

Online Club Meetings Ease Shelter-In-Place Isolation

Use videoconferencing software to keep your club vibrant in this time of social distancing.

Lee Chambers, K17SS, and Phil Cornell, W7PLC

Under a “stay home” order due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington state’s Olympia Amateur Radio Society (OARS) members were feeling the impacts of isolation, missing the camaraderie of meetings, programs, and much more. Forced to implement a solution, we evaluated the cost and benefits of internet video conferencing programs available, settling on Zoom video conferencing software. It fit our budget and participant needs, and it works on any platform — PC, Android, iPhone, or iPad.

Zoom Features

Think of Zoom as a video net, complete with a Net Control Station in the form of the host, check-ins as your image on everyone’s screen, and message traffic as the chat function and screen sharing. Zoom has remarkably easy integration with any program on the presenter/host’s laptop, which allows for PowerPoint presentations that can be viewed by all participants. During the live video, participants can comment, ask questions, or transfer files using the chat function. There are even breakout Zoom Rooms where subgroups can meet and report back.

Setting It Up

Members have the option to join a meeting with audio only, video only, or a full audio/video connection. A device with a camera, a microphone, and an internet

connection are the bare minimum requirements. All modern laptop computers and smartphones have these features built in, making Zoom a logical answer to the feeling of social isolation created by the pandemic.

With the purchase of a Zoom license, which can be purchased on a monthly or yearly basis, we were given the ability to host meetings with up to 100 participants. Higher priced plans are available for larger groups. To participate in any online meeting, the host must distribute their Zoom-assigned 9- or 10-digit ID number.



Typical OARS Zoom meeting on March 25, 2020. [Phil Cornell, W7PLC, photo]

Signing up for an account is also easy. Go to **Zoom.us** and create an account by clicking the **SIGN UP, IT'S FREE** button in the upper right corner of the screen. After viewing the Privacy Policy and Terms of Service, you enter an email address, or sign up with a Google or Facebook account. Zoom will send an email with the directions to create your account.

When you start Zoom and join a meeting, the video and audio controls are in the lower left corner of the screen. The host will know you've joined, but won't see you until you enable the video, and once you're in the meeting, you can control your audio. You can choose to view participants side-by-side while the presenter is talking, or the presenter may fill the whole screen.

Because of expanding use of video meetings, we have heard of internet slowdowns, but meeting during the evening, on weekends, and during off-peak hours, we haven't seen any systemwide problems.

Balancing Conversations

Our club's in-person meetings are typically hosted by our club president, and we break off into smaller groups for a portion of the meeting. While in-person meetings can have breaks for individual or subgroup conversations, an online format makes that a challenge. Zoom Rooms offer some possibilities, but don't work as well for people to switch between groups easily.

The club president — acting as a host and Net Control of sorts — must, therefore, be prepared to balance these subgroup conversations. A list of potential topics is useful to help the host stay organized and on point. Meetings may become longer, so participants need to be patient with each other, but in our experience, we have benefitted from opinions that otherwise may not have been shared in an in-person format where groups break away from each other.

We have also discovered that this group dynamic is more convenient for members — enough to ask for more meetings. Having previously met once a month, we now meet weekly. Without driving obstacles, more members are able to participate. We even had one member participate from across the country.

Continuing to Overcome

Hams innovate — it's in our blood. As an alternative to face-to-face and physical group meetings, Zoom is a very easy, inexpensive choice for almost any group. Social distancing is necessary to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus, but we will find ways to connect.

Online CW Class for Children and Teens

Robb Zarges, K2MZ

Our world changed drastically in March with strict COVID-19 restrictions. For children, that change took the form of school from home. With 30 years of working with teens and children, I was inspired to offer Morse code classes for children and teens through the Long Island CW Club.

Within 2 weeks of spreading the word through emails to club members and Facebook, Twitter, and **QRZ.com** posts, we had 57 kids from 31 states and four countries. These results far exceeded my expectations.

I split the material into three Zoom classes — kindergarten to third grade, fourth and fifth grades, and sixth to 12th grades. We meet every day. Three weeks into our classes, we scheduled a fourth class to account for 15 additional students.

Within a month and a half, all the children had learned all 40 characters of CW, learned how to send and receive a CQ, and can use their made up call signs to send the first stage of the CW contact protocol. We have 5-year-olds that are just learning to read that can copy and send short messages to classmates. We have teenage girls meeting in Zoom Rooms to practice on their own. We've had kids make keys out of LEGO, while others build oscillator kits. One student graduate from the beginner class posts a CW Joke of the Day on our class Facebook page. Additionally, because the class requires a parent to be within earshot, we've had parents start learning CW along with their children.

We've had generous donations of build kits, and 20 straight keys. With 75 children (60% girls) enrolled to date, we are planning to offer classes year-round, with the next set scheduled for mid-May. Enrollment has already begun with 30 children in the intermediate class and 12 children in the beginner classes. We plan to offer a summer Technician-class license exam prep class, too.

First licensed in 1959, Lee Chambers, K17SS, is a former Navy A6A radar technician. He retired from an electronics career, is the past president of the Olympia Amateur Radio Society, and is an ARES member. He is the communications coordinator for several local events, has taught many license classes, and has moderated the Olympia OARS Info Exchange Net for many years.

First licensed in 1978, Phil Cornell, W7PLC, has been a member of OARS since 1982. He is in AEC-Training for Thurston County ARES. He enjoys DXing, contesting, participating in nets, and antenna building.

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