Using Basecamp in student-staff partnerships to organize, communicate and promote non-hierarchical leadership

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Abstract

Student-staff partnerships can benefit from using a digital project management platform tool for organization. However, implementing digital technologies in student-staff partnerships requires consideration of how such tools help to promote the values of the partnership. In this review, we explore how our research activities as members of the 'Partnerships for Research in Education Program' (PREP) have been influenced by our adoption of *Basecamp* as a project management platform.

Introduction

Student-staff partnerships can benefit from using a digital project management platform tool for organization. However, implementing digital technologies in student-staff partnerships requires consideration of how such tools help to promote the values of the partnership. In this paper, we explore how our research activities as members of the Partnerships for Research in Education Program (PREP) have been influenced by our adoption of the 'for Education' version of *Basecamp* as a project management platform. Through this review, we intend to: a) provide a technological review of Basecamp; b) reflect on key aspects of Basecamp that suit partnership work, specifically within the structure of PREP; and c) reflect on whether Basecamp has helped to promote the values guiding our specific partnership.

Partnerships for Research in Education Program (PREP)

Partnerships for Research in Education Program (PREP) formed in August 2019 as a voluntary, grassroots project comprising a group of instructors and students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. In Ontario, pre-service teacher education programs serve as professional training programs, promoting theory and practice related to elementary and secondary (i.e. K-12) teaching. However, for some students, the opportunity to partner in extra-curricular research activities is of interest. This interest sparked the initial conversations about the structure and feasibility of PREP.

PREP was designed around the idea of *students as partners* (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Cook-Sather *et al.,* 2018), where student partners would be active and, in many ways, equal partners in research projects while receiving mentorship from instructor partners. PREP's work is *"both risky and enables taking risks"* (Healey *et al.*, 2014, p.20). Yet we believe *"we must move beyond taking risks and reaping rewards as individuals"* (Hagood, 2012, p.17). From the beginning, we committed to developing partnerships that supported shared goals of developing research, mentoring, communication and project management skills. We also chose to use specific language when speaking about our work in PREP; partnership accurately represents our mutual roles in the success of the projects we undertake. We operate in contrast to the traditionally defined roles present in research activities involving students and staff: research assistants and supervisors.

PREP partners are currently involved in a number of research projects, the largest being a funded, multi-institutional project investigating the relationships between student approaches to learning and Big Five personality factors. Other PREP projects include: exploring the effects of experiential learning on the future career plans of upper-year undergraduate students; and an analysis of pre-service teachers' comfort levels when addressing LGBTQ issues in the classroom. These projects are at various stages of completion, with some engaged in research ethics review while others have moved to the knowledge mobilization phase: the preparation of journal manuscripts and conference presentations. As a precursor to the previously mentioned projects, a series of systematic literature reviews were completed in order to foster a scholarly approach to research prior to conducting research in the field (Boote and Beile, 2005).

PREP's selection of Basecamp

One of our initial tasks was to find a way to organize the multiple research activities that we would develop as PREP. One of the instructor partners suggested using Basecamp because he had used it previously in his role on a national board of directors. We tested a few other platforms (Asana, Slack, and Monday.com) and chose Basecamp for its simplicity and because it offers a 'for Education' version – a full, unlimited version for teachers and students in K-12 and higher education and 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations – free of charge. We in PREP have been using the 'for Education' version since the beginning of our partnership work.

The Basecamp platform

Basecamp touts itself as *"more than just a project management tool—it's an elevated way to work"* (Basecamp, 2019). Indeed, the platform has several features which distinguish it from other project management programs. Basecamp includes a variety of resources (such as digital to-do lists, calendars, file-sharing and internal messaging systems), thus providing teams and projects with a centralized medium to keep track of their individual priorities and actionable items. The platform is accessible through a web browser or by using the Basecamp application for iOS- or Android-enabled devices.

