'Give me a minute, I just need to put you into your groups': transferring group activities to the online space using breakout rooms

Gemma Carr
University of Leeds

Abstract

Transitions to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic challenged how group-based activities were delivered. This paper explores how a quantitative social research design project allowed insights into digital pedagogy. Transition to group working in breakout rooms required planning to be centred on an imagined student learning experience. As a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), this included understanding the dynamics by group, supporting learning in the digital space, presenting accessible materials, facilitating the learning process across multiple groups, and (re)planning teaching sessions successfully for the online milieu. Breakout rooms are dispersed digital learning spaces and were in use at a time when students were experiencing significant declines in mental health, challenges with digital exclusion, disengagement, and a lack of online confidence in peer-to-peer relationships (Peper et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2020). Addressing these key factors required a more student-centred planning approach, based on individual and group needs, in ways which were not seen within face-to-face delivery. Drawing on experiences of the potential for isolation and uncertainty for students in breakout room spaces, I reimagined the digital space in terms of material presentation, facilitating student empowerment, and communicating and managing across multiple breakout rooms concurrently. These strategies contributed towards positive student experiences, providing pedagogical insights into newer online teaching practices for GTAs.

Introduction

Online learning is nothing new. Online methods have been a main source of learning for institutions such as the Open University since 1969 (LSBF, 2019). Yet when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, students and teachers were propelled into an uncertain chaos. The move from face-to-face learning shifted quickly to online, enabling students to continue with their learning. Whilst many students embraced the move and adapted with ease, difficulties arose across degree programmes. Lab work, for example, was suspended causing delays and difficulties for students who were based in STEM subjects (Sonbuchner et al., 2021). Social sciences and humanities however, continued to some extent, yet modifications of delivery needed to be planned and executed with some precision to enable students to continue with required module outcomes. Further, GTAs had to quickly adapt their pedagogical approach to ensure delivery of materials remained consistent and met module and teaching outcomes.

This reflective paper examines my experience as a GTA in a Scottish university, teaching on a research methods module. The module at hand required students to work as part of a group, designing and researching their own quantitative topic. Pre-COVID, this module enabled students to utilise a variety of different methods, including observation, parametric tests, and questionnaires. However, in addition to moving online, students had to remain socially distant, which further prevented different methods being employed. This limited scope meant students in this cohort all used online questionnaire methods as a group, and then analysed their data in the software package SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) individually, as part of their individual assignments. Teaching was delivered via MS Teams, with students working in breakout rooms in their groups.

History and experience

The history of distance learning stems back from as early as the 1700's (LSBF, 2019). In the modern millennia however, distance learning has grown at a significant pace with access to resources such as the internet and online university systems. Nevertheless, when the switch to online learning occurred during the pandemic, student engagement was said to be at an all-time low, with many expressing their disappointment at the move to online (Abbasi et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2021). In part, this feeling was due to a variety of different reasons, such as poor internet connection, lack of adequate space, no privacy, electrical equipment not meeting the requirements of software, unfamiliarity with video platforms, unclear expectations, accessibility needs not being met, feeling uncomfortable using video cameras and/or speaking out using microphones (Alfadhel and Alorani, 2021; Bashir et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020).

At the start of the pandemic, I had one year's teaching experience as a GTA, allowing me to re-plan my sessions using the knowledge I had gained previously. Although I had no prior familiarity with the MS Teams software, I was fortunate enough to be offered some online training prior to teaching online. As the module I was working on required students to work in groups, it was important for me to understand how to operate breakout rooms. Although a relatively easy task, using breakout rooms as a main function caused several issues in teaching.

Planning and delivery of the sessions

Previous experience of this module meant that planning sessions required minimal time as previous materials were available to me and I knew the necessary teaching outcomes. Nevertheless, there were new challenges to contend with, which I could not foresee prior to the first online session. Lee et al. (2021) argue online teaching delivery is specifically designed to account for technological

characteristics and is designed to be pre-planned. The pandemic, however, saw an emergency shift into digital spaces, and those who had not taught online before had to reimagine teaching delivery.

