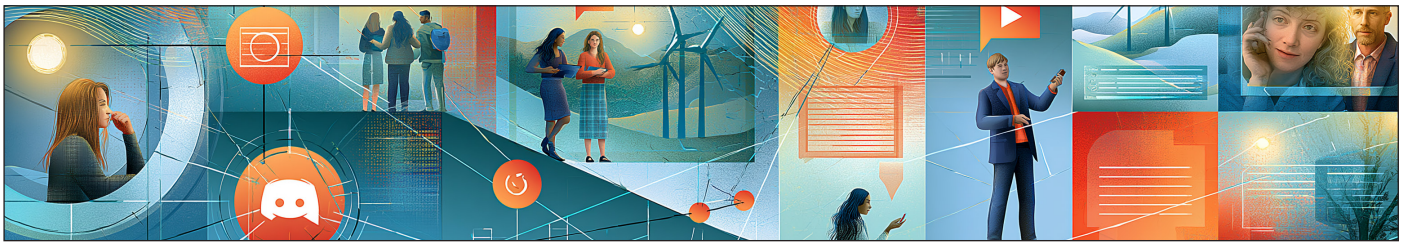
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From Discord to connection: Tutor perspectives on building engagement in distance higher education

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Abstract

Discord has been widely adopted by students for real-time social interaction and is increasingly present in higher education contexts, yet research has disproportionately emphasised student experiences over tutor perspectives. This qualitative study addresses that gap by examining how Associate Lecturers (ALs) at a large UK distance learning institution used Discord to support engagement and interaction with students across four modules spanning first year to postgraduate level. Using a connectivist approach, data was gathered via reflective journals maintained by participating ALs over the course of a full module presentation and analysed thematically. Findings indicate that Discord was perceived as easy to use after an initial learning curve, with participation levels varying across student cohorts. Tutors used the platform for informal social spaces, targeted academic channels (e.g. assessment specific threads), timely reminders and polls and as a contingency communication channel during institutional system outages. Benefits included more frequent, naturalistic exchanges, improved visibility of student needs and enhanced peer to peer support. Challenges involved boundary management, equity and fairness in parallel with official platforms, and questions about workload distribution across multiple communication spaces. The study contributes tutor centred insights into the affordances and constraints of Discord for distance education and offers practical recommendations for institution wide adoption, including early onboarding, clear

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expectations, purposeful channel design and tutor availability norms. Limitations include the small number of tutors and the self selecting nature of participants. Implications for practice suggest that when intentionally implemented, Discord can complement, although not necessarily replace, official platforms to cultivate connection and engagement in distance learning.

1. Introduction

Online and distance learners often report isolation, irregular participation and limited spontaneous interaction, amplifying the importance of purposeful engagement between students in digital learning environments (Berry, 2019). At large distance institutions, asynchronous VLE forums have long served as default spaces for communication. However, their potential for engagement is not always realised and student participation can remain low or largely transactional (Nandi et al., 2009; Sharples, 2000). In parallel, students are increasingly active on social media platforms that afford immediacy, presence and informal peer support, conditions aligned with contemporary networked learning paradigms such as connectivism (Siemens, 2004). Within this ecosystem, Discord, originally designed for gaming communities, has emerged as a real-time communication platform with substantial user uptake and affordances suitable for group coordination, voice and video interaction and topic-based text channels.

This study builds on a previous student-focused investigation conducted by Mel Green (2022) within the same distance learning institution, which explored the use of Discord as a learning platform and identified a range of perceived benefits for students, including enhanced communication, peer support and increased engagement. Despite growing interest in Discord for educational use, published work remains weighted toward student-centred evaluations and short-term implementations (Arifianto & Izzudin, 2021; Cacho, 2020). While Green's (2022) study foregrounded the student experience, the current research extends this work by shifting the focus to tutors' perspectives, examining how they interpret and manage Discord as a learning environment. In doing so, it provides a complementary perspective that deepens understanding of Discord's pedagogical potential by considering both learner and educator viewpoints. A tutor centred view is critical because instructors shape pedagogical intent, set boundaries, orchestrate learning activities and interpret platform affordances in relation to institutional policies and student needs. This study therefore investigates tutor perspectives on using Discord alongside official platforms during a full module presentation cycle at a large UK distance learning university. Specifically, it examines how tutors implemented Discord, the challenges they faced, the benefits they perceived and whether experiences varied by module level.

