

Enriching Classroom Discussions with Breakout Rooms

Elise Verdooner

Breakout rooms in Adobe Connect have the potential to create an intimate classroom experience where students can engage with each other and group-based, participatory learning can be facilitated. This chapter describes how Adobe Connect breakout rooms can be used for short in-class activities, highlighting four different use cases. The four types of breakout group discussion activities include 1) discussions based on the homework, 2) discussions based on in-class materials and lectures, 3) a case study analysis, and 4) group project-based work. These examples are drawn from my experiences conducting breakout groups in a wide range of classes, including the course Program Planning and Development taught by Rick Greenberg, and is written from my perspective as a teaching associate: supporting the professor with the course, including planning and facilitating breakout activities.

Teaching and Learning Goal

Breakout groups were used in a variety of contexts, including debriefing the homework assignments, discussing in-class videos and lectures, engaging with case materials, and group project-based work. Our goal was to allow students to more deeply engage with the course material and to provide ample opportunities for everyone's perspective to be shared, something that can be challenging in courses of any size. In addition to these goals spanning each type of breakout group discussion activity, each use case had another objective:

- The focus of the homework breakout group discussions was to connect the homework to the course concepts and to keep students accountable in completing the homework;
- The focus of the breakout discussions based on in-class material was to elicit student interaction, keep students engaged throughout the class session, and to “dig deeper” in a small setting;
- The focus of the case study breakout group discussion was to use a concrete example to deepen student understanding of strategic planning, budgeting, and the pros and cons of different organizational structures;
- And the focus of the project-based breakout group discussions was to allow students time to collaborate and make progress on their group assignments as well as to use the other students, the teaching associate, and the professor to “bounce around” ideas.

Activity and Results

The class was designed so that there were breakout group activities in every class period. We facilitated four types of breakout group activities: 1) discussions based on the previous week's reading or homework, 2) discussions based on a shared in-class experience (such as a section of the lecture or a video), 3) case study analysis, and 4) unstructured group project-based work.

Discussions based on the previous week's reading or homework

The discussions based on the previous week's reading or homework were a nice way to start off the class and set the stage for the topic of the day. After a two-minute welcome and introduction, some weeks we would move into breakout rooms to discuss the homework. By creating breakout groups for the homework discussion, it allowed all students to share their thoughts and reflections rather than only having time for a few students to share as part of a full-class group discussion. In addition, I suspect there was greater accountability to completing the homework when students knew they would have to discuss the readings or videos with their peers during class. Depending on the duration of your course and how much content you need to get through, this can easily be a five minute activity: four minutes in breakout rooms followed by a one minute debrief (such as a poll question or asking for one or two comments). At the same time, if students are really engaged in the discussion, it may be advantageous to more fully integrate this into your class outline and allocate more time to the activity in future weeks. I think taking the time at the beginning of class to engage students goes a long way in deepening the learning for the rest of the class period.

Another slight variation on the homework breakout group discussions is to divide into groups based on which reading or video students watched and wanted to discuss. To do this, we asked students to change their Adobe Connect status icon based on which article they read (for example, students could raise their hand if they read the first one and put a green check mark if they read the second), and then separated them into groups based on their preferences. Organizing breakout groups in this way might take longer than simply randomizing the groups, however, I found that giving students the option to decide which reading or video to discuss in the breakout groups enriched the conversation and increased class participation and engagement for the remainder of class. In addition, if students were not able to complete all of the assigned readings for the week, it allowed them to engage with the specific material they may have read or were interested in learning more about from their peers.

Discussions based on a shared in-class experience

We also had breakout groups to deepen in-class shared experiences. These were typically longer activities (approximately 10 minutes in breakout rooms and 5-10 minutes debrief) with more targeted questions that connected to the lecture topic. For example, one week we watched a TED Talk together as a whole class. We then divided up into smaller groups and asked questions specific to the video. In another week, there was a brief lecture on the importance of business plans. We then moved into breakout groups to discuss the five business planning steps from the reading and asked students to "note one key reason that [each business planning step] is crucial to the process and what could happen if we skip it." This was a great way to break up the lecture and invite students into the conversation. It allowed students to reflect and react to what was being presented in the moment, aligning it with their personal experiences, and boosting engagement throughout the class period.