The seminar group consisted of twenty-eight 2nd year students who had previously worked together and I had taught in their first year on another research module. In this regard, the students had some familiarity with my pedagogical methods and with each other. Beqiri et al. (2009: 97) state "in the traditional classroom setting, although students may frequently struggle to solve a difficult problem, they also enjoy access to immediate help from the instructor or peers". I was aware that in the online environment, students were still likely to have some element of comfort as they were already familiar with me and their peers. However, this did not deter from the fact that the first session required some further in-depth discussion on how the seminars had been planned and how they would work in practice. This included reassuring the students that the online delivery was new to both me and them, and that any issues arising would be dealt with, where possible. All sessions began with recapping content provided in the lectures. The students also had the opportunity to ask me questions before they had been placed in the breakout rooms. Students were reminded at the start of each session that I would enter each breakout room throughout the seminar. This enabled me to monitor student participation and engagement with each other and to allow students to ask questions.

Breakout rooms on MS Teams enable the session leader to place students into separate groups, separate from the main room. Rooms are created either automatically by inputting how many rooms are required, with the software assigning students to rooms at random, or by manual input (Microsoft, 2022). Students within this module were assigned to a group manually and this process needed to be repeated at the beginning of each session. Within the rooms, students still have all the features that the main room provides such as chat, raise hand, microphone, and video. Students also have access to the chat within the main room. Therefore, during the seminar, they could ask me any questions whilst the session was ongoing or invite me to enter the breakout room.

The training session provided by university staff was informative and gave me some confidence to navigate the software. That said, issues still arose. Placing students into breakout rooms also took time as there were twenty-eight students. To simplify the process, I made a chart which listed each student in their group, however the design of MS Teams meant that students were placed into their groups by being manually assigned as they appeared on the MS Teams participant list. The process, however, became easier as the weeks progressed as I would start to assign students to their breakout room as soon as they entered the session. Nevertheless, this was not always a seamless process. Many of the students on the research module were already waiting for the session to start when I arrived, despite being five minutes early; they were eager to learn! Challenges also arose when students were absent from the sessions and this caused difficulties when there was only one member of a group present. This presented me with an opportunity to speak with the student on a one-to-one basis, enquiring how group work was going; making sure that the student had the necessary resources to continue with their group research task.

Agustina and Suharya (2021: 42) state that the use of breakout rooms facilitates student-led tasks and group work. Working online in small groups can promote confidence and a sense of security as there is physical and digital space between the students and teacher (Agustina and Suharya, 2021: 44). As this module required students to work on their own research topic, it was designed as a self-directed, student-led approach of independent study. This meant that my interactions with each group varied according to what guidance they required. My pedagogical approach, therefore, had to be adapted within each group: Having previously taught this module in a classroom setting, students appeared to be more engaged in their breakout groups compared to face-to-face sessions in the previous year. Students appeared to be more confident in asking questions and making use of the

additional opportunity to discuss the task. In this experience, I found learning in the digital space can provide many positives for student engagement. The absence of physical presence of the tutor can provide the students with a *safer* space to work at their own pace. They are completely self-accountable to complete their work without the constant supervision of the tutor. However, not all students may feel comfortable working in the digital space, and challenges can arise when technology fails to support the online learning platform.

Moreover, these issues were likely to contribute to the decline in student mental health with many students reported being 'scared and confused' regarding lockdown rules (Stubley, 2020). I recognised the emergent uncertainty concerning moving learning onto online platforms and this was a particular concern in relation to group tasks (Peper et al., 2021). To assure students, each session began with enquiring about their wellbeing and reaffirming that I was available to answer any questions in relation to their learning. Students were advised in each session that they could contact me outside of the seminar.

In my own experience of operating breakout rooms, additional challenges arose when students did not have access to the most up to date version of MS Teams, and where their device did not support the function itself. Those who were using mobile phones for instance could not access the breakout rooms. When this occurred, I had to manage these students separately. This included speaking with their group and asking them to use chat function or email to communicate with the student who could not join the breakout room. There were further issues when students could not gain access to the session itself because of limited or poor Wi-Fi connection. It is likely that students who did experience technical issues were frustrated and this could have caused disengagement from the module.

Monitoring group work in breakout rooms

Unlike the classroom space, the digital environment is less personal. In a classroom the tutor may move around each group to see if any guidance is required, or if the group needs to ask any questions. The tutor's presence is continual throughout the face-to-face session. Breakout rooms, however, remove the personal factors and in some instances when I joined students in their groups, I felt there was an element of intrusion. Overall, all groups were ready with questions regarding their project, which ranged from styles of questions to use, how to complete their ethics forms, guidance on recruitment, and length of questionnaires. If students had no questions, I engaged with them by asking questions to monitor the stages of group work and to maintain the 'digital' relationship, in addition to offering assurance that I was engaged with their learning as much as them. Additionally, assuring the students that this was a new experience for myself facilitated the learning experience as the students appeared to feel comfortable and able to express their concerns freely.

