Rethinking Remote Community: Using Slack for Virtual Engagement in Graduate Education

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Rationale:

In Fall 2020, we piloted a Slack instance for the Texts & Technology program, integrating discussion channels for every core course. This effort is focused on some of the concerns raised by students following the spring pivot regarding the greatest losses from the move online: the loss of hallway chats, one-on-one conversations, and easy connection with other students and faculty. As an optional community, Slack presents challenges for integration and motivation, but offers essential opportunities to regain the "shared space" that has been lost in the migration to remote. Through iterative redesigns of channel organization and integration of plug-ins targeted at needs identified by students and faculty, we are working to increase engagement and build this as lasting hub that can supplement instruction and community-building efforts going forward.

Description:

Prior to the pandemic, the Texts & Technology administration (myself and Mel Stanfill) had been planning to host a NEH-funded summer institute as well as two online conferences during Summer 2020. As all three of these events were migrated virtually, they offered us the opportunity to pilot a number of tools and particularly look for success patterns in peer interactions and getting support with difficult technical platforms.

Slack is one of the tools that has been identified as particularly valuable for maintaining research communities while social distancing (Lamming and Carter). Along with the similar community-building tool Discord, it is particularly valued for its potential for increasing communication between peers, and offering a less formal means of reaching out to instructors (Drange and Kargaard). Based on design patterns formed during the summer, we built the initial instance of the Texts & Technology Slack prior to the start of classes, giving students time to accept their invitations and provide initial introductions in August. For each course, students were encouraged to enroll in their dedicated channel, named after the course number (see screenshot in the link below). Additional spaces were created for sharing jobs and resources following requests from community members.

In addition, I created a private channel for technical support for my courses. Using Slack's threaded structure, I was able to request students share vital information in quick threads (such as gathering information on Mac / Windows users for troubleshooting) while creating a space students could easily consult as the courses handled more complex software installation, programming, and debugging. This is the most essential aspect of building online community for me during a pandemic: as many of us are teaching skills that require additional configuration and support without the availability of campus labs, this additional resource substitutes for the lost shared space.

To encourage students to engage regularly, every week my course includes an "On the Slack" prompt for optional engagement. These weekly prompts are not graded, but can be factored in holistically to a self-evaluated "Engagement" reflection conducted at the end of the semester, which encourages students to reflect on what they've brought to their learning community throughout the

semester. Example prompts include sharing a screenshot from a data collection exercise; offering initial versions of research questions for feedback; or sharing resources on a topic of community interest. Additionally, students can demonstrate their engagement by offering solutions to peers: as the course has progressed, students have become more proactive about reaching out to share their knowledge with others, creating the sense of a classroom support network potentially lost without face-to-face contact.

The initial investment of creating this space as a persistent network for all PhD students in the program will allow for a faster launch in the spring: students will already have formed connections, created accounts, and will have a faster ramp-up to joining the new channels for spring courses.

Appraisal:

While we have not formally assessed the implementation in T&T yet, the initial experiment with this tool was conducted to support the NEH institute, and was deemed a success, with one participant calling it "the best mode of communication we had during the institute." We will conduct further formal assessment on T&T's usage during Spring 2020, but can report thus far that average weekly active members have ranged from 35-40, trending upwards (approximately 2/3rds of T&T's total enrollment), with over one thousand messages exchanged during the first thirty primary days of use.

References:

Drange, Tom, and Joakim Kargaard. "Increasing student/student and student/lecturer communication through available tools to create a virtual classroom feeling in online education." The International Scientific Conference eLearning and Software for Education. Vol. 1. " Carol I" National Defence University, 2017.

Lamming, Dudley W., and Christy S. Carter. "Maintaining a scientific community while social distancing." Translational Medicine of Aging (2020).

Teckchandani, Atul. "Slack: A Unified Communications Platform to Improve Team Collaboration." (2018): 226-228.

Link or explanation: As the platform itself cannot be shared, here's a screenshot of the interface: https://ucf-my.sharepoint.com/:i:/g/personal/an111789_ucf_edu/EUt0nEuZNSREmddxxBXb0wYBsMhNVo--OANMENLLdtf57Q?e=zyabFV