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Laboratory literature boards in the digital age

Many, maybe even most, research labs once had a tradition of posting and discussing a “paper of the week”, often near the group coffee machine or other high traffic area. Usually, this was some high-profile paper in the field of the lab, or occasionally something truly new in a neighboring field. With the move to electronic publishing and the deluge of journals and articles, this tradition seems to be disappearing. Even the effort to print a paper, pin it up, and encourage discussion among colleagues seems nowadays like too much work.

How, then, can one maintain the important tradition of sharing and discussing the latest research? This may be work directly related to ongoing projects in the lab or simply exciting things going on in science. Given the constant flow of information, and the ever-diminishing signal-to-noise ratio of the current literature, finding opportunities for alerting colleagues and lab mates about new developments is more important than ever.

Our group at ETH Zurich has long fulfilled this important part of science education and research through internal electronic messaging systems. In the early days, we used a product called Yammer, which provided a private messaging system that would automatically collect abstracts and table of contents graphics from a pasted link, and allowed direct online discussion of the paper among group members. After Yammer was bought by another company and largely removed from the small business market, we switched to Slack, which has proven to be a suitable alternative with several important advantages. Slack provides a closed network that can be limited to group members; project students and newcomers can be added or removed easily by one of several group administrators. We can set up many channels, both public and private, for discussions – the most

important one being the literature channel. Within the literature channel, group members can post links to papers of interest, allowing for everyone to read and comment them. As a research advisor, this provides me with an excellent forum to post papers or news items that I think are important for students or postdocs to know about, and sometimes to give my personal thoughts about why this work is important (or, occasionally, not as important as it might look at first sight). Although group members do not post or participate as much as I would like, I am always happy to read their posts and see the papers they flag as being sufficiently interesting that everyone should know about them.

Although we initially set up this system with the sole purpose of establishing a platform for literature posting and discussion, Slack has taken on many other important roles and helps to build a group community. Every subgroup has its own public channel, where literature or discussions relevant to specific projects can be housed. Private boards can also be set up, allowing for closed discussions and for sharing files among a few members, which is particularly useful when writing papers or grant proposals. Slack works across many platforms, including smartphones, desktop applications, and web applications. It has largely replaced e-mails as the group communication system.

Finally, Slack allows for direct private messaging between group members. This provides an excellent informal tool for discussions between myself and group members, and is used extensively for intra-group communications. Based on our usage statistics, direct messages contribute more than 95% of all communications on the group system. Our group, like so many other research groups at major research universities, is increasingly delocalized.

Team members may be working with collaborators at a remote location. Our group also has a satellite lab in Nagoya, typically staffed not only by local postdocs but often also by group members from Zürich. Our electronic system allows everyone to stay engaged and be part of the lab conversations.

As one improvement over the old paper-based system, Slack allows us to archive all the papers, posts, files, etc. I often recall that I posted some paper to Slack – and a search usually quickly retrieves the appropriate link. There are more advanced features, such as direct integration with Dropbox or Endnote, but for these more technical aspects one must ask my younger group members.

Modern publishing houses promote ever more tools to encourage “sharing” of literature results, with Twitter and other social media quickly becoming one of the primary venues by which we interact with the literature. But it is usually the people closest to us – our students and group members – with whom we want to discuss new papers in a semi-private fashion. While the days of the printed papers posted to the lab pin board may be gone, there are many modern ways to maintain this important part of research and education.



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