Academic BRASS

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Looks Matter: Basecamp and Slack for Virtual Reference

More instructors are using team communication tools like Basecamp and Slack as alternatives or supplements to the traditional learning management systems. This article briefly introduces these tools and explores how using them as platforms for virtual reference in the context of tech entrepreneurship courses can disrupt preconceived notions of the library's value, and how interacting within a relevant aesthetic environment is essential to building trust.

Particularly as campus accelerators and related service roles such as "entrepreneurship librarian" grow in popularity across academic libraries, librarians can benefit from applying knowledge from the startup world in terms of user-focused design approaches to their traditional tasks such as virtual reference. This year, I supported two semesters of a course that guides students through the process of commercializing a software product. The popular course is tied to the Department of Computer Science Innovation Lab, a campus-linked accelerator here at the University of Toronto. The instructors—also the accelerator's co-directors—opted for a variety of reasons to use Basecamp in lieu of the university's learning management system. Subsequently the TA also opened a Slack channel to facilitate group, private, and direct messaging communication.

Basecamp and Slack are team collaboration software applications produced by startups and intended for commercial use. Basecamp, founded in 1999 by 37Signals, is now on its third iteration, and offers chat, message board, to-do lists, schedules, check-ins, and file storage as core features. San Francisco-based Slack is a messaging app teams use "to make their working lives simpler, *more pleasant*, and more productive" ("Slack.com," emphasis mine). It is organized into public and private channels, such as a topic, team, or assignment, that also offers file storage and sharing, all of which can be archived and searched. Both tools identify simplicity and ease of use as central guiding principles, reflected in their uncluttered, open interfaces.

The user is at the centre of both Slack and Basecamp. Basecamp's "Me Page" is analogous to a Facebook profile page that collects all your posts, comments, files, etc.

into one place. Other advantages primarily have to do with aesthetics: Basecamp's icon of a smiling mountain (you can do it!) and Slack's familiar hashtag, friendly sans-serif fonts, and profile photos of everyone (Facebook again). Everyone sees all the comments (and can adjust their own notification settings), while instructors can create and control their own course domains.

Neither Basecamp nor Slack offer the same robust functionality as dedicated learning management systems; neither have the capacity for users or messages that large campuses demand. However, when used on a small scale (in our case, a group of under 50 users), the core communication, organizational, and file-sharing features are equivalent. Email notifications keep group members up to date on threads (e.g. the week's assignment) and comments. Both platforms can be integrated with other apps, and by using the two together I could avoid email altogether; being an over-30 dinosaur, however, I couldn't bring myself to take that plunge.

After a brief in-person orientation on the first week, most of my interactions with the students were virtual. By adding me to the course Basecamp and Slack channel, the instructors effectively embedded a librarian in their course. Experimenting as I went along, I was able to respond to queries and posts in real time, access the syllabus and assignments as needed, and support coursework with resources such as videos, links, and slides at the appropriate time. I promoted and facilitated registration for two mandatory workshops held outside of class time. While there wasn't an overwhelming number of questions directed my way, I was nevertheless able to integrate library resources and services into all stages of the research process as the students investigated chosen industries and markets, and develop a pitch including information found during that process. Because the course was themed around a particular sector, I could also periodically provide links to relevant reports and infographics, and tailor quick videos to suit search criteria.

There is nothing preventing a librarian from conducting any of the above in a traditional learning management system, or on an open course site or blog, for that matter. This idea that tools can make group work "more pleasant," however, is an area that is often overlooked or underfunded when it comes to the typical educational interface. After all, spending on design is frivolous as long as the functionality is there, right? Not any more.

In his 2007 presentation "Eye Candy IS A Critical Business Requirement" [sic], Stephen P. Anderson makes the argument that visual design is not frivolous but central to user experience and particularly to user trust. In fact, he says, "you can't separate usability from visual design," which is as much about the psychological response of the user as the choice of colour or font (8-9). Anderson cites the concept of affordance, co-opted from psychology into design by Don Norman, which says "an object's sensory characteristics intuitively imply its functionality and use" (22), and the concept of affect, in that perception is strongly influenced by feeling, both present and future. Again echoing Norman, Anderson argues that "attractive things [are perceived to] work better" (65), the basis behind much of the efforts of branding (see for instance Jansen, Zhang, and Zhang, in Anderson 62).

In this way, comparatively light tools such as Basecamp can be seen by users as "working better" than more robust platforms with fewer aesthetic bells and whistles. (Terms like "bells and whistles" work to trivialize the importance of aesthetics, Anderson would argue.) By using tools designed for and by startups in a course intended to inspire

new startups, librarians can recontextualize library resources and services. Our interactions with users can take place in what is perceived to be a friendlier, more manageable context: the mountain of coursework doesn't seem quite as high.

Students often view library instruction and resources with skepticism, unconvinced that they offer anything more than can be found via a cursory web search (Head and Eisenberg). This may be particularly accurate the domain of tech entrepreneurship, from which Google and other challenges to libraries such as Amazon have sprung. To this generation, the Google search bar is ubiquitous; as we know, students are prone to returning to the single resource they know (Head and Eisenberg). In the marketing and management literature, Gefen applies sociologist Niklas Luhmann's 1979 finding of familiarity as a precondition for trust—developed well before the internet, with its myriad trust issues, came along—to modern concerns such as e-commerce.

The literature on building trust over virtual reference illustrates how the concepts of affect and affordance apply to librarianship. Fagan and Desai (2003) suggest strategies for incorporating a "human element" (124) into virtual reference, including "a caring attitude" (127) by the use of online communication skills [that] substitute for many of these nonverbal cues" of a face-to-face reference interaction (121). Lancaster, Yen, Huang, and Hung found that students preferred the real-time interaction of instant messaging—of which Slack is a modern iteration—over email (18), and used emoticons to replace emotional cues and humanize virtual communication (9). Their article also summarizes Carroll and Mack, who found that "the ability to enjoy work and treat work as play is often viewed as a characteristic of successful adult learners" (7). Supporting student research in a virtual environment where they feel comfortable can help build trust in the librarian, cultivate usage of library services, and hopefully a better learning experience for students.

Without a controlled study I can't argue that Basecamp is *more* effective than the alternatives, and that's not really the point. What I can say is that my experience using these tools to supporting this technology entrepreneurship course has been very positive, and feedback from both students and faculty support that. It's been a great platform to provide access to library resources that can support this new subject area, in a speedy and relevant way; hopefully it's also demonstrated to students that library resources are worth including in their broader research strategy. Anderson has something to say about experience, as well: that moving beyond from tasks (functional, reliable) toward experiences (meaningful, pleasurable) is the goal and purpose of good design (80). I could argue that the same applies to our library services, and any tool that helps us get there is one worth trying.

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