



Learning Spaces

***Project Management Apps as
platforms for online learning***

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Project Management Apps as platforms for online learning

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Abstract

Creative online collaboration does not have to be implemented as project-based learning, but project-based learning usually includes creative collaboration. Managing projects on a learning management system (LMS) can be painful, as neither communication nor sharing tools are optimized for this. Also the strict roles and rights model applied in project management platforms (PMP) does not reflect the requirements of creative team collaboration.

Project Management Platforms as collaboration platform

Project Management Platforms are collaboration platforms by nature. From a teaching point of view, they lack the most basic support for individual students assessment and grading, so the choice to put a PMP at the heart of the online collaboration environment is a purist one. Still there are a lot of PMP out there, which can be classified by the following criteria:

- Lean vs. rich platform: Lean platforms concentrate on essential features, having the platform stepping behind the discussion of the matter. Rich platforms have a lot of features and are usually even extensible with plug-in modules.
- Open vs. closed structure: Open structure platforms leave a lot of freedom to find conventions on the social layer on how exactly to use the platform. Closed structure platforms follow dedicated methods and processes which cannot be changed much.





		Open structure		Closed structure
Lean platform	+	Good type of platform for teams that also reflect their process and build structure on the social layer. May be mixed with other online tools to form a mashup.	+	Good platform for starters that do not have much time to adapt the collaboration process, but quickly need a working solution to adhere to. May be mixed with other tools to form a mashup platform.
	-	The need to structure content yourself might challenge teams that cannot spend much time per week on the project. PMP looks only as good and structured as deliberately planned. If the platform looks untidy, your management strategy is untidy. Example: basecamp.com	-	Gives the illusion of an orderly and sophisticated process even if there is none. Determines at least some methodological aspects of the process. Example: trello.com
Rich platform	+	Allows to build a bespoke platform and provides an extensible one-stop communication solution for remote collaboration.	+	No other platforms needed for most collaboration needs.
	-	Might be too demanding to use for teams that work 8 hours per week or less on a project. Example: slack.com	-	Very much predetermines process, does not blend well with other, more specific tools. Example: podio.com





Why using a project management platform as collaboration tool?

There are a number of indications when choosing a PMP as collaboration tool to run an online course:

- Your course IS in fact a project.
- You want to teach the use of PMPs or some platform in particular.
- You need a very equitable style of working.

Strengths of project management platforms in creative collaboration courses

PMP are optimized for task planning and tracking, team communication and document sharing. Many of them are also optimized for connectivity with other services, making them ideal to be put in the center of a mash-up online environment. Version clutter in co-edited documents can be avoided and the whole platform can usually be used by the whole team with more or less equal rights and roles, making it easy to change project roles or delegate work into work packages.

Problems with project management platforms in creative collaboration courses

The main downside simply is that a PMP is not an LMS and vice versa. What you win on the collaborative side, you might lose on the didactic side. The platform basecamp.com e.g. emphasizes current content and lets older content and discussions slip out of side. There is not really a place where static learning material remains visible throughout the course. Also, there is often no place for a separate teacher feedback channel and individual submission of assignment is not really possible either. All content is at least visible to the respective team, so a mix between individual and team activities is not possible. In some cases, it can be advisable to combine a PMP with a static page on an LMS.

Complementary tools and platforms

The following platforms and services complement a PMP well, provided that their purpose is agreed upon early in the project:

- Cloud storage — most PMP integrate with all widespread cloud storage services, leaving it up to personal choice to find a suitable service.





It is easy to reference, access and modify content in the cloud directly from the platform, often offering non-blocking real time collaborative editing features.

- Webmeeting platforms, such as Adobe Connect, WebEx or BigBluebutton. They serve a clear purpose of synchronous group communication and collaboration.
- Online pinboard services such as realtimeboard.com or padlet.com. Having an infinite virtual visual desktop allows for more direct sharing and commenting of visual sketches than up- and downloading PDF files in forums for commenting.
- Learning Management Systems, if they are used to give a rather static overview of the project and provide learning material.

The following platforms and services can create problems if you try to use them in parallel to an LMS for project based learning:

- Social media platforms, because they can cause a conflict on where asynchronous group communication shall happen: In the chat or post threads of the PMP or on the social media platform. Students tend to stick with the PMP, as the social media platforms are inferior in document management and sorting of message threads.
- Other project management tools, unless they only provide a very specific and valuable feature.
- Work Chat platforms such as slack.com or hipchat. Meanwhile these kinds of platforms have grown to be project management platforms on their own, a complementary use with other platforms such as basecamp.com is difficult, as people simply might experience platform clutter, not knowing when to post what where.

Useful Hints and Methods

- As teacher, introduce yourself as a kind of consultant to the project team. Your actions on the platform should be in an equitable team spirit.
- Avoid building up a second communication structure to build up via email. Email means that everybody is responsible herself





to recap and structure the communication, which can cause misunderstanding due to different individual approaches to email sorting and keeping.

- Agree on a “project charter” and “working guidelines” to model the social part of the PMP. Explicitly agreeing on how to use the tools avoids conflicts later in the project.
- On platforms with open structure, support students in modelling such a structure.
- Chats, emails and forums create different expectations in terms of responsiveness within the team. The more time per week the team spends on working on the project, the better you will get along with a work chat PMP. Rule of thumb: If not at least half of the people on the project spend half of their weekly work time on the project.

Literature

There is not much literature around at using project management platforms to run actual courses. However, HTW Berlin has an excellent seminar series on digital work covering much of what was mentioned in this document.

<http://www.marceldux.com/digital-work/> (german only)