The study contributes three developments to this pedagogic topic: (a) a systematic account of tutors' direct experiences of implementing Discord to support both academic and pastoral functions; (b) theoretically informed interpretation using connectivist principles (Siemens, 2004); and (c) practical recommendations for responsible, scalable adoption in distance learning contexts where forum participation may be waning.

The study addressed the following questions:

MRQ: What are tutors' perspectives on using Discord with students in distance higher education?

- **RQ1:** What challenges do tutors face when setting up and managing Discord channels for students?
- **RQ2:** In what ways do tutors use Discord with their students?
- **RQ3:** What benefits do tutors perceive from using Discord with a student group?
- **RQ4:** Are there differences between experiences by module level or school?

2. Literature Review

This literature review is based on a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed studies on the following databases: Academic Search Complete; British Education Index and Education Research Complete. Searches were carried out using key words 'Online education' or 'distance education' or 'distance learning'; 'Discord'; and 'higher education or college or university'. Boolean operators (And, Or and Not) were used to ensure the search yielded maximum results and filters were applied to limit the search to peer reviewed studies in English. The peer reviewed studies retrieved were screened by reading titles and abstracts and eighteen articles were selected for synthesis. The subtopics selected for this literature review were conceptual choices made by the author as they fit with the overall themes of this study and do not constitute a thematic analysis. The primary goal was to investigate and describe the learning theory of connectivism and its relevance in education in the digital era.

2.1 Discord for student engagement

Discord is a free, social communication platform used by millions, featuring topic-based text channels, voice and video rooms, and instant messaging. Its popularity extends beyond gaming, with large, persistent communities organised around shared interests. Discord is now considered a global communication hub, with over 614 million registered users and 231 million monthly active users (demandsage.com, 2025). It hosts more than 28.4 million servers, including one massive community with 19.93 million members. In the U.S., 37% of people aged 18–34 use Discord, where it holds a 9% market share among messaging apps (demandsage.com, 2025).

In educational contexts, empirical studies demonstrate Discord's potential to enhance student engagement, improve academic performance and foster a sense of belonging. For instance, Cacho (2020) found that over 80% of students in a study at the University of Nevada believed their grades improved due to Discord use, while nearly all respondents expressed enjoyment and support for its continued integration. Similarly, Ayob et al.'s (2022) and Wulanjani's (2018) studies of Discord in social sciences courses both highlighted Discord's ability to transform passive learning environments into dynamic, interactive spaces with its clear app layout and low internet bandwidth usage leading to a perception of user-friendliness. Arifianto and Izzudin (2021), who carried out a questionnaire study at the State University of Malang based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), showed that most participants found Discord to be a favourable alternative media due to its attractive user interface, completeness of features and ease of use. However, the questionnaire did not include any open-ended questions for students and was only advertised to students via social media. Despite some limitations, overall, the findings suggest that Discord not only facilitates academic collaboration but also addresses the emotional and psychological needs of students in distance settings. Still, usage patterns vary, and outcomes hinge on intentional design and facilitation that align technology with pedagogy and equity.

Lauricella et al.'s (2023) study explored student perceptions of the benefits and challenges of using Discord in two upper-year undergraduate online courses with 45 students. The subsequent survey responses from students, using three open-ended questions, equally outlined key benefits including increased engagement, connection between students and teachers as well as the establishment of a 'casual, informal learning environment' (p.20). However, the students did highlight some challenges including the preference for a tutorial on how to use Discord, the need to check for notifications and the necessity of a clear structure to discussion threads. Green's (2022) study of Discord student groups alongside two distance-learning HE modules allowed students to create informal communities which they considered interactive and engaging.