Case study analysis

In weeks four and five of the class, we immersed ourselves in a case study exercise using a fictional case study of changes in a fictional organization during many years of its long existence. The homework assignment for the previous week was to read the 7-page case study document. This document included a description of the organization, a brief history, the changes in organizational structure, a budget, and changes in recent years, including company mergers, changes to the mission statement, and changes in assets and contracts. During these two weeks, the in-class lecture and breakout group question prompts were focused on this case study. Each week, we allocated 20 minutes to breakout groups and 10-15 minutes for debriefing the activity. Given the rich detail in the case study document, it was important for students to read it before engaging in the in-class activity. However, when doing case-based activities like this, it is likely that at least one student did not read it ahead of time. In order for all students to maximize learning from this type of exercise, I would recommend a few different options: 1) presenting a brief summary of the case as part of the lecture and before moving into breakout rooms, as this might even be a good refresher for the students that read it and can help highlight the details you see as most important to the case; 2) moving into breakout groups right after a class break so that students can read the document during the break if they decide; or 3) including a prompt within breakout rooms for students to start the discussion by sharing a brief summary amongst themselves, as having the students summarize the reading themselves might be a good way to deepen their understanding of the case.

Unstructured group project-based work

Lastly, students were placed into teams at the beginning of the semester to develop a program/project/product from inception through funding through a series of assignments due throughout the second half of the semester. To allow students to make progress on their project while having the teaching team available as a resource, we often allocated the last minutes of class for group work. In group-based work it can be helpful to create this time for students where everyone is available (instructor included), as it can sometimes be difficult for students to find time outside of class to meet and make progress on the assignments. The amount of time for these breakout groups was allocated based on the perceived need of the specific assignment they were working on. Ideally, we would have liked to dedicate 20-40 minutes for these particular breakout sessions; however, this often needed to be adjusted due to the demands of a particular session.

I would recommend thinking about how much structure (if any) you want to have in this last type of breakout activity. Do you want to require a deliverable at the end of the breakout group (i.e., notes, outlines, verbal debrief, etc.)? Do you want to come back into the main room as a full class for any closing remarks or do you want to share closing remarks before moving into breakout rooms? It may even be advantageous to have an open conversation with students about how they want to use the time and to answer some of these questions together. In our class, this was time devoted exclusively to the groups. We typically didn't visit these breakout rooms unless invited in for questions or to brainstorm an element of their project. We encouraged them to utilize the time together, but did not require them to stay. Therefore, we had some groups that decided to leave class early and others that used the whole time and even stayed longer to continue working. I'd recommend setting the intention for this breakout group activity collectively with students (either as a whole class or individually with each group) and honoring what is agreed upon.

Recommendations

In any breakout activity, it is important to think about how and if you plan to visit the breakout rooms. In the homework and other short breakout activities, we typically remained in the main room because there was limited time for the activity, and we wanted to give students the full time together to discuss. Whereas in the breakout group discussions that were longer than 10 minutes, we would typically visit each of the breakout groups to engage and answer questions. This worked well based on the nature of the activities the students were doing in this class; however, I've also facilitated breakout group activities in other classes where we intentionally did not visit the rooms to allow the students to more confidently engage with each other. At times, going into the breakout rooms can feel a bit like spying on the students, so I would recommend stating your expectations and intentions with breakout groups at the beginning of the class or activity. Do you want to observe quietly or engage in the conversation? Do you want to drop in randomly or set a general time to drop in? If you are needed in multiple breakout rooms at once, how might you handle this situation? If you plan to visit breakout rooms during the activity, I would recommend normalizing this early on and clearly outlining some of these questions for students so that it doesn't feel intrusive when floating from room to room. This could also be collectively decided. Consider asking students whether they would like the teaching team to come around to the groups to answer questions and engage in dialogue or if they would prefer you only enter the room when invited in. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that each activity may vary, requiring different needs and levels of support from the teaching team. In the same way, each group may have its own "personality" with different preferences for levels of support and attention. We should be constantly seeking feedback from our students and adapting to create the most conducive learning environment for each cohort of students.

