Being creative in the face of adversity

Annual #creativeHE collection 2021

Edited by Nathalie Tasler, Rachelle O'Brien and Alex Spiers

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21. Enhancing interactive learning in an online setting: Breakout rooms and questions to ponder

By Lovleen Kushwah, Geethanjali Selvaretnam

Introduction

The academic year 2020/21 posed many challenges of moving much of the teaching activities which are usually held in-person to an online environment. The priority was to do justice to our students and deliver our usual high quality student experience. A major concern was that students will miss out on the positive spill-overs of interacting with each other, which is an enriching experience. There is evidence that group discussions among peers in higher education is beneficial (Drouin, 2010; Cambre et al., 2014; Nicol, 2010; Roehling, 2010).

The discussion and findings in this article are from the experience in a Postgraduate course in Development Economics. Because the programme ran during many lockdown restrictions, the students were unable to interact with each other in a physical space. There were 84 students enrolled in the course, who came from all over the world. Each unit had recommended readings, lecture slides, videos by the lecturers to complement the slides, discussion questions for online forum, tutorials and weekly online live sessions. The focus of our analysis in this article is about the *design and delivery of interactive opportunities*.

In past years, the students had two hours of in-person lectures per week and tutorials. In 2020/21, COVID-19 restrictions resulted in all learning outcomes being delivered online. On average, 100 minutes of video content per week was uploaded to accompany the lecture slides for that week. These were planned so that each video was about 20 minutes long and could stand alone.

Design

An important aspect of the interactive design was 'questions to ponder'. When preparing the lecture slides, at intermittent points there were appropriate questions to ponder, usually appearing at the end of each short video. First the students were supposed to think about these questions individually. The questions were also made available for online forum discussion as an additional opportunity for reflection before the synchronous session.

The questions were set in such a way to ensure students had a good understanding of the relevant economic models and their applications. Questions should be thought and framed carefully so that learning outcomes are effectively achieved. Another aspect of the questions was to encourage students to think and enable discussions about the applications of what they had learnt through the lectures and videos in the real world. Such questions did not have one perfect answer. Students can get familiar with real world applications through other students' experiences, examples and points of view. Some examples of questions are given below:

- In your country, think about customs and practices which are barriers to development. Think of how such 'culture' has evolved and what mechanisms might have pushed for these changes.
- Explain demography trends in your country or a country of your choice, highlighting demographic transitions and why these transitions may have happened.
- In your country or country(s) of your choice, think about how education is provided. How does the system affect people across different income groups? Think about the economics behind the system and people's behaviour in response.
- In your country or country of choice, explain about the institutions which need to be improved or established and think about how this can be achieved.
- When reflecting upon this use the recommended reading.
- Find at least one journal article about the impact of Health/ Education on development and give the main findings.

In one session, students were asked to search for at least two journal articles related to that week's topic and be prepared to share the summary of the papers, along with one's own thoughts about the research methodology and outcome. This was an opportunity for students to experience searching, reading and drawing out the main ideas of a paper, articulating this succinctly and critiquing.