As outlined above, it is necessary in distance learning contexts to consider strategies for improving engagement between students, starting by acknowledging the challenges inherent in online learning environments, where students often experience isolation and disengagement due to the lack of physical presence and spontaneous interaction. At many distance learning institutions, traditional tools like asynchronous forums are used to establish community between tutor and students. These forums, while intended to foster dialogue (Nandi, et al., 2009), in practice frequently fall short of encouraging and supporting engagement, with low participation and limited emotional connection (Cacho, 2020). To address these issues, this study tests the use of intentional engagement-building practices using alternative digital platforms. The present study builds on and extends previous work by focusing explicitly on tutors' experiences and decisions when introducing Discord into distance learning programmes. As distance education pedagogy has evolved from autonomous learning to dialogic models, more modern approaches must prioritize networked, collaborative learning experiences.

2.2 Connectivist theory

Distance education is frequently theorised through the lens of three key interaction types: student–content, student–student, and student–educator, each of which can be supported or constrained by digital platforms (Moore & Kearsley, 1995). They argued that while distance education has evolved through three pedagogical generations (autonomous, dialogic and connectivist), the current emphasis on networked learning demands tools that support both academic and emotional connectivity. Siemens (2004) posited that networked approaches like connectivism support learning and engagement through distributed nodes and relationships, foregrounding the role of social media platforms that catalyse connections and make knowledge flows visible (Siemens, 2004).

Recent research demonstrates that the foundational theory of connectivism from Siemens and Moore continue to shape distance education, with newer researchers (e.g., Kabir, 2026; Mukhlis et al., 2024) reviewing the theory in distance educational settings to MOOCs, learning analytics and digital learning networks. In Kabir's (2026) review of evolving theories in technology-enhanced education, con-

nectivism is presented as a key theory for distance learning, emphasising that knowledge is distributed across networks of people, technologies and digital platforms, and that learning involves navigating and forming these connections rather than relying solely on individual understanding. The article highlights benefits such as increased learner autonomy, collaboration, engagement and the ability to participate in open, networked learning environments like social media-based learning. However, it also identifies limitations, including a lack of clear theoretical boundaries, limited empirical evidence and challenges in assessing learning within networked systems. Overall, the paper argues that while connectivism is valuable for modern digital and distance education, it is most effective when combined with other learning theories in a blended, multi-theoretical approach (Kabir, 2026). Similarly, Mukhlis et al. (2024) provide a comprehensive review of connectivism in modern educational settings. They examine how this theory supports engagement in interconnected social media spaces, arguing that connectivism offers a robust framework for student-centred, network-centric learning, significantly enhancing synergistic collaboration and autonomous knowledge creation across multiple educational tiers. However, they recognise that successful connectivist learning heavily relies on students' digital competencies to navigate complex information environments effectively and suggest the need for educational institutions to continuously adapt their pedagogical practices to support inclusive engaging educational spaces.

While many distance learning institutions offer students the use of forums to support asynchronous dialogue, they may not generate the immediacy, informality and social presence many learners associate with contemporary communication apps (Cacho, 2020). Consequently, educators have explored complementary spaces that can cultivate belonging and mutual support, conditions that are regularly associated with persistence and satisfaction in distance education programmes (Berry, 2019; Joksimovic et al., 2015). Discord emerges as a promising solution, offering real-time voice and text communication, user-friendly interfaces and features that support collaboration and informal interaction.

2.3 Tutor perspectives

However, there are also gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of tutor perspectives guiding Discord's implementation. Across studies reporting positive student reception to Discord (e.g. Cacho, 2020; Green, 2022; Wulanjani, 2018), the educator's perspective on enactment including setup, moderation, boundary setting, workload and alignment with institutional policies, remains comparatively underexamined leaving a void in understanding how educators perceive and adapt to this technology. This gap matters because tutors mediate platform affordances, design communicative routines and interpret the ethical and equity considerations of adding thirdparty tools to official ecosystems. Tutor presence through timely feedback, active participation in discussions and facilitation of group activities can significantly enhance students' sense of connection and community. Discord's practical impact depends on intentional design and inclusive implementation of digital tools. When effectively implemented, these platforms can mitigate the isolation often associated with online learning, enhance academic outcomes and create vibrant, supportive learning communities. There is a need for further research that incorporates tutor perspectives, evaluates long-term outcomes and develops evidence-based strategies for integrating Discord into online pedagogies. By doing so, distance learning institutions can move beyond technocentric approaches and embrace participatory models of education that prioritize connection, collaboration and belonging. The current study addresses this gap by capturing tutors' reflections over an entire module presentation and analysing their accounts thematically to surface challenges, opportunities and conditions for success.