A user's homepage on Basecamp provides access to all teams and projects (figure 1). At the top of the screen is a collection of shortcuts to various platform-level features, including *Pings* (private message), *Hey!* (individual notifications), *Activity* (all actions related to work in your teams/projects), *My Stuff* (individual actions) and *Find* (search tool). This toolbar remains on the top of the pages as the user moves throughout the site.
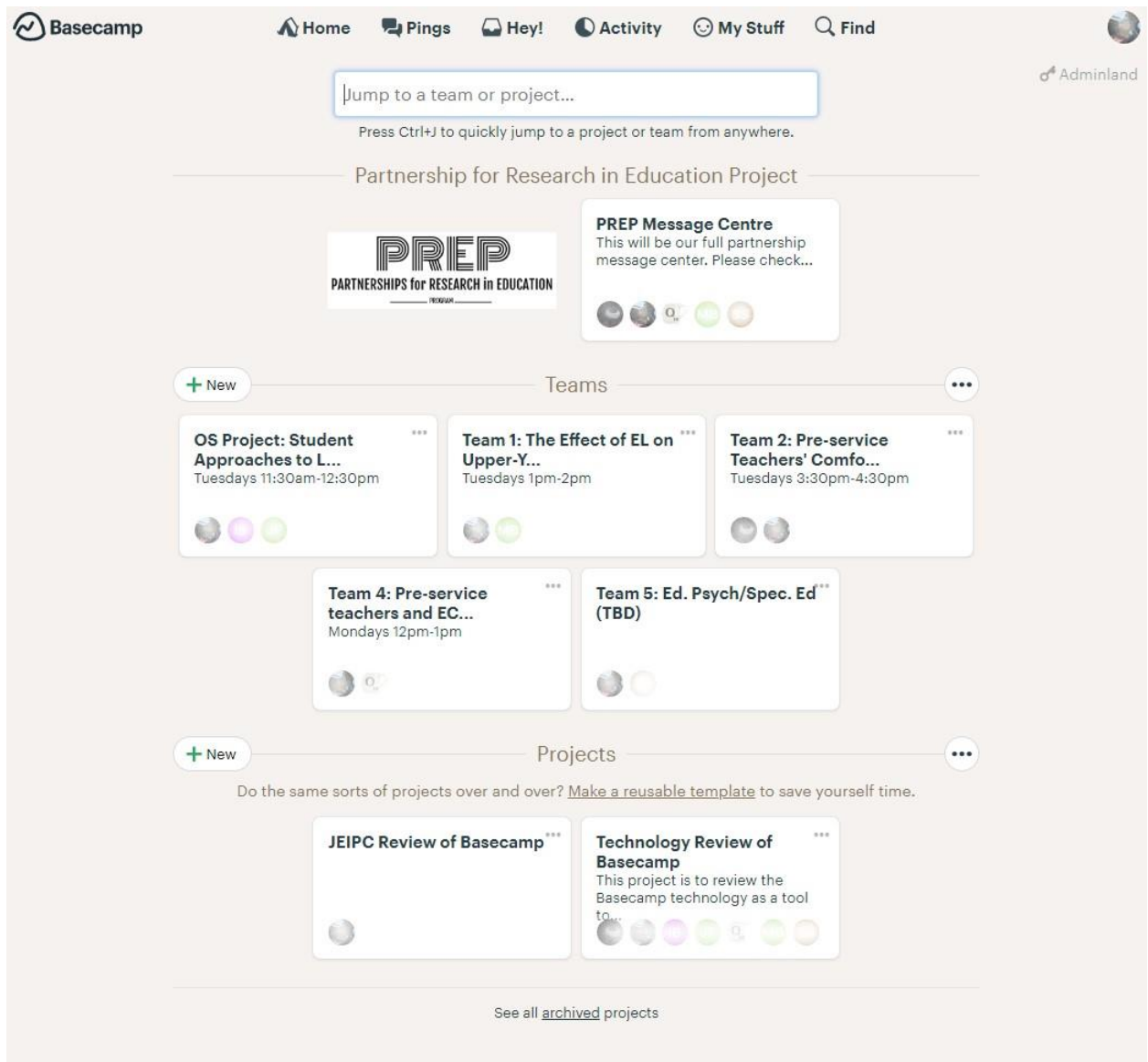
Figure 1. Screenshot of a user's home page on Basecamp

