

The Potential for Discord in the Higher Education Classroom

Olivia C. Buzzacco



DISCORD

It's easy to say the 2020 pandemic changed the realm of higher education with a surge in virtual classes, with platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WebEx coming in hot to convert face-to-face courses into a synchronous environment. I was only halfway through my second year of full-time teaching when colleges and universities drastically switched to finish out Spring 2020 as best as possible with the little time and resources they had. Fall 2020 was the same. So was Spring 2021.

By Fall 2021, we started to seep back into the classroom, but classes were only half filled with the other half attending via Zoom. Spring 2022 worked similarly—it was clear that synchronous learning was here to stay, and while I was less than thrilled, I did what I do best: think outside of the box. How can I make this work best for me and my students?

I stuck to Zoom in the Spring and Fall of 2020 but started to switch gears before the Spring of 2021. By this time, I was an active streamer on Twitch—a popular live streaming service that started in 2011, allowing users to create their own space and stream games, entertainment, and more. My partner was on and off streaming on this site for years, and in the boredom of social distancing, I decided to give it a try. While I had a blast meeting new people, playing new games, and making friends, I did not expect streaming to affect the future of my teaching.

An integral part of the streaming world is the additional use of Discord (2024), defined as "...a voice, video, and text communication service used by over a hundred million people to hang out and

talk with their friends and communities." Ayob et al. (2022) put it this way: "In Discord, users can create a server and inside the server, several channels can be created and classified. The concept of server and channel in Discord is like the concept of house and room. In a house we can have several rooms and inside a room people can sit together having conversation and only people inside the room can listen to each other."

Discord originated in 2015 and worked to serve the gaming community by giving gamers a place to talk outside of a Twitch stream. As 2020 progressed in unexpected ways, studies and research began to emerge about the potential this service had in higher education. Could this be a way to hold synchronous classes? I decided to give it a go myself and see what others had to say.

For the Spring 2021 semester, I got the okay to hold my would-have-been Zoom courses on Discord. I taught a total of seven courses; four were asynchronous and three were synchronous using Discord instead of Zoom: a British Literature II course and two sections of English Composition II. Here are some takeaways from my experience aligned with current research.

Ease of use

Many of my students already knew Discord before the class began, so their integration into my created servers was quick and easy. Several articles can agree with this statement (Ayob et al., 2022; Odionokaya et al., 2021; Thornton, 2021). Students found this platform comfortable to use in their classes, as noted by Arifianto and Izzudin (2021), "They tend to feel happy because the relaxed at-

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the North Carolina Community College Faculty Association @NCCCS. It has been accepted for inclusion *North Carolina Community College Journal of Teaching Innovation* by an authorized editor of NCCCFa. For more information, please contact editor@ncccfafa.org.

mosphere while playing games or chatting with their friends is carried away in their learning activities.” Discord can be used easily on a laptop, tablet, or phone, and the bandwidth requirements are low, which is another positive compared to applications such as Zoom (Arifianto and Izzudin, 2021; Lauricella et al., 2024; Vladoui and Constantinescu, 2020).

Communication

Several studies noted the improvements in student-to-instructor communication through Discord, noting how the platform fostered community and engagement (Craig and Kay, 2023; Jannah and Hentasmaka, 2021; Lauricella et al., 2024). One noteworthy comment came from Oliver Bills at the University of Southampton, who reported in the term he used Discord with this classes, he received a total of 4 emails from students to his work email, compared to the 518 student emails from the previous term where he did not use Discord (2021). In my own experience, I sensed students were more likely to contact me via Discord than via email. When it comes to communication, Discord has a feature similar to Announcements on LMS platforms, where you can use the command @everyone and all members of the server will be notified (Ayob et al., 2022). In Odinokaya et al.’s (2021) study, their student Discord users had “. . .4650 text messages, 6823 emojis, 981 links, 432 videos, 856 pictures.”

The multiple forms of communication on Discord hold strong potential as a higher education tool, as students can talk through text, voice, and video. While other platforms have similar features, Fonesca Cacho (2020) noted the difference by stating “While. . .Canvas and other discussion boards already allow public student interaction, the technology of message boards and threads is outdated and a very slow way to exchange information. Discord is essentially a public instant messaging system that allows a live discussion and exchange to happen with multiple messages exchanged per minute between potentially a large number of individuals.”

Active Learning and Gamification

Many instructors are looking for ways to engage students in active learning, and Discord could be a gateway to this achievement through the idea of “gamification.” Di Marco (2021) noted, “The idea is to bring a playful dimension to certain learning activities in order to engage students in active learning.” Arifianto and Izzudin (2021) also noted Discord’s potential with gamification as a way to keep

students engaged and motivated in the class. When brainstorming the possibility of using Discord to teach my synchronous classes, gamification was something that interested me, as I constantly look for ways to keep students interested in a required course, such as Composition or Literature.

Noted Drawbacks and Solutions

While students familiar with Discord experienced easy navigation, those who were new to the platform had their share of struggles. This is supported by various articles that also noted newcomers to the platform experienced some confusion and complications as they familiarized themselves (Arifianto and Izzudin, 2021; Lauricella et al., 2024). My solution was to provide students with a “getting started” user guide to provide as much of a smooth transition as possible. As with most programs, they take time to get used to. Thornton (2021) backs this up by noting his experience with Discord: “. . .as a new user of Discord, I found the user experience overwhelming. However, after spending more time on it and reading the server guides it started to make more sense.” Just as students learn an LMS when starting classes, Discord will take time to get used to.