Technical Details and Steps

Step 1: Create breakout rooms in Adobe Connect

Create breakout rooms based on the number of students in your class and how many students you would like in each group. I suggest 3-4 students per breakout group so everyone has the opportunity to engage in the discussion. For short, homework reflection activities, I recommend allocating 5-7 minutes for the whole activity (4-5 minutes for the breakout group discussions and 1-2 minutes for debrief). For the longer lecture-based activities, I recommend allocating 15-20 minutes for the activity (10 minutes for the breakout group discussions and 5-10 minutes for the debrief). The case study activity was slightly longer, with students in breakout rooms for 20 minutes, followed by 15 minutes debrief, for a total of 35 minutes. For the group work breakout activity, we aimed for 10-15 minutes.

In each breakout group, we had a screen sharing pod for a slide with the activity instructions, a chat box for the group members to message with each other, a video pod for students to come on camera, and a note pod where students could write notes from the discussion to reference while debriefing the activity (see **Image 2** below). Depending on your activity, you may want to modify this list or utilize other tools on the Adobe Connect platform.

Step 2: Share discussion materials

Before moving into breakout groups, you may find it helpful to include a lecture slide that briefly outlines the expectation for the activity. This could include the discussion prompts and the amount of time that will be allocated to the activity. A similar slide could also be shared in the breakout room for quick reference, especially if you are asking students to respond to specific questions rather than a general reflection and discussion on the material. When possible and appropriate, I would recommend prompting students to respond to specific questions curated based on the reading, video, or lecture that connect back to the weekly topic and course learning objectives. In addition to more carefully targeting the learning objectives, this can help guide future in-class conversations, allowing students to build off what others are saying in meaningful ways.

When doing a case study activity, we shared the case document in an email ahead of time, posted the document as a resource in Canvas, and made it available for download in the class session through a files pod in Adobe Connect.

Step 3: Assign roles in breakout rooms

At the start of most breakout group activities, we asked students to assign the following roles: facilitator, recorder, and reporter. The facilitator would facilitate the group conversation, ensuring that everyone had a chance to share; the recorder would take notes during the activity; and the reporter would share during the debrief with the larger group. Depending on the way you debrief the activity (group sharing versus individual sharing or alternative ways of debriefing), you may not want to include the reporter role. We also asked that students rotate roles in subsequent breakout groups so that everyone had the opportunity to assume different roles. This can be challenging if you are randomizing the groups each time, and people will likely repeat roles at one point during the semester.

Step 4: Debrief the breakout group discussion

Depending on the activity, we would debrief in different levels of depth. For example, after the homework breakout groups we might move quickly to the lecture, asking for one or two high level comments from folks. In this case, you can use the slides layout (see **Image 1** below) with your original question prompts. When debriefing the case study and longer breakout group discussions we would allow for more time to debrief, inviting the reporter from each group to share what they discussed. In these instances, we included the note pod from the breakout groups in the main room so that the reporter could reference their notes when sharing (see **Image 3** and **Image 4** below).

Another possible way to debrief the breakout group discussions is having poll questions for students to answer while in the breakout group or immediately after returning to the main room (see **Image 5** below). Using polls is a good alternative way to debrief the activity in a more anonymous way. In addition, it might be interesting to encourage drawing as part of the debrief and include a whiteboard for students to do this in Adobe Connect (see **Image 6** and **Image 7** below). You could include a whiteboard either in each breakout room for students to draw on as a group or one in the main room to draw on collectively.

What this looked like in Adobe Connect

Image 1: Adobe Connect classroom displaying breakout group discussion instructions on a share pod and downloadable instructions in a file pod in the main room. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 1 Alt-Text: This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom shows a large pod along most of the top of the screen, showing the slides presentation. The slide in this pod says "Breakout Groups" in the header and "Insert Prompt here for discussion" in the body. Below the slides, there is a chat box taking up most of the width of the slides and there is a smaller

file sharing pod on the right where the breakout documents can be shared with students. Along the left side of the screen are a narrow video pod, with an attendees pod below.

