

Strategies for Motivating Small-Group Interactions in Breakout Rooms during Synchronous Remote Classes

When we ask students to work together in small groups in face-to-face classes, they usually organize themselves and put effort and energy into the work, even if their contributions are nods, focused looks, or note taking. Our availability and our proximity to students as well as the buzz of groups being aware of each other's progress can also serve to motivate student productivity. When our teaching shifts to remote synchronous class meetings, however, there can be a dramatic decrease in the level of interaction we see between our students. The Breakout Room function in Zoom looks like an ideal way to get students talking to each other, but simply placing students in these rooms, even with a stimulating prompt, does not guarantee motivated and rigorous student give and take. In fact, instructors sometimes pop into Breakout Rooms only to find silence or soliloquies and wonder what's gone wrong. The good news is that there are effective strategies that can help motivate productive small-group interactions in Breakout Rooms.

Strategy 1: At the outset of the semester, set expectations for small-group interactions with your students.

Our students don't always know the value of or the ground rules for having a productive interaction. It's important to take time early in the semester to explore with students the value of interactions for their learning and the best ways to conduct small group interaction. Not only do they need time to develop an understanding of the why and the how of collaboration, they are also coming to our remote classes having had both positive and frustrating interactions in Breakout Rooms. Early on in your course, set aside time to help students articulate their prior experiences of small-group work in remote learning and then help them learn about and build new ways of communicating with their peers in Breakout Rooms. These conversations might focus on these topics:

- Why and how interactions help us learn
- What students have experienced in Breakout Room interactions that was productive
- What students have experienced in Breakout Room interactions that was not productive
- What shared expectations they have for motivating interactions in Breakout Rooms
- What kinds of language they have used or can try using to productively agree, disagree, make connections, ask for elaboration, etc.

Ask students to write individually in relation to these prompts and then ask them to share ideas. Write down students' ideas and ask follow-up questions so that you can draw on their thinking to create a set of shared community expectations for Breakout Room interactions. As the expert in the class, help students see the connections between these expectations and professional or disciplinary standards for group work in your field. For example, students may describe that it is helpful when peers ask them follow-up questions during discussion. In this case, you can emphasize the value of these kinds of probing questions when experts in your field are trying to wrestle with the interpretation of data. It can be highly motivating for students to recognize that these small-group interactions are warm-ups for professional or real-world problem solving. This conversation should take 30 to 40 minutes: it is time well spent.

Post a final version of these expectations in Blackboard soon after this conversation and be sure to draw students' attention to this document. It can be motivating for students to review their own progress toward these expectations about three weeks into the semester and again later in the semester; require students to self-evaluate at key points in the semester by spending a few minutes in class writing about their own behavior in relation to the standards the class has set.

Strategy 2: Scaffold student interaction using detailed instructions.

While it might be tempting to simply send students into Breakout Rooms and hope that something magical will occur in that space, the reality is that students need a paced plan to guide them into and through the interactions we want them to have. This means we must lead them into a small-group interaction with detailed directions, help them organize their interaction with detailed directions, and guide them out with a plan for sharing their discoveries. Here is a sequence that can be motivating to students as it guides them into, through, and out of their small-group work:

1. *Ensure students have access to the task or prompt and time to analyze it.*

Put the prompt on a PowerPoint slide if it is a case or problem and read through it with students. If they are going to discuss or work with a video or podcast, make sure students have time to watch or listen at least twice (during or before class).

2. *Provide detailed instructions on PowerPoint and in Chat.*

When we want students to analyze, solve, evaluate or do other meaningful work in small groups, we must take the time to ensure they know what that work will entail. When those instructions are reviewed slowly and written down, students are more likely to see the focus of their work and also see how they will complete that work: the result is that they will be more motivated. Share the instructions for the work both on PowerPoint and in Chat so that students have access to these instructions after they have moved into Breakout Rooms.

