# SOCIAL AFFORDANCES AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN MEDIATED COLLABORATIVE PLATFORMS

**Peter Vistisen, Thessa Jensen**

Aalborg University (Denmark)

vistisen@hum.aau.dk; thessa@hum.aau.dk

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine and analyse the affordances and social affordances of three online platforms, used as conference and learning tools: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Discord. With our grounding in the ontological ethics of Løgstrup and the theory of recognition by Honneth, our analysis suggests the need to focus less on the utility of available features of digital collaborative tools alone, but just as much on how the features encourage or inhibit desirable expressions among the participants. We propose this as a need to focus on community building as a main aspect for full online teaching and learning, as prerequisite before choosing and configuring didactic components. We analytically show how slight differences in the way the same feature is implemented in the three platforms can spark significantly different potentials for user interaction, expression and ultimate didactic participation. While all three examined online platforms provide feature-by-feature parity, only Discord shows clear social affordances encouraging multiple forms of expression and recognition, and thus enabling community feeling as being present *together, despite being apart.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a wave of rapid digitalization swept over institutions all over the world. One of the ubiquitous changes is the adaption of digital collaboration tools to mediate meetings, teaching, collaborations, and social gatherings. At Aalborg University, Denmark, this happened in the middle of the Spring semester of 2020, leading to a focus on quickly mediating the curriculum, creating workspaces, and different possibilities for the interaction between teacher and learner. Less structured efforts were made in mediating a community of learners and providing a feeling of togetherness despite being apart. The issue of mediating culture and community through digital platforms is the focus of this paper. We argue this is a critical issue of both current and future situations of local lockdowns and reduced traveling due to upcoming sustainable agendas.

In this paper we examine and compare three online collaborative platforms regarding their sociability and functionality in the context of teaching and community building: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Discord. Of these, Zoom and Teams were implemented by Aalborg University during the first half of 2020 as the main teaching and learning applications for the transition to online coursework and project work. Because of the abrupt transition, these platforms were not fully integrated by university IT service at the time of the initial lockdown, causing us to use Discord as our first choice of platform at the time. Our main reasons were the students' knowledge of Discord, as they were already using it for their gaming and fandom communities, as well as its proven workability for online meetings, chatgroups, and collaborative groupwork, all of which are important in the context of problem-based learning (Kolmos, Fink & Krogh, 2007), the fundamental pedagogy at Aalborg University. With the reoccurring lockdowns, another aspect of the platforms became increasingly important: how could the online platforms help students and teachers deal with the isolation and stress of the ongoing

pandemic? Our focus shifted from creating an effective space of teaching and learning, to that of enabling a space for creating a community of learning, participation, and creation.

In the following, we will examine this focus through the optics of ethics and recognition theory, influenced strongly by Løgstrup's ontological ethics, and Honneth's structure of recognition. Løgstrup's ethical demand poses as a recognition of the Other through sovereign expressions of life in the form of trust, mercy, openness of speech, and sincerity (Løgstrup, 2013). The ethical challenge is found in this perspective, since each of the examined platforms has its uses in a learning environment, but the ethical demand of understanding and recognizing the Other, in our case students and fellow teachers, is not a given in the digital world. Løgstrup's ontological ethics with its focus on the dyadic face-to-face meeting and Honneth's theory of recognition, appear to be hampered by the mediation through screens and digital platforms (Løgstrup, 1997; Honneth, 2005). Of course, body language and facial mimic are missing or obscured, but it is possible to create communities in which its participants experience belonging and togetherness, despite the mediation through online platforms (Christensen & Jensen, 2018; Jensen, 2013). The need to be recognized as a person with needs and emotions, not just traits and abilities, may not be part of the curriculum as such. However, in the online environment of digital course and group work, it becomes a necessity. While the teacher concentrates on furthering the learner's abilities and knowledge, the learner, also, needs to be recognized as a person with the need of emotional support. Because of these demands, online platforms must ideally support and enable the building of communities in which primary relationships in the form of friendships, even love, can thrive side by side with a community of practice and solidarity. Honneth's modes of recognition, table 1, are showing these different dimensions of the personality, as well as the threats posed by a misrecognition of the same.