Next, we move to the main part of the design where interaction happens through synchronous sessions. These sessions are online live Zoom meetings where some 'questions to ponder' were chosen for discussion. These weekly sessions ran for nearly two hours and saw more than 75% attendance on average. The session always started in the main room so that the lecturer could lead students into the breakout room discussion, following which, we had some time to debrief in the main room. Three breakout rooms, about 15 to 20 minutes, were planned for each synchronous session and were sandwiched between the main room discussions. Figure 1 shows the order of play of contemplating the questions.
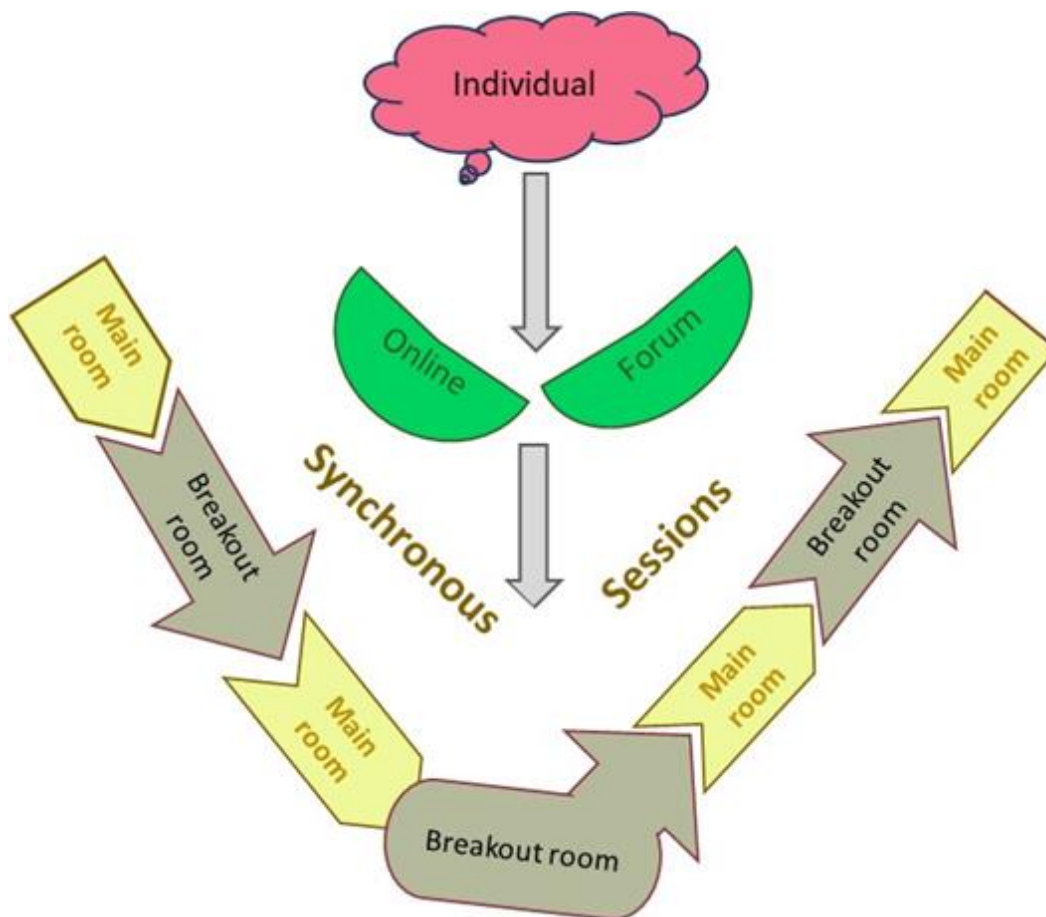
Figure 1 Timeline of discussing 'questions to ponder'.

Another important aspect of this design was allocation of students in groups that ensured learning through discussion and interaction. A poll was taken to inform us that students preferred five members in a group so that they can get additional insights while keeping it sufficiently small. According to students' wishes each breakout session was recreated for more opportunities to meet peers.

Learning through interaction

This analysis investigates not only the effectiveness of breakout rooms to enable interaction but also how we can design and link activities to facilitate learning. There are studies which explain how students can enhance their learning and generate feedback when provided with a comparator such as group discussion. (Nicol, 2021, Nicol and Selvaretnam, 2021; Kushwah and Nicol, 2021; Gilley and Clarkston, 2014).

To investigate the learning that happens through discussions in these breakout rooms, an online survey was carried out at the end of the last synchronous session. The findings will shed light on how online forums and small group discussions (either online or in-person) can be designed to deepen the learning of the course material.

As usual students were given questions to think about and write down their thoughts in advance. The students then discussed the answers to the questions in the breakout rooms. Students on their experience in the survey questionnaire on their learning during group discussions and benefit/challenges of breakout rooms in this course.

