

## TechMatters: Wading Into the Backchannel with YoTeach

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**H**ave you ever noticed students whispering amongst themselves while you are teaching an in-person class, or discovered them sending texts to one another on their phones? Of course, you have! This behavior is known as backchanneling, which can be defined as any discussion that takes place at the same time as another in-person activity such as a classroom lecture or presentation. Obviously, some backchannel conversations can be disruptive, but if integrated into your teaching, backchannel chat can become a powerful pedagogical tool for student learning and engagement.

Consider some of the instructional possibilities that become available if you setup an online backchannel for your classes and then encourage (or even require) your students to participate. At a minimum, the backchannel provides a forum for shared notetaking. But it also allows students the opportunity to engage with one another by sharing ideas and responding to questions raised by peers.

For some introverted students, a backchannel can allow them to participate more comfortably and ensure that their voices are heard, while for others it provides an opportunity to test out ideas before expressing them verbally in class. Additionally, the backchannel allows students to participate at their own pace, leaving comments or asking questions even after the instructor has moved on to a new topic.

Of course, a backchannel can also be intentionally pushed to the foreground to be used as a collaborative workspace during a teaching session. If the backchannel tool provides for the creation of separate “rooms”, you can assign small groups to brainstorm, engage in discus-

sion, or work together to solve a problem. Alternately, you might simply pose a broad question at the start of a class and invite students to post and discuss their responses throughout the session.

Last but certainly not least, a backchannel can be used to extend learning beyond the scheduled class time. Discussions can continue in the backchannel after the presentation concludes. The instructor can provide responses to any questions they were not able to address during the session and/or students can continue to pose new questions. An instructor might even choose to share additional related resources to enhance student understanding of the material covered in class.

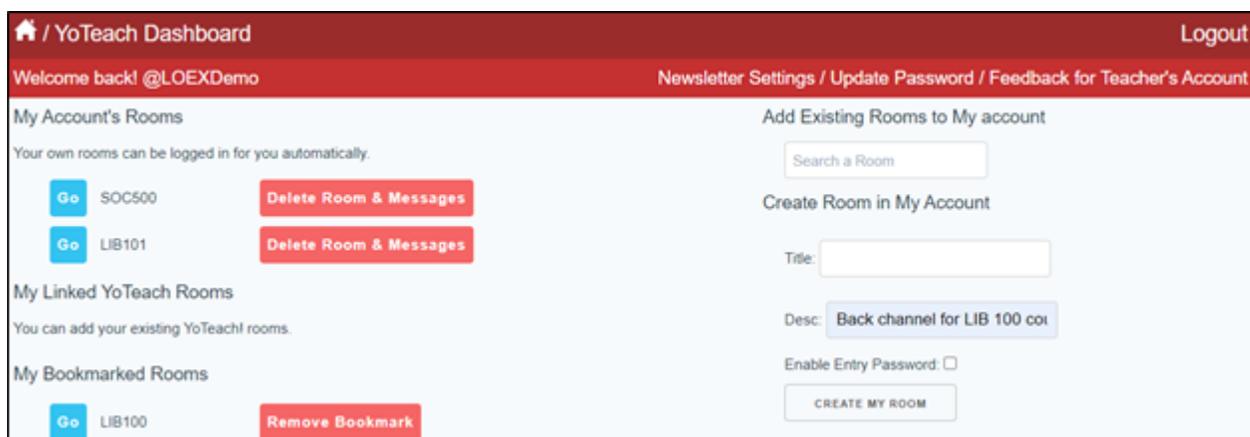
Sounds great, right? But how does one go about setting up a backchannel for a class? And making sure it works in a way that is productive, and not distracting or demeaning? As it turns out, there are quite a few backchannel tools available each with different features and price tags. In the remainder of this article, we will take a closer look at one such tool.

### What is YoTeach?

<https://yoteachapp.com/>

Developed by Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s PALMS (Pedagogic & Active Learning Mobile Solutions) Project, YoTeach is a free, web-based chat room tool designed to facilitate backchannel classroom discussion and collaboration.

**Figure 1: Access and manage your backchannel chat rooms from the Teacher’s Account dashboard**



## Getting Started

As an instructor, you will want to start by creating a “Teacher’s Account”. Although not required, a teacher’s account will let you create and access all of your rooms from one central location. Rooms created via this account will always have administrator options enabled. To register for a teacher’s account, all that is required is a username, password, and email address.

After you access your account, you have the option of creating new rooms or adding existing rooms to your account (e.g., those you created without an account or those created by others). To create a room, simply provide a title and optional description, indicate whether you want to enable an entry password, and then press the “Create My Room” button. All of your owned, linked, and bookmarked rooms will appear in your “YoTeach Dashboard” (see Figure 1) and can be managed and accessed directly from this page (i.e., study, teach, work), the type of organization where you work/study (e.g., middle school, college/university, professional exams, etc), topic areas of interest to you, and subjects you are teaching (assuming you selected educator as your role).

## Using the Chat Room

When you enter a new chat room, you will see a blank canvas on the left and a message box on the right, along with buttons to access “Admin Options”, “Enable Voice”, and “More Options”. In addition to typing a text message, there are also options to send an image, access a drawing tool, generate a math equation, insert a poll, and even create a collaborative workspace.

