

Student-to-Student Cooperation in Virtual Learning without Breakout Rooms

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Abstract

Education has increasingly turned to virtual learning in response to greater awareness of the benefits of virtual learning, increased technology to support learning outside of educational institutions, and, sadly, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, awareness has also increased of the benefits of student-student cooperation, and technology to facilitate that cooperation has multiplied. Unfortunately, not all students have access to that technology. This article shares ideas, both low-tech and high-tech, to enhance the functioning of groups in virtual learning environments.

Introduction

The use of small groups has the potential to bring cognitive and affective benefits to education (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Cooperative learning and other forms

of group activities are well-known internationally among teachers at all levels of education. However, these activities were conceived for in-person classrooms, where

students could usually form groups easily by arranging their seating. Indeed, in some classrooms, students sitting in groups, e.g. groups of two with their desks side-by-side, represents the default seating arrangement.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly disrupted education. Schools closed, and classes shifted to remote formats often via IT-based formats. However, a significant number of children were excluded from accessing these formats due to lack of hardware and internet access (UNICEF, 2020). Furthermore, with an increased international emphasis on lifelong learning (OECD, 2020), adults must also be counted among those excluded from formal education due to the pandemic and the lack of electronic resources to compensate for the temporary closure of face-to-face education options. It bears mentioning that despite great improvements over the past 100+

years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of children and youth have been unable to attend school (Wood, 2020).

Even for those learners with the necessary hardware and internet access to participate in remote learning, another issue arose: could they do group activities as part of their virtual learning? As we write this article in early 2022, many virtual learning platforms support communication only between a teacher and their students, not among students in small groups. For example, a secondary school associated with a university in the Philippines asked one of the authors of this article to do an online workshop for teachers on how students could do cooperative learning in virtual learning environments that do not include breakout rooms and similar affordances that allow for synchronous interaction among groups of students.

Virtual Learning After COVID-19

Some readers of this article might wonder whether there really exists a need to discuss how to teach in virtual learning contexts, as hope grows that the destructive power of the COVID-19 pandemic might greatly diminish in 2022, although some experts caution against such optimism (e.g., Barry, 2022). Also, it bears considering that COVID-19 could soon be followed by another, perhaps even more serious, global zoonotic (based on transmission between species) pandemic due to human impact on the planet, in particular the increasing and increasingly intensive use of nonhuman animals as a food source (United Nations Sustainable Development Group (2022).

Whether or not pandemics continue to disrupt education, virtual learning has much to offer (Panigrahi, 2018). Group activities have an important role to play as part of this.

For example, the Singapore Ministry of Education's 21st Century Competencies (2021) highlight such core values as students feeling and demonstrating respect for other people's inherent worth, students showing responsibility for themselves and others, and harmony among students via the appreciation of unity and diversity. The competencies also emphasize social-emotional abilities including social awareness and relationship management. As the world continues to become more globalized in the 21st century, the overlapping competencies of communication, collaboration, civic literacy, and cross-cultural interaction become increasingly important. Group activities, whether done online or in-person, provide multiple opportunities for development of all these competencies.

Helping Group Activities Succeed in Virtual Environments

In order for group activities to succeed, teachers must be wary of the possible difficulties that arise when students learn in groups of two and more. While group activities are potent strategies to maximize learning, undeniably, they can pose a great challenge to teachers. For instance, not all students participate actively in their groupings; in fact, some students will even request to work individually. The reluctance of students to join in group activities could be attributed to a variety of reasons, e.g., some students report difficulty with communication and a lack of sense of community as the most challenging factors (Faja, 2013).

These difficulties with group activities can be exacerbated in online learning. For example, online learning makes social interaction among the students more difficult. Being unable to personally meet their classmates can bring about a feeling of strangeness, if not intimidation among students. Furthermore, in some settings, students are not required to open their cameras when joining synchronous classes (or perhaps, students lack the bandwidth to do so). This lack of visual connection can worsen the feeling of uneasiness and the lack of belongingness. For these reasons, instead of students being eager to learn together, they may become uncooperative.

