

What a great teaching idea!



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Using structured breakout groups to engage students with course content

You use breakout rooms in your courses to allow students to engage with case examples. Can you describe your strategy and why you find it effective?

Breakout rooms in my USC Marshall School of Business MBA courses serve as dynamic platforms for students to delve into real-world case studies, fostering collaborative problem-solving and critical thinking. By immersing themselves in practical scenarios, students can apply theoretical knowledge in a simulated business environment, exercising their decision-making skills and enhancing their ability to navigate complex leadership challenges and dynamic demands of the business world.

Students prepare in advance for each class session by reviewing cases and related readings. Once class starts, they are presented with a prompt for their breakout group, along with specific directions for how to collaborate. Breakout group activities are 20-30 minutes in length, followed by 30 to 45 minutes of discussion, and can be conducted in both my on-ground and online courses. Each breakout group works on a deliverable that helps them stay on task and focused on learning objectives. In some cases, breakout groups are randomly assigned, while in other cases the students work in formal (semester-long) project teams. Students enjoy the experience and appreciate the opportunity for real-world application.

What lets you know the breakout discussions (or deliverables) are working to support student learning? Have you witnessed any “aha” moments for students or received helpful feedback?

Several indicators suggest that the use of breakout group activities and deliverables is an effective way of supporting student learning. I “visit” with each of the breakout groups in my course while they are working, and I observe very high levels of engagement and animated discussions within each group. The structure I use, where the instructions and deliverables are

aligned with my course objectives, means students are usually on task and focused on the prompt for the activity. This tells me that they are grappling with and understanding the issues in the cases being discussed. The quality of the deliverables submitted post-discussion provides insight into the depth of analysis and synthesis achieved by students. During the discussion period, which happens immediately after students complete their activity in their breakout groups, I frequently see “aha moments,” which manifest as students uncover novel insights, propose innovative solutions, or articulate newfound perspectives, affirming the efficacy of the breakout approach in facilitating deep learning experiences. Clear directions to help students complete their required deliverable are key to the success of this pedagogical technique.

What advice do you have for instructors in other disciplines who are interested in doing something similar?

For instructors in other disciplines interested in incorporating breakout group activities into their pedagogical toolkit, I'd offer several pieces of advice. The first would be to provide structure for the activity, but balance this with flexibility. Provide a framework for discussions to ensure they stay focused and productive, but also allow flexibility for students to explore diverse perspectives and ideas within their groups. Have a clear prompt and a clear (required) deliverable that's “due” at the end of the activity to encourage student groups to stay on task and maximize the learning opportunity that breakout group activities offer. The structure of the activity or the requirements of the deliverable can also be used to help foster a collaborative environment in the breakout groups where students feel comfortable sharing ideas, asking questions, and engaging in respectful debate. Your instructions and feedback can emphasize the importance of active listening and constructive feedback for students to get the most out of the activity.

I would also recommend being very “present” as an instructor. I try to “visit” (whether in person, or online) with groups briefly during the activity to address any questions or concerns. This allows me to keep time, reinforce instructions and the purpose of breakout activities, or give reminders expectations for participation and deliverables. This is also a chance to encourage collaboration and offer constructive feedback to help students understand their strengths and areas for improvement. To build on that, it's a great idea to incorporate opportunities for reflection to help students solidify their individual understanding after the group task and get the most out of the learning activity. Encourage them to identify key takeaways, challenges encountered, and strategies for improvement.

Tips from CET

Steps to consider when implementing breakout rooms or small group discussions of cases in your online or on-ground class:

1. **Clearly align breakout group activities with learning objectives.** Breakout group activities should directly connect to the learning goals of your course. Tailor discussions and deliverables to reinforce key concepts or skills.

2. **Communicate with students on what to expect and how to prepare.** You might consider sharing information such as: questions to be discussed, length of time and size of groups, deliverables, and any individual expectations
3. **Consider in advance how the activity will be assessed.** Will the activity or deliverables be graded? Will grades be for groups or individuals? How and when will you provide feedback to individuals, groups, or to the whole class?
4. **Reflect on the best approach for forming groups for your course and teaching approach.** Will groups be static or dynamic? Will they be assigned by the instructor, student-selected, or random? Will individual group members be asked to adopt specific roles in order to complete the task?
5. **Create a plan for troubleshooting.** If you plan to use technology or physical materials for the task, consider testing in advance, providing links for technical support, or planning for alternative ways to complete the activity.

What does the research say?

- Radebe, N., & Mushayikwa, E. (2023). [Bloom's Taxonomy and Classroom Talk: Exploring the Relationship Between the Nature of Small Group Discussion Tasks and the Quality of Learners' Talk](#). *African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education*, 27(1), 14–24.
- Read, D., Barnes, S. M., Hughes, O., Ivanova, I., Sessions, A., & Wilson, P. J. (2022). [Supporting Student Collaboration in Online Breakout Rooms through Interactive Group Activities](#). *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences* (Online), 17(1).
- Schenker, T. (2021). [The effects of group set-up on participation and learning in discussion forums](#). *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(5–6), 685–706.
- Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M., Hazzam, J., & Marder, B. (2023). [Collaborative learning in online breakout rooms: the effects of learner attributes on purposeful interpersonal interaction and perceived learning](#). *International Journal of Educational Management*, 37(2), 465–482.