2.4 Reflective practice

Reflective practice is widely used in higher education to support continuous improvement and critical selfexamination (Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983). By attending to multiple lenses including students, colleagues and theory, reflection can illuminate tacit assumptions and inform actionable change (Kahn et al., 2007; Moon, 2004). In digital teaching contexts, reflective journals can capture evolving perceptions of platforms in use producing rich, longitudinal accounts of practice. The present study leverages tutors' reflective journals to probe how Discord was adopted, adapted and perceived across educational levels. Reflective practice has become a cornerstone of professional development in Higher Education (HE) teaching, fostering continuous improvement and deeper pedagogical insight. Originating from Schön's (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner", it encourages educators to critically examine their teaching experiences, assumptions and decisions to enhance future practice.

In HE contexts, reflective practice is often embedded in teaching portfolios, peer review processes and professional accreditation frameworks such as the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). Research by Kahn et al. (2007) highlights its role for academic staff in promoting learner-centred approaches and adaptive teaching strategies. Moreover, Moon (2004) argues that structured reflection can deepen understanding of complex educational environments and support the development of critical thinking. Digital

tools, such as blogs and e-portfolios, have expanded opportunities for reflection, enabling asynchronous dialogue and longitudinal tracking of professional growth (Trevitt et al., 2014). However, critics caution against overly formulaic approaches that risk reducing reflection to a tick-box exercise (Finlay, 2008). Overall, reflective practice in HE teaching is a dynamic and evolving process that supports pedagogical innovation, self-awareness and responsiveness to diverse learner needs.

3. Research design

This section outlines the overall research design underpinning this study. It begins by presenting why the theoretical framework of connectivism guides the analysis, followed by a description of the research design and contextual setting. The section then details the data collection procedures and analytical methods employed.

3.1 Theoretical framework

Connectivism was selected as the theoretical framework for this study because it provides a relevant lens for understanding learning in digitally mediated, networked environments such as Discord. The theory conceptualises knowledge as distributed across connections between individuals, technologies and online communities, aligning closely with the affordances of Discord as a platform for real-time, collaborative student–tutor interaction. In the context of distance education, connectivism emphasises learner autonomy, participation and the co-construction of knowledge (Siemens, 2004) through dialogue and engagement within networks, all of which are central to Discord-based discussion spaces. Furthermore, despite acknowledged limitations such as challenges around conceptual clarity and assessment (Kop & Hill, 2008), connectivism remains valuable for examining how students navigate, contribute to and learn from dynamic online communication environments, particularly when considered alongside complementary learning theories in a blended analytical approach (Kabir, 2026). This study applied connectivist theory by examining how tutors perceived the Discord channel as a networked space where collaborative support was provided through interactions between students and tutors. It further explored how tutors facilitated connections and engagement, guided participation and supported learners in navigating and contributing to this digital support network.

3.2 Research design and context

Following the positive findings from Green's (2022) project using Discord and analysing student perceptions, a qualitative project design was adopted to explore tutors' perspectives on using Discord as a supplementary space for communication and student engagement during a full module presentation. The study was led by the author and took place at a large UK distance learning institution. This institution currently uses traditional VLE forum-based discussions alongside module studies where participation is waning (Green, 2022). Due to the high number of students on each module and study-pathway at this university, students rarely know each other and therefore, creating a comfortable and engaging space for students to communicate and support each other is vital. The project aims to identify if Discord could be proposed as an alternative option for student-student and student-tutor communication across multiple schools and subject areas. Discord was selected as it is free to use, does not require students or staff to share phone numbers, can be accessed on any device and does not include advertising (Lear, 2023).

