

## Using Zoom Breakout Rooms for Course Activities

If you have ever observed students right after they've been asked to gather for a group activity, then you have probably overheard the question, "What are we supposed to do?" more times than you can count. This usually happens due to some combination of the following: (a) a lack of clear instructions, (b) a lack of attention, (c) a disconnect between what was just covered and what students are being asked to do, (d) a pace that exceeds students' mental bandwidth, or (e) logistical or classroom management issues, such as not being able to hear the instructor well. When you throw in the online element, added distractions and technological issues arise.

When used well, Zoom breakout rooms are a useful tool for online synchronous class meetings. Breakout rooms can provide space for small group discussion and activities. The ideas and tips below are meant to help you think through the design and facilitation aspects of the activity you are implementing in Zoom.

### 1. Signal that an activity is getting ready to start.

Signaling helps provide additional cues that something is getting ready to change. For students who may have been zoning out or multitasking, the subtle cue can help facilitate an attentional shift back to the class lesson.

To communicate that an activity is coming, you may consider signaling students with a simple slide (if you're sharing your screen) that says, "Activity" in a font that stands out. To liven things up, you could use imagery that is relevant to the task or provides a humorous break for the students.

If you want to be more creative, you could use a clip from a song to play each time you're going to introduce an activity. For added community building, have the students provide a shortlist or vote from a shortlist to choose what plays. For example, if one of your activities involves students answering questions together, you could play part of the *Jeopardy* theme song.

### 2. Provide directions in multiple formats.

In addition to signaling, make sure you are providing directions orally and in writing to help students with task management. While it is always a good idea to do this, it's vital in an online environment.

As you're explaining the activity, have a slide that also details the directions if you are sharing your screen. If you choose not to use slides, have the directions in Canvas or in a Google doc that students can access.

### 3. Be transparent about why students are doing the activity.

To help increase student motivation and understanding, be clear and transparent about the purpose of the activity. If students fail to see the rationale behind an activity, then they often view it as busywork or the instructor trying to pass work off onto students.

### 4. Make sure students have access to the directions before and AFTER going into their breakout rooms.

To help ensure students can still access the directions after they've been placed in their breakout rooms, consider one of the following options:

- Copy and paste the directions into the Zoom chat before breakout rooms are opened. Students can still access the chat when they've entered the breakout room.
- Have the directions as a file that you drop into the Zoom chat box before breakout rooms are opened.
- Utilize Canvas or Google docs to house activity directions (see point on the report out feature below for more information).
- You can also do announcements to all breakout rooms in Zoom; however, these announcements easily get missed.

### 5. Have a report back feature to ensure accountability.

To help ensure that students stay on task, have a means in place for them to report back the results of their activity. Here are some ideas to facilitate reporting:

- Utilize Google docs. You could have a Google doc for each separate group, or just one document that all groups work in (with clear designations and sections for the groups). You can send students the link to the Google doc in your Zoom chat prior to opening the breakout rooms. Ask each group to designate one recorder to enter their responses.
- Setup the activity as an assignment in Canvas. A designated student can submit the group's submission for you to access. This option may work better when you want to view responses later and not in real time during the class meeting.

- Have a member of each group take notes during their activity. That person is then responsible for copying and pasting the group's response into the whole class Zoom chat once the class rejoins in the main room.
- Each group could create their own slide or document with their responses. Group recorders would then share their screens (you would have to ensure your setting allow this) as they go over their response.
- Depending on your activity, the responses could be more appropriate in polling tool like Mentimeter. For example, if your lesson centered around getting students to understand how outside factors affect different parts of a system, you could have students discuss and vote in small groups. Then, students would go to the Mentimeter poll to enter their final vote using the rating poll feature. This would allow you to see results in real time. You could also implement short answer, multiple choice, or other poll types.

#### 6. Consider how you're going to provide assistance during the activity.

If your activity is rather brief, then it may be best to just ask students to call you from their breakout room if they need your help (make sure they know how to do this). Alternately, a student from the group can exit the breakout room to ask you a question in the main room, and then reenter their breakout room.

If the task is more substantial, then you may want to consider popping into rooms to check on students to see if they have questions. Just make sure students are aware that you are going to do this beforehand. Because this is a bit more intrusive, you could ask them to contact you for help if needed, as noted above.

If you're asking them to report out in Google docs or elsewhere, you can monitor that for their responses to see how things are going.

#### 7. Consider room assignment.

Assigning students to breakout rooms can take some time. If there is not a strong rationale for having students work with a particular group, then using random assignment is the easiest and fastest means. Zoom will automatically and randomly assign based on the criteria you have entered.

However, if you want students to work in particular groups (or with particular topics), here are some ideas:

- Use the pre-assignment feature in Zoom. This will allow you to set rooms up ahead of time, prior to class beginning. The one downside is that students have to be signed into their VT Zoom accounts in order for this to work properly. For students who did not sign in through their official accounts, you will have to manually move them into the breakout rooms.
- If you want students to choose between topics for discussion (i.e., themed breakout rooms), have a slide with the options on the screen as students enter the Zoom room. Ask them to send you a private chat with their choice. Alternately, students can use the Rename feature in Zoom to make their choice (this makes it a little faster to move students into their respective rooms). Students can then switch their names back after room assignments have been made.