

Bentley Teaching and Learning Resources

Encouraging Active Participation in Zoom Breakout Rooms | Tips and Resources for Faculty

Cooperative group learning promotes student engagement and academic performance (Kuh et al., 2007). In remote class sessions delivered via Zoom, breakout rooms are a great way to set up group learning and engage your students during class. In practice, however, students often complain that some classmates do not participate during the breakout time. As a result, peer learning may be hindered, a deliverable requested by the professor may fall on one person to complete (“free riders”), and students may feel that the breakout is a waste of time.

Popular Solutions:

1. **You know your students.** Remember that each course and class group is unique. What works in one dynamic may not work in another. Start by considering what motivated student participation in face to face meetings.
2. **Clear instructions are key.** Give the groups specific instructions before entering the breakout room (in writing) and reissue the instructions with a broadcast email during the breakout time. Consider posting the instructions to Blackboard (BB) before class and ask the students to download or refer to it while in the breakout room.
3. **Visit!** Professors should monitor the groups’ progress by joining different breakout rooms periodically ...not for a few seconds but to ask each person in the room a question about what work is being discussed. You do not need to join every room, every time but students should know this is a possibility.
4. **Consider group size before creating breakout rooms.** The fewer people, the more responsibility each student will have. Select a group size that is in line with the activity you would like students to do. Pairs are good for individual sharing, groups of 3 or 4 are optimal for problem-solving tasks. Any more than that, and in a 10-minute group activity, some participants will not have a chance to speak.
5. **Group connections.** You might mix students randomly so they have the opportunity to meet other classmates and hear different perspectives in the discussion. Start each breakout room with a conversation starter such as “Which TV shows are you streaming now?” or “What is your top Spotify song this week?” Report these back to the larger group.
6. **Assign roles.** If you notice that some students are not participating or a single student is doing most of the work, consider assigning roles to group members. Common roles are recorder, spokesperson and timekeeper. Other roles could include skeptic/devil’s advocate or conciliator. When debriefing after the breakout sessions have ended be sure to call on different people to ask what was done in the breakout rooms. As in a physical classroom, be sure to hear from everyone over the course of a couple classes.
7. **Assign a deliverable.** Breakout sessions are more productive when students are accountable for a deliverable. You can have each student turn in an individual deliverable but allow them to discuss it during the breakout session. Students who do not engage will not benefit from the collaboration. If students are responsible for solving a problem, consider stopping the groups part-way through the exercise and ask some groups to present in-process reports to the full class; other groups can be invited to ask questions or provide feedback. You don’t need to have each group report back every time, but cycle through so that everyone knows they will be held responsible eventually.
8. **Self- and Peer evaluation.** Have students do self-evaluations and/or peer evaluations of their breakout sessions. Use this feedback to directly follow up with students who did not participate to

see what can be done to support, encourage or motivate the students. This could be done after class via BB.

Advanced Solutions:

1. **Time Zones.** Remember that some students are not attending your class synchronously because of time zone issues and may be watching the video later. If recording your class, you might join one breakout room for the entire time so that a student watching the video later can have the experience of being in a breakout room as an observer with the other students. If you do bounce around between breakout rooms, pause the recording (since it will be hard for students watching the video later to follow disjointed conversations).
2. **Allow students to choose who they work with in a breakout room.** Group work can be a great way for students to stay connected with their classmates. In a physical classroom, students typically sit near and work with classmates with whom they feel comfortable and work well. You can set up groups in Zoom once and keep them in place for the rest of the semester. One way to easily assign students is to ask them to edit their name to include their breakout-group number in their displayed name (as in 3 – Mark) then you can easily find all the 1's, 2's, 3's etc. If they use virtual backgrounds you can ask each group to develop a common virtual background (perhaps a solid color) so it's easy to identify which students are in which group.
3. **Group document.** Depending on the activity, identify one student in the group to be the "recorder" for that group and have that person take notes on the group's conversation. Beforehand, you might create a Google doc or PowerPoint slide with the elements you want the group to create together. Share the link so all students can edit and then have each group present their slide. Alternatively, identify several aspects of a topic and assign each group to research one aspect while in their breakout room. Each group is responsible for creating one or two slides to present to the class after breakout groups finish.