Successful virtual group activities, therefore, depend on many factors including schools and students possessing the ICT (Internet Communication Technology) hardware, software, and WIFI, as well as student and teacher knowledge of how to use them. The current paper focuses on other areas necessary to successful online groups. These areas are the *how to* and the *want to* of student-student cooperation, and teacher

knowledge and attitudes toward facilitating the how to and want to. The how to involves knowledge of how to work together in ways that include everyone in learning and raise the quality of that learning. The want to, i.e., the heartware (Yaacob, 2021), involves everyone being active in creating the atmosphere in which students feel as though their success is contingent on their groupmates' success.

Group Leadership

Groups have leaders, whether these leaders are designated or not, explicit or implicit. Sometimes, teachers are the leaders of student groups, with the students dependent on constant teacher guidance. Other times, student groups have a student leader designated by the teacher or elected by the group members. However, Kluge (1999) suggested the use of *distributed leadership* in which all group members, regardless of their skill in the particular tasks the group is undertaking, play leadership roles. These roles could be as simple as timekeeping, i.e., being responsible for encouraging the group to keep within the time parameters decided upon by the group members and the teacher, as well as more complicated roles, such as helping the members competently and punctually complete the tasks they have agreed to do.

Communication Within Groups

Communication among groupmates is crucial, regardless of whether learning takes place off- or online. Good communication makes learning more efficient, as students can guide each other on what needs to be done, on criteria for what constitutes good work, such as that answers need explanations and ideas need sources, and when work is due. When students have peers to provide feedback on whether they are

doing work properly, stress can be reduced. Plus, teachers prefer questions and solicitation for help from students who have asked their peers first. Effective communication also reduces unproductive conflicts among students. Yes, disagreements can prompt thinking (Jacobs, 2010). However, conflicts caused by lack of communication or miscommunication seldom bring useful results. Additionally, learning to communicate clearly and patiently, even in difficult situations, e.g., when WIFI connections are weak, constitutes an important life skill.

Eikenberry and Turmel (2021) suggested several ways to improve communication in virtual groups. These include attending to tone, as even written communication can be interpreted, correctly or incorrectly, as having a tone (happy, angry, etc.). Similarly, when online communication includes video, the way people look communicates a message. This involves not just the look on their face, but also their gestures, clothing, background, lighting, sound quality, and positioning on the screen. Of course, the words people use are central to effective communication. Thus, students might want to think through what they are going to share online before saying it or read through what they have written before transmitting it. For example, Ferreira (2019) reported that sometimes student writing contained instances where what pronouns referred back to was unclear. For instance, in the sentence, "Sumali borrowed a pencil from Azlina but forgot to return it," to what does *it* refer. Students can lessen the chances of miscommunication by paraphrasing what others have said or written and then asking if the paraphrase was accurate. Such paraphrasing has been incorporated into a cooperative learning

technique sometimes called Paraphrase Passport (Hastuti, 2019).

Getting To Know Groupmates

Even in online groups, students need time to get to know each other, and bonding can facilitate better performance. Team building activities form a regular part of guidance on group functioning for face-to-face groups (e.g., Jacobs & Renandya, 2019), and it is even more important in online groups, because such groups may not have time to jell informally before or after class, in the school canteen, during extracurricular activities, or on the walk or bus to school. Thus, in a virtual context becoming more familiar with each other and bonding can be more difficult. Thus, it may be worthwhile to devote time to team building. Similarly, even groups of teachers may spend time bonding, e.g., just chit-chatting before getting down to business or may go off topic for a little while in the middle of an online work session. Such excursions from the task at hand may actually be beneficial to accomplishing the task at hand.

In any class, even a face-to-face class, some students may get the feeling that they are "out of sight, out of mind," i.e., no one seems to know they are there; no one knows or cares about them. This problem can be even worse in virtual learning. Students who feel invisible may become disruptive or stop engaging with class activities. Group activities, as opposed to only teacher-fronted instruction, may help to address this invisibility, because students can more easily be seen at least by their groupmates. In a group, each student is one of only 2, 3, or 4 people, rather than one of a class full of students. Plus, teachers can more easily monitor groups, rather than individuals, e.g., in a class of 40 divided into 10 groups of four.

