SYNCHRONOUS CASE TEACHING

MAKING THE MOST OF BREAKOUT ROOMS

Breakout rooms offer a chance for small groups of students to engage in conversation, deliberation and collaboration. Tips on making the most of breakout rooms follow:

For case discussion, groups of 4 to 6 students are generally recommended—large enough to include a range of views but small enough for all students in the group to make a meaningful contribution. If you are using Zoom, settings allow you to send students to breakout rooms without requiring that they "accept."

Breakout group activity can be relatively quick (5 minutes) or it can be longer (10-20 minutes), allowing students to collaborate on a focused group task. You might ask students to analyze an aspect of the case using a chart or table. Or, depending on the issues raised in the case, you might ask them to make a difficult choice, come up with a persuasive argument, or outline a strategy.

Whatever the task, it is important that the breakout activity is clear. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students sometimes spend breakout time trying to figure out what they are supposed to do. Consider giving students instructions in writing as well as verbally, for example, by posting them in the Chat feature. You can also provide each group with a shared slide or document (e.g. Google Slides) to work on together, with instructions included at the top. See page 17 for more.

PERSISTENT GROUPS

There are advantages to "persistent groups" in which the same students meet in small groups for a portion of the course. By meeting together over several case sessions, they become familiar and comfortable with one another. It will be useful to create names or numbers for these groups. The downside to this arrangement is that the chemistry of some groups may be better than others. Thus, you may want to periodically assign students to breakout activity with others that share a common interest, for example, or randomly assign students to different groups for each case-based session.

Groups should also understand what they are expected to produce/deliver when the breakout session ends and the class reunites in plenary. For example, you might ask each group to assign a spokesperson who can, if called upon, report group conclusions. You may also ask each group to "turn in" its chart, worksheet, etc.

You will probably want to call on a few groups to report out to the full class, but, especially in a large class, it is best not to ask every group to report back every time, as the content is likely to be repetitive. If each group turns in a "deliverable" of some kind, your students will be unlikely to feel they've labored in vain even if not called to report-out.

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LEVERAGING SHARED SLIDES

Breakout groups can be enhanced by various kinds of tools and collaborative software, which are especially helpful in facilitating group assignments. Shared slides or documents (for example, Google Slides) can help students feel like they are all working on the same well-defined task or deliverable through collaborative viewing, writing, and brainstorming. If using a collaborative slide-based software, see suggestions below.

+ A slide to display initial instructions for the breakout group activity, laying out what you want participants to do. A clear task, deliverable, and specified timeframe helps ensure they are using their time productively.

+ A template slide that groups can use. Tables usually work well to guide students on how much you expect them to write. This slide could also include the group number or name, and places for members to designate their role, if applicable (i.e., timekeeper, facilitator). Each group will have a slide to fill out within the larger document, the link for which you can share through the Zoom chat.

+ An added plus: you can monitor the slides as groups write on their designated slide and can identify which group(s) to call on to participate once the class reconvenes for discussion. In this way, not only are the slides visible products of group work and learning, but also the basis to conduct a discussion that is both effective and inclusive.

Consider dropping in on the different groups to see how they are faring. Students should also understand how to use the "ask for help" button, assuming that feature is available through your videoconferencing service.

If a countdown clock is included in the videoconferencing service, it can be useful to set one up in each group, so they do not lose track of time. If your videoconferencing service does not have such a feature or you choose not to use it, it may be useful to recommend that someone in the breakout group be assigned the role of timekeeper.

Send broadcast messages out to all the groups to indicate remaining time. These typically appear only briefly, so they should be short (for example, "we'll be finishing up and returning to class in three minutes" and "returning in 60 seconds").