



## Break out the Breakout Rooms!

### Introduction:

The advent of COVID-19 in spring 2020, profoundly changed the structure of instruction in higher education. At Penn State we had less than a week to adjust from classroom instruction to remote, synchronous online education. For some, the learning curve was steep. Not all instructors were familiar with CANVAS, the online course management platform, much less knowing how to use Zoom, Kaltura or Voicethread. It is very possible we will be asked to continue our remote instruction through the fall and perhaps beyond that. I am sharing a technique I used to create a more dynamic remote learning environment and encourage student interaction and sense of community. The use of in class assignments using Google docs and breakout rooms allows the students to interact, perhaps not as they did in the classroom, but still maintaining the relationships they had established through 2 years of taking classes together. These tools allowed me to talk to them in small groups and assess how they were navigating their new Covid-19 world. Small group interaction promotes a more in-depth understanding of how each student is navigating the remote learning process and the uncertainties of COVID-19. I believe the combination of in class exercises as knowledge checks, reinforcing lessons and the use of supportive personal contact improved outcomes.

### How does it work?

As a little background, my courses are small in size, around 15 students, and students typically develop strong supportive relationships with each other and sometimes with the instructor. The students have the freedom to ask questions in and outside of the classroom and this discourse was difficult to duplicate in the new remote synchronous class environment. This led to employing chat rooms to facilitate discussion. After presenting a short lecture or the day after an important lecture I divide the students into breakout rooms, usually of 2-3 students. I share a link to a Google doc designed to assess the ability of the team of students to apply the knowledge presented in lecture. I drop into each breakout room for a short visit, ask how each student is doing, how are things at home and in their other classes. Almost always they share how they are doing, if they are worried about jobs and careers, bills, family and how much they miss friends and the activities they looked forward to, such as commencement. It helps to know who might be missing classwork because they are simply having a hard time. We talk for a short time; I ask

if they have any questions regarding course material and I visit the next group. I always inform the students as I make the breakout rooms that I will be visiting, it saves both of us the embarrassment of overhearing an awkward comment. Once I leave the rooms the students have time to act like they would in class, make jokes, socialize and complete the assignment together. When there is 10-15 minutes left in the class we meet in the main session and discuss the assignment. The assignments are submitted and I award points for the submission, not much, just enough to make it worth their time and reward students for attending the Zoom lecture.

### **Why does it work?**

I believe that the students appreciate the time to interact with classmates and share ideas, much as they did in the classroom. They missed each other intensely especially early on. All of them had concerns, distinct to their own situation and they could share these in the breakout rooms. They could also joke, tease and sympathize. The breakout rooms allowed discussion and peer to peer help if students had trouble with technology or comprehension. For instance, one assignment required the students to remotely login to the program's computer lab. They then received instruction on the use of a new design software and were assigned a short in-class design requiring them to use certain functions of the software. There was a surprising amount of resistance to using the software. Students who were not comfortable with technology in classroom situations were really uncomfortable when working remotely. It was evident they were clearly stressed. Working in the breakout rooms allowed students to encourage each other and improved problem solving. In this situation pairing students so every room had a savvy, technologically oriented student made all the difference. After the breakout room assignments, the students were given an individual assignment using the same software. The next class it became evident that overall the students required additional time to master the software sufficiently to correctly use in a design. Granting additional time, communicating understanding, is essential to engage the students and maintain the environment of trust. The class period the projects were presented, various levels of competence and mastery were exhibited. In one interesting presentation the student claimed she was unable to get the software to work but was able to substitute a different program and created an end product that amazed the whole class. She was able to instruct her classmates on how to achieve the end result which we turned into an additional assignment. Awarding points for the in-class assignments is an essential element. The points encourage students to stay "Zoomed in" instead of logging on and leaving the room or simply doing something else besides engaging in the class.

I believe that engaging students is a greater challenge in the Zoom environment but not impossible. We need to recognize that Covid -19 presented just as much a challenge to our students as to us as instructors. Perhaps creativity and empathy are crucial tools we need for effective remote, synchronous teaching.

**Submitted by:**

Dr Margaret C Hoffman

Department of Plant Science, College of Agriculture

The Pennsylvania State University

State College, PA