Eikenberry and Turmel (2021) offered ways to increase students' feeling of visibility via what they term *ethical visibility*. The word "ethical" connotes that students achieve visibility by contributing to overall group and class goals, instead of seeking only individual benefit. Here are some of Eikenberry and Turmel's suggestions for promoting ethical visibility.

a. Use words such as "we" and "us," e.g., when reporting to the class on what your group has done. This fits with the cooperative learning principle of group autonomy.

b. Remember the cooperative learning principle of "cooperation as a value," i.e., building cooperation inside as well as outside of small groups, by highlighting the importance to others of what other groups, individual students from other groups, and even students and non-students elsewhere are doing and wishing them well.

c. Praise what other students have done well and instead of just saying "Good job," make the praise specific, e.g., "You include lots of examples to make your ideas clearer."

d. When appropriate, give negative feedback. As the saying goes, "An enemy will agree, but a friend will disagree." However, criticize ideas, not people. In this way, students focus on what is best for the group/class, not on individually being right.

e. Appreciate feedback even when it might be negative.

f. Volunteer for tasks; offer to go first in discussions.

g. Share your knowledge at appropriate times, as well as ask many questions as a way to show you are listening and interested in others; they are ethically visible to you.

h. Prepare well for meetings and be active in those meetings, e.g., offer to take notes.

i. Use a variety of ways, e.g., communication channels, and times to contribute.

j. Congratulate and praise others. Follow up on what they are doing as a way to show interest.

k. Look as good as practical on your webcam (if your WIFI signal is strong enough), and when you are going to share screen, prepare your visuals well and practice using the various features of the technology you are using.

l. Find opportunities to chat casually with others; appreciate the social element in learning.

m. Look for the good in people, rather than assuming that they want to use you, i.e., view others through the lens of positive interdependence, not negative interdependence.

n. Similarly, promote happiness by expressing gratitude, seeing the glass as half full not half empty, and looking for opportunities to help others, e.g., new students or students who missed class for whatever reason (Achor, 2010).

Group Members or Groupmates?

Eikenberry and Turmel (2021) urged that groups attend to whether participants are being group members vs being groupmates. Group members do their own individual tasks with little or no collaboration, whereas groupmates care about the big picture and look to see how

they can help others and see the benefits of seeking others' help. Group members have transactional relationships in which people are just a means to an end, as if other group members were robots. In contrast, groupmates try to get to know each other and show concern for each other. This does

not mean that groupmates need to become close friends; it just means that they become part of each other's support network.

Therefore, groupmates likely are more engaged than group members. Student engagement can be seen as the alternative energy fuel that powers learning (Eishami et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the authors of this article have heard from many fellow teachers that so many students do not even turn their cameras on during online learning, including when students interact with peers during or outside of class time. While several possible explanations exist for cameras not being turned on, lack of engagement may be the key factor. Engagement is not something teachers can do to or for students. Students must engage themselves; teachers can only facilitate the process.

Sharing goals promotes engagement. In the cooperative learning literature (e.g., Johnson et al., 2007), common goals provide one of many ways to promote positive interdependence, i.e., the feeling among students that their outcomes positively correlate: what helps one helps the others and what hurts one hurts the others. Too often, students do not feel positively interdependent with groupmates. Instead, they may feel negatively interdependent, i.e., they feel as though they are competing against each other for grades, teacher praise, etc. Engagement also suffers when students feel no interdependence, positive or negative, with those in their group, i.e., as though no correlation exists between their outcomes. Feelings of negative interdependence and no interdependence may lead students to feel as though they are merely group members, not groupmates.

Other ways to promote an atmosphere of positive interdependence include students having different resources, and these

resources need to be shared. For instance, the well-known cooperative learning technique Jigsaw (Aronson, 2022) highlights resource positive interdependence. Briefly, the four steps in Jigsaw are as follows:

Step 1 - Students form groups of approximately four members, and everyone in each group has a number 1, 2, 3, or 4. These are their Home Groups. Each group member receives a different piece of the same text, or they each search on their own for information. An example of teacher-supplied information would be that a text about Greta Thunberg, the climate activist, could be broken into four pieces: (a) her childhood before she became an activist, (b) her family and their reaction to her activism, (c) her early activism, and (d) her 2019 trip to North America. Students work alone to read and understand their individual pieces.

