

Transforming your teaching for online learning:

FACILITATING SMALL-GROUP ACTIVITIES

OVERVIEW & AIMS

This guide addresses planning and delivering teaching sessions that incorporate synchronous 'breakout' activities within larger group sessions, or asynchronous small-group assignments within modules (please note that the guide does not deal with specific approaches linked to Problem-Based Learning or Case-Based Learning). Assigning learner-to-learner tasks in online environments has the same educational and social benefits as in face-to-face classrooms, but requires a different kind of scaffolding to account for more intermittent contact with the tutor.

THE BASICS

1. Select and design breakout or group assignments to enable students to achieve clearly identified purposes that are linked to learning outcomes, and make sure these are communicated to your students.
2. Decide whether the intended learning will be best achieved by synchronous or asynchronous activity.

Synchronous discussion tasks are good for activities that benefit from dynamic interaction, immediate responses and/or collective problem-solving, and at points in the curriculum when you want to build community engagement. For this type of task:

- Provide students with clearly expressed preparatory tasks and prompts to direct their learning.
- Keep instructions simple enough for students to be able to do the task without getting confused or distracted by an overly complex session plan.
- Choose a group size, configuration, and process to best facilitate learning. For example, allocate roles such as discussion leader, moderator, or note-taker on a rotational basis, or specify turn-taking in response to preparatory tasks.
- Keep discussions relatively short: the pace in online forums can be fast, especially if students make use of chat functions, or other forms of 'back-chat' such as WhatsApp at the same time.
- Build in ways of recording and summarizing learning from live activity. For example, convene a whole-group round-up session, or require students to generate a shared document or space for recording collaborative work.

This can be achieved by using [Big Blue Button](#) for synchronous breakout activities along with live feedback sessions, or with [MS Teams](#) if the groups will remain the same throughout a module or academic year.

Asynchronous groupwork tasks are good for sharing and building on individual research and reflection. For this type of task:

- Provide clear instructions on how, where and when students should engage and respond within their group: students need to know how often they need to engage (such as a minimum number of posts they should contribute to a forum each week), when the activity should begin and end, and how the activity links to prior and future learning.
- Consider providing prompts, exemplars or model answers so students know what standards to work towards.
- Build in check-in points so you can motivate, challenge, correct, or answer questions. Students will want to know you are keeping track. This could be via intermittent contributions to a Discussion Forum and scheduled Q&A slots.

Use [Canvas Discussion Forums](#) for the engagement between group members in module assignments or problem-solving activities where engagement from students is through discussion only. MS Teams can also be used for activities which require more functionality such as group calls, notes, shared spaces and documents for collaborative production of group work such as reports, presentations, or posters.

3. For all kinds of small-group activity establish and repeat formats that students become familiar with. For example, ask students to generate individual answers, share their responses to a question, reflect and revise. Or use the formula: think, pair, and share.
4. Encourage students to be active and to help each another, for example by providing places for them to share materials and/or collectively trouble-shooting technology issues.
5. Provide guidelines to set standards for student contributions, such as how to ask and respond to questions in live discussions, or how to give constructive feedback to peers. Specify online session etiquette and boundaries of how you wish your students to be active during the online session. Examples include keeping microphones muted or unmuted, web cams on or off, and virtually raising hands to speak.
6. Ask students for feedback on what is and isn't working so that you can adapt your approach. Give students enough time to understand instructions for the upcoming group activity to ensure they have enough time to set up their devices to participate, to reduce delay at the start of sessions.

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

Big Blue Button	MS Teams	Canvas Discussion Forums
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous activities • Breakout rooms within live session • Discussions in small groups on certain topics or tasks • Small group activities to feed back to large group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of groups with module or academic year for on-going group work • Dedicated space for collaborative ongoing work • Share and store collaborative resources and notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asynchronous sessions for small group tasks • Pre session learning activities • Post session assignments • Q&A session with academic lead • FAQ for learning content • Social group learning area

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Learning Technology Quick guides for staff [canvas module](#).

Direction Correction: Getting the Discussions You Want by Rhonda Bondie. [Paper](#) within Dos and Don'ts for Good Discussions, April 23, 2020 Journal, Volume 15, Issue 16.

Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) online teaching toolkit, available on their [website](#).

School of Education and Professional studies [YouTube video](#) on discussion forums.

This guide as produced by CIDE and CTiE.