Table 1. Honneth's structure of relations of recognition.

| Mode of recognition | emotional support | cognitive respect | social esteem |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dimension of personality | needs and emotions | moral responsibility | traits and abilities |
| Forms of recognition | primary relationships (love, friendship) | legal relations (rights) | community of value (solidarity) |
| Developmental potential | - | generalization, de-formalization | individualization, equalization |
| Practical relation-to-self | basic self-confidence | self-respect | self-esteem |
| Forms of disrespect | abuse and rape | denial of rights, exclusion | denigration, insult |
| Threatened component of personality | physical integrity | social integrity | honour, dignity |

Source: Honneth (2005, p. 129).

The study into how the three collaborative platforms support the building of community and a milieu of recognition, is based on a participatory action research perspective (Chevalier & Buckles 2013). We have been teaching and 'hanging out' on the online platforms during the two semesters of 2020, and

the first semester of 2021, all which have been affected by the pandemic. The empirical basis of the study is done with inspiration to Hine's (2000) virtual ethnographic practice, and interviews with students and fellow teachers and researchers. Both authors have taught fully online courses during the three terms, as well as conducted project group guidance. While this limits the empirical basis for the paper's analysis being based on data akin to autoethnographic observations, we argue the combined 40+ years of teaching experience between the authors, as well as the colloquial engagement with the academic society throughout the data gathering process forms a professional and intersubjective grounding for the analytical findings. We were responsible for organizing courses and project work, as well as facilitating the creation and maintaining of a community for undergraduate and master's students. As shown by Haslam et al. (2021), these are some of the largest challenges during the lockdowns: enabling students to develop a sense of togetherness, community, and social closeness through online platforms to ensure their mental well-being.

Our research is centred on the functionality and the social affordances found in the three chosen platforms. How do these affordances enable the creation and maintaining of a community, which in turn enables learners to feel togetherness despite being apart?
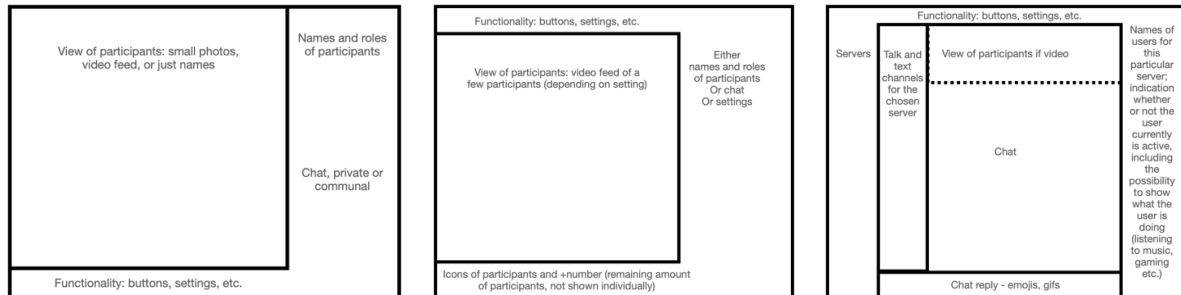
**THE THREE PLATFORMS**

The three platforms have feature parity in terms of technological functionalities, yet they differ on certain aspects. Zoom is a conference tool, Teams is a group work and teaching environment, while Discord is best known as a gamer and fandom communication platform. The main differences are to be found in the way the platforms afford different actions and cultures through miniscule, but important, differences in how the same feature set is implemented. A comparison of the three platforms with regard to online meetings is seen in figure 1. The figure shows a schematic of each platform when an online meeting is conducted. This is important, because without an actual video-meeting, Teams has major changes in its interface. When Teams is used as an archive or a chatroom only, it gives rise to major changes in interface, as shown in figure 2, which shows a comparison between Teams and Discord in the absence of a video-meeting. For Teams, these changes mean that both teachers and learners are frequently confused as could be witnessed during seminars, including a seminar for teachers on how to use.

