

# Breaking out: Using Negotiated Ground Rules to ‘DRIVE’ forward student engagement in online breakout rooms

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## Introduction

This small-scale practitioner-led research project evaluated the impact of negotiated ground rules on student engagement and participation in online breakout rooms. Negotiated Ground Rules, also known by other terms such as Classroom Contracts, are a set of principles agreed by all the students regarding their approach to learning. They can also be adapted for specific tasks such as how to contribute to an online discussion room.

Following the pandemic, delivery of the Police Apprenticeship at Staffordshire University has moved towards a blended model where face-to-face delivery is supplemented with online webinars. With online classes of over 40 learners, it was difficult to monitor and support engagement of the groups during breakout room discussions. Indeed, student feedback complained that there were varied levels of engagement from peers during such tasks.

This project therefore sought to motivate genuine student engagement in the development of ‘Negotiated Ground Rules’ to facilitate student empowerment and adoption of inclusive online discussion practices.

The study adopted an action research-based method with a ‘before and after’ cycle to evaluate learner views. We called this approach ‘DRIVE’:

1. Discuss: Learners participate in an online breakout room discussion without prior discussion on ground rules
2. Reflect: Learners reflect on the effectiveness of the discussion to inform the creation of breakout room ground rules
3. Involve: Students agree breakout room ground rules
4. Verify: Learners participate in a second breakout room discussion using their ground rules
5. Evaluate: Learners reflect on the effectiveness of these ground rules in terms of promoting greater learner engagement in the activity. Any proposed amendments to the rules are considered.

The study was completed as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher and Professional Education course at Staffordshire University, which is aligned with the SEDA Learning, Teaching and Assessing (LTA) Award.

The research findings gave positive indications of using this approach for developing negotiated ground rules and higher levels of participation and student engagement. It is acknowledged that this was a small-scale pilot study and further research is required to validate findings as well as consider the impact of the approach within different training contexts.

## The context of the project

Since the 2020 pandemic, Higher Education Providers (HEPs) have explored different technology-enabled learning methods to deliver educational courses, rapidly adapting to online teaching and learning to meet the needs of students (Xie *et al.*, 2020). However, this has brought notable challenges as summarised in the JISC (2023, p. 6) ‘Beyond Blended’ report on post-pandemic education technology development:

*‘...many students and teaching staff found online learning difficult. The issues included problems with focus and engagement, a lack of social cues, less responsive feedback and a loss of cohort effects such as belonging and collaborative learning.’*

Brookfield (2015) cautions against assuming that discussions are inclusive, and that without direction they are unlikely to be productive. Brookfield therefore advocates developing clear guidance: 'Protocols used are designed to equalize participation, keep people focused, and encourage new questions and perspectives' (Brookfield, 2015, p. 2). JISC (2023) also strongly advocate the need for clear rules when engaging in online learning in general: 'Norms and rules for online learning may need to be set out clearly' (JISC, 2023, p. 7) with specific reference to breakout rooms: 'the lack of social cues means interactions of all kinds may need to be more closely planned, with norms of behaviour and time/pacing made more explicit' (JISC, 2023, p. 16).

However, when teaching a large group online, the teacher has three main options:

1. Not using breakout rooms
2. Dividing the class into large group breakout rooms
3. Dividing the class into multiple small groups.

The first option may tend towards a traditional lecture, though the session may become dominated by the few students willing to speak up within a large group. Online polling during the lecture may mitigate passive learning to some extent, enabling the lecturer to informally assess at least basic participation and learning.

The second option, large breakout rooms, enables relatively easy direct monitoring by the teacher but again may exclude learners if there is insufficient time for contributions by all or unwillingness to speak out in front of many peers.

The final option – dividing the class into many small breakout rooms – avoids these issues, though does not necessarily guarantee equitable participation (Brookfield, 2015; Kagan, 1994). Furthermore, in an online environment, this makes direct monitoring of engagement difficult as it is unlikely that the teacher will be able to visit each group within a task's timeframe (Savvidou and Alexander, 2022).

What is therefore required to support small group online study is:

- A means of indirect monitoring of participation
- Developing student understanding of what effective group learning looks like
- Encouraging learner responsibility for enabling online engagement of all.

