

Teaching Bible Studies Online

A Simple Guide

Timothy M. Stafford, PhD





Introduction

With COVID-19 throwing everyone a curveball, and schools closing and being forced to put everything online, the question now comes to those of us who are teaching small groups and Sunday school classes, how do we respond to these changes in our culture? How can we adapt so that we can continue to minister to our people and use the internet as our ally?

These are great questions and there are some good options, but the decision that has to be made is that we are committed to ministering to our people regardless of our circumstances. For many in other countries, people are facing life and death to minister to those God has called them to minister to and so these issues that surround our ability to minister in a free-roaming way should not challenge our spirit, only our options. If we can get that worked out in our minds and hearts then the following infrastructure should give any small group or Sunday school teacher a way to remain in ministry sustainably throughout the current crisis that we are facing.

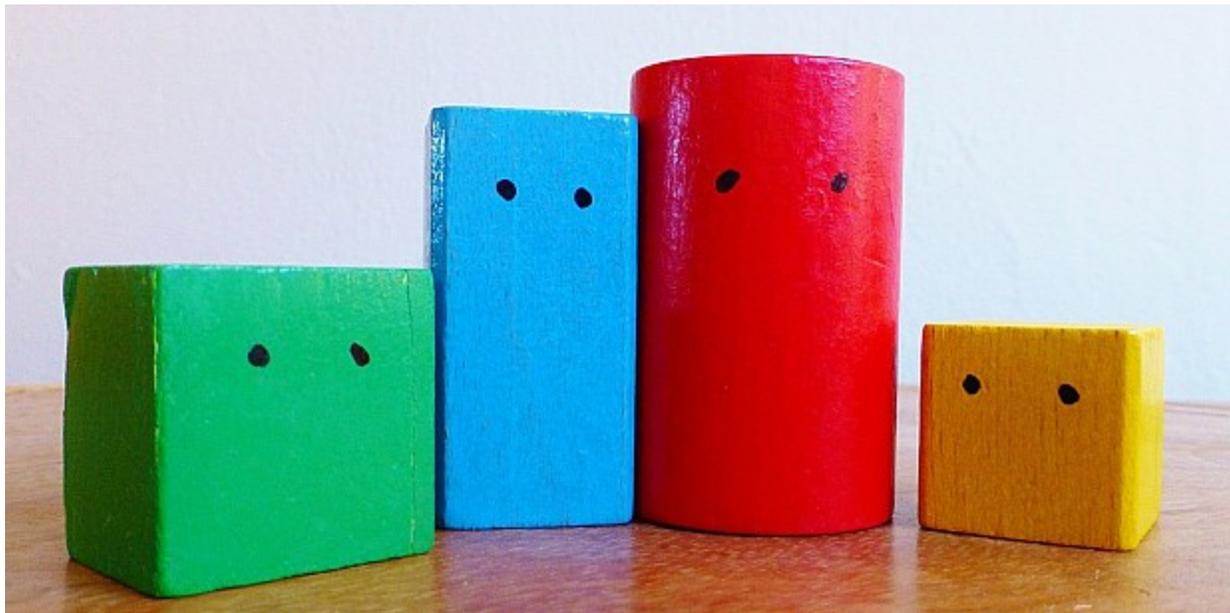
Laying out the basics

What do we need to sustain a small group or Sunday school class? At its core, we need **a group, a teacher, a curriculum, and a schedule**. These four things are what are really necessary for the life of a thriving group. So let's address each of them and see how to translate them to remote spaces.



A group

This one is pretty easy for the onset. The group already exists! But there are issues. Some do not have access to the internet easily and some have better access to the internet than others. The quality of internet service has a wide range and so as a group leader you need to begin to assess what this looks like as a map of your people. Also, you need to begin to understand the nature of their literacy when it comes to digital platforms. How many have smartphones? How many have Facebook access? How many have “old school telephones?” Starting to make these kinds of lists will help you to understand some of the options you have in order for the group to function as a group going forward given the restrictions of the current crisis that we are in. Make a list of your group members and then make columns for each of these items and you will begin to see where there are similarities and where there are gaps. Call them if you need to but make the list so you can make decisions. The trick is to find the lowest common denominator of the highest form of technology used by the most people possible in your group.