Because of the different interface layers in Teams, the platform needs heavy facilitation in its initial use. The global changes depend on whether the user is in a certain Team, in a chat, a video call, editing a file, or using one of the many apps, which are integrated in the platform. Zoom's single-use orientation, video conference calls, makes the initial use easy to learn and understand. Discord provides a single interface with only minor changes depending on whether the user is in a video call or just using written and audio chat. As such, Discord's interface has a large amount of functionality present at all times, which provides a clear overview, easily learnt and adapted to the needs of group chats and collaborative work. While these differences could be waved off as non-consequential interface patterns that just have to be learned and remembered, there is a deeper level of how these slight differences can affect the didactic situation. If we consider for example the chat functionality through the lens of Buchanan's (2001) triad of aspects affecting the use qualities of a product: utility (is it useful?), usability (is it usable?) and desirability (does it retain my interest/create excitement?) we can see beyond the feature itself. In Zoom, the chat function is locked to the meeting itself, and only exists after enabling it via interaction with a button. It is only saved if the server allows for it and the user remembers to save it. In Teams, the chat has to be actively enabled by both the server and the users; it is automatically saved but is hidden within a container for the meeting after it ends. Discord, on the other hand, places the chat as the front and centre of its social engagement, layering
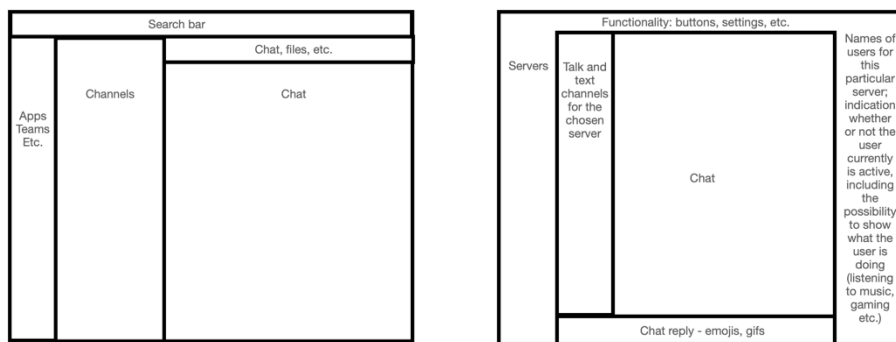
video and voice calls on top of the chat, which acts as a continuous stream within the channel itself. On the surface, the utility is the same of the three platforms, but the usability of how to access and retain the chat greatly affects the potential desirable role the chat function can play for the participants in the meeting – and if it can become a part of the didactic repertoire of the online collaboration

Figure 1. From left to right: Zoom, Teams, and Discord during a video-online meeting.



Source: own drawing based on the three platforms.

Figure 2. Teams and Discord without a video-meeting.



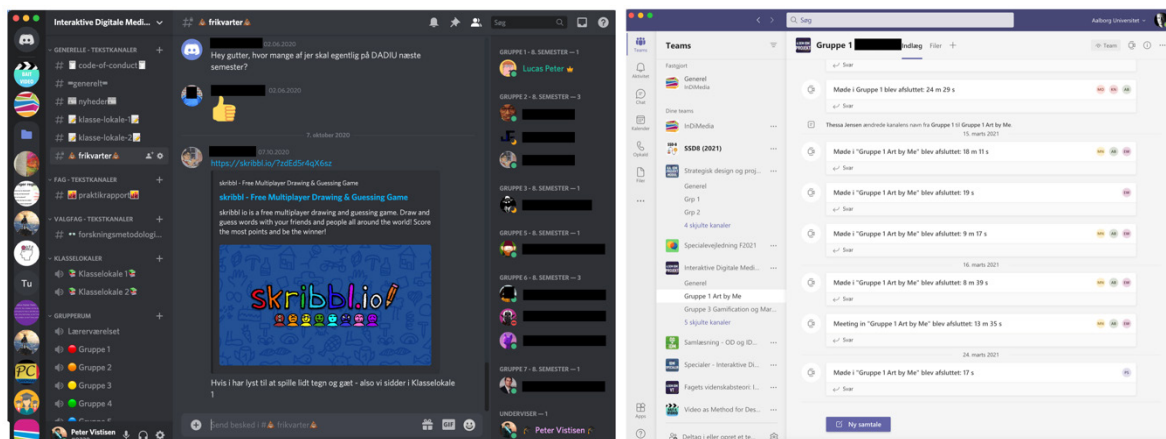Source: own drawing based on the three platforms.

