



THINK TANK: Change

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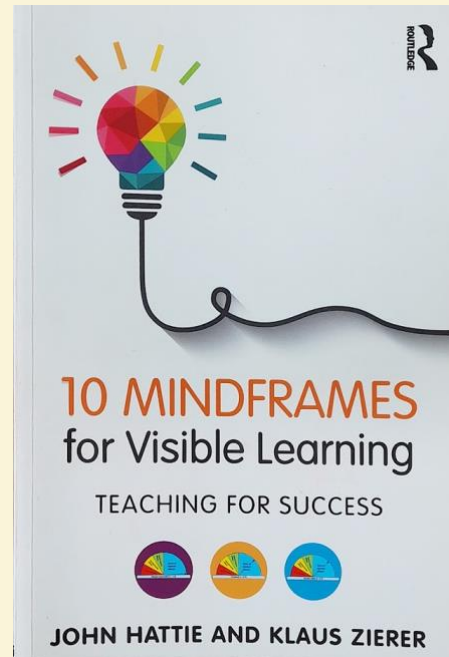
Student Perspectives on Breakout Rooms



In their discussion of educational expertise, Hattie and Zierer ([2018](#)) advise teachers to “engage as much in dialogue as monologue” (p. xv). In the days of the traditional classroom, I (Meredith) would randomly pair students up and prescribe a topic to discuss. Setting this up would occupy a considerable amount of class time. In a class of twenty, I would number the students on each side of the classroom from one to ten. Then I would ask the “ones” to make eye contact with each other, the “twos” to make eye contact, and continue until I reached the “tens.” Then I would specify the desks where each pair would sit. Sometimes students would get confused about who

their partner was and I would have to spend a few more minutes sorting this out. Then I had them regularly change partners as one member of each pair rotated in a clockwise direction every few minutes.

This was a useful activity, firstly, because the physical act of moving to a different seat relieved them of the tedium of sitting in the one place for ninety minutes. As Hattie and Zierer (2018) warn in their discussion of classroom management, “boredom is the effect size with the most negative impact” (p. 46). The second reason it was useful was that the students’ expressions suddenly changed to a smile when they met their new partner. Regarding the role of the smile in learning, Hattie and Zierer (2018) remind us that a teacher’s role is to “make sure humor and cheerfulness have a place in our classrooms” (p. 136).



“Learning is effective to the extent that it is enjoyable” (Hattie & Zierer, 2018, p. 136).

This procedure became much simpler when my teaching moved to the Zoom platform during the pandemic. Each time I wanted to put the students into random pairs I just had to open a [Breakout Room](#). I would count the number of attendees, and then halve that number to create the right number of rooms. The next and subsequent times I used the Breakout Room function I

would simply press “Recreate,” and then each student would find themselves with a new partner. I would visit pairs of students in the rooms and join in on their discussions. It seemed to be almost as effective as in a traditional classroom. However, I could only join in on one pair at a time and I no longer had an overview of all of the other pairs.

Hattie and Zierer (2018) discuss the importance of “privileging student voice about their learning” (p. 2) and with this in mind, my seminar student Takuma Sasakura decided to consult some other students about their experience of Breakout Rooms. Fifty-seven responded to a questionnaire and eight participated in interviews. His findings are summarized below:

PROS

1. Breakout rooms create a relaxing place among close friends or students to chat with each other.
2. Students can expand their networks through being paired with students who they do not know when teachers use the “recreate” button.
3. Every student has the chance to talk with teachers one-on-one, and can have better quality discussions.
4. Students can make use of the opportunity to express their opinions and feelings.
5. Students can listen to other students' opinions, feelings, and perspectives.

CONS

1. Teachers have to end the Breakout Room sessions all at once, and students feel stressed because of the limited time to talk with partners.
2. If an engaged student is paired with a disengaged student, the former becomes demotivated.
3. Some students feel awkward talking to students who they do not know.
4. Silence often happens due to a lack of a dynamic class atmosphere.
5. As teachers cannot be omnipresent, some students slack off in the room.



Before Takuma Sasakura collected this data, I was aware of the pros but not the cons. Addressing these will be my next task.

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Meredith Stephens is Takuma's supervisor at the university. She graduated from Adelaide University in 1982, and Macquarie University, Sydney, in 1999. Her writing mainly concerns English language pedagogy.

References

Hattie, J., & Zierer, K. (2018). *10 mindframes for visible learning: Teaching for success*. Routledge.