

# **Digi-Learning: Accelerating Theological Training and Leader Development during COVID-19 – A Leadership Laboratory**

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## **Abstract**

As the world changes, the shape of leader development and theological education is in flux and needing to pivot with the times. COVID-19 accelerated several key aspects of these changes, especially thrusting Bible schools, seminaries, and training institutes into the digital world. This article serves as a laboratory sharing insights from a few ministries into how they have navigated these shifts. Hopefully this study will also catalyze further learning for the author and readers alike.

**Key Words:** Asian Access, digi-learning, John Wesley, leader development, microchurch planting

## **Introduction**

“Theological education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is on a hunt.... Amidst declining church memberships, adequately prepared students are becoming more and more scarce. Resources are also scarce to fund education that is appropriate for the changing cultural landscapes” (Moon 2016, ii). The background behind this analysis was the need for new forms of training in the current era, with particular attention to oral learning. In 2017 I was invited to respond to a presentation by Russell West entitled, “The Re-Eventing of Theological Education: Toward a Pedagogy of Leadership Formation in the *Verbomoteur* Mode” (West 2014, 106-120). Asian Access, which I serve as President, along with several other non-formal theological training groups had previously been invited to another forum between formal and non-formal theological educators trying to discern a better way forward for theological training given the challenges to which Moon referred above.

To gain a better appreciation of the need for partnership, see how Ashish Chrispal underscores a critical issue: “The real danger we face in evangelical theological education today is that it is being overtaken by academia, without the vision for mission and ministry” (Chrispal 2019, 6). Later he emphasizes, “We need a two-pronged approach, which comprises both formal and non-formal theological education, with the main focus on the majority world’s contextually nuanced styles of learning” (Chrispal 2019, 8). The book with West’s article above, *Orality and Theological Training in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Moon 2016), was prescient in that it was published as a Digi-book: “The Digi-book provides a unique platform that is amenable to the 21<sup>st</sup> century digit-oral learner by providing embedded videos and blogs in order to create a rich learning community through the shared story. Initial research with the Digi-Book prototype have resulted in high acclaim” (Moon 2016, ii). Little did we know how important new forms of training would become!

## **Leadership Lab**

Asian Access, along with other groups like visionSynergy, Eagles Communications, META, and Scriptures in Use, were ahead of the curve for training oral preference learners (Handley 2014; 2015). While most of our participants are literate, by and large their learning modality is oral rather than literary. We incorporate deep communal learning experiences along with story, play, short lecture, and interactive Socratic-style discussion.

Prior to COVID-19 we were pursuing the implementation of a digital platform, knowing that

future learners would be more digitally adept and that certain situations where the church is under pressure or persecution might require this type of approach if our normal gatherings were less feasible. Restrictions on in-person gatherings accelerated with the spread of COVID-19, and we were forced to shift to a completely digital mode of learning. However, this shift proved challenging, as different generations react in various ways to using and adapting to new forms of communication (Vijayam n.d.).

This article will outline the steps we have taken as a laboratory and as a catalyst for further reflection.

Two years ago, Asian Access launched a new initiative called Pan-Asia Leader Development in which we experimented with a platform called Gnowbe (Gnowbe 2021). Gnowbe is an electronic platform allowing users to design their own learning experiences, providing content (audio, video, and written materials) along with interactive chat rooms for discussions. In personal correspondence, Hikari Suzuki, one of the participants, suggested:

Gnowbe has been a great help for this training. Before the beginning, the significance and content of the training were confirmed using Gnowbe, and participants could get to know each other, which motivated them. It is also useful as a place where the participants can organize and output what they have input during their training. In addition, we can upload the digest of the training as a video, so the participants can repeatedly check the learning and establish it. The trainees are also younger generations, so it's great to be able to use them on a smartphone (Suzuki 2020).

### **Acceleration to Digi-Learning**

We also conducted a pilot project recording several sessions with one of our lead faculty members at a church in California to begin the process, but we had yet to deploy that resource beyond a few selected viewers before COVID-19 came along.

During the COVID-19 season I began interviewing most of our national directors to see what was happening, and the learning about digital technology and digi-learning was immense. One of the first interviews was with Pastor Joshua Hari, Asian Access/Japan National Director, who was impacted months prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. His church in the greater Tokyo area was forced into a new reality when their landlord did not renew their lease. As they were searching for a new building, they started meeting in community centers—and then COVID-19 changed everything. But as Pastor Hari testifies in a recent interview, these changes were just preparation for a future reality (Hari 2020). He was wondering how Japan could possibly reach the vision set in 2014 at the Vision Festa event, and later shared more broadly at the 6<sup>th</sup> Japan Evangelism Congress in 2016, to plant 50,000 churches (Mehn 2017, 158-159). As his church was forced to employ Facebook Live and meet in homes, he saw with a new set of eyes how God was preparing his church for accelerated church multiplication. Now, instead of just having three or four active church plants from his home church in Toda city, Pastor Hari envisions each of the 20 homes hosting their services online as possible church plants. Today, he and his team are actively equipping these homes, preparing them for the possibility of becoming church plants someday. They record the Facebook Live video ahead of time and utilize Zoom calls on Sunday mornings, with each of the 20 homes as an equipping time to both worship together and prepare potential house church leaders.