Indirect monitoring can take place where groups are set tasks with clear outputs. This could involve quiz apps where progress can be monitored. Alternatively, using a Padlet with a separate column for each group enables the teacher to monitor which groups are – and are not – contributing. Support can then be concentrated on these groups; they may be disengaged, or engaged but not completing the required output. This then enables targeted intervention by the teacher to join any group not making sufficient progress with the task. As well as this deficit approach, there is also the opportunity to develop self and peer management of group learning tasks by allocating roles and responsibilities. The teacher and peers can also evaluate and support through commenting on posts the quality of student group work.

Although pre-dating online breakout rooms, Kagan's (1994) research highlighted the need for small groups to enable meaningful individual contributions to group activities. Kagan's PIES model emphasises student responsibility for learning in group activities:

- Positive interdependence
- Individual accountability
- Equal participation
- Simultaneous interaction.

To this might be added the need for a clear timeframe for focus and classroom management as well as a clear output (relating to the need for monitoring, discussed earlier). These considerations can therefore inform the development of inclusive ground rules for online breakout rooms. The need for such parameters is further supported by recent research which indicates 'positive learner behaviour' where learner rules are discussed and agreed by the participants (Khonamri et al., 2021; Savvidou and Alexandra, 2022). Additionally, a study by Lee (2021) also highlighted challenges with participant engagement in multiple breakout rooms, and they encouraged informal learning principles or ground rules to improve breakout room discussions.

## The study

In support of the purpose for this study, O'Brien's (2008) action research approach was taken. The project used the following stages (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Flowchart highlighting the 4 key stages of the study

## Breakout room group discussions without ground rules

The initial breakout room discussion reflected a typical online learning experience where a task was set but without any breakout room specific guidance on ground rules. Students had been briefed on general learner expectations and responsibilities as part of their course induction. The students were divided into 11 online breakout rooms, with each individual room having 4 students.

## Ground rules negotiation and briefing

The ground rules were then discussed in an open online class of 44 students, and all were encouraged to contribute. The ground rules were agreed by the group through a process of open discussions, with each student having the opportunity

to influence them, and also add their thoughts through separate online submissions. The group was divided into the same 11 breakout rooms with the same participants. This time they were encouraged to follow their agreed ground rules in their individual online breakout rooms. The students' feedback to evaluate the impact was then collected using an online questionnaire open to all students as well as a follow-up focus group discussion. This focus group consisted of six students, who had volunteered from the larger group.

## Findings

### Agreed ground rules

The students discussed and agreed the following ground rules:

- Everyone in the breakout group to participate and support each other's participation
- Keep cameras on in the online breakout rooms
- Assign and agree tasks in the group to include person feeding back to the main classroom
- Encourage turn-taking in role of feeding back task outcomes to the whole class.

### Student feedback on creating discussion group ground rules compliance

Out of the 44 students who participated in the action research set, 37 students (84%) responded to the questionnaire, which asked (2A) 'Were the negotiated ground rules followed by all in the breakout room?', and (2B) 'Did you

follow the ground rules?'

As shown in Figure 2 below (2A), 75% (28 respondents) stated that everyone followed the ground rules in the breakout room, providing a positive level of compliance. However, in answer to question 2B, this increased to 89% (33 respondents) when the students were asked if they personally followed the ground rules. This potentially indicates a difference in the participants' own perception as compared with their peers when providing feedback, in line with Kagan and Kagan's (1998) observation about the difference experienced in personal feedback and group feedback from students. Overall, though, these findings do give a positive initial indication of their adherence to the ground rules they created.