It is suggested that within a face-to-face setting, the relationship between student and teacher is accepted as a given; with feedback being readily available (Dumford and Miller, 2018; Wijekumar et al., 2006). In the digital learning environment, the delivery of feedback and guidance needs to be adjusted to suit the milieu (Dumford and Miller, 2018: 453). In all sessions my camera and microphone were switched on, so students could grasp some sense of my body language. Therefore, when feedback and guidance were required, students could read my cues (Irani, 2019: 4). Nevertheless, most of the students in this cohort did not have their cameras switched on. Not being able to see the student created some barriers when communicating as I was unable to gauge how my feedback and guidance was being understood. At the beginning of each session, I tried to overcome this barrier by encouraging them to use the chat function, the raise hand feature, the microphone, and reminded them they could contact me outside of the session if they needed further guidance and support.

Although working in the digital space is said to hinder the process of group work (Dumford and Miller, 2018), the use of breakout room provides some positives to online teaching and learning (Agustina and Suharya, 2021: 45). There is a clear shift from the role of the teacher being at the centre of learning which empowers the student to be at the centre (Agustina and Suharya, 2021: 45). As such, breakout rooms further enable students to work collaboratively and to use a self-directed approach, as the teacher is effectively removed from the teaching space for a period of time. This was evident in my experience with students appearing to be engaged with their research projects with minimal interruption from myself.

Teaching in personal spaces

The digital environment can make students feeler safer but can also be invasive. Carr and Tatham (2021) illustrate that online platforms diminish the private divide between individuals. Face to face teaching does not give access to the private spaces of individuals. In a classroom, students can make assumptions about the tutor based on their appearance and body language (Carr and Tatham, 2021: 11; Knapik, 2006). Digital spaces, however, recreate these assumptions as students can see into the tutor's private space. In the digital setting, students only see a limited view of the tutor (Carr and Tatham, 2021). Similarly, tutors may see into the private spaces of students such as viewing an unmade bed or personal photographs on their walls. Such insights influence both student and tutor to make assumptions about one another. However, as previously mentioned, students had already been taught by me in another module, and so a relationship had already been established.

In your own space you are likely to feel more at ease than when you are learning in a classroom (Irani, 2019: 5). As noted earlier, students were less likely to have their cameras switched on within the session. Speaking with fellow GTAs, there were debates regarding the 'pros' and 'cons' of having the camera on during the online sessions. However, within the institution I was working for, this was not an issue that caused concern. Students needed to feel comfortable in such settings and therefore it was at their discretion to decide if they wished to have their cameras switched on. Having the camera on in the online learning space can cause some distractions. Human nature makes us inquisitive beings and background interactions online can lead to students and teachers being distracted (Peper et al., 2021). In my experience, not having cameras switched on could have contributed to increased student engagement. In this regard, being present in their own space, with the privacy of no camera use, contributed to positive outcomes in learning.

Conclusion

Whilst online teaching delivery is not a new concept, many GTAs were faced with moving to online platforms during COVID-19. Modules that had been designed for face-to-face delivery became adaptable overnight, as teaching staff had to navigate the complex issues of online delivery. Moving into the digital teaching space meant I had to reimagine the student experience. Delivery of materials and communication was paramount to the planning process, and this included offering more opportunities for students to ask questions and to receive ongoing feedback.

Operating breakout rooms presented some small organisational issues such as the time taken to place each student in their groups, problems with technology, and lack of in-person rapport. These challenges meant I had to quickly reimagine how I interact in group sessions. In general, students felt comfortable working in private group spaces in the virtual space as there were less distractions than in a physical classroom. My physical absence was transformed into the virtual, meaning I had to

adapt my teaching sessions. At best, this presented as a positive outcome for students as it is likely they felt more comfortable within their own spaces.

Moving into personal spaces crosses boundaries between private divides. In this experience however, camera usage was not generally used by students. This provided them with privacy and facilitated their learning, allowing them to focus on the tasks required. Overall, my experience was positive as students took on the self-directed learning approach which was required of them. As such, my interactions in breakout rooms contributed to students feeling empowered as they felt comfortable asking questions and engaged with each other in their private spaces.

Teaching in online spaces can be a positive experience for GTAs as it enables them to reimage their teaching practices and their course delivery. Breakout rooms in particular can facilitate student group learning as the distance between the GTA and students may increase student confidence in a less invasive private space. GTAs should consider student preferences for camera use and the benefits of fewer background distractions.