An Expression of Interest was distributed to all Associate Lecturers (ALs) within the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies asking for participants. Applicants were to outline their interest in using alternative platforms to communicate with students and their experience in using Discord or similar social media platforms for student activities or discussions. The author noted that 10 ALs applied for only 3 remaining places on the project. Many outlined in their application how interested they were in trying alternative ways to communicate with students and help build more interactive support communities. 3 ALs were selected from the 10 applications with the aim of gaining a range of study levels and schools within the faculty. Table 1 provides more details about each participant AL.

As shown in Table 1, data was collected through reflective journals written by four Associate Lecturers teaching across various academic schools and HE levels 1, 2, 3, and postgraduate offering multiple perspectives. All ALs had extensive experience working as tutors in a distance learning online teaching context. Each AL set up and maintained a Discord channel for their students and were given autonomy to arrange their channel in a way that suited their module and students. The reflective journals were maintained over the duration of the October 2024 to May 2025 presentation and submitted after its conclusion. This approach enabled tutors to document experience close to practice without the temporal constraints of interviews or focus groups.

Table 1. AL participant & Discord usage information

Faculty School	Module study level	Experience using Discord	Experience reflecting on educational practice	Identifier code for quotes
Sport & Wellbeing	Final year undergraduate	Yes	Yes	1
Childhood & Youth studies	Postgraduate	Yes	Yes	2
Primary Teaching	2nd year undergraduate	Yes	No	3
Languages & Applied Linguistics	1st year undergraduate	Yes	Yes	4

As the lead for the Discord project and an active participant in facilitating their own student–tutor discussion space, the author occupies a clear insider positionality within this study. The author is identified as Participant 4 in Table 1. The author's dual role involved both coordinating the implementation of the Discord environment with the other three ALs, while also engaging directly with my own students through moderation and interaction, alongside maintaining a reflective journal that documented my observations and experiences. This insider perspective provided valuable depth of understanding, enabling nuanced insights into the dynamics of participation, engagement and communication that might not be accessible to an external researcher. However, it also introduces potential biases, as my close involvement may have influenced my interpretation of the data, particularly in relation to perceived successes of the platform. To address this, ongoing reflexivity was essential, with critical awareness of how my assumptions, expectations and professional investment in the project may have shaped the research process and findings.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The ALs each set up their own Discord servers (one per student group) and exercised autonomy in channel design, onboarding messaging and facilitation strategies. Throughout the presentation they completed reflective journals focusing on setup experiences, strategies to encourage student uptake, ways Discord affordances were used, perceived benefits and challenges and observations about engagement patterns. Journals were submitted upon completion of the presentation, enabling reflections on the full life cycle of Discord use within a single presentation.

The author then conducted a thematic analysis of the four reflective journals to systematically examine patterns of meaning. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach, beginning with familiarisation through repeated reading of the journals, followed by initial open coding to identify meaningful units of data. Codes were then organised into potential themes, which were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure coherence within themes and distinction between them. A reflexive approach was adopted, recognising the author's interpretive role in meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and to ensure that the author's inside role did not produce an overly positive or biased analysis. An analytically flexible approach was used to code data and develop themes with direct relevance to the study's research questions (RQ1–RQ4). The final themes were defined and named, with illustrative extracts selected from the journals to support each theme, thereby ensuring transparency and analytical rigour. The analysis prioritised tutor experience while attending to crosscase variation by module level. While the approach aligns with widely used reflexive thematic analysis practices, the focus here is on the substantive themes emerging from tutors' accounts.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee. Tutors were informed about the study aims and consented to participate; their reflections included anonymised references to students and the analysis reports aggregated themes rather than individual case histories. Students were not required to participate in the study and their participation and discussions on Discord were not analysed.

4. Findings

4.1 RQ1: What challenges do tutors face when setting up and managing Discord channels for students?

All four tutors reported that Discord was relatively straightforward to set up but involved a nontrivial learning curve, especially for those with legacy platform accounts or limited prior exposure. Tutorial guides and exemplars of server organisation were perceived as helpful. One tutor described the initial configuration as "fiddly" and "not intuitive" (AL4) while another found it "tricky" (AL2), especially when navigating multiple accounts and unfamiliar interface conventions. However, another noted that abundant online guides reduced the barrier to entry (AL1).