**MURRAY'S AFFORDANCES**

To examine further the different functionality and its influence on the creation and maintaining of a community, we now include Murray's (2012) grid of affordances. Murray distinguishes between four affordances in her grid: procedural, participatory, encyclopaedic, and spatial (Murray, 2012). She poses four questions to the analysis of the artifact: What does it do? What can I do? What are the boundaries of this domain? Where am I in relation to the whole? When comparing the three platforms in this regard, we can show how small features are implemented slightly different, but with rather significant implications for the user's interaction with both the software and with each other. Let us examine the chat functionality once again through this optic. While both Zoom and Microsoft Teams support chat functionality, Zoom allows participants to chat privately or choose to write out to everybody directly during the meeting. Microsoft Teams, on the other hand, allows for private chats as separate chat boxes, separate from the meeting, creating two virtual spaces existing simultaneously. In Discord, there is a mix of the two, where voice and text chats are visible to all, with full visibility of who are connected to what. Thus, a teacher or learner is able to see, who is present and interacting at any time.

*What does it do*, is Murray's procedural question. The three platforms have one similarity, offering video conference meetings. Besides that, they differ greatly in their procedural affordance. Discord's servers and channels offer an elaborate community-creating functionality, which enables group work and socializing, using transparency. At all times, everybody on a particular server can see who is present on Discord, and who is in certain text or voice channels. The text channels keep the conversations visible, enabling a feeling of presence, even when a user has been absent (Jensen, 2017). Teams' different layers offer different functionality, from a video call, to text chats, or archives of files for group and project work. Files can be edited in real time by the users of a particular team. However, the owner of the team has full control over what is possible to do for members of the team. Also, Teams offers an analysis on who has been present at what time, for how long. Data, which can be useful for teachers, may infringe the privacy of learners. Zoom's functionality is focussed solely on video-conference calls, with the possibility to create and work in break-out rooms, where smaller groups can discuss and work on given projects or tasks. Materials such as files or games need to be opened and worked on in their respective platforms or programmes. Teams and Zoom provide the possibility to record meetings, and Zoom's chat is, as mentioned above, lost when the meeting is closed.

*What can I do?* Murray's question regarding the participatory affordance is especially relevant in the context of community building. Zoom provides no possibility to create a lasting group work environment. Each video call must be separately recorded and stored outside the platform itself. There is no possibility to continue an ongoing discussion on the platform once a meeting is over. Teams provides the means to store material, files, videos; use other applications; and read and further discuss text chats. Both Zoom and Teams make a rudimentary reaction to chats or discussions possible through a limited amount of emojis and gifs–the latter only on Teams. In contrast, Discord allows for the use of a large amount of emojis and gifs, as well as giving users the option of being announced when entering a text channel. Users, teachers and learners alike, are able to write not only factual arguments, but express emotions, be funny, ironic, happy, or depressed. In our work as teachers, we could see a larger engagement by the students with each other on Discord than on the other two platforms. Especially in between courses and video-calls, Discord was the place where students did meet and hang out (figure 3).

Figure 3. Example of students using the didactically oriented Discord channel (left) to 'hang out' after class discussing both formal aspects of their studies, but also informal social interactions, such as quizzes etc. This is compared to the general tendency on Teams that channels are only active within the specific meetings, and not re-engage before the next meeting (right).
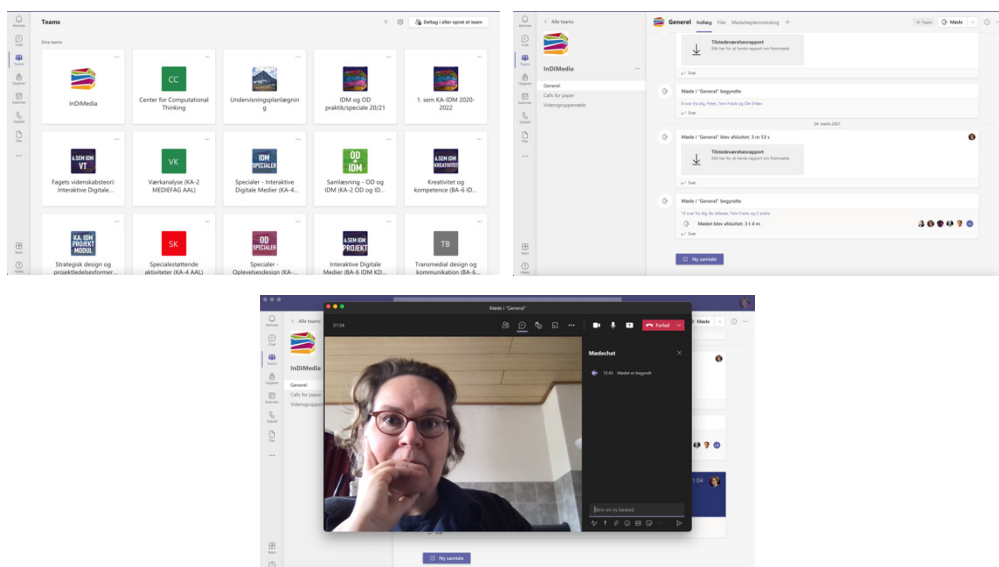