A teacher

This is easy too, just like the group, YOU have to really assess your situation and determine what gaps you have and if those gaps are easily mitigated. If you have a spotty internet or no internet at all then your options are really limited. If you have great access to a high-quality internet signal then you have more options but based on your own literacy, you may find that you are limited by your digital literacy and understanding of technologies or platforms. Here are some questions to try to help you understand your own gaps. Are you comfortable with using apps on your cell phone for getting things accomplished and connecting with people? Are you good at Facebook? Are you good at texting? Have you ever recorded a voice message on your cell phone and sent it to someone? Do you feel comfortable that you could set up a conference call or a video meeting? Are you open to learning these technologies and platforms? All of these things are important for you to know what you are capable of and where you may need some help. Don't be afraid to be honest with yourself and don't be afraid to ask for help. Focus on becoming good at a few things at a time and then move on when you are totally comfortable.



A curriculum

You may already have a curriculum that you teach from or you may develop your own. So the content may already be there, but how do you distribute it? Is there an electronic means to distribute the curriculum? Can you get real books to reach folks without compromising them (like maybe through the mail?) Can you easily make videos of yourself teaching, like with your cell phone? Can you use a conference call or video conference service to get together with your small group folks? Are there other platforms that you may be familiar with and help use to get teaching out to your group? These are all of the questions that you can begin to answer to help point you into a direction of how to facilitate the teaching part of this ministry. Remember there are no wrong ways to do this, you just want to be able to serve as many as you can through the lowest common denomination of technology described in the group section above.



A schedule

Your group is used to a certain schedule and if one can learn anything from education, it is that people, as a rule, work best on a schedule. Think about this, when you are a student in school you have fire drills. The fire drills are done in the same way using the same schedule of events so that when a real fire happens, everyone follows the schedule and protocols from those events and if something comes up then decisions can be made quickly. Overall the idea is that whether it is a drill or real, everyone knows what to do. Ok, well your small group has been keeping the same schedule for years and so don't alter it. Try to stay as close to your regular schedule as possible, just use a different set of means and platforms to accomplish your work. If you visit folks in their homes on Tuesday, then call instead. If you meet on Sunday mornings at 10:00 am then try to meet online or in a conference call at that time. Try to keep the schedule as simple as possible. Recently a group who always met for breakfast on the fifth Sunday of the month met online and everyone brought coffee and donuts to eat themselves with the others and the groups fellowshiped, shared stories with each other and prayed, just like they always did in person.

Now, as a leader, you may have to help push it along some because digital spaces don't feel as "personal" because they aren't! But if you will encourage folks, they will get on board and talk and you can have a special time with your group at every scheduled meeting. One final thing, be prepared to shorten your lessons. If you are used to going an hour face to face, well you are probably looking at cutting that in half on line. In online education, atomization is the key to people staying engaged. Short powerful pieces (atoms) are much more learning sustainable than anything long. Just remember that and adjust accordingly. One session at the church could become 2 or 3 online.

Some practical options

Now that you have done the work of figuring out what kind of technology that you and your group can really handle and what your schedule will look like, then here are some platforms to consider as part of the communication structure that you are going to set up.

Freeconferencecall.com

This is a free service that you set up by going to the website and signing up for a free conference call line. No credit card needed, it is free. You then can give everyone in your group the information about how to call into to the conference call line and everyone is there for you all to talk to get her. This is a great option for any group leader but especially one who has a lot of people who only have cell phones and limited internet access or ability

Zoom.us

This is a video conferencing platform that will allow you to have 25 people on at a time for 40 minutes for free. Just sign up and then give the link to people in your group and they click on the link and enter the video conference. It is a great platform used by hundreds of corporations and universities, but WARNING at 40 minutes, it boots you off so watch the time. However, you can log back in as much as you want for 40 minutes at a time.