A consistent concern involved student uptake. While some students, particularly those already familiar with Discord, were enthusiastic, others preferred established channels such as institutional forums, email or student-organised WhatsApp groups. Consequently, participation varied notably across groups: active Discord usage ranged from a minority to over half of the tutor's cohort (AL2), with some students joining later in the presentation after initial hesitation.

Equity and fairness emerged as salient issues. Tutors were attentive to the potential for unequal support if Discord became a de facto space for realtime help while other students remained on official forums. Balancing information flow across platforms required a conscious effort to avoid privileging one communication channel. The related workload concern for tutors maintaining multiple parallel spaces was mitigated after the initial setup. Most tutors reported that routine maintenance was "minimal," though coordinating activity across spaces could make sustained, groupwide engagement more difficult as one tutor explained,

> "*this might mean that students have unequal support/ways of communicating with each other as not all would access Discord with it not being an official [institution] platform. Would some students think this was unfair?*" (AL3)

Boundary management was a recurring theme. Tutors reflected on how informal, alwayson channels might reshape the professional persona and expectations for responsiveness. One tutor expressed ambivalence about developing closer relationships through social exchanges (e.g. sharing GIFs or discussing nonmodule life events) and questioned the downstream impact on feedback dynamics and perceived tutor impartiality. The tutor stated,

> "*It has made me consider the professional persona I have and how this might interact with other personas. I have always found this hard as I present one side of me to students and the idea that I might also show another side is something I have mixed feelings about. For example, if I did this and built stronger relationships with some students than others by 'socialising' - how might this impact other areas – would I feel OK about giving negative feedback? How might students feel thinking that I had stronger bonds with some students because of shared interests? For me, this is something that would need to be explored further*" (AL3).

In contrast, others felt Discord strengthened rapport without compromising professionalism, though they emphasised the need for explicit availability norms.

Finally, concerns about access control and privacy were reported. One tutor worried about invitation links circulating beyond the intended group; expiring links were used as a partial safeguard, though this created friction for late joiners who needed new invitations. Desire was expressed for serverlevel join requests that tutors could approve or deny to keep membership fully aligned with enrolled students.

4.2 RQ2: In what ways do tutors use Discord with their students?

Tutors initially envisaged text channels for general discussion, resource sharing and Q&A, with exploratory interest in using the voice/video rooms. However, over time, usage converged on textbased features, with video being used minimally. Topicspecific channels, particularly assessmentfocused threads, were seen as effective for maintaining focus and discoverability. Push notifications (which pop up on students' devices) were leveraged for timesensitive reminders (e.g. tutorial dates and assignment deadlines) as well as simple polls that enabled rapid checkins on students' progress and confidence. Tutors could then follow up directly with students who signalled uncertainty or the possible need for an extension.

In one case, Discord also functioned as a resilient contingency channel during institutional outages. On one occasion when the official virtual classroom and institutional email temporarily went down, the tutor (AL2) used Discord to coordinate with students and salvaged the planned session, highlighting the value of a parallel, platform independent communication route.

4.3 RQ3: What benefits do tutors perceive from using Discord with a student group?

Tutors reported that Discord facilitated more frequent, naturalistic exchanges that combined academic and pastoral dimensions. The informal tone and affordances for quick backandforth made it easier for tutors to notice early signs of struggle and to offer timely support. Offtopic channels served as social anchors where students developed rapport, normalised challenges and occasionally answered each other's questions before tutors intervened. One tutor mentioned,

> "*Seeing students answer each other's questions was a particularly encouraging sign that the platform was developing collaboration*" (AL1).

Conversations in all the channels were friendly and supportive creating a safe environment for students with one tutor noting that early adopters seemed to set a positive tone. As students knew that the tutor was monitoring comments, this may have facilitated the friendly atmosphere, something that could be more beneficial than student-only WhatsApp groups. Tutors also perceived that students active on Discord engaged more readily in live tutorials, though these observations were not tested quantitatively.

Across accounts, tutors valued a shift from long, infrequent emails or phone calls to shorter, more frequent messages that kept the relational thread alive. One tutor stated,

> *"I've communicated much more often with the students in that group and with much shorter, concise and quick messaging rather than longer emails or longer phone calls: short and frequent rather than long and spread out. This has been much easier to manage and meant we have a more natural relationship between us all"* (AL2).