Step 2 - Students leave their Home Groups to form temporary Expert Groups of approximately four members with students who have the same piece. The Expert Groups have two purposes. First, they need to check that everyone in the Expert Group understands their piece. Second, they need to make a plan for teaching their piece when they go back to their Home Group.

Step 3 - Students return to their Home Groups and take turns to teach their members.

Step 4 - Students individually take a quiz which requires knowledge of all four pieces.

Another form of positive interdependence is role positive interdependence, i.e., each groupmate has a designated role, as mentioned above with distributed leadership. Roles can include participation encouragers, who encourage everyone to share their ideas; elaboration requesters, who ask groupmates to elaborate

on what they said or wrote, such as by giving examples or explanations; and roster maker and checker, who makes a roster of what each group member is supposed to do and checks that they have done those tasks. Roles should rotate.

When students feel positively interdependent with each other, they feel as though they are groupmates, not just members of the same group. Thus, they offer help, as well as seeking help. However, it often is difficult for students to ask peers if they need help or to ask them for help. Indeed, any interaction can be challenging, especially when studying online, but interaction is often when the magic of cooperation takes place, where we see $1 + 1 = 3$ happening, i.e., when the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Instead, too often, students, even when doing a project, work alone, with each person doing their separate part. This resembles one aspect of what Eikenberry and Turmel (2021) referred to when they contrasted being group members vs being groupmates. Sometimes teachers encourage the feeling of being individual group members by grading each part of a project separately, meaning that nothing is done to promote celebration/reward positive interdependence, i.e., the feeling of “All for one, one for all” among students.

Seeing the Big Picture and Looking to the Future

When groupmates feel positively interdependent, they are proactive; they encourage each other to have a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017) and an internal locus of control (Shifrer, 2019). In other words, students should nurture in each other a future orientation, a long-term view in which they, in collaboration with others, can move forward toward what they see as success in life. In the workplace, Eikenberry

and Turmel (2021, p. 22) advocated that employees take a similar long-term view via the slogan “It’s not just your job; it’s your career.” Employees (and students too) need to ask themselves, “How will what our group do today help us develop the skills, knowledge, habits, and relationships that support our future growth, success, and contribution to others?” Specifically, students need to realize that what they do in their virtual class today is not just getting through a day or earning a grade; they are experiencing the precious gift of life and laying the groundwork for their future experiences.

Furthermore, employees and students should look beyond their group to the entire organization. In the case of students, this expanded view of positive interdependence could incorporate the entire class, academic institution, or even society in general. As stated above, Jacobs and Renandya (2019) called this “cooperation as a value.” In a similar vein, Eikenberry and Turmel proposed the slogan “It’s not just your job; it’s about organizational success” (p. 23) and to emphasize the importance of a group perspective, they suggested the formula “Your job = your work + team work” (p. 24).

“Old” Technology

This article talks about some fairly new technology, but old technology can still be of use, including that tool from more than 100 years ago: the telephone. Of course, nowadays many people’s phones come with a multitude of features. These features allow callers to check first with the people whom they want to call to arrange a mutually beneficial time to talk synchronously. Much less than 100+ years old but still a long-standing form of communication is email. Suggestions for effective email use include:

- a. Writing something on the Subject line.

b. Changing what is on the Subject line when appropriate.

c. Using or not using Reply to All as appropriate.

d. Considering when it is appropriate to include all the messages in an email chain when including new people in the chain.

Facilitating Effective Group Activities in Virtual Environments

Many concepts can impact the effectiveness of student groups. When groups work well, students feel a sense of positive interdependence. As explained above, positive interdependence represents a feeling among groupmates that what helps one member helps all members, and conversely, what hurts one member hurts all. When feelings of positive interdependence predominate, students enjoy a sense of belonging. This belonging encourages a feeling by each student of individual accountability to the group, i.e., wanting to do their fair share so that the group achieves its goal of everyone in the group learning and enjoying the learning experience. Toward that same goal, groups promote equal opportunity to participate among their members, i.e., no one is excluded from the group's thinking, doing, and learning.

