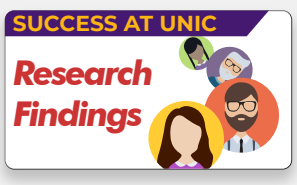
Dr Christine Savvidou & Dr Katarzyna Alexander



Dr C Savvidou And Dr K Alexander Talk About Their Research Findings On Breakout Rooms

In 2020/2021, we attended several TELC-run training sessions and began integrating several new digital tools and resources into our online classes. By Spring semester 2021, we were particularly interested in exploring students' experiences and perceptions of working in online groups and finding out what happened behind the 'closed digital doors' of Breakout Rooms (BRs). Using a mixed methods research approach, we gained feedback from 132 university students based on survey and interview data.

Overall, findings revealed students' ambivalence towards the use of BRs; on the one hand, students acknowledged the potential of BRs for creating interactive and engaging online lessons; on the other hand, they pointed to some limitations in the implementation of BRs. Thus, we offer some initial findings as we reflect on ways to improve practice in online teaching.

Why use BRs? An overview

Student feedback was generally positive. Students felt that working in BRs made them feel part of community (58.3%), helped them to forge new friendships (56.5%), and receive support from other students (47.3%). Students agreed that BRs increased the interactivity of online classes (66.7%), allowed them to exchange ideas (64.8%), and helped them to understand the lesson (49%).

Half of all students indicated that time in BRs was 'well-spent', while 43.5% agreed that BRs generated motivation for learning and allowed them to re-engage in lessons and 'wake them up'. While a minority of students (18.5%) described BRs as 'boring', most feedback was positive with students commenting that online classes that included BRs were more engaging that those that did not.

However, alongside positive feedback, findings suggest that BRs did not engage all students, with 38.9% of students stating that not all classmates participated. Additionally, some students commented on a sense of unease and feeling 'uncomfortable', 'awkward' and 'anxious' when working in BRs. Thus, while BRs may help create an online learning community similar to the physical classroom, consideration needs to be given to creating motivating activities and providing conditions for positive social interactions.

Some concerns

Specifically, students expressed concerns about the use of BRs in several areas including the following:

(1) Fairness and equity: Students voiced concerns around unfair and unequal peer interactions. Some students reported that with the absence of the lecturer, they felt unable to express opinions for fear of negative judgement. Other students were concerned with the unequal distribution of work. Yet again, the absence of the lecturer from the BR meant that some students failed to participate, leaving others to complete the assigned task.

(2) Group size and composition: Based on experience, students expressed preference for groups of 2-5 people. While some students felt that randomly assigned groups provided opportunities for working with different people, many students expressed a preference for self-selected groups.

(3) Task type, assessment and incentives: Most students (70.3%) believed that 'type of task determined the success of BRs' and this finding was echoed in interview data. Students expressed preference for specific problem-solving tasks with clear guidelines (e.g. writing a small programme in programming or correcting/completing some sentences in English classes). They also reported that lack of obligation and/or incentives for students to provide feedback on the task, led to their disengagement within BRs.

(4) Use of cameras: Most students (67.7%) reported that they failed to turn on cameras due to lack of obligation ('I haven't had any course that required me to put my camera on'), group norms ('I don't turn my camera on and no one else does') and concerns for privacy ('I don't want my classmates looking at my family'). However, without the face-to-face interaction that cameras provide, depth of communication may be limited.

Suggestions for using BRs

Based on these preliminary findings, we offer these suggestions for lecturers who are currently using or considering using BRs in their teaching:

- Organise students into small groups and pairs;
- Allow students to choose partners if possible BUT consider also group rotation which also allows students to try working with different people – it often depends on the group;
- Increase lecturer presence in monitoring and participating in BRs;
- Choose specific tasks with detailed instructions and clear explicit outcomes;
- Assign task roles and make individuals accountable;
- Expect feedback from all groups;
- Ask students to turn on their cameras, if you feel it will benefit them in a particular task.

The full study is currently being prepared to be submitted for publication.