Some highlighted how informal exchanges (including the use of GIFs) lightened the atmosphere and reduced intimidation, thereby encouraging participation from students who might not post on official forums. Still, tutors reiterated the importance of boundary clarity to avoid creating expectations of 24/7 responsiveness.

4.4 RQ4: Are there differences between experiences of tutors at school or module level?

With only four tutors across four levels, differences by module level were modest and should be interpreted cautiously. The Level 2 tutor observed that students tended to use Discord primarily for social chat, which, while not a concern per se, meant that tutorled academic exchanges were less frequent. In contrast, tutors at levels 1 and 3 reported that Discord supported regular checkins and made it easier to identify students needing support. The postgraduate tutor indicated that Discord use correlated with more active engagement overall, including in email and official forums. These patterns may reflect cohort preferences and norms rather than levelbound effects; a larger study would be required to examine levelspecific dynamics.

5. Discussion

The reflective journals gathered from tutors at the end of the presentation offer rich insights into the practicalities, challenges and benefits of using Discord as a supplementary communication tool in online learning environments. While initial setup was largely straightforward, tutors encountered a learning curve and expressed concerns about student uptake and engagement. Discord's novelty, coupled with technical barriers and student preferences for familiar platforms, contributed to uneven participation. Nonetheless, tutors found that once established, the platform required minimal maintenance and offered unique affordances that enhanced communication.

5.1 Interpreting tutors' experiences through interaction frameworks

Findings from tutors' reflective journals align with and extend established models of distance education. Discord's affordances appear to support student–student interaction by enabling realtime social ties and peer assistance; student–educator interaction via rapid, informal exchanges and timely nudges; and, indirectly, student–content interaction by organising assessmentspecific channels that scaffold task focus (Moore & Kearsley, 1995). This triangulation of interactions resonates with connectivist perspectives, in which learning emerges from distributed networks and the ability to

operate across multiple nodes (channels, groups, tools) is a crucial competency (Siemens, 2004). The tutors' accounts suggest that Discord can function as a connective tissue that binds academic and pastoral threads, making participation more ambient and relational than traditional asynchronous forums alone.

5.2 Promoting engagement in distance settings

The platform's informal ethos and lightweight messaging supported engagement, which in turn, helped normalise helpseeking and peer response in ways consistent with the literature on belonging and engagement (Berry, 2019; Joksimovic et al., 2015). Importantly, tutors highlighted that early adopters often set a positive tone, with friendliness and mutual support becoming community norms. Such norms likely reduce the concerns for hesitant posters. However, tutors' sensitivity to fairness underscores that gains in one space can create hidden inequities if information, reminders or engagement opportunities are not mirrored elsewhere.

5.3 Boundary work and professional identity

Discord's immediacy invites questions about boundaries, persona and the emotional labour of being more present to students. For some tutors, closer connections were energising and pedagogically beneficial. For others, they raised reflective concerns about impartiality, visibility of "off duty" identities and the longterm manageability of constant lowfriction contact. Establishing explicit norms for availability (e.g. response windows, "office hours" in Discord and use of status indicators) can mitigate risks while preserving the platform's benefits. These insights extend the literature by articulating tutorcentred boundary strategies for non-institutional thirdparty platforms.

5.4 Complementing official platforms

Tutors' mixed experiences point to a complementary model rather than wholesale replacement. Discord appeared to flourish as a social and coordination layer that sat alongside official forums and email, not least because its push notifications and conversational affordances are attuned to contemporary communication habits on mobile devices. From a connectivist perspective (Siemens, 2004), this configuration reflects a distributed learning network in which knowledge and interaction are spread across multiple nodes, each fulfilling distinct functions. While Discord supports immediacy and peer support, institutional forums retain value for archiving, formal announcements and inclusive access. A pragmatic stance would be to formalise crossposting protocols, ensure parity of critical information and design purposeful handoffs between spaces (e.g. social momentum on Discord integrated with structured academic threads on official platforms). However, this distributed model challenges institutional expectations of centralised control over communication and knowledge management.

