

Making the Most of Online Breakout Groups

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If you are accustomed to using small group work in your traditional classrooms, you can also implement it in your virtual ones. Most video conferencing platforms for teaching enable you to move students from the common meeting room where you are all together, to breakout rooms for private group work. If you don't ordinarily use groups in traditional classroom teaching, we encourage you to try them online. It's a great way to break up what can be the monotony of watching a screen, give students a chance to establish closer connections with each other, work intensely on focused tasks, and build momentum for discussion in the common room.

Designing breakout groups

If your students are not experienced with breakout meetings, consider starting with groups of 2 or 3. Choose assignments with predictable timing in traditional classrooms and add a few minutes. Once students get more comfortable, you can scale up the size of the groups and the complexity of the assignments. We've found the ideal breakout group size to be between 3 and 7 people, depending on the time, task, and student facility interacting on the videoconferencing platform. You can accelerate the learning curve by encouraging students to practice outside of class time; consider an assignment that requires the use of the platform. Include an "if you finish early" task to keep more efficient groups engaged. Over time, your students may even become more efficient than in-person – they get together instantly (no milling about the classroom!), and ready access to shared software can speed up many types of work.

Most videoconferencing platforms enable you to either pre-set the team composition, or generate teams automatically during the session. Independent of how you composed the groups, find a way to identify each student's group membership in the common room. Depending on your platform, students could:

- Change their screen name to include their group id.
- Select a similar virtual background. You could assign the background, or let each group choose.
- Display a sheet of paper with their group id.

In small classes, consider putting each student in their own, one-person breakout room. You can then communicate privately with each of them. They can share their screen, ask questions they may have been reluctant to ask in front of others, or save face as you assess their level of preparedness.

We have found that the smallest meaningful breakout requires a minimum of five to seven minutes. Even solving a simple problem requires some lead time as participants acknowledge each other's presence and formulate a collaboratively composed solution. If an artifact must be composed, starting up the tools takes time.

Instructions for assignment

Providing clear instructions for the assignment to be worked on in a breakout room is vital for the success of the activity. Unnecessary group deliberations on what is expected to take precious time away from the task. Instructions should be as concise as possible, but should ideally cover:

- The assignment description
- A clearly specified deliverable, including the nature and format of any output you expect, how it will be submitted and evaluated
- Timing
- Description of how deliverables will be used. Set expectations if you plan to share some or all of them with other groups, or use them later for another activity
- Precise locations for any materials required
- Guidance on the process, including media for communication (audio, video and/or chat), mechanisms to balance participation, and task structure

We recommend one additional deliverable: a list of difficulties encountered during the breakout collaboration, especially in the beginning stages of using breakouts. Knowing about technical or procedural difficulties groups encountered will help you improve the experience for everyone next time. You can collect the feedback privately or have participants share it with everybody.

Display the instructions in writing in the common meeting room, and ensure access to them in the breakout rooms. In some platforms, you can post a document in each breakout room, or send a chat message all groups will see while in the breakout room. In other platforms, you may need to use another channel such as posting on your learning management system (LMS), social media, or sending an email. Set up each room with tools and information ready to go, to the extent your platform permits.

Before moving students to breakout rooms, ask for questions about the task and the process. Resolving ambiguity will be much easier in the common room than with individual groups. Be clear about when you are sending them to the rooms, and what, if anything, they will need to do to join. Being sent to a breakout room is disorienting, so make the trip as smooth as possible.

Student collaboration in breakout groups

Within each breakout room, beyond communicating via chat, audio, and/or video, students can share software to co-create digitally, either by displaying the work an individual group member is composing for everybody, or giving other group members the ability to make changes to it, sequentially or simultaneously. Any software students use in your

courses can be shared in a breakout room, from drawing and simple text editing to full versions of spreadsheets, word processors, presentation software, collaborative diagramming, emulators, and collaborative programming environments. There are three ways students can do this:

1. **Functionality built into the videoconferencing platform.** Most platforms include a basic whiteboard or text editor. These tools are easy to access in the room. They usually allow simultaneous editing and require little setup on student machines.
2. **Software running on one group member's computer.** Most platforms will let group members display what is on their screens to the group, and even allow other group members to make changes to it. Allowing others to make use of one's personal computer can raise security risks, but if you and your students are comfortable with the process, this can be a powerful solution.
3. **Cloud-based tools outside the videoconferencing platform.** Any third-party collaboration platform can work. Be sure students have the necessary links and account credentials before sending them into breakout groups to use them.

When deciding what students should use in the rooms, consider their infrastructure. If they are all joining on computers with fast connections, you can push the limits in exciting and productive ways. If many of them will be on phones with slower connections, then keep to more basic tools within the platform.

Communicating with students during breakouts

As an instructor, you can join a breakout room at any time, just as you might visit small groups working in a traditional classroom. You have the same options for pedagogy in terms of how you want to use that ability, but we do suggest you check in to identify any technical issues, especially if students are new to breakout rooms. If you like to spend time with groups while they are working, breakout rooms let you do that more efficiently, so you can spend more time with them, rather than moving between them. Most platforms provide group members a way to signal the instructor they would like help.

You can broadcast a message to the breakout rooms, which is particularly useful for letting teams know when the allocated time is coming to an end. Keep messages concise, as they may only appear briefly. Implement a countdown timer in your room if your platform permits it. If not, consider setting one up in your LMS or other site and asking students to open it. Let students know if the chat in the breakout room is limited to the members of the room.

Reporting out

Don't feel obligated to have every group report their results every time, particularly if the reports will be time-consuming. Having each team submit a deliverable (this is greatly simplified by using a cloud-based artifact as a

deliverable that is shared with you) will add motivation to work diligently. Meeting time in the common room is precious – avoid repetitive reports of the same findings by multiple groups.

You and your students can quickly master virtual collaboration in the breakout room environment. Accept that some glitches are inevitable, and keep open communication about what worked well and what was difficult to continue to improve.

Appendix: Some Skills to Practice and Test Before Class

Breakout rooms introduce a lot of small elements. Some of them may need to be configured before your class meeting, and others used during it. As you work with your videoconferencing platform, you may discover additional functionality beyond what we have discussed. Managing breakout rooms is not terribly complicated, but we have found it helpful as faculty to be comfortable with (and eventually master) some key skills:

- ✓ Sending students to breakout rooms
- ✓ Bringing students back from breakout rooms to the common room
- ✓ Sending a message to all students during a breakout
 - What do the students see? For how long? (in some platforms, messages only show briefly)
- ✓ How to send instructions to breakout rooms
- ✓ Sending a message to a specific breakout room
- ✓ How to visit breakout rooms
- ✓ Pre-loading room assignments
- ✓ Managing names that are displayed
- ✓ Running all the tools you will use: have a complete list (including versions if that is relevant for you), and be sure they are open and running on your computer before class

Skills for the students to practice:

- ✓ Using the tools to create, share, save, and submit the results of their work.
 - Tools within the videoconferencing platform
 - Software on their personal computers
 - External cloud-based software
- ✓ Sharing their screens
- ✓ Sending a help request to the instructor from a breakout room
- ✓ Identifying their group membership for others:
 - Updating their screen name to include group id
 - Setting their background image