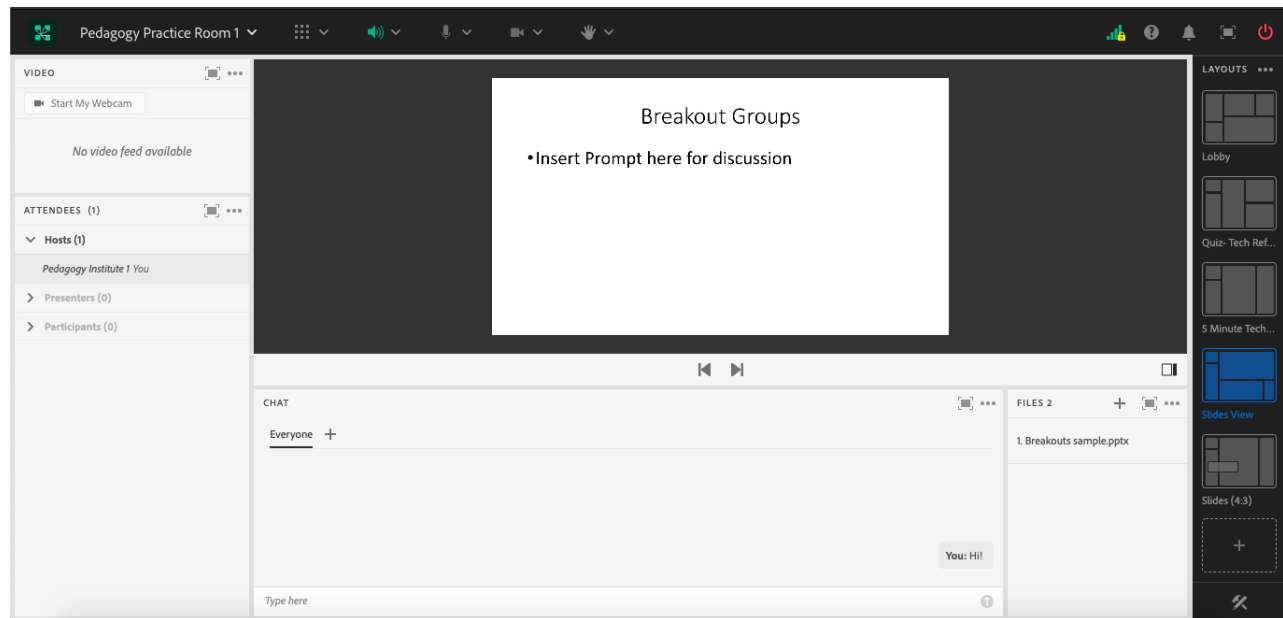


Image 2: Example of a possible Adobe Connect breakout room with a note pod, a share pod with slides uploaded, a video pod, and a chat pod. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 2 Alt-Text: This screengrab of the Adobe Connect breakout group room shows five pods. Along the left side of the screen are a video pod and the attendees pod below that. The main part of the screen is divided between three pods. Along the bottom is a chat pod, and above this the space is divided between a notes pod and a presentation sharing pod with an example slide titled, “Breakout Groups.” The slide says “Insert Prompt here for discussion.” The notes pod says “Breakout Group 1 Notes.”

