

YAMMER GOES TO COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

Universities are constantly looking for ways to improve courses, the delivery of those courses, and ultimately student learning. As fast as social networking has taken off, why not incorporate this technology into current Learning Management Systems? In recent years we have seen smaller online systems turn into things like WebCT, Blackboard and D2L. Now we are seeing public social network systems like Facebook turning into company social networking systems like Yammer. As a spin-off, Yammer is now being used for a variety of things within the university environment, from student/faculty collaboration, group collaboration, and faculty/faculty collaboration. This paper introduces the reader to Yammer and some of the things that have been done with it in the classroom and university environments.

INTRODUCTION

Universities world-wide are seeking new ways to enhance collaboration between students and faculty. Over the past ten years, learning management systems (LMS) have moved from the fringe novelty of education to a core business system in an academic enterprise [4]. Universities that support online or blended education use LMSs such as Blackboard or Desire to Learn (D2L) to deliver online courses to students. The LMS provides online course content, discussion areas for group discussions, gradebooks for course assignment delivery, whiteboards, chat sessions, and email functionality. However, the LMS is not good at providing a casual, collaborative, social networking environment both in and out of the classroom. "Schools are facing increasing pressure to provide faculty, staff and students with the highly connected tools and information that match today's consumer social networking experiences" [5]. All of this is changing however, with the introduction of Yammer on university campuses.

So, what is everyone yammering about? Yammer is a social enterprise networking service that Microsoft purchased in 2012 to integrate into their Office 365 suite of products. From the Yammer website, the company describes the technology as "a private social network that helps you and your teams stay on top of it all. Yammer team collaboration software and business applications allow you to bring your team together so you can have conversations, collaborate on files, and organize around projects so you can go further – faster". Yammer has been described as "Facebook in a business suite" [6]. However, Yammer is much more and it's also different. First, Yammer is for use inside the enterprise as opposed to Facebook which is a public social network. Yammer users log into the system using their corporate credentials and Yammer can easily be set up to launch from internal applications. You can, however, create external networks to allow non-employees (i.e. customers) to communicate with the organization. Second, Yammer was built for team collaboration. Users can collaborate on documents, post updates, share links, join groups, join conversations and more. In addition, the

Yammer network is secure so that you are guaranteed your organization's documents and conversations are safe from outside prying eyes [8]. Academic institutions, like corporations, need enterprise-grade security. In addition, Yammer helps alleviate some of the problems that have surfaced from employees "spouting off" on public social networks such as Facebook and Twitter; keeping all comments in-house through the internal social network [7].

Yammer shares functionality with Facebook in many ways. The Yammer user interface is Facebook-like friendly so there is little to no training needed to get up and running immediately. Yammer users can post events, 'like' posts, and communicate in conversations in real time while they are on the go from any device such as mobile phones and tablets. Users can also upload photos, update profiles, add links, and take polls. Yammer also shares functionality with the Linked-In professional social network with features such as praising and following coworkers. Yammer has some unique features such as with the @Mention which draws your colleague's attention to a conversation. And, you can embed Twitter hashtags in conversations and files that can be used by Yammer's robust search function for later access and reporting [8].

As an example, Figure 1 depicts a typical Home Page in Yammer.

