**ETEC 540 Final Project: Microsoft Teams**

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ETEC 540: Text Technologies: The Changing Spaces of Reading and Writing

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This year, 2020, has been both an eventful and life changing year. It started off with the threat of a potential World War 3 and the nuclear risk that it would have involved. Then Kobe Bryant shockingly passed away in a helicopter accident, which made everyone realize that even a global superstar is not able to escape mortality. The icing on this unfortunate cake was the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time March came around, COVID-19 made its way to Canada. A pandemic of this sort had not been seen in generations. Global reactions were very different. Each country made unique changes to minimize spread of the virus, which effected each area of society and life. Some countries went very quickly into all out lockdown while others tried to keep normalcy in certain elements of society. Canada’s reaction was to go into lockdown. One question amongst many at this time was, how will we continue to safely provide education? This question would have to be answered by each province and territory independently, since they govern education.

British Columbia’s top doctor and Minister of Health ruled that large gatherings were to be forbidden. This included in-person education, so going to back to school in the same old way was not going to be an option. The timing of spring break this year was such that at the end of March, students would have been expected to return to classes. Since this year, that was not an option, an alternative form of education was necessary. The direction provided by the province’s Ministry of Education was to shift school to a virtual setting. What is virtual education? In order to explain this, it is important to explain what virtual education is not. Virtual education is not online classes, where students just complete work and submit it. The current format of online education offered in British Columbia is fully on an elective basis where students who feel they can motivate and learn by themselves and at their own pace sign up for particular courses. However, this was not a feasible option for all students across the province. Some students need the face-to-face time and interactions to learn effectively and get immediate help with clarification. Since this face-to-face education was not going to be possible, an alternative, virtual learning, was needed.

The distinction between online learning and virtual learning is that virtual learning facilitates frequent teacher-student interaction, without the need for in-person interaction. The province allowed each school district to select their own platform for virtual learning. This platform had to closely provide a learning experience similar to what students receive in class. The Vancouver School Board (VSB) chose to use an application called Microsoft Teams. Martin and Tapp (2019), say Teams creates a virtual learning environment, which is precisely what was needed for students in public education, a platform to try and maintain quality of education and engagement while in-person schooling was not an option. Microsoft is the main software company used by the VSB. This means student already have accounts linked to the company’s applications such as Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and OneNote. The students’ school email addresses are also based in Microsoft, using the Outlook application. This made it easier to transfer student information over to accounts on Microsoft Teams.

Microsoft Teams is one of the newer applications developed by Microsoft. Martin and Tapp (2019) say that the application has the capacity to host many different “Teams” and each team can be filled with “Channels” (p. 58). The use of channels is up to the host of the team. Some ways that channels could be used is to create a location to have dialogue with students, split the course topics into different sections, or organize class members into groups. The channels can either be kept public, so all Team members can access them, or be made private so that only select members can have access. This is particularly useful for students who need extra attention from other school staff. One way that I found this particularly effective is making a private channel for students with learning disabilities to be able to communicate with myself and their assigned support worker.

Martin and Tapp (2019) note that Microsoft Teams can host “conversations, meetings, files, and [other Microsoft] applications” (p. 60). The conversations can be between individuals or groups. The chat function for conversations makes it much simpler to communicate immediately, whereas with email there tends to be more delay in correspondence (Martin and Tapp, 2019). These chats or conversations can also be held via messaging or a video call. The meetings can be either live, or live and recorded, so that those who miss the live meeting can access it later. I would use the recording function of meetings to host my classes so that any students who were not online could access the information at their convenience. This proved to be very effective since many students were not following their usual school sleeping schedule, meaning they would sleep through class times.

The meeting function on Teams made organizing meetings very simple. If a meeting is to be setup beforehand, the application can send an invitation to those that the host selects, making it easier than the host reaching out to everyone individually (Martin and Tapp, 2019). Hosts of meetings are also able to share their screen to show a document. This was primarily how Administrative teams did the large staff meetings. I used this once to coordinate a conversation with a colleague who is not at my school.

Uploading files onto Teams allows for lots of flexibility, depending on the purpose of the file. Team hosts can upload files that team members can either edit or not edit. A purpose of a document students cannot edit would be the instruction to an assignment or the rubric for an assignment. Teachers would not want students to be able to change this information. A purpose of a document student can edit would be the template that students would use to fill in to complete an assignment. The ability to upload files allows for differentiation of assignments, just like when given in person. Teams allows for teachers to assign assignments to particular students so that selective scaffolding can be applied (Martin and Tapp, 2019). Differentiating assignments is very important for teachers because not all students are coming into each assignment at the same place. Some students may be new to the English language, so some sort of key vocabulary box can help them with understanding what they are supposed to do. One way I preemptively tried to accommodate all students was adding both text and pictures to reach both visual and auditory learners. When students complete assignment, Martin and Tapp (2019) outline how students can submit the assignment using the “Turn it in” function under the assignments tab in the Team (p. 62).

Along with files, hosts of teams and channels can add in links to videos, presentations, and external websites. Microsoft Excel, one of many Microsoft applications, is built right into Microsoft Teams to act as a type of gradebook. This allows teachers to have one location to see how students are performing on all of their assignments for the class. The same is true of Microsoft OneNote, this application allows teachers to write or load notes and images for their students. This function is particularly useful to ensure all students have access to resources. This was a concern because not all students brought their textbooks home before spring break. This meant that students would have been without necessary learning resources, so OneNote allowed for important resources to be uploaded to Teams. Another built-in application that is very useful on Teams is Microsoft Forms. This application allows for quizzes to be integrated right into the Teams. This allows for teachers to have students complete either short answer or multiple-choice quizzes to test student understanding. Teams is also very convenient to access, as it is available via a desktop app on computers and an app on mobile phones.

An additional bonus of using Teams is Microsoft’s commitment to ensuring their products have high levels of security (Chowdhary, 2020). Teams ensures “privacy and security controls for video conferences, safeguard user privacy, secure user identity and account information, as well as protect customer data and defend it against cybersecurity threats” (Chowdhary, 2020). This commitment to security makes Teams a great platform for virtual learning. If there were security issues, parents would likely not allow their children to participate in certain aspects of Teams, such as video calls and any writing that discloses personal information. This would significantly hinder the ability for teachers to ensure the most vulnerable students are able to learn effectively. Video calls at minimum allow for voice to voice interaction which some students need, in order to feel reassured about their understanding. Microsoft makes it such that Teams is safe and secure for virtual learning.

Microsoft Teams and virtual learning will continue to play a role in this upcoming school year. The platform so far has been extremely helpful, but it is not perfect. Martin and Tapp (2019) suggest Teams hosts should clarify rules around communication, as well as how the team is set up and to be used. Chowdhary (2020) believes that these uses of remote learning and working will persist beyond COVID-19, so it is important for educators at all levels to become comfortable with teaching using this type of platform. The need to continue to educate has necessitated the widespread use of a tool such as Microsoft Teams. If this pandemic remains or goes away sooner than anticipated, the use of virtual platforms to assist with education will remain. It is the next natural evolution of education as technology becomes more prevalent in our lives.

References

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