Like many programs, there were times when students had internet connectivity issues, which could cause them to drop out of the middle of the class session (Wulanjani, 2018). I noted instances where students would reach out to me about their poor connection, which could be due to the weather, or general location in a rural area. Jannah and Hentasmaka (2021) also noted similar problems. These same issues are common when using applications such as Zoom, Teams, etc.

While I piloted the use of Discord in my Spring 2021 classes, I was met with a challenge that did not arise in the studies read: usage restriction. Several of my students were dual-enrolled at their high school, where most of their work is done on a school-issued laptop which barred several websites and applications. This problem was solved by talking with the local schools and informing them of this pilot program, in which Discord was permitted on the students’ laptops.

Supplement or Total Replacement for LMS?

While my pilot of Discord was as a supplemental material for the course (students were making regular use of Moodle LMS for submitting assignments, accessing resources, etc.), Vladoui and Constantinescu (2020) made a case for Discord to po-

tentially replace LMS, as their study had success with incorporating attendance-taking abilities, checking grades, homework assignments, etc. Lauricella et al. (2024) explored Discord in a fashion like my own, as a supplement to the course instead of a replacement for LMS. I believe testing Discord as an LMS replacement requires further studies and pilots.

This being said, Discord has taken note of the educational use of the site and has since made updates to the platform with their onboarding of “Discord for College” and “Student Hubs”. “Student Hubs” is a way for students to use their school-issued email to instantly connect with others from their college, which can lead to community, connection, and potential study groups. “Discord for College”, on the other hand, is more geared towards college organizations and clubs to have a meeting spot, instead of something like a Facebook group. During Spring 2021, I was a co-advisor for our college’s Writer’s Club, where the members pushed for creating a Discord server to host their meetings though, which was met approval.

In closing, Discord has vast potential to change the game of higher education. In a study written by current students, Dayana et al. (2020) made a clear call for schools to make use of Discord after the success noted in their ideas: “Thanks to this experience, we were able to find a platform that would suit our communication needs and with a friendly interface.”

References

- Arifianto, M. L., & Izzudin, I. F. (2021). Students’ Acceptance of Discord as an Alternative Online Learning Media. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (ijET)*, 16(20), pp. 179–195. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v16i20.22917>
- Ayob, M., Abdul Hadi, N., Mohd Pahraraji, M., Ismail, B., & Saaid, M. (2022). Promoting ‘Discord’ as a Platform for Learning Engagement during Covid-19 Pandemic. *Asian Journal Of University Education*, 18(3), 663-673. doi:10.24191/ajue.v18i3.18953
- Bills, O. (2021). *Taking the university community virtual with Discord: A Success Story* [Webinar]. Digitally Enhanced Education Webinars. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkCJsKMXoHk>
- Craig, C. & Kay, R. (2023). Examining the Discord Application in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Journal of Digital Life and Learning*, 2. 52-66. 10.51357/jdll.v2i2.205.
- Dayana, Y. E., Andre, O. M., & Andrade-Arenas, L. (2021). Design of the Discord application as an e-learning tool at the University of Sciences and Humanities. In M. M. Larrondo Petrie, L. F. Zapata Rivera, & C. Aranzazu-Suescun (Eds.), *Prospective and trends in technology and skills for sustainable social development-leveraging emerging technologies to construct the future: Proceedings of the 19th LACCEI International Multi-Conference for Engineering and Technology* (Article 9).
- Di Marco, L. (2021). User-centered evaluation of Discord in midwifery education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Analysis of the adaptation of the tool to student needs. *European Journal of Midwifery*, 5(November), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.18332/ejm/142638>
- Discord Inc. (2024). *Discord*. Retrieved from <https://discord.com>
- Fonseca Cacho, J. (2020). Using Discord to Improve Student Communication, Engagement, and Performance. *UNLV Best Teaching Practices Expo*. 95. https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/btp_expo/95
- Jannah, E.I., & Hentasmaka, D. (2021). The Use of Discrod Application in Virtual English Learning: An Investigation on Students’ Perceptions. *Premise: Journal of English Education*.
- Lauricella, S., Kay, R., & Craig, C. (2024). Examining the Benefits and Challenges of Using Discord in Online Higher Education Classrooms. *Journal of Educational Informatics*. 4. 20-31. 10.51357/jei.v4i2.225.
- Odinokaya, M.A., Krylova, E.A., Rubtsova, A.V., & Almazova, N.I. (2021). Using the Discord Application to Facilitate EFL Vocabulary Acquisition. *Education Sciences*. 11. 470. 10.3390/educsci11090470.
- Thornton, S. (2021, October 11). Discord's growing relevance in the education sector. *JISC Codesign*. <https://codesign.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2021/10/discords-growing-relevance-in-theeducation-sector/>
- Vladoiu, M. and Constantinescu, Z. (2020). Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic: Online Education Community, Based on Discord, 2020 19th *RoEduNet Conference: Networking in Education and Research (RoEduNet)*, Bucharest, Romania. 1-6,

doi: 10.1109/RoEduNet51892.2020.9324863.

Wulanjani, A. N. (2018). Discord application: Turning a voice chat application for gamers into a virtual listening class. In D. Mulyadi, H. D. Santoso, T. D. Wijayatiningsih, D. Hardiyanti, Y. M. Ocktarni, S. Aimah, M. Ifadah, R. Budiastuti, & Y. Nugraheni (Eds.), *English Language and Literature International Conference (ELLiC) Proceedings* (Vol. 2, pp. 115-119). <https://jurnal.unimus.ac.id/index.php/ELLIC/article/view/3500>

Author's Note

The author has no known conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Olivia Buzzacco, College of the Albemarle, 1208 N. Road St., Elizabeth City, NC 27909. Email: olivia_buzzacco80@albemarle.edu