Findings

Twelve students consented to their survey responses being used for research and a summary of their responses is given below in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of Survey responses

Category	Details	%	Comments
Knowledge sharing	About other countries, Ideas, examples, experiences, thoughts	75%	"Thank you for giving us the opportunity to discuss our thinking with our classmates, it is very beneficial." "Discussions in the breakout rooms always bring up more aspects of what is being discussed which I probably wouldn't have thought of beforehand and vice versa." "It was great to learn about other country since we tend to take certain things for granted."
Enhance social interaction	Getting to know peers	42%	"I find them really beneficial because it gives me a chance to speak to my peers in an informal way and get to know them more." "I like the breakout sessions to a point, it is nice to have some form of social interaction despite the online learning this year."

Being reflective	About own answer/new aspects not considered before/oneself/comparison with others	50%	"After discussions with my other classmates, It made me think of the institutions that are inclusive, and I realised that it was possible to have a mixture of the two types." "not assuming people have prior knowledge on my country" "I therefore find it easier not to properly write down an answer beforehand but rather discuss it together." "During the first breakout session on institutions, I had answered that the institutions in my country were highly extractive… After discussions with my other classmates, It made me think of the institutions that are inclusive, and I realised that it was possible to have a mixture of the two types… gave me ideas on how to contribute positively to mine."
Develop graduate skills	Confidence, communication skills	17%	"As a non-native speaker, through conversations in breakout room I have opportunity to practice my speaking" "It is easier for the people who are not very confident talking in the main room to talk in the small rooms."
Student engagement in breakout rooms	Challenges with Muted/ Camera off/ Lack of interest and knowledge	50%	"The problem, and I'm not sure anything can be done about it, is that about 3/4 of the class students stay muted and without cameras." "we can interact with other people in the class. Unfortunately, usually not all students participate in the discussion."

When students were asked whether reflective writing about their learning through survey questions was a useful exercise that they might use in the future, 10 students answered 'yes' while the remaining 2 said 'maybe'. This reiterates the value of students being given the opportunity to reflect upon their learning and skill development through learning activities.

Recommendations and conclusion

We find there are several benefits that can be derived from designing student interactive opportunities this way. Upon reflection and analysis of this design, we can recommend the following:

- Ideal group size would be 4 or 5, depending on the class size, time availability and space.
- Have appropriate 'question to ponder' in each breakout room session which should be part of the learning outcomes for the week.
- Questions should facilitate interaction. They should enable students to bring different ideas, facts and points of view to the discussion.
- Allow enough time for discussion and interaction. Our design of three breakout sessions of 15 minutes each worked well.
- Listen to student voice and make it enjoyable and comfortable rather than a chore to be anxious about.
- Encourage students to speak and participate in breakout rooms.

There are a couple of challenges for this design in an online environment that are worth mentioning. In an online setting, the teacher cannot observe how well the students are engaging in group discussions without intruding into their group. In similar activities during in-person lectures, we can observe how students are engaging in discussions, how quieter students become more confident over time and students being able to better put their points across, listen to other points of view, etc. Another challenge was that only a handful of students engaged well on the online discussion forum. Coleman (2014) says just a message board for discussion is of not much use. Since this was just another tool to encourage students to think about the questions before coming for the discussion, there is a benefit of continuing this practice.

Despite these challenges, the online setting has an added benefit of students being able to think about the questions beforehand. This facilitated good discussion as well as reinforced the pedagogical benefit of deeper learning by comparing their own input with what other students and the teacher were saying. Student evaluations at the end of the course indicated that they were satisfied with the opportunities for interaction.

This design worked very well and can be continued not only in this course but also in other courses and disciplines. This created fantastic learning opportunities for students to think about how applications of their academic learning can happen in different settings around the world. Given that all learning objectives were delivered online and government regulations limiting social interaction, it is amazing that we were able to deliver this experience for our students. These pedagogical benefits should be considered and incorporated into the teaching design when we revert to in-person teaching. When we look

back, it has been an excellent year of developing online teaching skills, turning obstacles into opportunities!

Note: The ethics approval for this research has been obtained by the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow where this study took place.

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Happy New Year