


# My Experiences in Using the Telegram Messaging App as a Teaching Tool

 [blog.nus.edu.sg/teachingconnections/2021/02/03/my-experiences-in-using-the-telegram-messaging-app-as-a-teaching-tool/](https://blog.nus.edu.sg/teachingconnections/2021/02/03/my-experiences-in-using-the-telegram-messaging-app-as-a-teaching-tool/)

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*In the first of three posts on the use of Telegram as a teaching tool, Jonathan discusses the learning issues he observed which prompted him to adopt this platform in his teaching, the implementation process, and his observations of his students' response to this approach.*

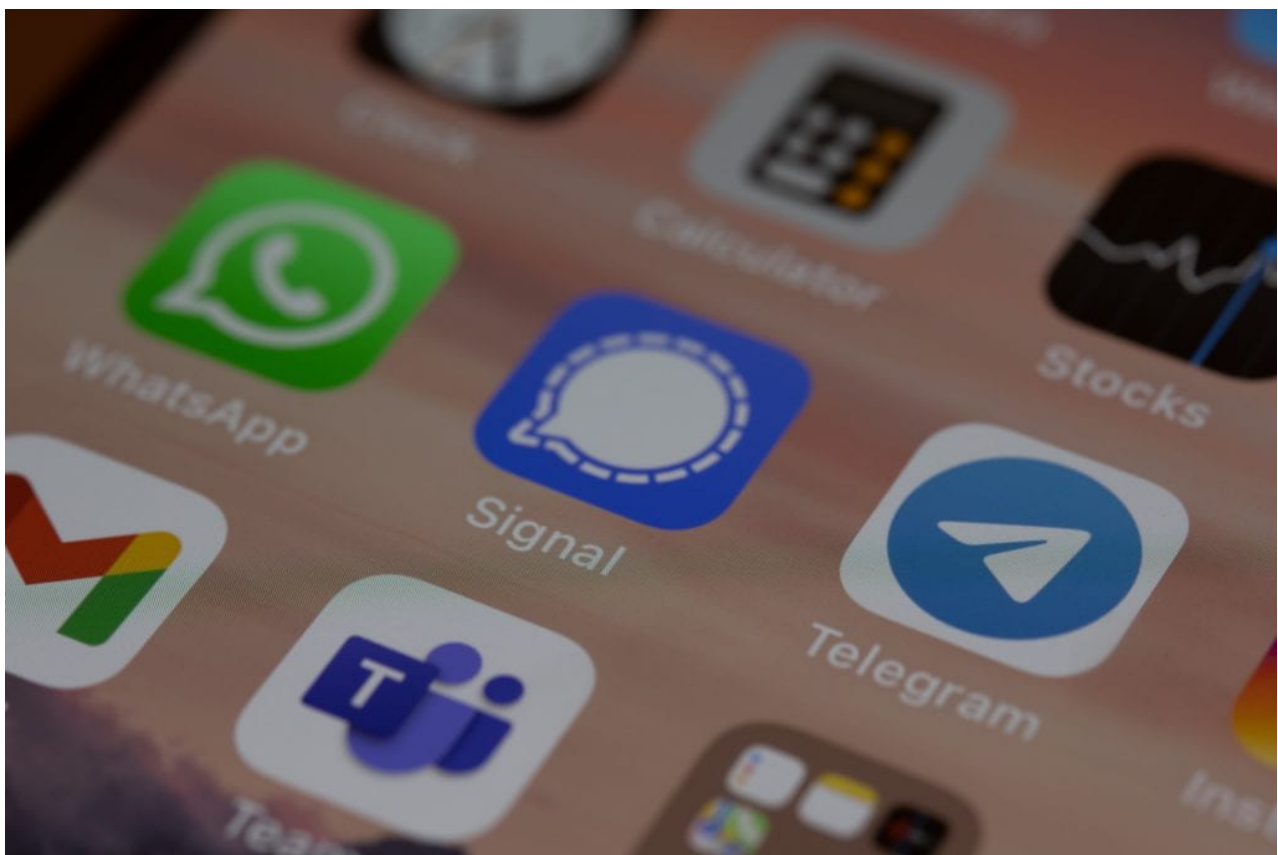


Image courtesy of Dimitri Karastelev from [Unsplash](https://unsplash.com/photos/9Z8vYkZ8vYk).

