Supporting Discord in Computational Media Courses

The use of Discord can be seen in undergraduate CM or CS courses. The Discord channels may be entirely organized by the students within the class. As courses are held online, students may rely on Discord as their sole means of communication amongst their peers. Students often work together and answer course-related questions from one another without the presence of the instructional staff. This self-directed learning can encourage learning outside of the classroom (or online lectures). Past research also suggests that social networking is correlated to academic progress. With all this in mind, I have proposed some methods to support student's use of Discord within the course. Some of these suggestions may translate to other communication platforms as well. The ideas suggested are the result of surveying CMPM 80K students who have created their own communication server at the start of the online course and understanding their motivations for communicating within it. Some ideas are also inspired by past research in supporting the use of online discussion forums for university courses.

The full methodology for the study leading to this can be found in this slidedeck.

Suggestions

1. The instructional staff (TAs and graders) should be the ones to set up the Discord server. Students should also be required to join, although they will not be forced to participate.
    - The staff should allow students to set up their own channels to speak about their own topics. The staff should be prepared to form channels for new assignments and important topics when it may be helpful. This idea is from past research suggesting staff actively organize subforums in forum-based platforms. It could also prevent the general chat from becoming cluttered.

2. Instructional staff should keep a hands-off approach to the server after setting it up.
    - The only time staff should get involved is when students directly "ping" them or when a serious event occurs where a student must be removed. Students surveyed in 80K enjoyed the student-driven nature of their server, and no issues occurred where students required disciplinary actions.

3. Students should be allowed to identify however they want. (Avatars, names, etc.)
    - The students in 80K usually did not have a username related to their actual name. Most of them appeared to have a custom avatar. The majority of the users enjoyed the anonymity offered through this. Having their identity hidden may

encourage students to speak without embarrassment. There were no issues in 80K of students abusing their anonymity.

4. There should be a channel created for communication with staff. This will be the only channel moderated actively by staff.
    - While students preferred having the server lead by students, having direct contact with staff was still very important to them.

5. A communication channel should also be made for evaluating projects for feedback,
    - In 80K, the students arranged a channel intended for them to playtest eachother's games. Many students noted the value in having this channel. Students would also learn to critically analyze the work of other students. This could directly foster peer learning.

6. Provide space for non-course related communication
    - A recurring motivator for joining the server in 80K was to make up for the lost social communication that normally occurred in the classroom. A channel designated for off-topic or random communication can help students feel like they can chat without bothering everyone on the general chat. Channels can also be set up for hobbies. In 80K, a Minecraft server channel was formed and was well-liked and frequented. This can help students build social networks and hopefully improve their academic performance in an unconventional manner.

7. Encourage participation in the platform.
    - A common complaint in the 80K survey was that there was a lack of participation. Requiring students to join could help. Other suggestions would be for extra credit points to be assigned based on student participation. Some assignments may also require collaboration or discussion among peers to complete.

8. Create non-intrusive reminder bots to supplement Canvas.
    - Remind notifications were a favorite feature noted by the 80K students. A large number of students claimed the notifications prevented them from turning in assignments late. This may suggest a failure on Canvas' part. However, some students were bothered with the notifications sounds, and muted the server as a result. We would want to avoid this from happening. Some suggestions noted were to have bots PM students on upcoming deadlines and due dates. This would prevent the sound of being "pinged."

Pitfalls to Avoid

1. Unnecessary moderation.

- 80K students surveyed had created their server as a result of the excessive chat moderation from a previous course. The students felt like it stifled the class culture and prevented students from talking with one another. Students may create their own Discord where we have no way of assisting them if we fail in this regard.

2. Requiring students to participate.
    - We want to encourage informal learning where students are self-directed. Requiring participation would oppose this idea. Most of the 80K students also believed they were not actively participating in their server, but they still found it to be greatly beneficial and aided in their success.