

# **Creating and Extending classroom community with GroupMe**

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## **Introduction**

With the advent of Smartphones, many students have access to numerous tools in the palm of their hands, including e-mail. However, as a generation that came about with instant messaging and text messaging, e-mail is not the preferred mode of communication for these students. Students are more likely to send text messages and to check their text messages. Therefore, this fall, I experimented with adding GroupMe as a class communication tool, and I was quite impressed with the results.

## **What is GroupMe?**

GroupMe is a free group messaging smartphone app, available for iPhones, Android, and Windows phones. GroupMe allows users to send text messages to other members of a group without sharing cell phone numbers. You also have the option to make your contact information visible to GroupMe users, but it can remain private without losing any functionality in the app. Group members can send messages to each other directly, or post to the whole group. If group members want to send private messages, they can click the person's avatar they wish to contact, or simply type "@username" to send a direct message to that person. Those messages will not be visible to the entire group.

GroupMe can also be helpful if you are traveling with a group of students or are supervising a large group of students (such as during Orientation weekend/Welcome week). Users can also send photos and videos within the app. This could be helpful if students are having issues with an assignment or other class-related question.

### **How can I get GroupMe?**

GroupMe is available free through Google Play or the iPhone App store. You can also go to [www.groupme.com](http://www.groupme.com). Simply enter your mobile number on the website, and you will get a link to send to your phone. You must create an account using your mobile number. You can check messages from the web, and, if desired, you can disable the messages coming to your phone if you are using the website. In addition, you have the option of receiving messages via the app, desktop, or in your phone's text messaging (SMS) system. You do not have to download the app to your phone if you wish to use it through your phone's SMS system. There are no upgraded plans for purchase; all use of the app is free.

You also can link your GroupMe account to a Facebook account, so if you have a professional Facebook account that you use to communicate with students, you could link the two. In addition, you can also use your personal Facebook account if you are comfortable with that type of connection with your students. Linking the two does not change the functionality of the app. The app cannot be linked with Twitter or LinkedIn at this time.

Once you have the app, you can create groups, and then you can add people to groups, which can correspond to your classes, or other groups, such as student advisees. Once you create a group, the app will create a link that you can e-mail to potential group members (you could use your institution's LMS e-mail to send the link out if you are creating a class group). Once users have the link, they can join the group. Any user can add another member to the group. This is where your students can help you; since many of them are already in multiple groups with other students in class, they have connections to each other and can add others to the group faster. Once you have been in groups with others, you can add people to the group directly, as the app saves your connections and reminds you what other group connections you have. I have found that students already have the app and use it frequently, so they are quite familiar with it. If they are not currently using GroupMe, the learning curve is not steep, and they typically pick up the use quite quickly.

### **How can I use GroupMe?**

1. *as an announcement tool.* While group messaging can also be accomplished through e-mail, what I found when using this app for my classes is that the app broke down barriers to communication. For example, there was a class activity on the "to do" list at the beginning of the semester. The students were unsure about what they were supposed to do for the assignment, but I needed to tell them it

was an in-class activity, and, therefore, they did not need to complete anything before class. I was getting several e-mails, so I just quickly put out a message in the app. The students were relieved, and there was no issue with the activity anymore. I also did not have to send out a mass e-mail that the students may or may not have read before class.

2. *a peer-to-peer tool.* Students use the app for peer-to-peer communication. They use the app to ask each other questions or clarify assignments without me having to intervene. The photo and video functionality can assist them with collaboration. I would encourage you to remain a member of your groups, as to deter academic dishonesty and misuse of the app.
3. *a community builder.* I have not used the app in an online class, but the app could help to create community with a class that does not meet face to face.
4. *a communication tool to student leaders.* I also use the app for other groups. For example, I am the Director of University Seminar, our first year experience course. The class utilizes peer advisors; returning students who help guide the first year students through their first semester. We frequently use the app to put out announcements to the students in the class, and they use the app to reach out to each other to ask if other peer advisors are having issues with an assignment during class.

5. *as reminders*. I also advise the student communication club, and we use the app to remind for meetings, and prepare the agendas. It helps to create more community with the club. I also use it to see how many people might be attending the meeting, and to see if there are too many other conflicts so that we can reschedule the meeting.

### **Conclusion**

GroupMe is a simple to use app that can extend community and group communication with your classes and other student groups. As students utilize new ways to connect with each other, it is important as educators that we are willing to adapt and utilize the best methods for creating community and connections with our students.