In another call, a leader from one of the largest countries in the world (which cannot be named for security reasons) told me that Christians are seeing a *kairos*-like moment in their country. In early February 2020, right after the initial news of the COVID-19 outbreak, he set up a video call for pastors in their nation. He thought they might get six or seven leaders to join the call, but he was astonished to have over 20 pastors on that first call. When I interviewed him, 800 pastors were gathering every week via these video calls on a weeknight and another 500 pastors meeting weekly during the weekday as well. He said, “We have never seen anything like this.” These gatherings involved just the pastors, and each of them represents large church networks that are operating in a similar fashion. These networks have quickly converted to meeting in these digital spaces for church services and leadership training (Anonymous Pastor a 2020).

Following this call, I spoke with Pastor Juserdi Purba from Indonesia. His church is also meeting via Facebook Live for their main services, but weekly he posts and interacts with his congregation using InstaGram. He posts daily short videos and interacts with his young congregation via text messages and sharing posts (Purba 2020).

My colleague Chinzorig Jigjudursen from Mongolia has been discipling leaders online for over five years, since well before COVID-19. His family left Ulan Bator several years ago because his wife took a position in a Japanese university. Since then he has been coaching from afar via Facebook Messenger and other digital platforms. Today he is equipping Mongolians in several countries around the world using these technologies and, while doing so, seeing each mentoring relationship as potentially fostering a new house church (Jigjudursen 2020).

### **A Microchurch Movement**

Herman Moldez from the Philippines and Adrian De Visser from Sri Lanka both believe God is using this unique sabbath season to forge a new form of church and a return to more organic, home-based models of church development (Moldez and De Visser 2020).

During my own personal devotions one day, I was reminded of John Wesley’s work in England where he took the church to the streets and people mocked him (Jethani 2020). I pondered, could this new form of church become another Wesley-like revival today?

In further correspondence preparing for a global prayer gathering, Adrian De Visser shared, “Over the past few weeks, I was grappling with the Lord over the Corona virus, and feel led to believe that the Lord is resetting many buttons. One of the buttons God seems to be resetting is Church. I feel led to believe God is moving us from an organizational church structure to a home based Holy Spirit led movement” (De Visser 2020).

These types of movements some are now calling MicroChurch. Ralph Moore, founder of the Hope Chapel Movement, has been interviewing pastors using this form of church throughout the shelter-in-place pandemic season. In one interview he highlights a church from Houston that has multiplied rapidly using this digital format:

Last week the podcast was an interview with Jason Shepperd who leads a network of hundreds of house churches centered around a weekly gathering in the Houston area. They've reduced church to its essentials. As a result, they're multiplying quickly and across America as well as overseas. Today's podcast is a follow-on to the first. It pinpoints the ability of a network of microchurches to adapt, evangelize and grow in the digital environment induced by COVID-19 (Moore 2020a).

In the interview, as well as in the series of podcasts, Ralph highlights the multiplication of microchurches that are forming (Moore 2020b). In another interview of Moore by Exponential, he describes how microchurches operate much like CRU campus Bible studies, but rather than stopping at just study they embody the body-life dynamic of Acts 2:41-47 (Moore 2020c).

There are many ways of describing these expressions of church, each having its own nuance. Examples include “simple churches” (Dale 2000), “fresh expressions” (Moynagh 2012), and “house churches” (Cole 2010). Some could even argue that at their most basic level these church expressions follow Disciple Making Movement principles (Lim 2008).

## **Lessons Learned**

To be effective, however, this learning format requires significant internet bandwidth. Given this limitation, some participants must use lower-tech options in their networks. For instance, in Myanmar Pastor W connects with his colleagues via Viber. They send messages to one another and call each other. People are ingenious at finding ways to foster community when they are in lock-down or shelter-in-place conditions. One of his colleagues shared via a message, “We maintain our discipleship through phone, Viber and Facebook Messenger.... We are excited and full of expectancy for God’s interventions in the future” (Anonymous Pastor b 2020).