References

Abbasi, S., Ayoob, T., Malik, A. & Memon, S.I. (2020) Perceptions of students e-learning during COVID-19 at a private medical college. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences,* 36(4), pp. S57-S61. DOI: https://doi.org/10.12669%2Fpjms.36.COVID19-S4.2766

Agustina, E. & Suharya, T. (2021) Zoom breakout room for students' collaborative skill enhancement in history learning during COVID-19 outbreak. *International Journal of Research in Counseling and Education,* 5(1), pp. 41-46. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24036/00430za0002

Alfadhel, L. & Alorani, L. (2021) Family roles in their children's education: a critical discussion of the future roles of families in educating their child with special educational needs and disabilities. *Hillary Place Papers*, 9 Available from: https://hp:education.leeds.ac.uk/issues/issue-six-2020-2021/ [Accessed 1 September 2022].

Bashir, A., Bashir, S., Rana, K., Lambert, P. & Vernallis, A. (2021) Post-COVID-19 adaptations; the shifts towards online learning, hybrid course delivery and the implications for biosciences courses in the higher education setting. *Frontiers in Education,* 6, pp. 1-13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.711619

Beqiri, M.S., Chase, N.M. & Bishka, A. (2009) Online course delivery: an empiricial investigation of factors affecting student satisfaction. *Journal of Education for Business,* 85(2), pp. 95-100. DOI: 10.1080/08832320903258527

Carr, G. & Tatham, K. (2021) 'Excuse me, I have a delivery' The [re] construction of interview 'space' in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Hillary Place Papers*, 9. Available from: https://hp:education.leeds.ac.uk/issues/issue-six-2020-2021/ [Accessed 15 May 2022]

Dumford, A.D. & Miller, A.L. (2018) Online learning in higher education: exploring advantages and disadvantages for engagment. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education,* 30(3), pp. 452-465. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-018-9179-z

Howard, E., Khan, A., K., & Lockyer, C. (2021) *Learning during the pandemic: review of research from England*. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/learning-during-the-pandemic/learning-during-the-pandemic-review-of-research-from-england [Accessed 31 August 2021]

Irani, E. (2019) The use of videoconferencing for qualitative interviewing: opportunities, challenges, and considerations. *Clinical Nursing Research,* 28(1), pp. 3-8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1054773818803170

Knapik, M. (2006) The qualitative research interview: participants responsive participation in knowledge making. *The international Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 5(3), pp. 77-93. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500308

Lee, K., Fanguy, M., Bligh, B. & Lu, X.S. (2021) Adoption of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic analysis of changes in university activity. *Educational Review*, 74(3), pp. 460-483. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1978401

LSBF (2019) *The history of online learning - a guide*. Available from: https://www.lsbf.org.uk/blog/online-learning/the-history-of-online-learning-a-guide [Accessed 31 August 2022].

Microsoft (2022) *Use breakout rooms in teams meetings.* Available from: https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/use-breakout-rooms-in-teams-meetings-7de1f48a-da07-466c-a5ab-4ebace28e461[Accessed 5 September 2022]

Peper, E., Wilson, V., Martin, M., Rosegard, E. and Harvey, R. (2021) Avoid zoom fatgue, be present and learn. *NeuroRegulation,* 8(1), pp. 47-56. DOI: doi:10.15540/nr.8.1.47

Sahu, P. (2020) Closure of universities due to coronavirus disease 2019 [COVID-19]: impact on education and mental health of student and academic staff. *Cureus,* 12(4), pp. 1-6. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7759%2Fcureus.7541

Savage, M.J., James, R., Magostro, D., Donaldson, L.C.H., Nevill, M. & Hennis, J. (2020) Mental health and movement behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic in UK university students: Prospective cohort study. *Mental Health and Physical Activity,* 19, 100357. Available from: https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/41003/1/1370748_a1190_Magistro.pdf

Sonbuchner, T.M., Mundorff, E.C., Lee, J., Wei, S. and Novick, A. (2021) Triage and recovery of STEM laboratory skills. *Journal of Microbiology and Biology Education*, 22(1), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v22i1.2565

Stubley, P. (2020) Coronavirus: students 'scared and confused' as university halls locked down 'without warning'. *Independent.* Available from: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/manchester-university-lockdown-students-police-coronavirus-b632513.html [Accessed 19 June 2023]

Wijekumar, K., Ferguson, L. & Wagoner, D. (2006) Problems with assessment validity and reliability in web-based distance learning enviroments and solutions. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia,* 15(2), pp. 199-215. Available from: https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/6259/