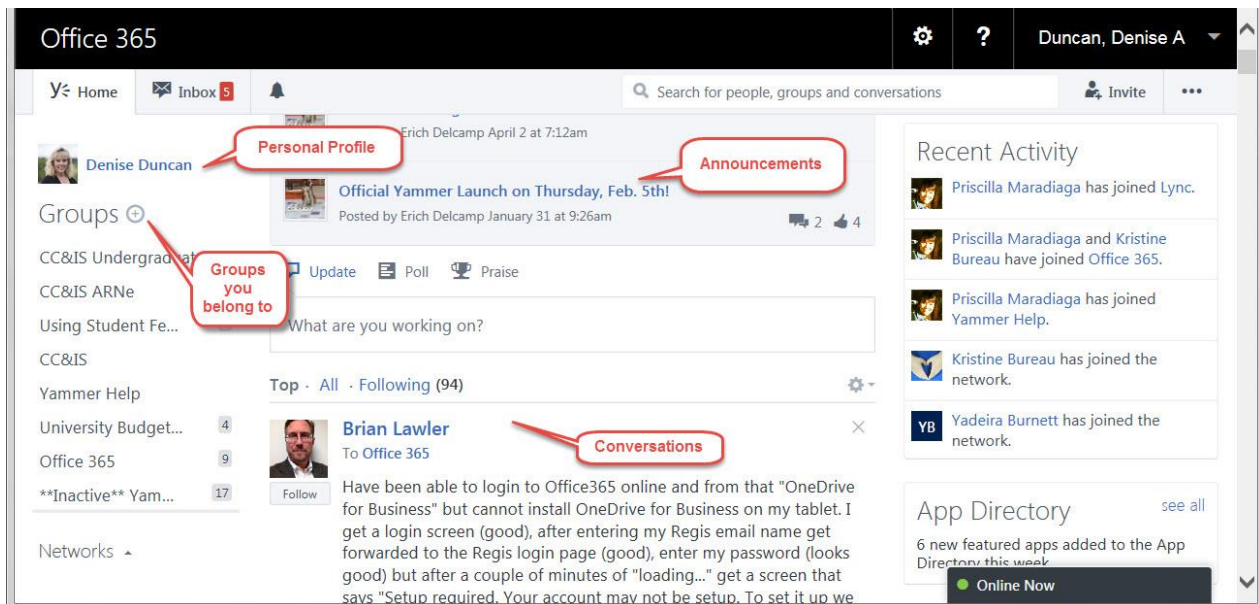


Figure 1. Yammer Home Page Example

In order to get up and running on Yammer, you need to do two things: create a profile and create/join a group. A Yammer profile looks similar to a Linked-In profile where you let people know who you are so you can work better together (Figure 2). You can include personal information about yourself and your family, work information, education, and Twitter, Facebook, and Linked-In handles.

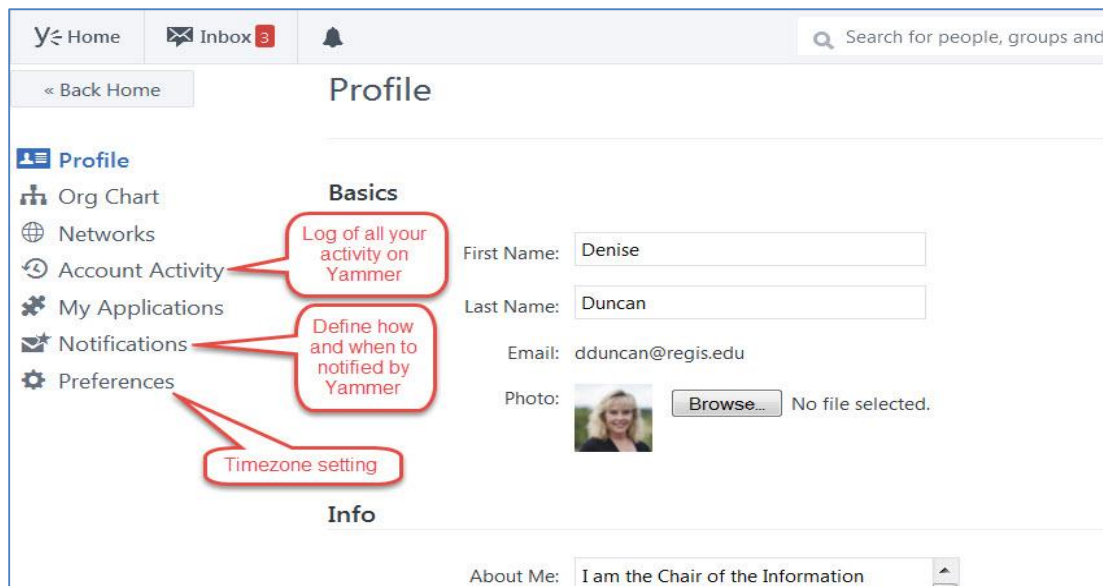


Figure 2. Yammer Profile Setup Example

You also define how and when you want to be notified of activity on Yammer. For example, you can receive emails when someone wants to join a group or someone posts a conversation to a group you joined.