The positive interdependence, individual accountability, and equal opportunity to participate only bear fruit when students experience maximum peer interactions (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019). This term has two elements. First, students need to spend a good amount of time interacting with each other, face-to-face or electronically, in class and out of class, synchronously and asynchronously. Second, a large percentage of these peer interactions should involve higher order thinking, i.e., tasks that challenge students to go beyond the information given to them by textbooks,

e. Possibly using emoticons to express emotions in a concise manner.

f. Rereading emails before pressing Send to avoid making errors or expressing ideas you may later regret.

teachers, etc. Also, students need to use cooperative skills when interacting with peers, such as giving each other specific praise, asking for explanations, disagreeing politely, and checking that groupmates understand.

With all this as background, the remainder of the article offers ideas for facilitating group activities in virtual environments where breakout rooms are not available. These ideas focus on using small groups and on sometimes seeing the entire class as one group in which positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal opportunity to participate, and maximum peer interactions all pertain. A wide variety of software and platforms are mentioned below. Readers can use the internet to learn about them.

Small Groups of 2-4 Members

Typically, groups are small, i.e., two to four members. While large groups have advantages, including more students to contribute ideas and fewer groups for teachers to monitor, on the other hand, smaller groups, including groups of two, also have advantages, including more opportunities for each member to speak and greater ease of group management. The current section of this article lists ideas for how small groups can collaborate when students are doing remote learning and the platform they are using does not have built-in features, such as breakout rooms, for student-student cooperation.

1. Students can use other means of communicating with each other, for

example, phone apps, such as Telegram, WeChat, or WhatsApp, email, group chats in Messenger, and phone calls.

2. Two students can sit side-by-side to share a laptop or other device, making it very easy to communicate with each other.

3. Just as teacher-student interaction need not always be synchronous, student-student interaction can also be asynchronous. This enables groups to meet outside of class time.

4. Many Learning Management Systems (LMSs), such as Blackboard, have forums or other mechanisms for students to post ideas and give each other feedback. Similar sharing tools are available via Google Groups and Groups.io, as well as groups on Facebook, etc.

5. Students can do projects and other tasks together, as well as studying for assessments. For this, they can meet face-to-face or use tools, such as Zoom. For example, a group of students can set up a time for their own group meeting on Zoom, Google Meet, etc.

6. Google Docs and other tools allow students to share files and work on the same files synchronously or asynchronously. The same principles could also be applied with other tools for creating content, like Canva and Genially, or for brainstorming ideas, like MindMeister or Coggle.

7. With the increased use of Gamification, students can learn content while playing a game in their groups, not to mention collaborating to develop their own games for themselves and others to play.

8. For small group activities, such as discussions, a gaming messaging app platform called Discord can accommodate creation of subgroups in the same group.

9. The students in the group can also do crowd curation activities, i.e., when a small number of people are selected from among a

larger group, and that small group are asked to accomplish a task according to guidelines set by the large group and subject to the large group's approval. Crowd curation can be facilitated via such platforms as Wakelet, Evernote, or Mix.

10. In hybrid learning, i.e., some students are in a face-to-face environment, whereas others are in a virtual environment, and in blended learning, i.e., sometimes the entire class is learning face-to-face, whereas other times, the entire class is studying online, feedback is very important and with small groups of 2 – 4 members, feedback platforms can be audio-based, such as using Talk and Comment and Mote Chrome Adds On, or Vocaroo, audio and annotation, such as Voice Thread, or video-based, such as Flipgrid, Zoom, or YouTube. Screen-casting-based feedback using Screencast-o-Matic, Screencastify, or Zoom can also be useful.

The Class as a Single Group

In education, the concept of positive interdependence usually applies to the small groups discussed above. However, positive interdependence and the other concepts discussed earlier—individual accountability, equal opportunity to participate, and maximum peer interactions — can be expanded to apply across an entire class of students or even an entire school or other institution of learning. Below are suggestions for promoting classwide student-student cooperation in online environments. Some of the suggestions in Section A above may also be of value.

