A Summary of Collected Student Feedback on the DIP '365 Teams' Project

Aaron Cawte, University of Leicester
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1. Context

As the Digital Associate for the current DIP project "*Using 365 Teams to promote student-mediated lecture support*", henceforth "*365 Teams*", I have led and been involved in multiple discussions with my peers in the Informatics department regarding the need for such a tool, whether it could be an effective tool to support our learning, and how it might be best tested.

Unfortunately, constraints beyond this project have led to me withdrawing from the project prematurely, meaning I won't be involved in any further planning or testing processes. Therefore, as agreed with the DIP Team, I have compiled some thoughts and commentary from my peers as well as my own developed understanding of this project's place in the wider environment from my time involved with this project.

2. Discussing the Initial Idea

2.1 Student Feedback

In one conversation with third year Informatics students, I asked "*If [you all] had access to a Slack-like tool for discussing your modules with peers and/or staff, do you think you might use it?*". My peers immediately drew parallels to our existing use of Blackboard forums to interact with staff:

- "It'd probably be better than Blackboard forums [because] basically nobody uses them"
- "I think the problem is that students just choose not to use the Blackboard forums …, I don't see something like Slack being any better"
- "The concept … is a bit flawed because the people who would be able to help are also the people who don't need to use the forums"
- "I could understand people being apprehensive about answering other students' questions, and personally I don't know if I would trust an answer if it didn't come from a lecturer or TA"

Reflecting on past use of Slack for Informatics' summer programming boot camp, one student said:

- "… I didn't want to post [questions] in it [because] I wouldn't want for every lecturer to see what I'm asking"

Here, students clearly identified some potential issues, if a tool like 365 Teams were to replace Blackboard forums as our "official" method of student-staff group communication:

- Students already neglect to use the forums, either because they don't need to, aren't confident to or aren't aware that they can
- For peer support, students who understand topics better will be less inclined to visit a forum-like digital realm, thereby reducing the quality of information available
- Anxiety in speaking in front of a digital audience, perhaps at risk of embarrassment by asking a question deemed easy by others, or providing an incorrect answer
- A lack of trust in other students to provide accurate assistance

2.2 In the Wider Environment: Replace, Enhance & Introduce

Given the somewhat sceptical initial feedback, I think it is important that we consider what an implementation of a tool like this might replace, what it might enhance, and what it might introduce.

Replace:

- Blackboard forums, other forum tools for student-staff Q&A
- 3rd party messaging platforms for group work (a University managed platform mitigates arguments over platform choice, allows easier connection with staff)

Enhance:

- Forums, by providing a platform accessible on a wider range of devices, a less abrasive user interface, and perhaps additional features like tagging users
- Course-wide student conversation, currently on private platforms that exclude students outside of certain social groups by nature.

Introduce:

- Work submission on a platform that works on a wider range of devices
- Group communication, work, submission and assessment possible all on one platform
- Live co-working in lectures

3. Needs, Concerns and Solutions

Group	Needs	Concerns	Solutions
Staff	To offer an environment where students are comfortable asking questions An implementation that requires minimal work to answer queries An implementation that allows secure and private file sharing and annotation	Overhead in introducing a new workflow to students requires a lot of teaching time A tool that students don't engage with is useless	Step by step instructions on using Teams must be available to students, and not the responsibility of individual teaching staff A simple functionality should be piloted, introducing more complex use cases as both students and staff gain familiarity with the tool

Confident Students	Not to be put on the spot, it is not the responsibility of advanced students to bring up others	Promoting peer to peer help as a feature risks putting pressure on students known to be advanced in their subject area	Don't promote peer to peer assistance as a feature without structure that goes beyond the tool, splitting general conversation and staff Q&A into separate channels may help here
Students lacking confidence	Privacy and comfort in asking for help A student community that helps prevent isolated feelings related to academic issues	A P2P or community platform does not offer such privacy by default	A Q&A channel that makes questions private, or even better gives students the option of sharing their question with other students.
Wider student body	More opportunities to work with other students without being forced Accessible help A digitally native learning experience that prepares them for industrial practice as well as giving them technical literacy	Pilot projects risk forcing students to engage in group activities they don't see the value in Students voiced concerns about being social, clearly students in Informatics are uncomfortable with a change in workflow without immediately obvious benefits	Given some of our existing modules attempt to emulate business practice (see CO1008, CO2012, CO2015), should team communication tools be integrated as a part of this to offer a real-world value beyond study? Bar assessment, there mustn't be an expectation of students to participate, but we must keep in mind that if they don't want to, there may be a barrier that needs to be addressed

4. Closing Thoughts

Despite concerns expressed to me by both students and staff, I believe there is still room for an implementation of Teams as a learning support tool in specific use cases.

- I think a focus is needed on how tools like Teams and Slack are used in industry to give students a motivation to engage with the tool
- I think the platform can be used for multiple purposes (e.g. general course chat, academic Q&A, group work communication, assessment submission, conversing with tutors), but each of these functions should be clearly separated on the platform to prevent students feeling confused, lost or under pressure when using the platform

From my three years' experience as a student of Informatics, students in our field are not naturally sociable which I believe hinders their learning significantly. A tool like Teams has the potential to create new means of engagement between both students and staff, as well as wider groups of students. However, any execution must be very careful of pushing too hard, and must carefully consider its exact functions and be upfront about those.