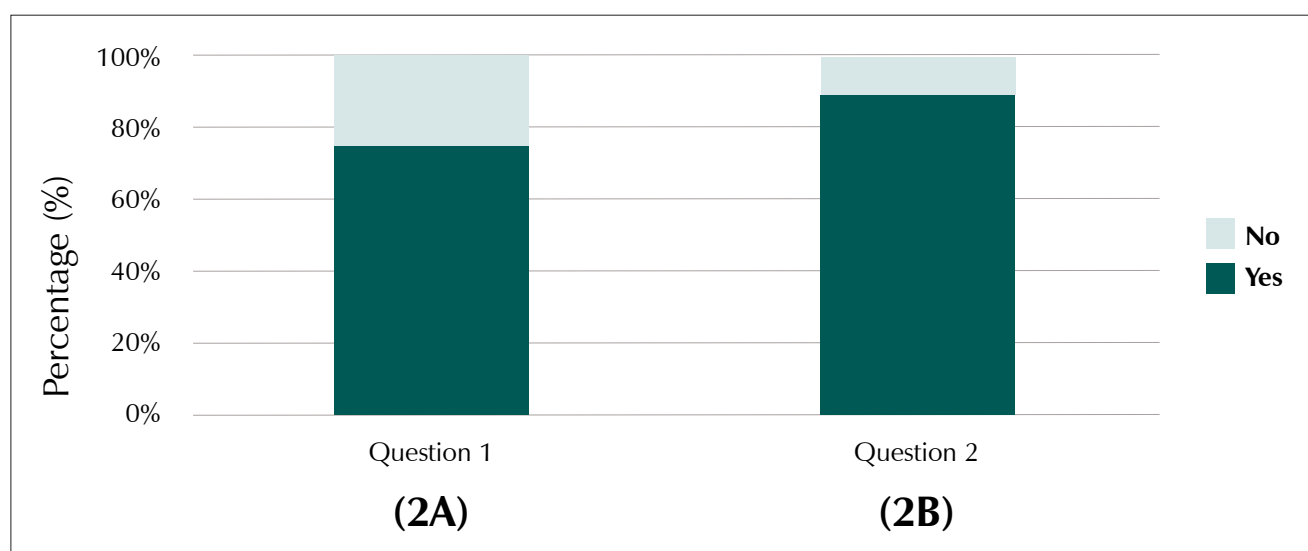


Figure 2 Graph illustrating perceptions of peers' and personal compliance with the ground rules

### Participants' reaction to ground rules

If peers found that the ground rules were not followed by some in the group, in most cases they felt comfortable in challenging each other, though they accepted that, ultimately, they could not enforce compliance. The feedback from both the focus group and the questionnaires indicated a positive attitude towards ground rules from the majority of the participants. Not putting their camera on was the one ground rule participants found most challenging to follow. The main reasons were internet issues and some students preferred privacy as they did not want others to see their personal backgrounds. This highlighted the need for clear guidance to learners on how to apply a picture

background screen/blur background.

### What went well with the ground rules

When exploring what went well in relation to the ground rules, 97% – 36 of the 37 – survey respondents contributed to this discussion. The key themes highlighted by the participants from both the questionnaire and the focus group were:

1. Strong group contributions to the discussion in the room
2. Having cameras on where possible encouraged people to engage more
3. Assigning tasks to group members was helpful and more productive
4. Encouraged team working
5. Provided a structure and frame-

work to follow

6. Behaviour in the breakout rooms was more in line with professional expectations
7. Smaller breakout room groups worked better, as it allowed all to have a voice, summarised by one student as follows: 'The rules helped bring the quiet people out of their shells, so they talk a bit more. This made the whole chat more interactive and more beneficial for all of us.'

The above feedback points towards a positive impact of having negotiated ground rules in improving student engagement in online breakout rooms.

At the conclusion of the focus group discussion, some participants gave informal feedback requesting the ground rules approach to be followed in all online lectures they attended as they believed it improved their quality of learning: 'The ground rules made it feel more like a normal classroom, in terms of actually seeing people and doing the work rather than just voices', and 'Everyone had clear roles and actively participated'.

The participants in both the questionnaires and the focus group were asked to compare their learning and engagement experience between the breakout rooms where no ground rules were agreed and applied and those where ground rules were applied. 91% – 34 out of 37 – respondents provided feedback. Their key positive themes were:

- Increased participation
- Better engagement when cameras were on
- Encouraged contribution and open discussion.

There were a small number (10%) who felt it did not make any difference.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study implies some clear benefits to learners in adopting negotiated ground rules in online breakout rooms *after* they have experienced a short breakout room activity without task-specific ground rules. This experience gives learners the opportunity to see the importance of implementing ground rules in a specific context and provides motivation

to engage in their development. The participants felt it professionalised the teaching environment and group discussions, providing a clearer focus with increased engagement and encouraged student participation. A very important point that was made by one of the students who had a learning support agreement in place was that they found the ground rules allowed them to participate and contribute more. As they had an assigned task and owing to the ground rules, all in the group had the opportunity to voice their opinion without being rushed or feeling left behind. This suggests the need for further research to consider the potential benefits of online discussion negotiated ground rules to promote inclusion with neurodiverse learners.

To summarise, the evidence from this study provides a positive indicator that negotiated ground rules in online breakout rooms, when developed and reflected upon by the learners, tend to improve student engagement and participation considerably. However, it is recognised that there are limitations to this study, as it was conducted on a relatively small sample of participants in a single course. Further studies to explore the negotiated ground rules method in breakout rooms would contribute to the understanding of the benefits and challenges of this approach and assist in building a stronger evidence base.

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