1. Use Slido or other software that facilitates students to ask questions. Peers can increase the likelihood of someone's question receiving a response by voting in favor of that question. For example, if the teacher has used the word *resilience* and only one student posted asking for an

explanation, the teacher would be less likely to stop and explain the word than if eight other students voted in support of that question.

2. Mentimeter and other software have functions such as Word Cloud that allow all class members to contribute words to one figure. An example would be if students were to use Mentimeter to contribute to a Word Cloud on the topic of “Possible benefits of learning in groups.” Words students might add to the cloud include “fun,” “motivation,” “help,” and “partner.” The more students who suggest the same word, the larger the letters of the word become and the closer to the center of the Word Cloud the word moves.

3. Slido, Mentimeter, and other software can be tools for students to vote. Voting can be used to give students more choice in how a course is conducted. For instance, if a class is doing extensive reading, the class could vote on what kind of post-reading activities they will do after finishing a book. Options include taking a short quiz on the book (Robb, 2018) or doing posters to let peers know books they enjoyed or did not enjoy. Students can also highlight favorite characters, suggest alternative endings or sequels/prequels, or make a short video featuring a scene or concept from the book. Alternatively, students might vote in favor of their post-reading activity being just to read another book.

4. Teachers, with student help, can create items for quizzes. The class can earn points if teachers use student-generated items. Various methods can be used to calculate student quiz scores. The easiest method would probably be to average everyone’s score. An alternative would be to use improvement scoring, e.g., in the case of two students, A and B, who both score 85

(out of 100) on a quiz, if A’s past average is 95 and B’s past average is 75, B contributes more points than A to the class’ overall score, because B improved, while A scored below their past average. However, their scores in the gradebook remain the same, i.e., both score 85.

Students can take part in scoring peers’ quizzes. This and many of the other suggestions in this paper fit with the Student-Centered Learning paradigm (Jacobs, Renandya, & Power, 2016). In this paradigm, students take more control of their own learning and the learning of their peers. Thus, students have a role in deciding what to study and when to study it. Additionally, students join teachers in assessing learning. For instance, students can discuss answers to quiz questions, in addition to their above-mentioned role in writing quiz items.

5. One way to encourage students to feel positively interdependent with group-mates and classmates involves celebrations (Johnson & Johnson, 2017), e.g., when a class feels they have done well on a quiz, etc., they can devise a celebration. Celebrations can be as simple as taking a class photo with silly poses or deciding on class songs, gestures, etc., and celebrating by singing the songs or flashing the gestures.

6. In a large class group, it is important to encourage classmates to actively participate in synchronous or asynchronous mode. Padlet can be one of the tools to be applied where the whole class can respond to questions or prompts provided or according to the assigned roles (e.g., Team A, Team B, etc.).

7. For brainstorming, class responses could be done by having class members respond together to a question, using Jamboard, MindMapping apps, such as MindMeister, or teaming.vercel.app.

8. To initiate class participation, virtual space-based platforms, like Miro, Gather Town, and Wonder, could be employed where students may visit their groups or classmates in smaller groups or circles synchronously while directly looking at the screen together.

9. A low-cost platform like Telegram can be used to have a virtual meeting just like Zoom with screen-sharing features with a maximum of 1000 participants. For a class around 25–30 students, this would be easier

than using a similar platform, such as WhatsApp.

10. When games are used, rather than individual winners being crowned, students can earn points for their class and toward a class goal. As a result, the class, not a small number of individual class members, can be winners, or perhaps the entire class can lose. For example, if the entire class earns above a certain number of points, a small amount of money can be donated to a charity chosen by the class. Thus, the charity's recipients are the winners.

Conclusion

Education and other areas of society were already moving toward increased use of virtual interaction, but the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated that process. While the pandemic continues to have many ill effects, the acceleration of virtual interaction certainly has many beneficial effects. However, all changes, including increased use of online communication,

require learning and adjusting. This article has attempted to provide ideas for facilitating the use of group activities in virtual learning environments where classes do not have access to breakout rooms. Furthermore, this advice can be of use even when breakout rooms and similar affordances are available.

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