Source: authors' screen dumps.

*What are the boundaries of this domain?* This encyclopaedic question by Murray is easily answered for Zoom: its boundary is the actual ongoing video meeting. Once it has ended, the domain is shut down as well, leaving the participants to work through other platforms and programs. While other materials can be shared via screen share or by uploading a file to the chat (if this feature is chosen), no other way of communal participation in group work is possible. Discord's boundaries are defined by the platform as well: screen sharing or live streaming are possible, so is sharing documents and other materials, including links to videos, which are embedded into the ongoing chat. Discord provides a search function in any given chat, provided it has been indexed. Even so, the ongoing nature of the text chats is not feasible as a way of archiving, leaving students and teachers to use other platforms and programs to do so. Teams provides a filing system, which works as an archive. However, the files are listed in accordance with which file has last been accessed or uploaded, not alphabetical. Microsoft files and incorporated apps can be opened and edited directly in Teams, allowing for an extended domain. This shows an important aspect of the 'memory' of the virtual collaborative space where miniscule differences can greatly affect the social interactions. As an example, in Zoom you can only see the chat from the moment you join the meeting, leaving the user potentially puzzled if an unscheduled break was announced in the chat a minute before the user joining. The continuously saved chat on Discord can also present a potential usability issue for the didactic situation, since it can be hard for the participant to decode what part of the chat belongs to the specific activity and what belongs to a previous one – unless the teaching actively builds channels for each activity or uses the chat to meta-communicate.

Murray's last question, regarding the spatial affordance, is the most problematic for Teams: where am I in relation to the whole? Zoom has the video meeting and breakout rooms, providing an easy overview of where the user is at any given time. Discord shows the list of servers a user subscribes to, with the existing channels and text chat of the chosen server, at any time, including other users of the particular servers. Also, no matter which server is chosen, the basic interface of Discord does not change, even when a video meeting is called, the change in the interface is minimal. This is not the case with Teams. Its interface differs greatly depending on what part or app is currently in use (see figure 4). Furthermore, when in a team, a user needs to click on the Teams icon several times to return to an overall view of the teams the user subscribes to.

Figure 4. Some of Teams different interfaces.



Source: authors' screen dumps.

The three platforms show feature-by-feature similarities when they are analysed with the grid of media affordances, with their differences highlighted primarily in how the implementation increases or decreases usability, and less on the issues of what constitutes the potential ethical and recognition-oriented differences. We argue that these factors can be associated with the desirability differences among the platforms, and that these differences become obvious when examined through the emerging lens of social affordances.

**SOCIAL AFFORDANCES - HOW A FEATURE IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS**

The differences among the platforms can be interpretated as the properties of the environment that act as socio-contextual facilitators relevant to the learner's interactions with the environments – what Krejns & Kirschner (2001) have labelled *social affordances*. When perceptible, social affordances invite learners to act in accordance with the perceived affordances i.e., to enter a communication episode and participate through the proper discursive premises.

Much of the use and design of online platforms for education depend on the teacher's pedagogical approaches. Davis and Chouinard present six views on how affordances afford especially for artifacts in social settings (Davis & Chouinard, 2016): requesting and demanding are bids, artifacts place on the subject; encouraging, discouraging, and refusing are ways, the artifacts respond to the desired action of a subject; allowing bids on both the subject, to act, and the artifact to respond to the desired action.

