

Navigating Discord to Reduce Discordance during the Transition to Online Education

Introduction

The implementation of virtual learning has quickly altered the techniques that teachers utilize within the classroom. Many online platforms have been recently discovered and made popular amid a pandemic that has caused worldwide school closures. Therefore, teachers increasingly require technology to aid them in the organization, instruction, and delivery of course content. Additionally, students need a platform that is user-friendly to reduce confusion during the navigation of their online education. As such, Discord, an online platform that is popular with gamers to build community, was leveraged to do the same in an undergraduate teaching methods course at Mississippi State University.

Discord - available for free on desktop, iOS, or Android - is made up of invite-only spaces called servers, that can be organized into channels (text and voice channels). Servers can be conceptualized as your classroom space, while channels are the specific locations where you interact with your students. Channels can be designed as either text or voice channels so that students can engage with each other through various modes of communication. Channels can be created for discussions, Q&As, due dates, assignment submissions, office hours, and more. The text channels enable students to interact with the other individuals on the server and upload files and photos. The voice channels give students the ability to utilize their device's camera and speakers to collaborate with each other and share their screens in live time.

Additionally, Discord gives you the ability to assign specific roles to individuals invited to join a server. For example, teachers, teacher aides, and counselors can have administrator permissions, whereas students should only have access to general permissions needed to collaborate with their peers and instructors, and to complete their assignments.

Procedures

To get started, visit discord.com/register to create an account. Once you verify your account, you can begin setting up your course (server). On the Discord dashboard, click on the 'plus' sign to create a new server. We named our server "MSUAgEd" and then established role permissions in the 'Roles' tab to be assigned to members of the server. The instructor and a graduate student assisting in this project were assigned as '@admin' roles and a '@student' role was established for all students in the course. The @student role removes all management related permissions so students can't alter any of the server settings. To create a channel, simply click on your server's name from the Discord dashboard and select "Create Channel." Decide if you want the channel

to be a text or voice channel and then give it a name. We created three text channels and three voice channels for our server which are outlined below.

Channel (Type)	Purpose
assignment-help (text)	Provide information and answer questions related to course assignments
due-dates (text)	Listed all due dates for course assignments
teaching-methods-s21(text)	General channel for course related conversations, reminders, and student communications
student-lounge (voice)	A place for students to collaborate and communicate
office-hours (voice)	Meeting place for office hours with students
aelc4424-lecture (voice)	Host live lectures

Once the server and channels are set up, you can invite students to the course. The platform will generate a link that should be sent to every student through their school email address. Once individuals have joined the server, the teacher can assign which role each participant receives (i.e., @admin or @student) to ensure that each member is assigned to the proper role and receives the correct access capabilities.

After a brief overview of the platform, and what each channel was intended for, we officially opened our server for use throughout the semester. During synchronous class meetings via Webex, we utilized the “teaching-methods-s21” text channel as our chat box. This allowed us to have access to all the chat logs throughout the semester in one convenient location. Additionally, students could hop into the “office-hours” voice channel during scheduled office hours. We did not utilize the “aelc4424-lecture” voice channel to conduct synchronous class sessions, it is an option in the future as voice channels do allow screen sharing and communicating like other videoconferencing platforms.

Assessment

Discord is an unconventional online platform that provides much-needed organization to its users during the navigation of online learning environments. The platform is effective, applicable, and offers unique functionality compared to other commonly used educational platforms. Some additional benefits of using Discord as an online classroom are the platform does not delete old content or messages without the teacher’s instruction, automatic responses can be set up to answer student questions, and students can be split into groups for discussions and classwork in either text or voice channels. Overall, this platform can aid teachers in organizing their courses during a time when the organization of educational content is difficult to achieve. We plan to continue using Discord as a supplemental platform to the LMS, even as we transition back to the traditional face-to-face delivery of this course.

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