

Breakout Rooms for Active Learning

Purpose: Breakout rooms provide structured opportunities for students to collaborate, reflect, and engage more deeply with course material. At Harvard DCE, where instructors teach adult learners from different parts of the globe and professional industries in online and HyFlex environments, breakout rooms are a powerful tool to support student-centered learning across disciplines. They promote active participation, community building, and real-time application of course concepts.

Why Use Breakout Rooms?

- 1. Enhance Engagement**

Smaller groups allow more students to share and contribute ideas.

- 2. Support Active Learning**

Breakout rooms create space for discussion, collaboration, and peer learning.

- 3. Encourage Participation**

Students who are quiet in large groups are more likely to speak in small groups.

- 4. Build Community**

Repeated small group work encourages relationships and trust among students.

Steps for Implementation

- 1. Set a Clear Purpose**

Choose an activity that aligns with your learning goals (sample activities below, but not limited to these choices):

- a. Interview:** Pairs of students take turns asking and answering questions. Great for introductions, perspective sharing, or reflective assignments.
- b. Think-Pair-Share:** Students reflect individually, then discuss in pairs, and finally share highlights with the class. Useful for concept checks, analysis, or opinion-based prompts.
- c. Jigsaw:** Students are assigned different aspects of a topic in small groups. Then, they teach their part to others in new groups, promoting peer instruction and synthesis of complex material.

d. Problem Solving: Students work together to solve a case, problem set, equation, or challenge. Encourages collaborative reasoning and reinforces understanding through explanation.

e. Peer Feedback: Students exchange drafts or ideas and provide constructive feedback. Useful for developing communication skills and deepening understanding of criteria for quality work.

f. Case Discussion: Groups analyze a real or hypothetical scenario. Encourages critical thinking, application of concepts, and diverse views.

g. Determine Group Size

- i. 2 students: Interviews, Think-Pair-Share
- ii. 3–4 students: Problem Sets, Peer Feedback
- iii. 4–6 students: Jigsaw, Case Discussions

h. Decide How to Assign Groups

- i. Randomly for variety
- ii. Manually for curated groupings
- iii. Self-selected for autonomy or topic interest

i. Establish Expectations

Clarify:

- i. What students will do
- ii. How much time students will have
- iii. Whether a deliverable is required
- iv. If roles should be assigned:

1. Facilitator: Asks the group the essential question and ensures that each member has an opportunity to speak.

2. Recorder: Takes notes on key takeaways and helps manage time by signaling the group about how much time is left.

3. Reporter: Shares key takeaways during the whole class discussion.

2. Provide Instructions Before Entry

Options:

- a.** Share a slide with step-by-step instructions or discussion questions.
- b.** Share Zoom’s “Ask for Help” feature.
- c.** Post directions in Canvas or the Zoom chat.

3. Monitor and Support

- a. Drop in briefly (inform students in advance when sharing expectations).
- b. Use Google Docs or shared platforms to monitor progress.

4. Bring It Back

- a. Debrief: Ask a few groups to report out or synthesize insights as a class.

Instructor Planning Guide

1. What will students do in breakout rooms, and why? How will you provide instructions?
2. How much time will students need? Will students use breakout rooms more than once in the class session?
3. Will students produce a deliverable? What tools will they use?
4. What criteria will you use to group them? How many students per breakout room? How will students be assigned?
5. When will you create the breakout rooms? Will you and/or your Teaching Assistant (if applicable) manage breakout rooms?

Instructor Checklist

- ☐ I've selected a breakout room activity that aligns with my learning goal.
- ☐ I've chosen an appropriate group size.
- ☐ I've decided how to assign students to rooms and communicated which member of the teaching team (co-instructor or TA, if applicable) will manage them.
- ☐ I've prepared clear instructions and expectations.
- ☐ I've identified roles (if needed) and tools for documentation.
- ☐ I've planned time for reporting out or debriefing.
- ☐ I've rehearsed managing breakout rooms if this is my first time using them.

Resource: [Zoom Break Out Rooms](#) (Harvard DCE self-paced training)