Much of the homepage is devoted to displaying a user's *Teams* (groups formed by user identity) and *Projects* (groups formed by common task). Customized email and Basecamp notifications can be set up for any team or project. Clicking on any of these teams or projects opens a common workspace for the team or project (figure 2). Numerous tools are available in each Basecamp team and project site: *Campfire* (chat), *Message Board*, *To-dos* (tasks), *Schedule*, *Docs & Files*, *Automatic Check-ins* and *Email Forwards*. In addition, features such as comments, boosts (emoji-style comments) and sorting tools (i.e., move, copy, archive etc.) help to organize content and interact with it within each tool.
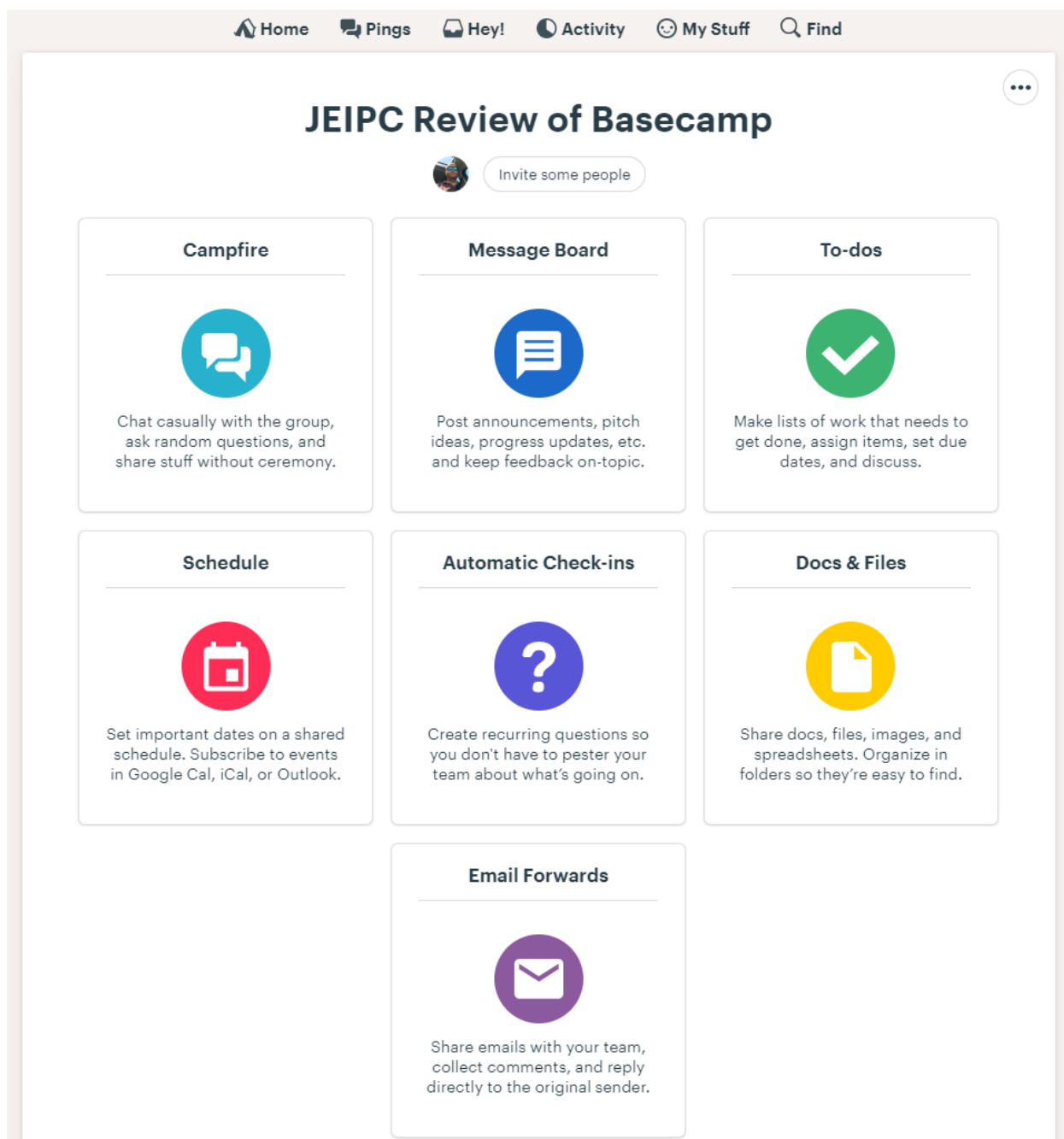
Figure 2. Screenshot of a sample project page in Basecamp

