

GROUP LEADERS FOR EFFECTIVE BREAKOUT ROOM SESSIONS

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THE PROBLEM

Like many schools currently teaching online due to the 2020 pandemic, the university is relying on Google Classroom for classroom management and Zoom for synchronous teaching. Zoom is a useful tool, as it features “breakout rooms”, so that participants of a meeting can move to smaller groups for group discussion, instead of always being in the main meeting. This is particularly useful in a class setting, as students in the breakout rooms can talk and work together more easily.

However, teachers cannot monitor all the breakout rooms at the same time and must either wait in the main meeting or move from breakout room to breakout room. Compared to on-campus classes, this makes it difficult for teachers to monitor the students and help them when they have questions.

In the first few weeks of teaching online, I also noticed that it took students longer to organize themselves and begin tasks or discussions in breakout rooms than in classrooms. This, combined with feedback from students that breakout rooms were difficult for them to use, prompted me to rethink the structure of the breakout rooms.

THE SOLUTION

I decided to implement a simple solution – group leaders. I hoped that the group leaders would facilitate group discussions and also be able to share the group’s activity with the teacher since the teacher could not be in the breakout room.

At the beginning of the semester, students were assigned new groups every time they had a breakout room session. However, with the group leaders, students stay in one group of four to five people all class. Group leaders are assigned at the beginning of each lesson according to the class list order; I mark who has done it each day to ensure that all students get an equal chance to be the leader. In the event of student absence or tardiness, I simply skip them and assign them as group leader the next time they are in class.

Group leaders have several jobs. These jobs were briefly discussed in class when we began using group leaders and are included in the daily PowerPoint slides for student reference. While this was useful at the time, in the future I hope to have a more in-depth discussion and gain more student input and ideas in negotiating the role of the leader. I discuss this in more detail later in this paper. The group leaders’ jobs include:

1. Starting the conversation - for example, if the group is discussing a question, the leader reads the question to the group.
2. Ensuring that everyone in the group has a chance to share their opinion by asking each person for their input.
3. Acting as a liaison between the group and the teacher / class - if the group has a question, the leader is in charge of using, or asking someone else to use, the call feature on Zoom to ask the teacher to join them. The leader should also be prepared to share the group's ideas with the teacher when the teacher visits the breakout room. In addition, the leader has the option to share ideas and answers with the class or assign a group member to do so as a "reporter."

As the semester progressed, I noticed several benefits of having appointed group leaders through observation of the breakout rooms:

1. Better time management – since students know who will start and guide their discussion, they do not spend extra time deciding that by themselves.
2. Improved participation – with an assigned leader, the strong personalities in the class do not always end up in the leader position, allowing others a chance to lead. Furthermore, since leaders make sure to ask each person to participate, students who are shy or quiet get a chance to share their opinions.
3. Possible increased English use in breakout rooms. If a group finishes talking about an assigned topic, the group leader can continue the conversation by asking follow-up questions or suggesting a different topic. Also, I observed a few instances of leaders encouraging their group to use English, which suggests that some group leaders may feel empowered by their leadership position to encourage their classmates to talk about a problem in English, instead of defaulting to Japanese.

I am not the only person who has noticed the benefits of having group leaders; in general, informal feedback indicates that students have also been positive about having this added structure in the breakout rooms, and many students seem to be more comfortable with one person as a designated leader.

FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

As with any new activity, there remains room for improvement in using group leaders. The implementation evolved as the semester went on; in some cases, I realized there were more issues I wanted to address with the group leaders and felt as though there was not enough time to fully discuss these with the class. In addition, assigning group leaders at the beginning of each class can take time which could be more effectively used in other ways. Finally, some students may be uncomfortable acting as leader or may be overpowered by stronger personalities in the group. Therefore, in the event of online classes next semester, I plan to make several changes.

First, to provide more support for students, we will do some group leader training at the beginning of the semester. This will include a discussion of what they expect from their group

leaders, what, if anything, they need to do to prepare for being a group leader and the creation of a list of useful phrases for group leaders to use. This information will then be made available on Google Classroom for students to reference throughout the semester. This will not only help students feel more comfortable acting as a leader, it will also create a common understanding of the expectations of the leader's role and resources which students can refer to throughout the semester.

Currently, I assign group leaders at the beginning of class. However, I would like to make a schedule for group leaders and post it on Google Classroom. This way, students will know when their turn is coming, and they can mentally prepare. Hopefully, this will be beneficial to students who do not want to be the leader or who feel uncomfortable being the leader. It could also tie in well with the reflective journaling that some students do in their classes.

This semester, my students have been completing reading reports using Flipgrid. In these reports, students give basic information about a text they have read, such as title and summary. They also reflect on the text and connect it to their life before finally asking their classmates a discussion question. Their classmates can then make a response video sharing their answers to the question. However, next semester I plan to have students give smaller reports in the breakout rooms. If group leaders are assigned from the beginning of the semester, they can also be assigned to do their reports on the same day, so they can integrate being the group leader and giving their report to their group. Although the details of this are still being worked out, this would most likely happen as part of a warm-up. The leader would share the details of their text (title, summary, and so forth) before leading the group in a short discussion based on questions the leader has created. Thus, the assignment would actually change to become a more interactive discussion. Each student would be a group leader around three to four times during the semester, so they would prepare and lead this short report / discussion three or four times, each time using a different text from their journal.

Finally, I would like to do some reflection with students to see how, and if, the experience of being group leader affected either their English use or their view of themselves as learners. In addition, I hope to gain more concrete knowledge of why students are so in favor of having group leaders.