Zoom is mainly a conference tool, which should enable lectures and certain kinds of discussions among the participants; it is not meant as a tool for sociability. People can meet and network, but a community has to be in place before a Zoom meeting can enable a further development of a given community. Because Zoom lacks the option to save ongoing discussions and build an archive of any kind, it needs a work or learner culture to be firmly in place.

Microsoft Teams has the option to keep an archive, and participants are able to develop as a work group. Yet, few affordances are presented for building a community beyond the educational necessities. The platform is all about giving the teacher control of the learning environment, missing the opportunity to let learners develop a learning community on their own. Also, the platform converges different technologies like apps and programs into one place, which is very different from the approach of Zoom or Discord.

Discord offers a considerable higher level of sociability, mostly through the transparency of participation, which lets new participants decide where they would like to meet, and with whom. What is missing is the option to keep a searchable archive of files and information, something which necessarily would have to be kept on a different platform. Interestingly, this is how Discord is used by gamers and fans. The game or object of fandom is kept on gaming sites or fandom platforms, while the discussions and community building are done on Discord.
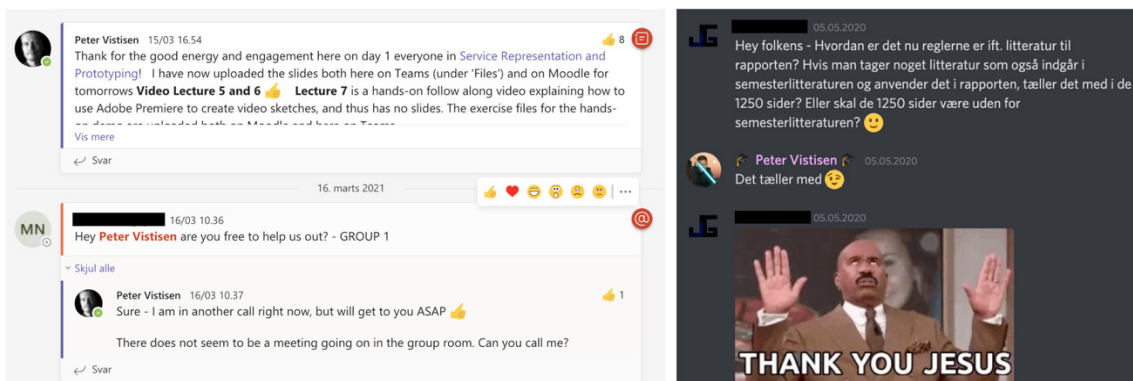
This highlights the intersubjective nature of social affordances, which Davis & Chouinard call a 'network of relations' that both enable (via features) and constrain (through discursive practices) technological capacities (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). Comparing Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Discord, and potentially other collaborative platforms through this lens reveals a web of relations among user perceptions, attitudes, and expectations – situating the differences between the platforms as relational processes among users, designers, environments, and the situations mediated. Discerning the platforms with regard to Honneth's structures of recognition (see table 1), all three platforms provide a recognition of cognitive respect, meaning the students and teachers have a moral responsibility towards each other, while legal relations and social integrity should be a given. Likewise, social esteem and the development of abilities and expressions of personal traits are possible on all

three platforms, enabling solidarity. However, emotional support and with it the development of friendships and recognition of needs and emotions, can be found mainly on Discord.

An intriguing example of relations regarding the social affordances are the differences in possible reactions of users towards each other's social presence. While video would be the obvious feature to provide feedback and interpersonal communication, students mostly avoid this option (as do teachers when in a seminar with fellow teachers or researchers). Instead, the written commentary in the chat is favoured when asking questions, and the ability to react with emoji 'thumbs up', 'smiley' etc. on all three platforms has become widespread. The difference is not in *what* is done feature-wise, but *how* it is performed as part of the social interactions. In Teams and Discord, the users can send animated gifs and memes through the chat. Teams is, by many IT-departments, restricted in what kind of gifs it allows to show. While this filtering can be applied to Discord servers, many channels mainly filter for violent or sexual content, and no restrictions are based on raunchy humour, political opinions etc, as is the case with some of the filtering applied on Teams. The topic of memes and online culture indicates that anti-social behaviour, trolling etc, are an unfortunate side-effect of unmoderated use of memes and other forms' visual expressions (Shifman, 2014; Phillips, 2016). We do argue the situation differs when considering the social affordances in an online didactic environment. In the first year of using Discord, we saw only one episode of anti-social behaviour communicated via memes. This was a spin-off between an already verbalised and written conflict between two students. The memes where not an escalation, but a continuation of a discourse which needed the teacher to step in, regardless of format. This is an outlier case, since the majority of meme use observed was indeed positive and provided an informal way for students to express small reactions of, for example, accept, encouragement, and appreciation, but also the occasional sarcastic reference to either the teachers or classmates. The important difference between the meme use on Discord and Teams was that Teams discourages the free use of memes and gifs as a mode of primary expression, instead promoting standardised emoji reactions, whereas Discord leans in with a social affordance of active encouragement.

