WestEd
WestEd.org

Facilitating Breakout Rooms

Jennifer Folsom — Lead Learning Architect, Making Sense of SCIENCE, WestEd

Goals

✓ Boost Engagement

✓ Minimize Roadblocks

WestEd
WestEd.org

Connect to their previous experiences

Talk students through what collaborative learning looks like in a physical classroom, both what they would be doing and what you would be doing.

Then describe how that kind of learning translates to the distance space.

"

If you were taking this class in my classroom at school, I would have you seated in groups around a table where you could all see each other. There would also be a small whiteboards on your table where your group could work on problems together. You would know what you were expected to do and why it was helpful to your learning. The room would be full of mostly on-topic conversation, but some social chatting too.

I would be wandering around, listening, and thinking about what I hear groups doing and how I can help you connect your thinking to our next topic. If I heard a group getting a little confused or stuck, I would listen near their table for a while to make sure they worked it out themselves. If I heard a group getting really frustrated or having trouble working together productively, I would intervene. I would respond as quickly as I could to any group that called me over with a question.

We'll do these same things in our distance course, but the format looks a little different. Your table groups will be your breakout rooms. You will be responsible for your own learning and your own collaboration with your peers. You will need to focus on the problem and on the way you work together to solve it.

I will jump into your rooms periodically throughout the session, not expecting to participate but to listen to your thinking and figure out how to leverage that thinking as we move forward in the course. If I get in there and see a group is really frustrated or having trouble working together productively, I will try to help. If you have a question that you need my help for in your breakout, you can ask me to come to your room within Zoom. As soon as I can get out of another group's room, I'll come to yours and see how I can help.

Co-develop group norms for breakout rooms

1. **Group norms help students know how they should participate**

2. **When groups are having trouble with their collaboration, reference and revise the group norms, as needed.**

3. **To boost engagement with group norms, give a few starter norms you feel are essential and then leave some extra empty slots where students can develop norms that are important to them.**

BREAKOUT GROUP NORMS

- Whoever is participating is learning. Take the mic, so you learn. Share the mic, so everyone learns.

- Cameras on when possible.

- Focus on the task AND have some fun together.

- Advocate for what you need. Listen to what others need.

- Call me into your room if you are stuck.

- Other norms you want to set for yourselves?

- ?

- ?

How and when to enter breakout rooms?

1. **Give groups 1-2 minutes to get settled**

2. **Then pop into each room to make sure they have started and don't have questions or tech issues.**

3. **After everyone is started, join a room for a few minutes and then rotate through remaining rooms, staying in each for a few minutes. Start with a different room each session.**

4. **Watch for groups calling you to their room with the call button.**

❖ Decide on your process for facilitating rooms and communicate these decisions to students, so they know what to expect and what your moves (or lack thereof) mean about their collaboration. If you decide to change your process, communicate the change and the rationale to students.

Things to consider:

- Entering the room with your camera on encourages students to stop interacting with each other and begin interacting with you. Coming in with your camera OFF reduces this tendency.

- Listening for a couple minutes before you intervene, unless they are asking you a question helps you more completely understand their situation before trying to influence their process.

- Turning your camera on every time you need to interact with a group improves communication.

- Not intervening communicates a lot about how much you value their collaborative work together.

- If you observe the group doing well, you can leave their room without saying anything (if they know that you leaving means you didn't think they needed help) or you can leave a message in their chat (e.g., excellent job listening to each other's ideas, you're moving along well)