Setting up your own Yammer groups for a team or project can be done in seconds. Once you create the group, you invite members to join your group. Groups can be public or private. Public groups are just that - open to everyone on the Yammer network. Private groups are only open to those that are invited to join the private group. This allows the group to work on sensitive information and projects. You can also follow groups that interest you, discover Related Groups, and receive notifications on changes to the group and its content (Figure 3) [8].

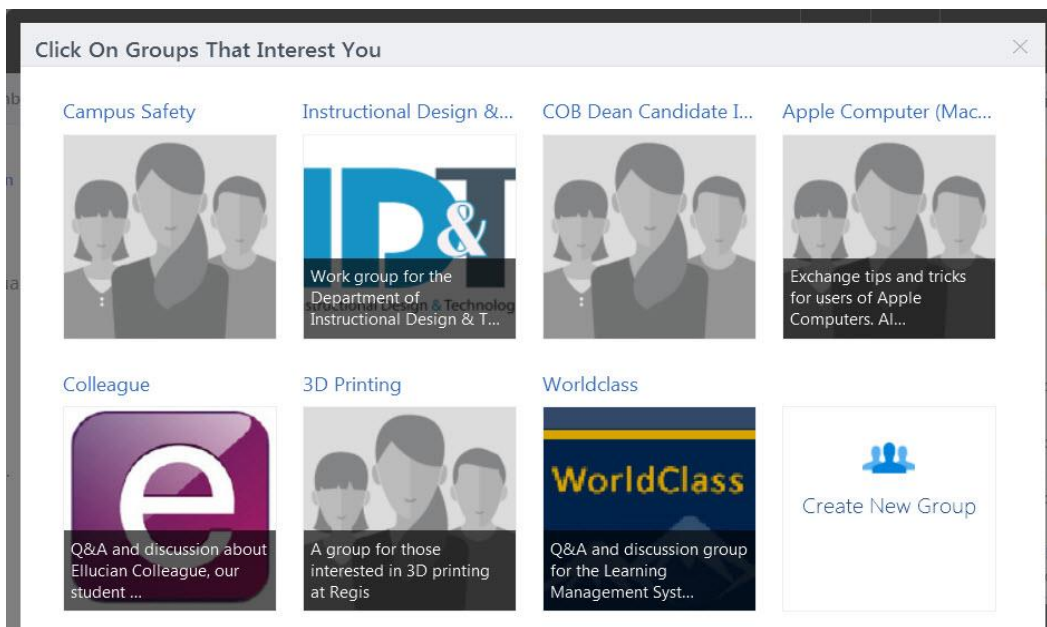


Figure 3. Yammer Group Directory Example

Students Using Yammer in an Academic Setting

There are numerous ways in which Yammer can be used to enhance student learning via this social network at the university. For example, students can use Yammer as a social network

for academic events and activities. Students can create a group for student user groups or chapters such as the Student Chapter of the ACM where meeting times and places are posted along with the chapter minutes. Students can use the 'Praise' function to indicate topics of interest or use a poll to vote on meeting agenda items [8]. Perhaps the greatest advantage of using Yammer is for group collaboration. Students can form a group to work on team projects in a collaborative manner. Team project documents can be uploaded to Yammer where team members can annotate the document which allows for quick feedback and reduces duplication. Students can also upload new versions of files, view the version history, and receive automatic notifications whenever critical files are updated. Yammer has a Note feature that students can use for brainstorming ideas, taking team meeting minutes collaboratively, or being the index for a project [8]. Yammer Notes allow up to a dozen people to edit the note at the same time. Each person is assigned a color and any changes made to the Note are stored in the student's color - a feature similar to the Comment feature in Microsoft Word. You can also link in people within a Note which is great for creating a rough project plan with students assigned to project tasks. Students can also have real-time conversations in Yammer about their team projects. From our class experiences, we have found students love the fact that they can post an article, post to Twitter and Yammer at the same time using the hashback #yam. All of this happens in a friendly, safe, social networking environment with students using a variety of platforms including mobile phones and tablets.

