Breakout Rooms Can Increase Student Engagement in Online Tutorials

What is this Research About?

Online tutorials can present challenges for students and instructors including keeping students engaged and presenting opportunities for collaborative learning. A way to resolve these challenges is by using breakout rooms, separate virtual rooms where small groups of students can work collaboratively. Many online platforms allow for breakout rooms, including Zoom and Courselink's Virtual Classroom tool. In this small-scale study, the researcher draws on her own experiences and the experiences of colleagues and student feedback to determine the benefits and barriers of using breakout rooms in online tutorials.

What did the Researchers Do?

The researcher maintained a diary recording her experience teaching 12 online sessions, attending 12 sessions as a student, and watching 10 recordings as a student. Her diary entries included information regarding how the breakout room was used in the tutorial, what went well, and what was challenging. The researcher collected additional input from colleagues and feedback from students. The researcher identified themes to describe the benefits of using breakout rooms, as well as any perceived or actual barriers to their use.

What did the Researchers Find?

The researcher found breakout rooms to be helpful from an instructor and student perspective. Students described that they felt more comfortable speaking in the breakout room and were more likely to raise concerns to the tutor when re-entering the main room. Activities in breakout rooms also served as a break from the main class and re-engaged students and decreased boredom. From an instructor perspective, breakout rooms provided tutors a break from presenting to a large group, giving them the chance to assist students one-on-one. Barriers to using breakout rooms included a lack of instructor confidence with the breakout room technology and technical issues with the online platform.

→ How to Implement this Research in Your Classroom

Breakout rooms give students in online courses an opportunity to collaborate and work in smaller groups. Students report feeling engaged in breakout room activities, and confident speaking in a small group. Breakout rooms also allow instructors an opportunity to check-in with students in smaller groups. Breakout rooms can be implemented using Courselink's Virtual Classroom tool or Zoom.

Tips for Successful Breakout Rooms:
- Set up breakout rooms in advance
- Plan activities for students to work on in breakout room (activities may be different than in a face-to-face tutorial)
- Provide clear guidance and all necessary tools (e.g., online whiteboard, link to Googledoc, discussion questions, etc.) to students to complete activity
- Aim for groups of 3 to 5 students in each breakout room, and ensure that each student has a task to complete
- Practice using the breakout room tool and become comfortable with the technology before the class

→ Citation

Chandler, K. (2016). Using breakout rooms in synchronous online tutorials. Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice, 4(3), 10.14297/jpaap.v4i3.216.

→ Keywords

virtual classroom
breakout rooms
small group work

interaction
online tutorials

UNIVERSITY of GUELPH

OFFICE of TEACHING AND LEARNING

Snapshot Writer: Giuliana Lowry