ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

Using Google Meet Breakout Rooms for Group Work
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Open Distance Learning (ODL) has been implemented in UiTM since April 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it comes with its own set of challenges. For example, some of the students' biggest challenges in their online learning were due to the lack of time management skills, poor Internet connection and noisy home environment (Aileen Farida Mohd Adam et al., 2021). Meanwhile, from lecturers' own limited experiences teaching online, one of the biggest challenges is carrying out group work.

Previously, group activities were carried out by assigning a task and delegating students into different groups in the physical classroom. Students' progress could be monitored by the lecturer by moving physically from group to group in the class. The first issue in online group work is we do not have the environment in which students could work together on a task by orally discussing their given tasks. It could be quite troublesome for students to do so on a chat application such as WhatsApp or Telegram whereby students would have to discuss by typing or leaving voice notes. This method would also be unsuitable for oral speaking classes as students would be required to practice their oral communication skills which involve verbal and non-verbal communication. Another issue in online group discussion is our inability to monitor each group's progress, or be present for all students to answer any questions that the students might have as they would usually do their discussions on their own. This brings us to the third issue, which is time constraints. Online group discussions are time consuming compared to face to face discussions as the lecturer is usually unable to control the discussion time, and getting the students back online promptly. Individual presentations could also be inconvenient as big classes with over 30 students would seem to be taking forever in practice sessions.

In order to address these issues, the breakout rooms feature which has been introduced by Zoom (paid version) in 2015 and more recently Google Meet (G Suite Education version), can be used to carry out group activities with students. Breakout rooms allow you to split your online meeting into separate sessions while giving the host of the meeting the ability to monitor all sessions at once. As UiTM staff, we do not have access to paid Zoom or Google G Suite Education but there is a way to use the Google Breakout Rooms for free, which is by installing a third party extension created by Robert Hudek. This extension can be found on the Chrome web store.

Google Meet Breakout Rooms application by Robert Hudek on Chrome web store

These are a few things that can be done by using this extension:

- View all breakout rooms simultaneously in tiled or tab format (I would suggest to keep it to a maximum of only five, anything more would slow down your computer)
- Create rooms and auto generate Google Meet links (useful especially if you have many groups)
- Move easily between the breakout rooms while having a centralized control of your microphone (I use this to make 'announcements' for all groups), video (which I normally turn off as turning it on slows down my laptop)

Ongoing breakout rooms for 3 groups

Ongoing breakout rooms for 6 groups

There are other features which we did not get to use as much as those mentioned, but for us, the stated features are more than enough to carry out group work more effectively than before. Another important factor to consider is that students do not require special knowledge to use this extension as it is basically the same as joining a regular Google Meet link albeit joining their different groups via pre-made link auto generated by the extension. An example of a simple lesson in which breakout room was utilised was for the Pitching practice class for ELC590. The students were briefed before class to come up with an idea or product and try to convince their audience aka their classmates. Then, the students were divided into groups using the breakout room extension and there they would initially discuss and then present their pitch to their respective group members. Each group had about five to six students. After everyone had presented, the group had to come up with a consensus on the best presenter. There are many other ways for lecturers to use breakout rooms, much like our traditional physical grouping.

Overall, we received numerous positive reactions from our Diploma and Degree students who used breakout rooms in the recent past semester. Below are their feedbacks:

-      *I also enjoyed during practice pitching session, we get to brainstorm our idea as a group and also communicate with friends in such generous way.*

-      *I do enjoy all of the classes but the best one for me is the week 5: role play practice where we have small discus-*

sion and jamboard etc. because it's actually do seem like a class compared to other classes so far. They're not just some random slide reading or just hours of straight up talking then Q&A session. There's human interactions which I long for.

-      *The most enjoyed class is when we do speaking practices when Madam just randomly put us together into a groups and do it as a group presentations. I love it because from there we can see how much we got a great ideas from our groupmates.*

-      *I think I enjoy the class that you give us the activity and we do it on our own in different google meet. I feel like I was in a real class cos I can talk to my friend while doing the activity*

-      *The practice speech session! When madam Aileen arrange the class into a small group each so that we can discuss among classmates and I feel more free to express myself in the group*

-      *I really enjoy the class where we have 2 ways communication between lecturer and other friends. Exchanging thought and ideas of the topics helps me to be more confident to speak English*

In order to have a profound grip on using the basic features of the breakout room extension, do check out Aileen's video on YouTube via the following link: https://bit.ly/easyguideBreakoutRoom

Or scan the following QR code:

Reference:

Aileen Farida Mohd Adam, Najlaa Nasuha Mohd Radin, Nooryuhanis Hashim & Mohd. Suhaimi bin Sulaiman. (2021). Diploma Students' challenges and best practices in ODL at UiTM Terengganu: A pilot study. *Attarbawiy: Malaysian Online Journal of Education Vol. 5, No. 1, 32-45.*