

Anna Yang

Exit Through the Breakout Room

Rethinking Inclusive Engagement Online and in the Classroom

The saying “dropping like flies” was the only way to describe how folks dipped out of sessions at the Generative AI in Libraries (GAIL) Virtual Conference when the trigger word “breakout room.” was mentioned by the speakers. As a moderator, it was shocking to see attendees flee for the hills simply because they were being asked to join group discussions. Mind you, these attendees are library folk and information professionals who are interested in and dedicated to learning more about generative artificial intelligence (AI) in libraries. Surely participating in a collaborative space like breakout rooms would be seen as an opportunity to hear more voices on the topic, yet folx are exiting the webinars. Now I won’t sit here in my swivel chair and say that I’ve never left a webinar because I was being asked to participate in a group discussion. All I’m saying—or more like asking—is if we as information professionals are disengaging from breakout rooms, what do we expect from our own students when we put them into groups in the classroom? Our hope is that this will create a sense of community among the students, but is group work truly inclusive for engagement or is forced participation, regardless of the format, just intensifying social anxiety for all of us?

Let’s take a step back and reset the stage for how I ended up in this conundrum. Recently I had the opportunity to moderate three sessions at GAIL, a virtual conference geared toward librarians who are interested in generative AI in libraries. Of the three sessions that I moderated, two of them included the breakout room format. The first session, titled “Librarian Attitude About the Environmental Impact of Generative AI,” was heavily attended by more than ninety folx. It got to the point that one of the speakers had to help me let folx in while I introduced the presenters (thank you, Mandi!). It was a relatively straightforward session—the speakers set the stage about the environmental impact of AI and then threw the microphone to the attendees. As soon as the “Discussion” slide popped up on the screen, the attendance started to trickle down. By the time the speakers had finished giving instructions for the group discussion, there were about forty people remaining, including myself and the three speakers.

A similar occurrence happened at another session titled “Human in the Loop: How Much AI Oversight.” I saw about fifty people come in and out of that session. As soon as the speaker mentioned the use of breakout rooms, that number fell drastically—down to eight. It was heartbreaking to see the speaker’s work essentially go to waste. As an academic librarian, this made me reflect back on my own instruction. When I create an instruction session,

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I think very carefully about how I would like my students to engage with the class materials. Oftentimes my version of engagement includes group activities. Naturally I get mixed reviews on this format from my students. Some seem excited to talk to their classmates, and some will begrudgingly moan at me with the can-do attitude of “let’s get this over with.” I go into my instruction building thinking that I’m trying to create an inclusive environment for my students, but does group work really generate what I’m trying to get at? It dawned on me at that moment at GAIL that group discussions don’t equal inclusive engagement. They might actually be creating discomfort for students, exasperating existing triggers like anxiety and imposter syndrome. Just like library professionals, students may not be interested in doing group work at all. If given the opportunity, I’m sure students would physically get up and leave my classroom too if I announced they would be working in groups.

As I sit in my cubicle looking at Frank, my skeleton cubemate, I’m left with the thought of *how can I create better engagement with inclusive design in mind, not just for attendees online but also for students in my physical classes?* I’ve had some success with think-pair-shares as it gets rid of the group work mentality, but there is still some sense of camaraderie because they still have to talk to one other person. Other activities like Padlet, polls, or—one of my favorite—“On a scale of cat, how are you feeling today” mood board can create space for anonymity but generate engagement from attendees (and hopefully some laughs).

Another method that we can consider is a “choose your level” of participation. While at the 2024 Library Assessment Conference, attendees had the option to sit at a table with a card that read “Low/No Engagement Table” or one that said open to engaging (I don’t know the exact wording because I sat mainly at the low/no engagement table). This was such a small technique, but it immediately calmed my nerves. I knew I wanted to be out of my hotel room, but I also didn’t have enough energy to converse with anyone (it was 7 a.m.!). This method could be applied to both an online webinar and in class. Rather than forcing participants to join a breakout room, speakers could set up a Padlet and ask attendees to spend the time to individually reply to the Padlet or join a breakout room and work together to discuss the question. In a similar sense, students can be instructed to either work individually or join a table/group to complete the activity.

I think it’s safe for us to assume that if we use a breakout room in our webinars, about half of the attendees will leave. I want to stress that I don’t think breakout rooms or group work in general are bad, but I do think they require more thoughtful consideration before use. Just like library folk entering an online webinar, students coming into our class may not know too much about the topic. Sometimes they want to be “talked at” because they’re there to soak up information, not necessarily give it. If we are going to introduce group work in our instruction sessions, I think it’s important to talk to the faculty member and ask about the class dynamic. Are they already in teams? Are students going to be required to complete a group project? This information might make the use of group work in our instruction sessions more acceptable. Another (and probably the most important) thing we should consider is what are the benefits of group discussions? Can we, as instructors or speakers, get the same type of engagement with our materials from individual work? If inclusive engagement is what we are actually striving for, then maybe what we should be emphasizing is belongingness within the materials and not necessarily forced collaboration, whether that’s in a classroom or an online setting. ≈