3. *Require individual work before students go to Breakout Rooms.*

It is crucial that students take time individually to attempt the analysis or work that they will be doing in a small group. When students are given some time to work out their individual thinking in writing and commit to that thinking either by posting to you privately in Chat or by responding to a Poll, they begin to develop a position that they can share and build on once they are sent to Breakout Rooms. Without this preparatory work, students may have little to bring to the interaction and simply agree with the first idea they hear.

4. *Assign a student who will start the collaboration and who will act as spokesperson for the group.*

While we assume students are digital natives who will quickly jump into a remote interaction, this is not the case. Discussion may stall out or become awkward as students struggle to figure out who is going to start a discussion and how participation should proceed.

5. *Provide a simple structure for interaction once the students are in Breakout Rooms.*

Tell students that they must all share their individual ideas first and then collaborate to reach consensus in relation to the task you've chosen for them. Provide a simple structure for how they will share their ideas. This can be something as simple as "share alphabetically according to your names." Make sure to post these directions in Chat so students can use them to guide this collaboration.

6. *Provide a simple structure for a report out before they go to their Breakout Rooms.*

When students know that they will be reporting out their small-group consensus or finding, this is highly motivating. It is even more motivating when they know that they will be sharing their thinking simultaneously because they will instantly see how their ideas compare to other groups' ideas. Tell students that when you bring them out of Breakout Rooms, the spokesperson will post the group's idea in Chat at your signal. This adds excitement and purpose to their interaction.

Creating these kinds of detailed instructions may seem time-consuming or even burdensome to you at first. However, you will quickly find that you can repurpose slides and handouts for new activities. You'll also find that guiding students through an interaction results in greater motivation. In other words, slowing down and pacing students actually results in excitement and focused productivity.

Strategy 3: Use permanent groups throughout the semester.

We sometimes think that students will be motivated by novelty and so when we create groupings for student interaction, we randomly assign students to small groups. However, in a remote learning context, working with a new set of collaborators can create problems for students. It's important to consider that each student in a small group may be accessing Zoom in a different way: some students may be using their phones and have no access to Chat; some students may not be using a camera because they have limited bandwidth; and some students may not be using a microphone and need to communicate using Chat. Imagine having to figure out and acclimate to this array of collaborative approaches anew at each class meeting. It's much more helpful and reassuring for students to know ahead of time who is in their group and how they will be accessing the interaction. And once in permanent groups of five to seven students, classmates can get to know each other, forge relationships, and ultimately develop feelings of accountability that result in meaningful preparation and sustained effort as they work together. During a time when students are struggling to feel connected, permanent groups support not just their learning, but also their well-being. Below you will find a process that helps create productive permanent groups.

- Begin by considering what prior experiences and prior learning will help students succeed in your class. For example, in an accounting class, an instructor may have found that historically older students and economics majors are most successful. International students' experiences may also be particularly beneficial in the class.
- The next step is to create groups that have an even distribution of students according to the characteristics that lead to greater success in the course. In the example we are using, the instructor will create heterogeneous groups, distributing a range of ages, majors, and home distance from the University across all groups.
- It's wise to create groups of about seven students, which ensures that even if one or two students are absent, groups will still have a good interaction and share a variety of ideas as they collaborate.
- Communicate your group design to your students transparently. Without this information, students will inevitably try to guess why and how they've been grouped, which could lead to suspicion and concern. When you explain how you've designed groups, you can also help students see the value in practicing interaction and collaboration in relation to their future success. Here's an example:

"I've created groups that are heterogeneous so that as you work together, you can draw on different perspectives and experiences to best solve problems together. I've tried to create a mix in each group of students with regard to year in college, major, and geographic home base. Today's employers state clearly that they are seeking problem solvers who know how to work in a diverse group and get input from one another to reach solutions."

As you design motivating small-group interactions in Breakout Rooms, don't go it alone. Reach out to an [ITLAL consultant](#) to get support and to develop your thinking.