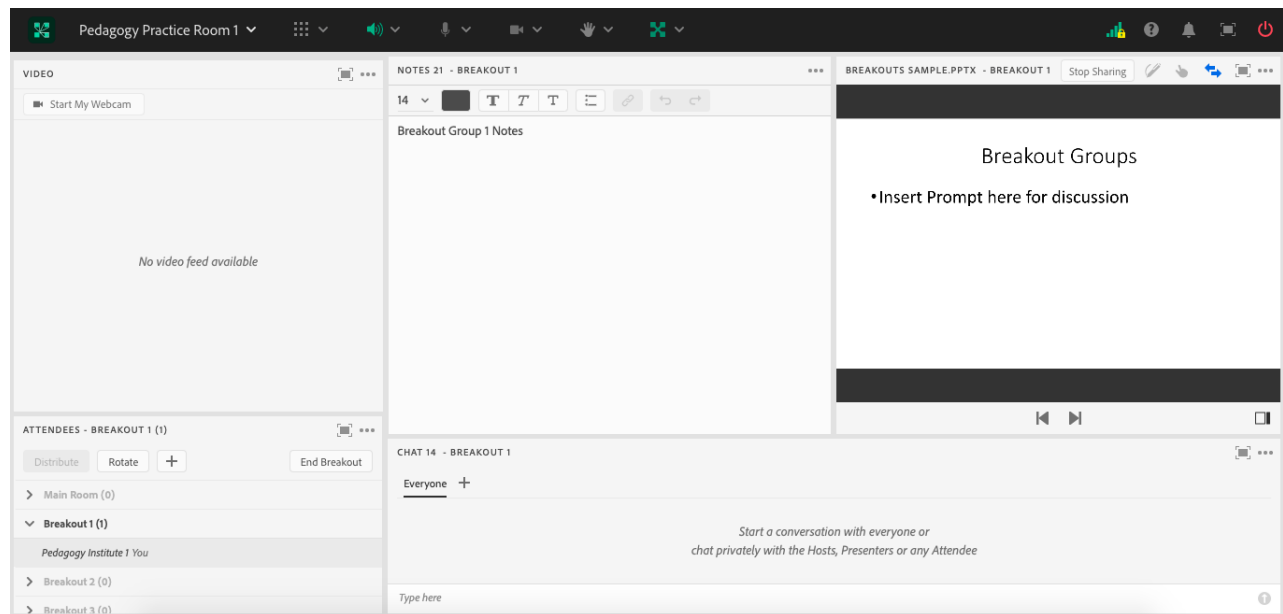


Image 3: Drop down menu showing how to add Adobe Connect breakout pods to the main room for use in activity debrief. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 3 Alt-Text: This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom shows a drop down menu with a list of the pods you can add to the room. The drop down menu includes the following options: “Share, Notes, Attendees, Video, Chat, Files, Web

Links, Poll, Q & A, Engagement Dashboard, Breakout Pods, Move and Resize Pods, and Manage Pods.” It shows me selecting “Breakout Pods” and then “Breakout 3,” and then “Notes 23.” Behind the drop down menu is a large video pod in the top left of the screen. Below the video pod is a chat pod running across most of the layout, and to the left of the chat pod is a narrow attendees pod. In the top right quarter of the screen are two note pods: “Note 21” includes the text “Breakout Group 1 Notes” and “Note 22” includes the text “Breakout Group 2 Notes.” There is an open space where the third note pod will go.