## Introduction

In my past four years of teaching in NUS, through conversations with many of my students, one thing I learnt is that many students perceive barriers to the various modes of consultation typically available to them. These barriers revolve around the fear of losing 'face', which they fear will happen when they ask "stupid" questions, or when they say something incorrect and are corrected by someone else, whether by their instructor or a peer. This fear hinders their ability to seek help when they really need it.

In many ways, this fear of losing ‘face’ also prevents students from seeking help in a more private setting, whether in a face-to-face consultation or by e-mail. Students perceive these consultation sessions as too formal. They feel that this apparent “formality” requires them to prepare well beforehand, e.g. compile all their questions into a tidy list, as they fear losing ‘face’, or appearing incompetent in front of their instructors. Unfortunately, since they are learning a subject that is unfamiliar to them, their lack of conceptual resources prevents them from articulating their questions in a deemed to be “legitimate enough”. Since they are unsure of what they do not know, they would rather not help at all than to do so and risk losing ‘face.’

## Setting up the Helpline on Telegram

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When I was tasked to develop and teach a new compulsory module—GET1050 “Computational Reasoning” (an unfamiliar subject for most FASS students)—I remembered the conversations I had with my former students and their struggles.

I decided to experiment with setting up a Helpline chat group on Telegram, a popular instant messaging app that allows users to create large chat groups.

The Helpline serves several functions (Figure 1).

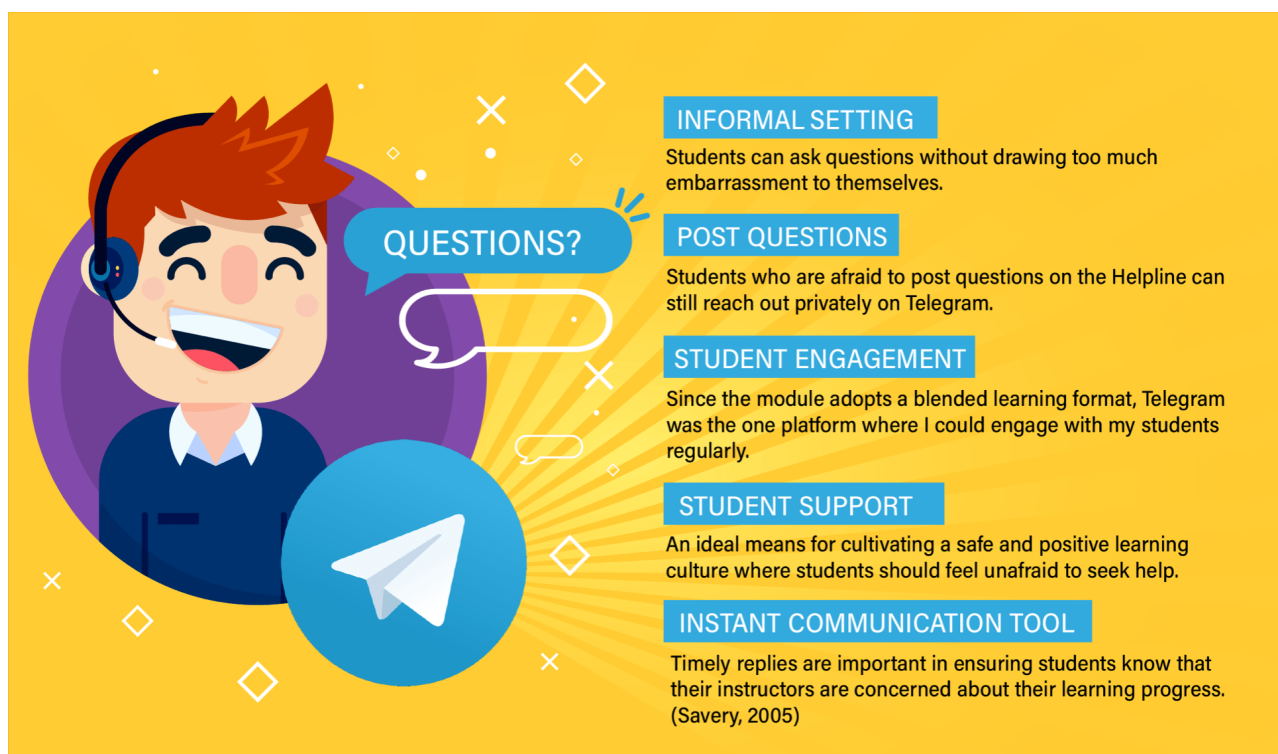


Figure 1. The various functions of the Helpline chat group on Telegram.