Email groups

Nearly every email provider provides a way to create a group of emails so that you can email everyone in the group all at the same time. Usually, you can create a group email (eg. church65smallgroup@gmail.com) and then add everyone to the group. Then just email that group email and VOILA! Everyone gets a copy. Just make sure that people check their spam since sometimes these kinds of emails can go there.

Cell phone/tablet camera

Almost every smartphone and tablet has the ability to record video/audio and so you can record your lessons and then use YouTube, or a similar platform to send your messages to people via email. You can try to attach the file to email but sometimes if the film/audio is long it will be too big for email, so you will have to experiment some with that. But you have some great tools on your smartphone and you may be able to leverage them to help get info and teaching out to your folks. You can also upload these files to micro (specific) social media group pages. We will discuss this in the micro social media groups section below.

YouVersion group studies

YouVersion is a bible app that works on any smartphone or tablet. It has been around for a while and most people are on it. The app offers a variety of bible studies for people to utilize, and many people are doing them all of the time. It has become a gigantic platform for this purpose. But what a lot of people do not know is that any Bible Study can be completed, “with friends.” This means that every day a group of people are going through it together and have space to journal what they are thinking and learning from the study every day. This is a great tool for you to use to keep your people engaged with you and each other between times of getting together. It is really a robust set of tools, but simple enough for most people to use and if they are on it already then it is easy to invite them to join you for a group study. This can be powerful to add depth and scope to the things that you are teaching and help keep everyone together when you are forced to stay apart.

Social media micro-groups

There is an increasing number of what are called, micro social media sites exploding on the internet. These are platforms that allow a group of people to have a space that they can meet together as a group and can moderate who is in it and who is not. Facebook has these types of groups that can be set up and one could be set up for a small group to use to share information and also it is a place that if you make files on your smartphone, you can upload them there for your folks to watch. It is a powerful platform to use in this way. However, there are also some smaller platforms that have some unique functions that you may consider. Marco Polo is one of those platforms.

Marco Polo is set up so that people can download an app on their phone, join a group and post video messages directly to the group and then people on the group can engage and post reply videos back to that person - hence the name Marco Polo (like the old swimming pool game). This allows you as a leader to post to the group who can then answer back or post to an individual and get individual feedback from them. It is a place where you can keep the relationships alive when you are separated from each other. There are many of these types of platforms and all of them are unique in some way so look at them and see if one fits your needs.



Wrap up

It is most important to remember that these suggestions are just suggestions and that you need to build yourself a platform that is easy to use, easy to manage and can reach the most people in your group with the biggest impact. If that is a conference call with telephones one day a week, then do that and do it really well. If you are able to connect several platforms together to communicate with your folks, then do that, but again, do it well or do less. No matter what, remember that in a digital world connections are not as lasting, so communicate, communicate, communicate. You should feel like you are communicating more often because the times of communication will be shorter and less often and when everyone gets off of the call, video or chat, then it is silent. So be aware that your people need for you to connect and connect more often.

COVID-19 has brought a curveball to us but we are resilient and our ministry need only look different, but it can have a great impact on folks who are looking for an answer for the hope that we have especially in these troublesome times. Keep in mind though that you need to more than solve a problem, if you think through how you can use these tools long term, you will still have a highly efficient way to communicate and stay connected to your group long after this crisis is over.



About the Author



Timothy M. Stafford, PhD is an expert in online learning and has helped design learning platforms and curricula for online learning systems in K12, Higher Education, Corporate, Industry and more. He is the author of [What RU Thinking: Foundations of the Christian Mind](#) and is the President of RU Institute (www.ruinstitute.com) a consulting firm for online learning and learning systems. HE can be reached for help by booking time with him at www.bookdrtim.com , or By email at tmstafford@ruinstitute.com . He is a teaching deacon at [LifePointe Church](#) in Central Florida and is an online Associate Professor at [St. Thomas University](#) .