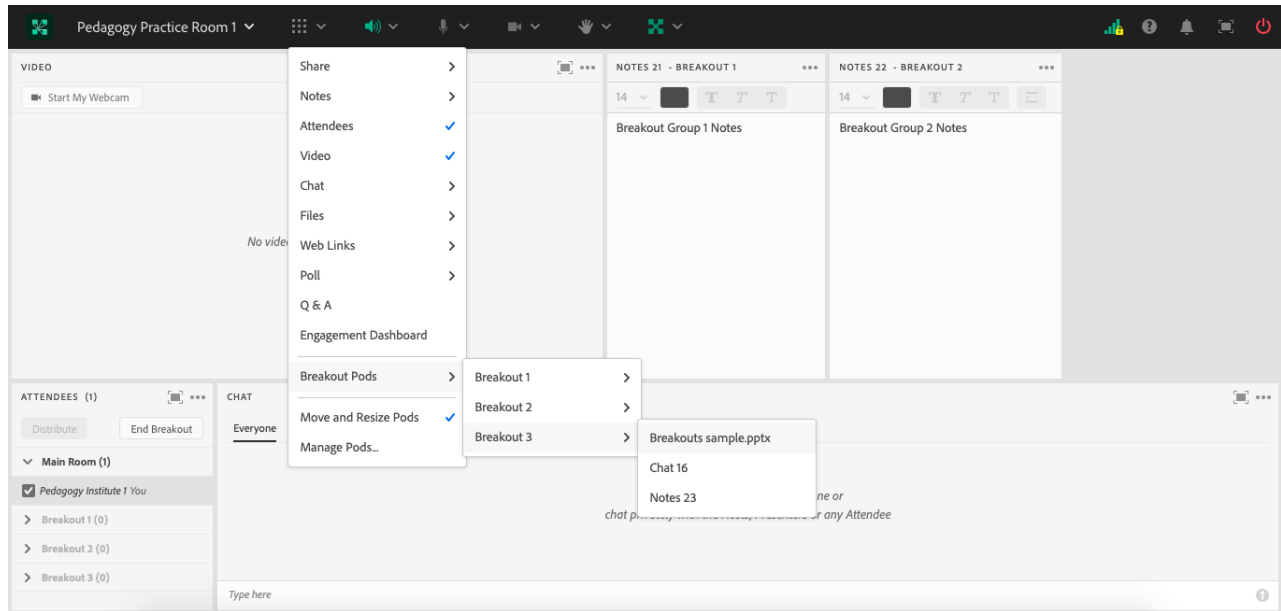


Image 4: Adobe Connect classroom showing possible debrief layout with breakout group note pods for student reference. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 4 Alt-Text: This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom is a continuation of the process illustrated in Image 3. The difference is that the third note pod has been added to the open space in Image 3 so that the three breakout group note pods are visible in a row.

