

Are virtual breakout rooms a blessing or curse in teaching and learning?

Conference or Workshop Item

Accepted Version

Kalyuzhnova, Y. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5781-8837>, Rowson, T. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1605-2927> and Khlystova, O. (2021) Are virtual breakout rooms a blessing or curse in teaching and learning? In: Learning, Teaching & Student Experience 2021, 29-30 Jun 2021, Virtual. Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/108085/>

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Are virtual breakout rooms a blessing or curse in teaching and learning?

Conference Theme: Innovations in online teaching and learning

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A virtual breakout room is a virtual space that is separate from the main online tutorial room. A tutor can create as many breakout rooms as are needed. Within each breakout room, only those present can hear the discussion and read any text chat messages, creating a more private opportunity for students to talk together and facilitating independent work. Virtual breakout rooms became widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic and it was perceived by many educators as an innovative tool in the teaching and learning (TL) process. To establish whether they achieve these aims, we conducted a pilot investigation on the effectiveness of the breakout rooms on teaching and learning, exploring facilitators and barriers for both parties (learners and educators).

For this study, we have applied a framework on Technologies in Learning, which implies that the learning process depends on both teachers and learners.

The first component of this framework is instructionism or constructionism. Instructionism refers to educational practices that are teacher-focused, skill-based, product-oriented, non-interactive, and highly prescribed. Constructivism refers to educational practices that are student-focused, meaning-based, process-oriented, interactive, and responsive to student interest. When a teacher establishes the teaching approach, the next component is building networks, which refers to learners. For students learning at a distance, online tutorials have the potential to bring together students with similar study interests and build networks of relationships to create communities of practice, which corresponds to the third component of the framework (Lave & Wenger, 1990). These two stages are interconnected, and in the reality of the online environment, students look for peers who have similar interests, use the same research methods or attend the same modules. This network could be enhanced by different group activities.

The researchers who examine breakout rooms in online teaching and learning claimed that this innovative tool could be stressful not only for learners but for teachers as well (Macdonald and Campbell 2012; Peacock et al. 2012). The teachers could feel overwhelmed by breakout room activity because preparing for online tutorials takes tutors up to 20 percent more time than preparing for face-to-face classes. In addition, module convenors/teaching assistants (TAs) also need to take into account

the additional time needed to train and practice the skills necessary for them to use the technology successfully (Laurillard 2009).

Other scholars argue that for distance learners, online learning can reduce impersonality and a sense of isolation. The building of trust, rapport, and a sense of personal belongingness in learners can enhance collaboration and success (Fasso 2013; Yamagata-Lynch 2014; McBrien, Jones, and Cheng 2009). Peacock et al (2012) investigated that an online environment is far more demanding than working face-to-face. Foronda and Lippincott (2014) investigated graduate nurse students' experiences of using the Blackboard Collaborate tool and found this to be positive, with students appreciating the enjoyment, flexibility, and convenience of online sessions. Interactivity was an important factor, and Foronda and Lippincott (2013) and Tonsmann (2014) suggested that increasingly sophisticated Blackboard Collaborate tools, such as breakout rooms, play an important role in achieving this, producing an experience that can be described as comparable to or even exceeding face-to-face tutorials.

In order to understand Henley Business School's experience in breakout rooms, we conducted a pilot study by creating a survey for learners and teachers. We received 40 responses from students and 30 responses from teachers. The survey included open and closed questions in English about the experience in breakout rooms, the personal characteristics of survey participants, and their opinion about breakout rooms. Weblink to the survey and the invitation letter to participate were sent by e-mail to 400 students and staff at Henley Business School. Our target audience consisted of Undergraduate, Master's, PhD students for at least one year full-time or part-time. We have also targeted professors, lecturers, associate professors, and teaching assistants.

The results for staff have demonstrated that 90% of staff believed that it was a good tool for the interaction and enhancing the seminars' delivery. 77% of staff is convinced that breakout rooms have increased the students' interest in seminars. Also, 84 % of staff pointed out that this format allowed them to participate in the discussion. However, 60% did not look forward to preparing the seminars using breakout rooms. Finally, 58% believed that breakout rooms increased students' knowledge about the module materials.

In terms of students, we identified that 62% of students found it a good tool to participate in discussions and to learn collaboration and communication skills. In addition, 55% of students claimed that breakout rooms increased their interest in seminars. Furthermore, 50% of students enjoyed this type of activity. On the contrary, 44% of students found this tool very stressful. Interestingly, 40% of students identified their developmental gaps. However, 34% of students found it hard to interact with peers during online breakout activities. Finally, 24% of students left seminars with breakout room activities.

The analysis of the results enabled us to identify several pros of breakout rooms, such as a useful tool for facilitating collaborative learning and interaction, a good opportunity to study remotely, time-saving. However, this tool requires IT skills, students can experience a language barrier and feel unconfident when dealing with other peers or staff. In order to overcome these issues, we have developed several guiding principles for breakout room activity, such as 1) the development of clear instructions of how to participate in breakout rooms; 2) Targeted tasks for specific problems; 3) A clear brief before starting the breakout room activities; 4) A clear debrief after each activity; 5) Individual engagement of the students to ensure diversity and inclusion. We have found these principles very helpful in terms of ensuring the safety of the online learning environment, complying with the diversity and inclusion concept, and reducing the anxiety and stress of the breakout room's participants.

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