## Observations and Actions Taken

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I have since used Telegram for three semesters with great success. Here, I document what I did and observations made:



- Helpline was quiet.
- Students were exploring and deciding on the sort of questions they could safely ask on the Helpline.
- First few questions were sent to me privately via Telegram.

To create a vibrant learning community on the Helpline, I needed to:  
**(1) Alleviate their fears, and (2) Create a comfortable environment**

**(1) I posted all privately sent questions and answers (Q&As) onto the Helpline**

This allowed me to (1) share the knowledge, since other students could have similar questions, and (2) educate them about what questions they could ask—that I was willing to answer questions without judgement, even those students might have felt are silly or irrelevant.

**(2) I would post light-hearted comments and joke around with students on the Helpline to build rapport**

Since I do not have the luxury of interacting with them in a lecture setting, I got my TAs involved so that we can reinforce the idea that we can learn, and have fun learning together, on Telegram.

With this, I built a Helpline that was a **community of learning**

Important, since a safe environment where students feel accepted is the best condition in which learning occurs (Samuel, 2017).

The students responded positively to my efforts, demonstrating **high engagement** with the Helpline



- The Helpline got livelier, with more questions and other off-topic discussions.
- Not only were more students joining the Helpline, there were more students who **dared to ask questions publicly**.
- The interactions my Teaching Assistants (TAs) and I initiated were critical in **establishing trust** among students.



- There was a sense that the community on the Helpline had grown and matured.
- There were moments where I would inform the Helpline that I was too busy to respond to questions and **students would rise to the occasion** and answer their peers' queries instead.
- So not only was there an increased sense of trust and respect for all on the Helpline, I believe students were beginning to feel safe enough to seek help and to help others on the platform. That is, of course, once the culture and environment has been set right from the start, and continually maintained.

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## Concluding Reflections

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In both semesters, we received incredibly positive student feedback about the use of Telegram. I conclude my post with an excerpt of a student's reflection that best summarises how using the Telegram Helpline played a critical role in helping students grow comfortable with seeking help:

*"My main learning point is summarized by the phrase: 'No one can push you if you don't want to push yourself; we all grow through struggles'. The instructor and my TAs from tutorial class are really encouraging and I like how they always assure us that they are very willing to help us as long as we seek help. It really motivates me to want to do well for this module since I know that I am equipped with all the resources that I need.*

*However this also means that it is a test of self-discipline as we take charge of our own learning progress. If I choose not to help myself, then I will not learn to the best of my ability no matter how encouraging the instructors and TAs are."*

We observed two limitations for the Helpline. The first is that by making myself more accessible, the volume of student queries increases, which entails more work on my part. However, this is a good problem as it provides me with rich immediate feedback on knowledge gaps in the course materials that might impede students' knowledge and understanding. This also allows me to make improvements to the course in subsequent semesters.

The second limitation is that students can get over-dependent on seeking help on the Helpline, and may lose their motivation to learn independently. I have since found that this problem can be circumvented by archiving past Q&As on Google Docs and publicising it on assignments. Students can then go through the archive of questions independently, and seek further help on the Helpline only if they exhausted all attempts to find the answer.



**Jonathan SIM** is an Instructor with the Department of Philosophy at NUS. He is very passionate about teaching and he continues to research fun and innovative ways to engage students to learn effectively. He has a special interest in crossing beyond disciplinary boundaries in the search for fascinating new insights to age-old problems. For his knowledge and expertise in philosophy, he has been invited to discuss philosophical issues for the *Financial Times* and Channel NewsAsia.

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## References

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