Figure 5. The standardised emoji-reactions of Teams (left) providing a non-verbal mode of expression, but within a limited expressive space, as opposed to the active encouragement of free form visual expressions via memes on Discord (right). In the example, the student asks a formal question about the study regulations which the teacher answers, the student responding with a positive (but slightly sarcastic) meme.



Source: authors' screen dumps.

There is a point to be made in favour of social affordances. The simple emoji reactions of Teams leave little to be interpreted, and thus require significantly less literacy in online discourse, pop-culture, etc, while enabling the users to react through six well-established cultural symbols, still allowing for the use of memes and gifs in a more restricted manner. Discord's approach of both having an emoji-based reaction system (with 100+ emojis to choose from) and a less restricted use of memes gif reactions is putting responsibility onto both teacher and students when it comes to deciphering the cultural code of expression. In figure 5, the reaction meme could be interpreted purely sarcastically as an expression of too much or too little information given, or literal as viewing the teacher as the all-knowing presence in the channel. The middle ground, reading the *Jesus* comment as sarcastic and the *thank you* as a literal confirmation of the exact needed information, necessitates a literacy that covers not only usage of the specific meme, but the assigned roles and expectations among the users of the digital platform itself. The teacher needs to reflect on both the cultural literacy among the participating students, the media affordances of the platform itself, as well as the social affordances of how Teams and Discord respectively discourage and encourage a specific mode of expression to act and react appropriately with memes. But finding the right balance, it can be argued that allowing for, and actively engaging in, the students' use of memes and gifs is a potentially powerful way of creating a social sense of presence, by seeing memes, when they are used with honesty and respect, as Løgstrup's sovereign expressions of life within a shared literacy. As such, the differences between the platforms' allowance for handling the social affordances for memes and gifs might actually provide an explanation for the reluctance of users to turn on their web-cameras in live-sessions. This is an issue of *how* the platform promotes different participatory modalities for its users, and perhaps this short example indicates that some modes of expression may actually be more immediate, present, and appreciative than video? The example shows, how the binary utility notion of feature-by-feature parity is not enough to understand the differences between the platforms. Desirability of a particular platform is strongly influenced by medium-specific and social affordances, requiring a dedicated focus on cultural literacy and recognition to be used in an ethically and appreciative manner.

**ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN ICT DESIGN AND USE – DISCUSSION OF AFFORDANCES**

We point to an ethical challenge for the three platforms in their way of supporting an existing work and learning culture. Zoom and Teams both depend on existing communities, which need other platforms to conduct sociability and maintain their community culture. This other platform could be Discord, which is already used by fandom and gamer communities to support and develop communities. These communities create content, share their knowledge and experiences, as well as events on other platforms like Youtube, Twitter or Reddit, while their core community is found on Discord. In doing so we argue that the most crucial factor in the success of digital collaborative platforms is not 'what' the technology affords of user interactions, but 'how' the technology affords said interactions. In this 'how' we find the ethical demand of considering how the discursive space is formed by acknowledging the full complexity of the participants enacting their practice through the chosen digital platforms (Løgstrup, 1997; Vistisen & Jensen 2013).

Our analysis is based mainly on data gathered from students and teachers with a background in media and design research. Reservations have to be made regarding the need for an extensive media literacy, which includes knowledge and topicality of memes and emojis. Different groups of students and teachers will base their interactions on social affordances that, in turn, are based on the codes found in their social system of online culture. The need to embrace the digital tools of their online environment goes beyond merely joining a conference call if the participants of a learning community want to create and maintain an actual community of practice and participation.