For universities that do not use an online LMS for online or ground-based courses, Yammer can be used as a place to communicate with students outside of the classroom. For example, faculty can create a Yammer group for a class, post discussion questions using the Conversation feature in Yammer and then have students participate in conversations in real-time. This works especially well for flipped classrooms where students research the discussion questions outside of class and come to the classroom prepared to discuss their findings. In addition, faculty can use the Yammer course group as a secure repository for course documents and use the Yammer Email feature to keep course emails separate from the university email system.

Yammer can also benefit universities that use a LMS for course management by extending beyond the online course. For example, Vlerick Business School uses Yammer in their executive education program. "Before they come to campus, students in our executive program virtually meet on Yammer so they get to know a bit about each other and share their learning needs" explains dean Haspeslagh. "During their studies, coursework is complemented with students' questions and insights, capturing the richness of their different backgrounds. And after the program, participants continue to share their experiences as they apply what they learned in their workplace." Vincent Bagué, Manager of the Innovation Centre at Vlerick, states "I would recommend Yammer to any academic institution. It's a powerful platform for comprehension, lifelong learning, which is what our school is all about" [2].

Faculty Using Yammer in an Academic Setting

There are also numerous benefits in using Yammer to help faculty and staff in the academic workplace. For example, faculty can use Yammer for committee work within the university. Faculty can create a Yammer Group to manage team projects where members are working on common documents and having real-time conversations across disciplines. Yammer can greatly reduce email traffic. Evans, a Yammer pundit, explains "Yammer allows people to share big ideas with large groups of interested parties... versus reply-all to uninterested parties. Reducing information overload may well be worth the service itself" [4]. If the information or project is sensitive in nature, a Private Group can be created with the added layer of security.

Faculty can also use Yammer for course development work. Instead of using a shared file system like SharePoint or Dropbox, a Yammer Group is created for the course. Subject matter experts (SMEs), faculty, and Instructional Designers share, edit, gather feedback and converse about the course materials and development process in a single venue. In a nutshell, the following are additional ideas as to how faculty can benefit from Yammer:

- Share ‘best practices’ in teaching or faculty development.
- Discover what your colleagues are up to. Get to know your colleagues better. Your job title does not always do your background justice. List things about your family, pets, interests, travel, and languages learned, etc.
- Enhance collegiality with conversations around the Yammer ‘Water Cooler’. Ask everyone what they think. Yammer was made for crowdsourcing [1].
- Collaborate with internal and external constituents on Request for Proposals (RFPs) and grant opportunities.
- Increase student engagement with conversations with students outside the classroom in a Yammer social setting.
- Collaborate on capital project planning and events where you bring contractors, architects, faculty, and other stakeholders into the same network [1].
- Make faster decisions in Faculty Senates and Academic Councils without all the meetings through polls, surveys, and questions.
- Increase student engagement and retention with Yammer. Yammer integrates directly into CRM systems such as Microsoft Dynamics. This allows student advisors and enrollment officers to keep up with students in real-time so that they remain on-track for a timely graduation [4].
- Host a real-time Yam Jam. For example, from 11:30 to 12:30, we will be brainstorming the new ad campaign for introducing the new data sciences Master’s degree program to the community.
- Plan events and invite people to them.

As one can see, Yammer greatly improves collaboration and communication across the university, for student and faculty alike.

CONCLUSIONS

The McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) estimates that organizations see a 20% to 25% boost in productivity with social technologies such as Yammer. Two-thirds of this productivity lies in improving collaboration and communication within and across the enterprise [3]. By adopting Yammer at your university, faculty, and students will benefit from similar productivity increases as well as collaboration, communication, and social learning communities. And the best part is that Yammer is free to academia at <https://products.office.com/en-US/academic/compare-office-365-education-plans>

To reap the full benefit of social technologies, organizations (i.e. universities) need to foster an environment of openness and trust where people are not afraid to share their ideas. The Yammer network will only be successful if there is wide-spread, enthusiastic participation from all areas of the enterprise/university.

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