YoTeach provides instructors with a variety of methods for granting student access to a chat room. Instructors have the option of sending a room URL to their students,

creating a QR code that can be scanned to grant automatic entry, or generating a PIN that can be entered on the YoTeach home page. Alternately, students can search for a room name and then provide a password (if required) to gain access.

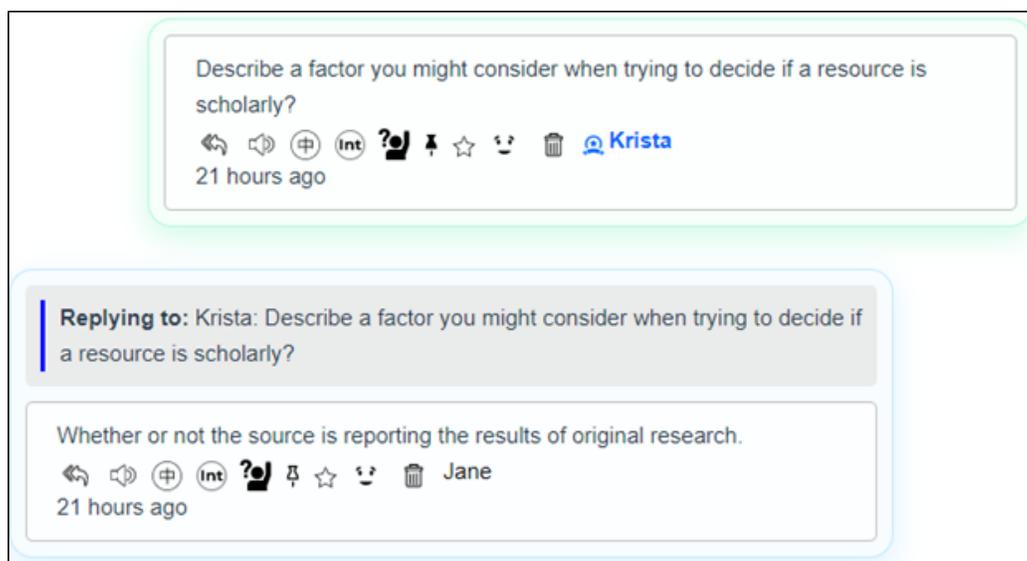
## Communication and Collaboration

Once everyone has entered a “nickname” that will be attached to any of their comments and has gained access to the room, communication and collaboration in the backchannel can begin. This may involve students responding directly to instructor questions, commenting on and questioning what they are learning in a class, responding to classmates’ questions, and/or working together to solve problems. As they do so, YoTeach provides a variety of features to support these activities.

Obviously, the simplest interaction mode available in YoTeach is chat messaging. As an instructor, you can use this feature to post questions or discussion prompts for your students. Students can then reply quoting your original message or just post a new message. By default, new messages appear at the top of the message board. If you prefer chronological order, you will find the option to “reverse message order” in the “More Options” menu. Alternately, if you just want to have a specific message always appear at the top of the page, you can do so by selecting the “push pin” icon from the message tools.

Other message tool icons (see Figure 2) include the double arrows (aka reply message) which will automatically append the text of the message to which you are replying to your new message, three “text to speech” icons that will read messages aloud each with a different inflection, and the trash can which you can use to delete any individual message. To highlight a “good question”, press the “star” icon and the message will be highlighted in yellow. Use the “face” icon if you need to mute a disruptive student. When muted, students will still be able to

**Figure 2: Message tools available to instructors appear as icons below each individual message**



view the discussion, but they will no longer have the option to post new messages. Finally, if a student wants to highlight a message that requires a response, they can do so with the “question/hand raised” (aka needs help) icon which will highlight the message in blue so that it stands out for the instructor and other chat participants.

Beyond basic messaging, the system also provides a number of additional communication options. In addition to a basic drawing tool and image selector, YoTeach offers a collaborative workspace that can be launched and/or entered by either the instructor or students. Just like the drawing tool, the whiteboard (it’s called a “Collaborative Spaceboard” in YoTeach) offers the option for freehand doodling, the ability to add and format text, as well as to insert image files. Although far from the most robust of collaborative whiteboard tools, it is perfectly usable for group discussion and brainstorming activities.

Last, but not least, instructors have the option of adding a polling question to the chat. Once selected, you can type your poll question and add as many response answers as you desire. Students can then “vote” by clicking on the thumbs up icon that appears next to each option. The one downside of this tool is that there does not appear to be a way to limit students to selecting only one response, so you will have to depend on the honor system for single response type questions.

## Conclusion

Although there may be challenges associated with using backchannels in the classroom, if thoughtfully integrated as a teaching instrument the benefits will outweigh the negatives. By providing an alternate avenue for student participation, instructors can broaden their awareness of what their students understand and where questions remain. At the same time, students are granted additional opportunities for engagement, interaction, and learning. If you find that you are interested in experimenting with backchannel activity in your teaching, consider giving YoTeach a try. It is free, simple to use, and will allow you to start using the backchannel quickly and easily.