

# 352 Creating a community through Discord: The use of innovative technology in distance education

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## Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## Abstract

This study examined the role of Discord in fostering community and enhancing the learning experience in a distance-learning tutor group, employing student focus groups, a lecturer interview, and reflexive researcher journaling. Students preferred Discord's informality over traditional forums on the university's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), resulting in greater engagement, improved module study, and increased motivation. Discord also facilitated stronger communication as well as more meaningful and realistic relationships between students and associate lecturers, aiding in achieving study goals. However, drawbacks were identified, such as the additional workload for lecturers. The findings suggest Discord's potential in promoting community and enriching distance learning, warranting further exploration for designing effective online education.

## Full paper

### Introduction

The digital age has given rise to new educational opportunities and challenges. Among these challenges, fostering a sense of community in distance learning is increasingly crucial. This study focuses on Discord, an app initially designed for gamers that various other communities, including education, have since adopted. After attending a webinar by Oliver Bills from The University of Southampton at the 'Digitally Enhanced' webinar run by University of Kent, I began using Discord with students from three modules in Oct 2021. I found that using Discord allowed cohorts to create more informal and naturalistic communities than the OU forums, as one student commented that they found Discord 'less intimidating than the OU forums' (OU student, 2022). This experience led me to conduct this research project with the aim of investigating how Discord impacts the learning experience, encourages engagement in module study, and facilitates the achievement of academic goals.

The research was conducted with the aim of answering the following:

1. How effective is Discord in creating a sense of community for students and tutors in a distance learning class?
2. What does a class community created on Discord look like?
3. How can Discord be used in order to encourage engagement in their module study?
4. How can Discord be used in order to improve and enhance the learning experience of students?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Discord alongside existing OU tools?

### Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach, conducting focus groups with distance learning students and a semi-structured interview with an associate lecturer. This researcher also kept a reflexive journal that was completed after every Discord learning event. This methodology allowed me to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding the use of Discord in an academic context.

### Related Literature

Several studies have previously explored the potential benefits of Discord in educational settings. Wulanjani (2018) asserted that Discord could transform traditional classroom settings, making them more interactive, active, and motivating. Fonseca Cacho (2020) found that 80.9% of students believed their grades improved due to using Discord, and 98.5% stated they enjoyed its implementation. Arifianto and Izzudin (2021) reported student acceptance of Discord as an alternative learning medium, citing the attractive user interface, features, and ease of use as favourable factors. Lacher and Biehl (2018) also explored Discord's potential to moderate student collaboration and teamwork, suggesting that the platform could facilitate group work and track student activity. These studies align with my findings, highlighting the positive impact of Discord on student engagement and learning experiences. However, unlike my research, these studies primarily focused on student perspectives, overlooking the viewpoints of educators.

Conversely, Jiang et al. (2018) identified unique moderation challenges within voice-based online communities on Discord, including unfamiliar disruptive practices such as disruptive noise and voice raiding. While these studies contributed valuable insights to my understanding of Discord's potential pitfalls and benefits, they lacked a comprehensive exploration of student and tutor perspectives, which this study aims to provide.

## Results and Discussion

My findings corroborate previous research indicating Discord's effectiveness in fostering a sense of community (Wulanjani, 2018; Fonseca Cacho, 2020). Discord's real-time interaction and informal environment allowed students and tutors to build more meaningful relationships (Arifianto & Izzudin, 2021), contributing to a cooperative learning community.

Echoing Fonseca Cacho's (2020) findings, Discord's features, such as direct messaging, voice chat, and file sharing, foster interaction and collaboration, leading to enhanced engagement in the module study.

Similar to Arifianto and Izzudin's (2021) results, Discord's user-friendly and accessible nature facilitated an enhanced learning experience, making it a potent alternative to traditional VLEs.

Supporting Wulanjani's (2018) observations, Discord's real-time access to tutors and peers significantly assisted students in achieving their study goals by immediately clarifying doubts and promoting active learning.

In terms of immediacy and informality, Discord outperformed existing Open University (OU) tools, fostering higher student participation. However, challenges were also identified, including the time-consuming setup for tutors and moderation difficulties like disruptive noises and off-topic conversations, as highlighted by Jiang et al. (2018).

## Conclusion

This research, in agreement with previous studies (Wulanjani, 2018; Fonseca Cacho, 2020; Arifianto & Izzudin, 2021), suggests that Discord can be an effective tool in distance education for fostering community, enhancing engagement, and improving the learning experience. However, potential issues such as setup complexities and data privacy must be addressed to optimise its benefits. Future studies should aim to integrate Discord effectively into the academic system without compromising academic integrity or data privacy standards.

## References

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