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**Subject:**Teaching: How to Make Breakout Rooms Work Better

This Week:

* I share readers’ approaches for making videoconferencing breakout rooms work.
* I point you to strategies to document Covid-19’s impact on faculty life.
* I share resources for teaching you may have missed.

**Productive Group Work Online**

Breakout rooms: love them or hate them? Many professors use them to spark conversation and group work in online classes. But students often find them painfully awkward.

So, not long ago, I asked readers for suggestions on how to design effective breakout rooms. I heard from many of you. But before we get into the strategies for success, I think it’s useful to recap the reason for students’ complaints. I should point out that the rest of us don’t much like breakout rooms, either. My initial post was prompted by a [Twitter thread](https://twitter.com/karenraycosta/status/1326909102451200004) noting that people were fleeing them at an online conference.

Rebekah Eklund, an associate professor and chair of the theology department at Loyola University Maryland, helpfully provided a list of what her students told her. She polled them at the beginning of the semester and was surprised to find that they were resistant to breakout rooms. Here are a few of the reasons:

* Nobody talks, which is really awkward.
* Classmates turn their cameras off or just walk away.
* The professor sometimes gives the groups too much time.
* When students aren’t prepared, it feels like a waste of time.
* If students are unsure what they’re supposed to do or don't understand the assigned reading, then everyone just shuts down.

OK, so what can you do? The answers I got from Eklund and others are consistent and straightforward. And they address the same underlying problems. Without clear roles, specific tasks, and limits on time, chances are many of the above problems will surface.

**Assign roles:** Don’t put students in a room together and expect them to sort out who does what. Assign one person to be a group leader, to keep everyone on task. Another could be the note taker. And another could be the one to report on what the group did when the entire class reconvenes.

Several readers said they like to make these assignments based on something random, like who lives farthest from campus, has the longest hair, drives the oldest car, or has the nearest birthday. These kinds of designations can also serve as conversation starters, so students can chat a bit before diving into the work.

**Mix things up:** Opinions are varied on whether groups should be changed up often, or whether they should stick together for several weeks so students can get to know one another. If you do keep students in the same breakout rooms for a while, some professors felt it was important to switch roles to give everyone a chance to take the lead on something.

**Use shared docs:**This was probably the most common suggestion among readers. Asking students to work with a Google Doc or something similar serves several purposes. It requires them to document their work, so they have to participate. It allows them to compare their work with that of other groups. And it gives the instructor a way to follow along.

That last point is particularly important. Several readers noted the awkwardness of “popping in” to breakout rooms and unintentionally stifling conversations. Yet it’s hard to know how well groups are functioning if you can’t observe them. Shared docs solve that problem by allowing the instructor to follow along without being intrusive. Then, if a group seems to be going off track, you know it’s time to join in and help out.

“The cool thing I’ve learned from this is that I can participate in all of the conversations without being in the room, by following the Google Doc. I can add to the discussion ... and also participate in all the discussions simultaneously,” wrote Jay Lunden, a faculty developer at the University of Delaware who is teaching a night course at Haverford College this semester.

Cotter Christian, who teaches in design studios at the Parsons School of Design, in the New School, uses Google Docs, Google Slides, or Miro whiteboards in his classes. However, he has the whole class use the same document. “That way I can see what's happening in real time, and the students are also able to see how the other breakouts are responding,” he wrote. “We'll then use that document or Miro board when we reconvene together.”

**Keep it short:** Some faculty members said that assigning a couple of tasks that take five to 10 minutes makes for an effective experience. “I’ll give them all very clear directions about only one or two tasks to do in the breakout room,” wrote Sarah Nichter, who teaches freshman remedial writing at the University of the Cumberlands and is director of its Center for Teaching and Learning. “Keeping it focused like that helps.”

**Except when it’s useful to go longer:** The exception is when you’re asking students to work on a more complex assignment. Kelly Amsler, a senior lead learning specialist at the University of Arizona, described a project she used in a voter-education unit of a freshman student-athlete success course. The students worked together to answer questions designed to emphasize the civic importance of voting.

“The purpose of the breakout rooms in this case worked out very well, because it allowed students to connect with each other and work in small groups, but they weren’t just forced to have three minutes of conversation and never talk again,” she wrote. “They spent [about] 35 minutes working on this assignment together, and it was something the whole class was able to engage in and have an end result from that collaboration.”

Here are some other readers' thoughts on maximizing the value of breakout rooms.

**Find the right group size:** Several instructors said they prefer groups of two to five to make sure everyone is engaged. But another reader pointed out that assigning groups of up to 10 helps keep conversation going even if some students don’t show up or participate.

**Give each group a different assignment:** One professor noted that varying the assignments can counteract the tedium of hearing several groups of students talk about the same thing when class reconvenes and teams present their findings.

**Put everything in writing:** Several faculty members said it’s helpful to share instructions for the breakout-room assignment in writing, in advance of the class session, and to keep the instructions in a place that students can refer to during class. This avoids the problem of students who didn't pay attention and enter a breakout room not knowing what to do.

Some professors share a link to a Google Doc, along with basic instructions, before class starts to give students a heads-up. You can do that through email or putting a link in the videoconference chat box.

**Give students agency:** Julia Kregenow, an associate teaching professor in the department of astronomy and astrophysics at Pennsylvania State University, says she has gotten more buy-in from her students by explaining to them why she sees breakout rooms as a powerful learning tool. She allows them to opt out on days when they’d rather not participate. And she provides an “escape hatch,” in which a student can ask privately to be reassigned to a different room, no explanation needed.

**Create connection:**Breakout rooms work better when students feel comfortable with one another. So consider starting the session by asking them to discuss a question that’s not specifically related to classwork, but will get them to share something about themselves. Or create breakouts solely for the purpose of sparking conversation.

“After several weeks, I learned that the students were using the breakout rooms to catch up with each other rather than discuss the task at hand,” wrote Jill Grigsby, a sociology professor at Pomona College. “So I started to institute short (three-five-minute) breakout rooms at the beginning of class and the end of class with no specific assignments, to ‘simulate’ the beginning and end of in-person class, when students chat with one another. During these times, I was available in the main room to answer questions or arrange a longer appointment.”

**Dealing With Burnout**

A couple weeks ago, I asked readers if their campuses had come up with ways to address faculty burnout. Mangala Subramaniam wrote in to describe some of the work she’s been doing at Purdue University, where she is director of the Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence.

One issue that has come up in conversation about burnout is measuring the ways in which the pandemic has affected faculty members’ research, teaching, and service work. What’s the best way to do that, and how can it be done without adding to your already overloaded schedule?

Subramaniam put together detailed lists of the ways in which faculty members — both [tenure track](https://www.purdue.edu/butler/documents/Best-Practices-Tool-1-Documenting-Impact-of-COVID-19-for-tenure-track-and-tenured-faculty.pdf) and [non-tenure-track](https://www.purdue.edu/butler/research/best-practice-tools.php) — can document the impact of Covid-19 on their work, as well as some tips on how to do so efficiently. In her overview, she noted that underlying structural issues have led to disparate impacts on women and faculty of color, something that many academics have worried about. But she said that’s why it’s all the more important to document exactly how people are being affected. You can find these and other [tools](https://www.purdue.edu/butler/research/best-practice-tools.php) at the center’s website.

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