What if I need to intervene in a breakout room's discussion?
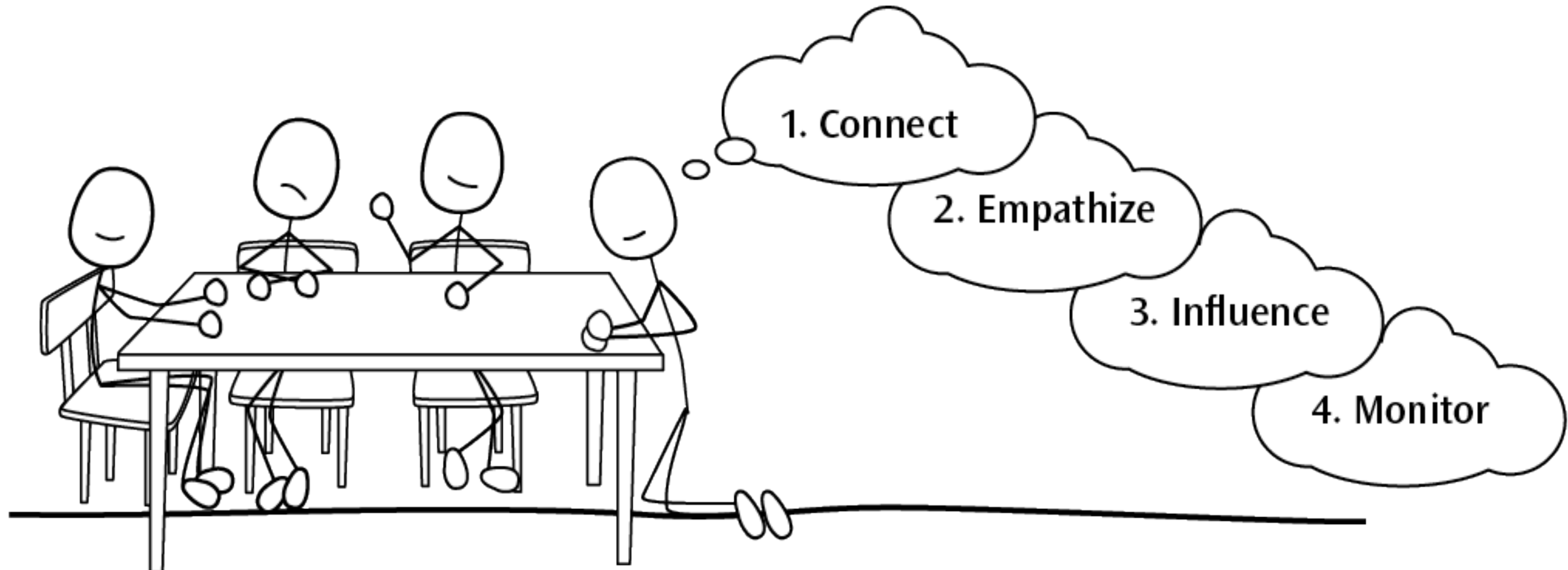
Example 1: A group is stuck

1. **Connect —** Sounds like you are having a bit of trouble deciding what to do next.

2. **Empathize —** This task is a bit different than the others you did in your prep work. I see you've tried a few approaches, none are really working, and it's getting frustrating.

3. **Influence —** Do you have ideas for how I might help? *If yes, try what they suggest. If no, you might say "I can make some suggestions, and you can see which might work for you."*

4. **Monitor —** Listen for another minute to see what happens or just leave and then pop back in a few minutes to make sure they've overcome the hurdle.

Example 2: A group is not collaborating well

1. **Connect —** I'm noticing that your group hasn't yet mastered problem-solving in a collaborative way where everyone is able to participate and feel valued.

2. **Empathize —** That's okay. Many of us haven't done a lot of learning in collaborative settings and certainly not in the distance space. Part of what our class is learning is figuring out how to do this.

3. **Influence —** Being able to collaborate well with others not only helps you learn, but it is also a critical skill to have for your lives and future careers. Let's revisit a couple of our group norms that I think are related to your struggle and think about what we can do to adjust your group dynamic.

4. **Monitor —** Leave and then pop back in a few minutes later to see how things are going. Make sure to listen in on the group during the next session too. Check in with individual members after the session to get their personal perspectives, especially if it seems related to a personal issue.