Given the acceleration of these platforms, Asian Access had to pivot and pivot fast. We were not able to deploy the original full-scale plan to develop video curriculum with our faculty on location like the earlier-mentioned pilot project conducted at a church in California. Instead, we are now recording interviews via Zoom with some of our faculty, and recently we held our first new country opening completely on Zoom. (The country cannot be mentioned due to security concerns.) To enhance the learning, we sent our PowerPoint slides and speaker notes to the translators a day in advance to allow them time to prepare. The participants were overjoyed, sharing often how much they appreciated the connection, especially given the COVID-19 restrictions. In the midst of feeling lonely and somewhat abandoned by the world, this platform and training proved life-giving.

The learning experience of transitioning more to digi-learning has had other sides as well. Many participants had never used the technology before, and the culturally normative practice of placing more value on the event over the time schedule has proven complex. Unfortunately, using high-tech platforms inhibits being flexible with time schedules. Additionally, while with the Zoom-only country opening about 18 signed up for the cohort, the four days of gathering fluctuated between 10-15 participants each day. Moreover, the numbers faded throughout each day’s session. Bandwidth was one problem, but the larger issue seemed to be reliable electricity simply to have access.

Digi-learning sessions require a great deal of patience, too, as it is best not to have everyone sharing at the same time. When one is used to “anybody can ask a question,” which is our Asian Access style (typically very interactive), the introduction of technology creates new problems. What might seem to be a simple interruption when together in person becomes a major source of confusion with several talking over one another online. We have done our best to have everyone mute themselves and try to take turns interacting with the faculty member. Even those of us teaching had to downsize our lessons into more accessible formats (moving from an average of 40 minutes of sharing down to 20). We were able to use breakout rooms to have small group interaction, but it was clear that the format was not ideal. People long to be in the same room

interacting face-to-face. That said, given the situation we faced, everyone was elated to be participating.

Each 20-minute segment turned into at least 30 minutes of sharing, because translation was a factor we had not anticipated. While everyone on the call could speak and understand English, the interaction still needed some translation from time to time. From this experience, we would advise a strong translator be available and work in concert with the presenters ahead of time. After the first day, take time to prepare. Experience shows that, with translation, the more advanced the notice is all the better. Also, it is helpful if the instructor has time to rehearse with the translator some of what will be presented. In an ideal world, the trainers and the trainees speak the same language, thereby facilitating a much more cohesive learning experience. In the situation just described, the program was new and none of the trainers were local. Over time, however, several participants from this cohort group likely will become faculty and trainers themselves.

Thankfully, we usually build in time for cultural adaptation and often work with interpreters, so our faculty members were adaptable and able to go with the flow. The sessions ended with some reflection questions for each small group to engage in their own language in the breakout rooms. The rooms proved to be a good place for the participants to share their own stories so they could get to know each other and grow deeper together.

After three days of training, as the instructor I was far more tired than during a normal session. The good news was that we could offer training during lock-down conditions and that leaders went from isolation to feeling connected. Of course, they are still eager to see everyone in person. Additionally, we are improving as we move forward. Each day we learned things to help enhance the next day, and now we are better equipped for the upcoming session.

My colleagues here in Japan where I am based are experimenting with a monthly webinar in which a handful of speakers share while participants message questions to the host. The questions are then filtered for responses. For the session I just described above, this webinar is certainly something to learn from. Also, using platforms like Gnowbe mentioned earlier could serve to enhance the process overall.

Several other groups are using these mediums as well. Recently my colleague Mary Jo Wilson was featured on a growth series webinar for Mongolians focused on Emotional Intelligence. The webinar used a recorded interview format with subtitles and included a list of resources for additional reading. The reach of such a niche topic directed toward one particular people group was surprising. Thousands of people have watched these video recordings available through the Asia Leader Development Network (Wilson 2020).

The biggest challenge, though, is creating space for community. Younger leaders are more adept at this. No technology can fully replace having meals together, sharing down time, and spending time life-on-life to reach deeper levels of community.

### **Conclusion: An Invitation to Learn**

Digi-learning is clearly a key to more effective training in the future. Even so, it is unlikely that distance learning by technology will be able fully to replace the value of life-on-life interaction and mentoring. For us in Asian Access, digi-learning will be an incredible supplement and provide added value between sessions. It will also be a lifesaver for those countries facing persecution or

pressure when we simply cannot meet face to face. Additionally, as mentioned above in some cases the creative meeting platforms are creating revival-like conditions.

In one difficult to reach region, we are getting reports of more people attending online church gatherings because they feel safe joining in the security of their own homes. If they were to venture out to visit a church in their community, they would be fearful for their lives. But during the lockdown brought about by COVID-19, they are not worried and have been worshipping, hearing the gospel, and participating in church gatherings for what apparently has been the first time.

We in Asian Access have learned a great deal in this learning laboratory toward further implementing digi-learning. This article should provide a set of tools and pointers toward learning, but the hope here is that more than just providing some ideas this study will spark dialog. We all need to learn from one another as the world moves increasingly into the digital age. Please share what you are learning so we can all grow together.

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