

EFFECTIVE ONLINE LESSONS

A short list of tips for an engaging, effective Zoom lesson – based on advice from church school directors with Zoom experience and what I've learned from watching my daughter's virtual classes through Outschool. By Anna-Sarah Farha

1. **Open with an interactive question** (What is your favorite dessert? What is your middle name? Who is your patron Saint? etc.)
2. **Play a game** ("Kahoot!" or Google search "Zoom games" and many options will appear.)
3. **Icebreakers** (refer to document from "Camp St. Thekla at Home".)
4. **Combine some age groups/grades** when possible so that families do not struggle to find enough devices for each child to participate in separate, simultaneous classes.
5. **Crafts.** Younger students enjoy crafts during a lesson; they like to show their work to teacher and peers.
6. **Keep class short** and reserve time at the end of class for students to share how they are feeling.
7. **Have a specific topic** for the lesson and throw in interesting/weird facts.
8. **Send links via email** for crafts or printable pages before class.
9. **Provide art supply kits** to go along with lessons: families pick up at church or have kits delivered.
10. Consider changing Sunday School class into a family event (sometime other than Sunday mornings.)
11. **Use Zoom tools** with older students: poll feature (with paid version), breakout rooms, whiteboard, chat (with paid version).

Refer to this article from Zoom for more teaching advice:

<https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Tips%20and%20Tricks%20for%20Teachers%20Educating%20on%20Zoom.pdf>

From "Fr. Tony's Advice" PDF

We still like to accomplish a lot in a Sunday school class, even when there is just thirty minutes. In the virtual religious education classroom that we will have this fall, we will have to use our time well and keep it focused.

Use icebreakers like those you would use in a youth group meeting or at camp (an online search can locate plenty of ideas). (See our Icebreakers PDF) Play some

games so that students can be comfortable with one another in the online world. Use part of the on-line time for keeping the relationships strong. Celebrate name days and birthdays. Allow time for sharing, "checking in".

Keep it Short and Sweet (or Simple). We all have heard this phrase and its variations. In the virtual religious education class, the principle of short and simple or short and sweet becomes important. Students may not be able to stay focused for too long, especially younger students.

As you begin to prepare for your online classes, you will have to review the materials that you typically have used for in-person class time. An on-line class session cannot replicate an in-person class session.

What's essential for this session and the future sessions? What are essential elements? (a helpful document from our office is <https://www.goarch.org/-/what-your-child-should-know?inheritRedirect=true>). Much of educational planning is discerning our priorities and values and then balancing that with how much time and energy can we devote to the topic. For example, what events in the history of the Orthodox Church are essential for a young person to know something about? Educators debate this kind of question all the time, but ultimately they have to select something. So, in this unusual time that we find ourselves, focusing on essentials is critical. Work through those questions with other teachers and the parish priest. If appropriate, ask the students.

How do you sequence topics? While this is always an important factor in lesson planning, online it becomes even more important. A Sunday school textbook has done most of that work for you, so you may only need to adjust that content to fit your time limitations.

Nice idea but it can wait. There are plenty of these in our class sessions. They enrich the time, giving it variety and adding richness to a curriculum. We want our students to know hymns and prayers. We want them to paint an icon or make *prosphoro*. Perhaps these activities can wait for other youth group gatherings, even on-line events. Work with the youth group leaders on that. Some ideas may be best handled in the occasional in-person gatherings, if you are holding them.

Using Time Wisely. When the class is together on-line, make the time as interactive as possible. Ask the

students to read the material just before going on-line and be prepared with a question or two for them to answer as they join the call. With younger students, you may have to read to them. But, the on-line time should be dedicated to the question and answers, the discussions based on what was read. Your questions could point to elements of the reading material.

When there's a handout or worksheet, let the students complete them off-line, then return to share them on-line. You could even break the class up into smaller online groups to work together. This gives them a break from the large group screen time.

A suggestion I heard recently was about how to keep everyone engaged. Turn a question and answer into a "game," with students holding a red card for No, a green card for Yes, and a Yellow for "I'm not sure." They can use blank cards to write answers and hold them for all to see on screen.

