in which you can go deeper into a topic than you might have time for in class. This can be a useful way to re-enforce a key point from a lesson or provide a delayed reminder about something important that students may have forgotten about.

6. Using Slack Outside of Class

Sharing links and audio

Both the computer and mobile Slack applications make sharing content effortless. In just a few taps I can share links to online resources. I can also record myself and share the audio with the students. For example, I could record myself reading a text as a model for the students to copy and then ask the students to record their own voice and send the recording to me through Slack. This allows me to listen to each student individually and give them one-to-one feedback on their speech, which would be impossible in class.

#Discussion channel

While not a new idea, it can be useful to provide students with space online to discuss the topics from the class. Using a #Discussion channel, students can be given help to prepare for a class, or questions to reflect on what was taught in class. Students can write comments and reply to what other students have written, or simply give a thumbs-up to support a comment made by another student. Participation in this channel could even be assigned a percentage of the course grade. An online discussion like this can be inclusive and offer support for students who dislike commenting in class as they are able to take their time to craft a response.

Group work and collaboration

The Slack platform was designed for group work. A teacher can assign groups and those students can link up using a direct message group. This creates a focus for the group’s work and everything related to the project is funnelled through this group. This gives the students valuable practice in using Slack for collaboration, something that they may have to do in a business environment.

7. Using Slack In Class

#Classroom channel

Slack can also be used real-time in class. Having a live #Classroom channel provides a space for students to add their thoughts, comments and questions. For example, students could be given a question to discuss for 5 minutes and then a couple of minutes to write a post to express their groups’ thoughts. The groups can post their comments at the same time and then look at the comments from the other groups. Having all of the comments available from all of the groups allows for a better follow-up discussion as the teacher can direct the class to explore interesting or contrasting views from different groups. This also makes it possible to get more feedback from

the students, not just from the one student who is willing to raise their hand or the student who is chosen by the teacher. This also avoids the “I had the same idea as her” response. Knowing that they have to post a comment adds some pressure and students tend to work more intensely; if students know that there is a high chance that they will not be called on by the teacher, they are less likely to prepare an answer.

8. Future Use of Slack

As I mentioned earlier, the possibility to share audio and video through Slack offers some interesting possibilities, and in this section I would like to explore how I intend to use these in the future.

Video conferencing

Slack allows users to make free computer-to-computer video calls, or audio calls to smartphones. I think could be particularly useful for a university like Atomi, which is split across two campuses. Students can request a meeting with the teacher talk online through Slack. A teacher can even schedule an online office hour and make themselves available to students in that way. Being available for a 10 minute chat online can be very valuable for a student who is having difficulty with something. As a language teacher, I can also offer online conversation through one of the channels, as up to 15 users can join a video call.

Uploading video

Slack also provides a place to post videos for longer and more in-depth feedback than I would be able to offer in class or in writing. This is a format that the students are very familiar with, as they are part of the YouTube generation. The students are more likely to watch a video of feedback than read a long text version. I see video as working well for class-wide feedback, rather than on an individual-level, allowing all students to benefit from these extensive feedback sessions. It would also possible to record a video based on questions that the students have asked. These short videos can supplement the course content and allow for issues to be covered that there is not time for in class.

Speaking course

I also see Slack as a location for a speaking course. Samples can be recorded by me in advance, and students could be given instructions on how to prepare, practice and record themselves. A different aspect of speaking could be focused on each week and it would be possible to create an online pronunciation course for the students to work through in their own time.

9. Conclusion

Fundamentally, Slack is a communication tool for business, but it can transform how a small seminar group or class communicates, too. It can provide a safe and supportive environment for stu-

dents to work in with a low barrier to communication between teacher and student. The students are able to use the Slack environment to build their confidence, experiment with language, and quickly resolve any problems that they are having. The inclusiveness that Slack offers means that teachers are able to engage with even the shiest of students in a way that is impossible in regular class time alone.

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