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Basecamp

As a partnership, we decided that an analysis of Basecamp was necessary to understand how our adoption of the tool was shaping our work. After working together as PREP for two months, we began a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of Basecamp. All partners reflected on their use of Basecamp while conducting day-to-day project activities. We started a document on Basecamp to organize our reflections; over a two-week period, each partner contributed to all sections of the analysis. The resulting SWOT analysis (Partnerships for Research in Education Program [PREP], 2019) included forty-three items and covered nearly all aspects of Basecamp. In this review, we chose to unpack the items which most align with the goals of PREP and our specific research

activities, as opposed to those items which could be generally applied to the use of online project management platforms. Where appropriate, we have identified whether an item was included by instructor partners, student partners or both. These distinctions are made to encourage student partners to develop agency and to highlight common and divergent perspectives of Basecamp within our partnership.

1. Strengths

From our SWOT analysis, both instructor and student partners suggest that the most impressive feature of Basecamp is its efficient design and coordination of processes between all partners. PREP partners typically operate on vastly different schedules; education students are enrolled in up to ten classes concurrently. The ability to create custom teams and projects within Basecamp has allowed us to organize our various projects mentioned earlier. Having specific nested teams and projects allows for more refined delineation between tasks which translates into easier management and reduced cognitive load.

We find the levels of privacy on the home page and in the ping chat feature are useful because they reduce the visibility of the contributions of each non-administrator member. For some student partners, it is reassuring to know that their work is not on public display – and this has allowed for creative freedom and work in progress to be shared freely amongst the PREP team. Other student partners were not accustomed to such openness – important to us because, for our collaborative digital workspace to be effective, there must be a level of support and trust among those who operate in the space.

2. Weaknesses

Basecamp's graphical layout is minimalistic and, though this allowed PREP partners to focus on partnership work rather than tediously customizing the platform, it also led to some challenges. Some student partners felt as though the platform was not representative of their identity. The inability to customize the platform visually and the lack of file nesting functions meant some student partners would upload only some files to Basecamp, opting instead to organize draft files and literature collections on their own personal Google Drive – problematic when trying to revise systematic literature reviews and conference presentation proposals, as, even while using date-stamped revisions, it was unclear if the file on Basecamp was the most updated version.

3. Opportunities

We find that Basecamp's design has provided PREP partners with two unintended advantages as we work: accountability and organization. Accountability is considerably enhanced by using To-dos and the schedule tool – both are visible to and can be created by any associated team or project member unless a user's account is intentionally restricted. By making the default options inclusive in this way, Basecamp's design matched PREP's goal of promoting partnership not only in name, but in action, too. PREP student partners have – with great success – created to-dos for instructor partners, empowering those students to make decisions and take leadership roles. Further opportunities exist for Basecamp to promote this non-hierarchical structure.

4. Threats

A continuing threat to our work is related to critical digital pedagogy. Basecamp's ease of use encourages partners to deploy it for various tasks that may also be completed in person, such as discussions. Early on, some instructor partners were quick to adopt a 'just put it on Basecamp' habit, which, as some student partners found, restricted opportunities for dialogue about the research process. Fortunately, PREP's structure includes frequent (i.e. weekly) face-to-face meetings and, since all partners agreed that mentorship was a defining characteristic of PREP, we discussed how over-reliance on Basecamp's convenience can restrict our growth and development as partners.

Conclusion

Our review of Basecamp has allowed us to understand more clearly the technology we use every day as partners of PREP. We had spent many months prior to this review using Basecamp without fully realizing how the platform was both promoting and hindering PREP's goals of authentic partnership and collaboration between instructors and students. It is with our refined understanding of Basecamp that we move forward with our work and provide for the academic community both a) a review of this platform and b) an example of the sorts of questions a student-staff partnership might consider when implementing an online project management platform to organize their activities. Overall, we find Basecamp sufficient for PREP's work, as it allows us to be productive, to be accountable to ourselves and each other and to distribute leadership tasks among all members of our partnership. We encourage other student-staff partnerships to assess how the technology they use influences the work they do as partners.

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