Expand the Staff. Invite the Digital Natives. If you are like me, virtual classes and on-line almost anything are a fairly new thing. I'd arranged and spoken at conference calls and videoconferences. But, last March, that went into overdrive. We are all learning how to function in this new format.

Our students are "digital natives," meaning, they have grown up with technology as part of their life; they don't know a time before cell phones, social media, etc. So, as we begin our virtual religious education and youth ministry programs, enlist those digital natives in your work.

High school students, in particular, might really enjoy teaching and guiding teaching, and working with a favorite Sunday school teacher. They can certainly assist set up the needed technical side of a class, like delivering scanned materials or developing clever ways to engage learners. They can also lead small group break out discussions.

Locate Specialists. Like any in-person program, not everyone teaches everything. Enlist "specialists" from the community. Of course, the parents of students will be the first to be asked but search widely. Every parish has members with special skills that could be shared and utilized in the online meetings, even as a "guest speaker." Arts and crafts, music, cooking demonstrations (make koliva, prosphoro, artos, etc.) can all be shared online. For younger learners, perhaps there can be a "story time," led by a beloved member of the parish. In this scenario, a forty-five minute class

session can be divided up into a lesson and an activity, with two teachers, the specialist or guest speaker and the "regular" teacher.

Resource Experts. Locating resources and determining ways to adapt them for an online session can become very time consuming. While many working professional teachers may not have a great deal of time these days, a young person studying to be a teacher or a retired teacher in a parish could be invited to help out. That volunteer could search online, review printed materials, and then share them with the teachers with ideas for using them in a virtual session, such as preparing a materials list that a student would need to find at home, or ways to encourage on-line discussion that would accompany both books and videos.

If you think about it, many of these roles work just as well for an in-person program as they can for a virtual program. They need not stop once we return to in-person religious education.

Don't be overwhelmed by these additions. Most likely, you only need to find a few people for any of these tasks. In these coming virtual days, expanding and sharing the roles and tasks that are needed to hand forward our Faith can help the program thrive.

Religious Education in a Virtual World 6

There is still a great deal of uncertainty about what parish life will look like this fall because of the pandemic. Most likely you will offer an on-line religious education program, perhaps with some in-person gatherings, depending on the local situation. As you plan your on-line religious education sessions, you will need resources for students. Here are some ideas.

Learning Requires Engaging with a Text

Most of us carried a set of books to school, used them in our classes, with a teacher guiding us through their contents. We'd take them home to read another section, answer questions, complete worksheets, and more, all with the goal of mastering the contents. Eventually there would be a quiz or test.

Learning and study require engagement with a "text." Texts, of course, are books and documents – the written word, but we can also study a piece of art, music, a film, and the like. Good "texts" (to be very inclusive) are often the "third thing" in the classroom (after teachers and students) that can foster learning. For example, reading Lincoln's Gettysburg Address can spark a great discussion of the words themselves,

their historical context, and the ideas that they convey about American democracy and society at the time of the Civil War. While we might ask a student to memorize the Gettysburg Address (and I'll bet many of us did), we wouldn't expect them to study the Address without a copy and the necessary texts to understand it.

In the on-line school settings that many of our children are attending these days, they still use books and other resources. Schools are finding ways to distribute resources to students (based on local guidelines). When they are online together in class, they work through the material in those books with their teachers.

We can do the same in our religious education classes. Engaging our students with the topics of our Faith requires the use of many resources. Books, Bibles, handouts, icons, hymns, liturgical objects are the "texts" that should be available for a class session. We wouldn't imagine holding a Bible study without each participant having a Bible to read from and to focus the discussion. "Show and tell" lessons that involve icons and liturgical items can work virtually. There are many companion books that a student can read as well about those items. Questions – whether posted on a screen or in a handout – to answer questions about a Bible passage or story can still be done as it would in person. The key question when using any of these in a virtual setting is how to get every student active with the material, not just let them be passive observers.

More to come.