5.5 Designing for purpose: Channels, notifications and microinterventions

Tutors' accounts illustrate how specific features such as assessmentspecific channels, reminders and quick polls, can facilitate timely support and early detection of issues (e.g. concerns about assignments or extension needs). Such microinterventions are small in time cost but high in perceived value, particularly when delivered via push notifications that meet students where they already are, echoing Mukhlis et al.'s (2024) argument that a connectivist approach supports engagement in interconnected social media spaces. This is consistent with findings that educational use of social platforms can transform passive engagement into dynamic participation when guided by intentional design (Arifianto & Izzudin, 2021; Ayob et al., 2022; Cacho, 2020).

6. Conclusion

This study provides a tutorcentred account of Discord's use in a distance learning context across four modules spanning first year to postgraduate levels, while also outlining key implications for practice and policy. Tutors reported that after initial setup, Discord required modest maintenance and yielded notable benefits including more frequent and natural exchanges, stronger engagement, rapid microinterventions near assessment deadlines and improved visibility of students' pastoral needs. Challenges centred on boundary management, equity across multiple communication spaces and access control considerations.

Based on the Findings and Discussion, practical recommendations for future implementation of Discord include:

- Introduce Discord early in the student journey, as early onboarding helps establish norms for participation, reduces apprehension about thirdparty tools and provides time for student led social spaces to develop. Orientation materials should cover joining procedures, channel etiquette, notification settings and privacy.
- Start small with purposeful channel design by beginning with a minimal set of channels (e.g. announcements, assessment threads and off topic social) and expanding only if needed, as clarity reduces noise and supports discoverability.

- Set explicit expectations for tutor availability by publishing response time norms (e.g. within X business hours/days) and using status functions to manage presence, alongside scheduling office hours in Discord for synchronous availability while keeping asynchronous messaging open. This reduces concerns from tutors of increased workload.
- Safeguard equity across platforms by mirroring essential information on official forums and/or email and consider automated cross posting or templated announcements to ensure parity for students who opt out of Discord.
- RQ2 findings demonstrated the advantages of leveraging push notifications for interventions through polls and short check-ins around key milestones (e.g. one week before assessments) to surface support needs early and target interventions.
- As highlighted in RQ1 findings, plan for privacy and access control by using timebound invitation links judiciously and exploring settings to confirm enrolment before granting access.
- Anticipate contingency communication by maintaining Discord as a parallel contact route during institutional outages and establishing advance protocols for switching modalities when systems fail as occurred for one tutor in the study.
- As tutors mentioned some learning is required in the initial set-up stages, support tutor professional learning through exemplars of effective server setups, sample onboarding messages, moderation guidelines and encourage reflective practice to calibrate boundaries and identity work in informal spaces.

However, it should be noted that the study's scope was constrained by the small number of participating tutors (n=4) and the self-selecting nature of the Associate Lecturers involved, many of whom were already interested in experimenting with alternative platforms. Consequently, reported benefits may be influenced by positive adoption bias, and findings are only generalisable with caution. Data was limited to tutors' reflective journals; no direct measurement of student outcomes (e.g. grades or retention rates) or systematic comparison of engagement across platforms was performed. Additionally, while tutors taught across four levels, the sample size precludes robust claims about levelspecific effects.

Overall, Discord functioned as a complementary layer to official platforms, best leveraged through clear expectations, purposeful channel design and parity in critical communications. Future work should scale the investigation across more modules and disciplines, integrate student outcome measures and examine institutionlevel governance for thirdparty platforms in distance education.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee. Tutors consented to participate and data reported here reflect aggregated, anonymised reflections.

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Data Availability

The qualitative data consist of tutors' reflective journals and are not publicly available to protect confidentiality; deidentified excerpts may be shared upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

About the author



Dr Olivia Kelly has worked as an Associate Lecturer at the OU for 19 years on modules within multiple faculties. During this time she became a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and completed her Professional Doctorate in Education researching how distance learners build community on Twitter. She has a keen interest in how social media is used in Higher Education having presented at conferences and published regularly on this topic. She now leads a Social Media Scholarship hub within the university along with hosting a podcast discussing the findings of scholarship projects.

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