

The time has come to make your breakout: opportunities and pitfalls when using breakouts in live online sessions

“When explanations make no sense
When every answer’s wrong
You’re fighting with lost confidence
All expectations gone
The time has come to make or break
Move on, don’t hesitate
Breakout”

(Swing out Sister, 1986)

The lyricists behind ‘Breakout’ were prescient, as a ‘need’ for breakout spaces within platforms used for online teaching can sometimes be seen as an essential feature for sense-making, confidence building and helping students get to the right answers, and which fundamentally enables students to engage with each other in ways that come close to the small group interaction of face-to-face environments. With students at the University of Greenwich and the sector at large ([JISC, 2020](#)) expressing a desire for more interaction, student engagement has become a key talking point in our discussions with staff about their initial experiences of teaching in the blended mode. These conversations have been accompanied by this sense of breakout room ‘need’ for those of us using *Microsoft Teams* for our online classes.

Our extensive experience of using integrated breakout rooms in equivalent platforms such as *Adobe Connect* and *Zoom*, has taught us that whilst breakout spaces do offer excellent opportunities for changing the dynamics and engaging students in different ways, they have to be used with care. This is not least in the context of MS Teams as an evolving platform, as the introduction of a new feature can inevitably mean glitches and inconsistencies. Indeed, as we write this blog, we know [not all colleagues have access to the breakout function](#) and how this function is displayed has changed in recent days. It is important we respect a few caveats and consider pedagogic aspects of using breakouts.

Let’s start with the why

As academic developers, when colleagues express a desire to use a new technology, tool or feature, we normally take people back to the question of purpose. Why do you want to use breakouts, and what are you trying to achieve in terms of your students and their learning? Greenwich Learning & Teaching (GLT) colleagues recently explored the question of why we may introduce breakouts and the following were at the forefront of our collective thinking:

Supporting active engagement and interaction

- To enable students who may never meet, or communicate virtually, to work together.
- To support student confidence-building through expression, and testing, of ideas within a small group.
- To purposefully bring students into discussion groups with those whom they wouldn't normally work.
- To support contributions from people who feel uncomfortable contributing in front of a larger group.
- To support contributions from people unable to contribute due to the number of contributions within a larger group.

Supporting active student learning

- To support more interactive classes, with more opportunities for peer learning and less didactic teaching.
- To enable more student-led small group discussion of a specific topic in a small group.
- To brainstorm different perspectives and viewpoints and summarise these when back with the main group.
- To provide the opportunity for different breakout groups to work on different sub-topics of a larger issue.
- To allow a semi-private space for students to apply learning or practice.

However, in our GLT discussion, topics such as feeling apprehensive about who you may end up in a breakout room with, to what extent this space is 'private', and whether people will even talk once they get there, all reinforce our belief that this function should not be seen as a panacea for student engagement. If your students are quiet, not actively engaging and not turning their camera or microphone on in your synchronous online sessions, the addition of breakouts could compound rather than change this. So, how can we set up breakouts to maximise engagement?

'How' Strategies

Consider for a moment the old and fondly remembered days of heated, mask-free and packed seminar rooms. After putting your students into small group discussion, what happened next? Did you ever find that after setting the ball rolling your next 5 minutes were spent moving from group to group clarifying, cajoling or calming? 'What are we supposed to

be doing?’ is not an uncommon question in these circumstances, even when you feel you have been 100% explicit in your initial instruction for the group activity.

Now consider the difference between that scenario and setting the same activity in an online breakout space. Of all the potential issues, the biggest is likely to be students suddenly finding themselves in a smaller group, in a virtual space in which their tutor isn’t immediately present to clarify, and uncertain about what they should be doing. It is of course possible to request help, but the mechanisms for this are less obvious than getting your attention in the physical classroom. To that end, in any breakout scenario the following ‘rules’ are generally helpful to apply. Before putting your students into breakout rooms, tell them:

- why they are going into small groups;
- who they will be in breakout groups with or clarify that this is randomly allocated (if it is);
- how long they will be in the breakout activity;
- clear instructions for the task;
- that what they say is between them unless you join their breakout but you can see meeting notes/ the chat;
- if you are likely to pop in;
- that they can message you (remind them how to do this);
- to look out for messages from you in the chat; and
- if you are allocating roles (e.g. note takers) to support the discussion upon returning to the main call.

Avoiding assumptions

Even with this guidance, we need to acknowledge that we can’t assume students know how to engage with each other virtually and in breakout rooms. Breakouts can certainly be useful in developing student confidence in speaking but we shouldn’t assume that they will be either willing or able to turn on microphones (let alone cameras).

- You may want to have a pre-breakout activity exploring with students a commitment to ways in which they may engage respectfully and productively in breakout spaces and with acknowledgement that not everyone may be able to participate in the same ways.
- We always suggest a note taker is nominated and that they use ‘chat’ rather than in-meeting notes (as then everyone in the breakout has access to them after the session, unlike meeting notes).

- You might want to consider techniques for determining if and how you will get ‘volunteers’ for feeding back in plenaries, and identifying this role before the breakouts.
- It’s worth noting that a frequent face-to-face teaching complaint from students is that plenaries are dull, especially if every group is covering similar points. Is a plenary beyond a general chat necessary at all? Can you use the chat feature to get a delegate from each breakout to share two key points instead? Or could you use [a Mentimeter poll](#) to which each group contributes and you as facilitator in the main room can pick up on some key points for further discussion in the plenary? Such approaches mean that plenary responses are captured in the written form for students and can be accessed after the class or shared on Moodle.

When supporting teaching in the blended mode, we repeatedly emphasise purpose, signposting and avoiding making assumptions about our students’ abilities or confidence as online learners. In this sense breakouts are no different from the guidance for any other tool or platform you are considering introducing to your teaching. Be prepared for glitches and having to think on your feet, especially as the breakout function finds its own feet as MS Teams’ newest tool. In terms of pedagogy, it may prove for many that the bigger ‘breakout’ needed is from our own assumptions and mindset about how we teach and manage online spaces. Nevertheless, finding the right balance between relinquishing control and offering structure and coherence in breakout spaces can be tricky but ultimately rewarding.

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