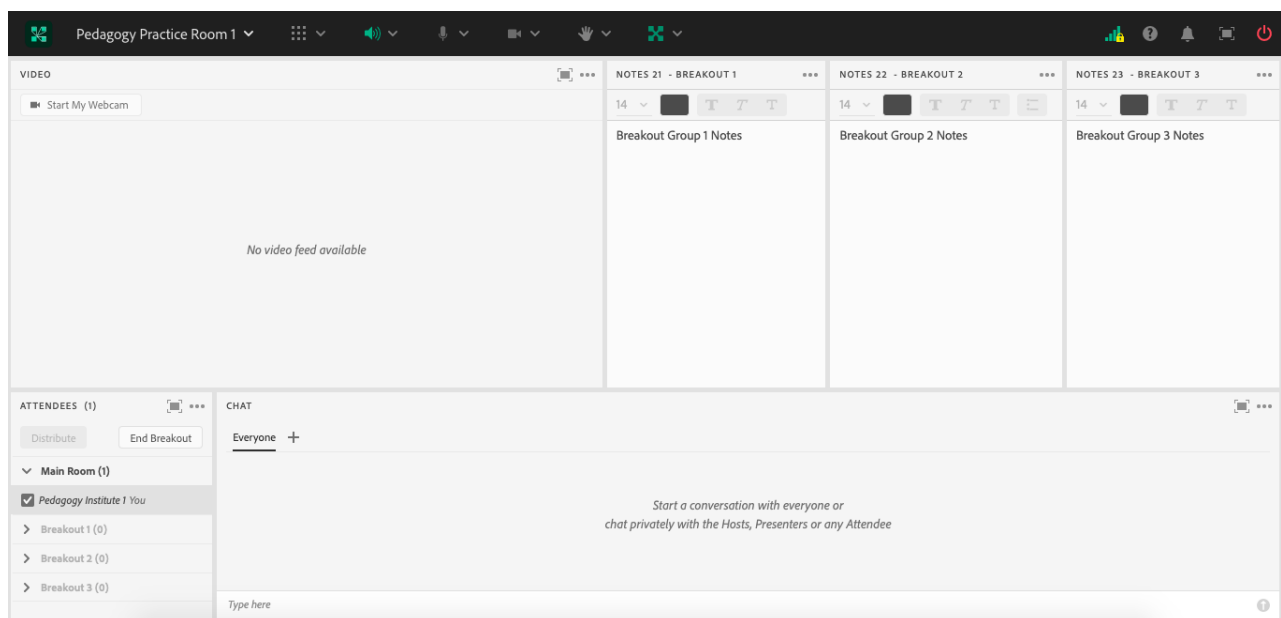


Image 5: Drop down menu showing how to add Adobe Connect poll pods to the main room for use in activity debrief. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 5 Alt-Text: This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom shows a drop down menu with a list of the pods you can add to the room. Behind the drop down menu is a large video pod in the top left of the screen. Below the video pod is a chat pod running across most of the layout, and to the left of the chat pod is a narrow attendees pod. In the top right corner of the screen there is an open space where the poll pod will go. The drop down menu includes the following options: “Share, Notes, Attendees, Video, Chat, Files, Web Links, Poll, Q & A, Engagement Dashboard, Breakout Pods, Move and Resize Pods, and Manage Pods.” The screengrab shows me selecting “Poll” and then “Add New Poll.”

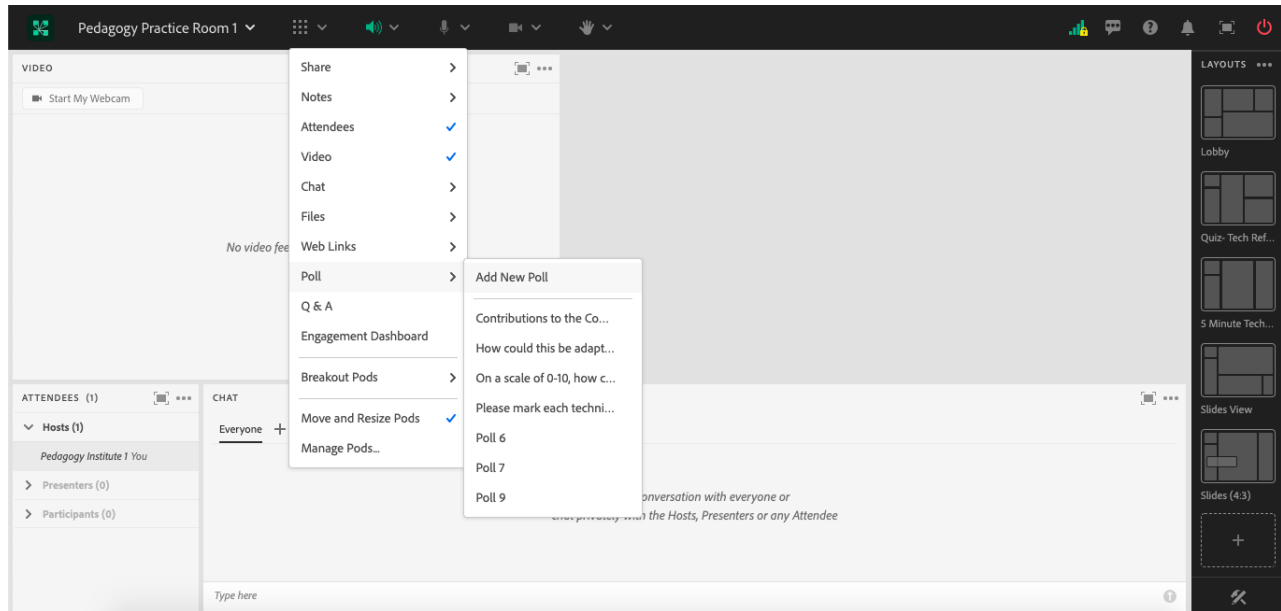


Image 6: Adobe Connect classroom showing possible debrief layout with a large video pod and a share pod with the option to upload a document, share your screen, or create a whiteboard for drawing. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 6 Alt-Text: This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom shows a large video pod in the top left of the screen. In the top right of the screen is a large share pod which is currently blank. Below these pods is a chat pod running across most of the layout, and to the left of the chat pod is a narrow attendees pod.

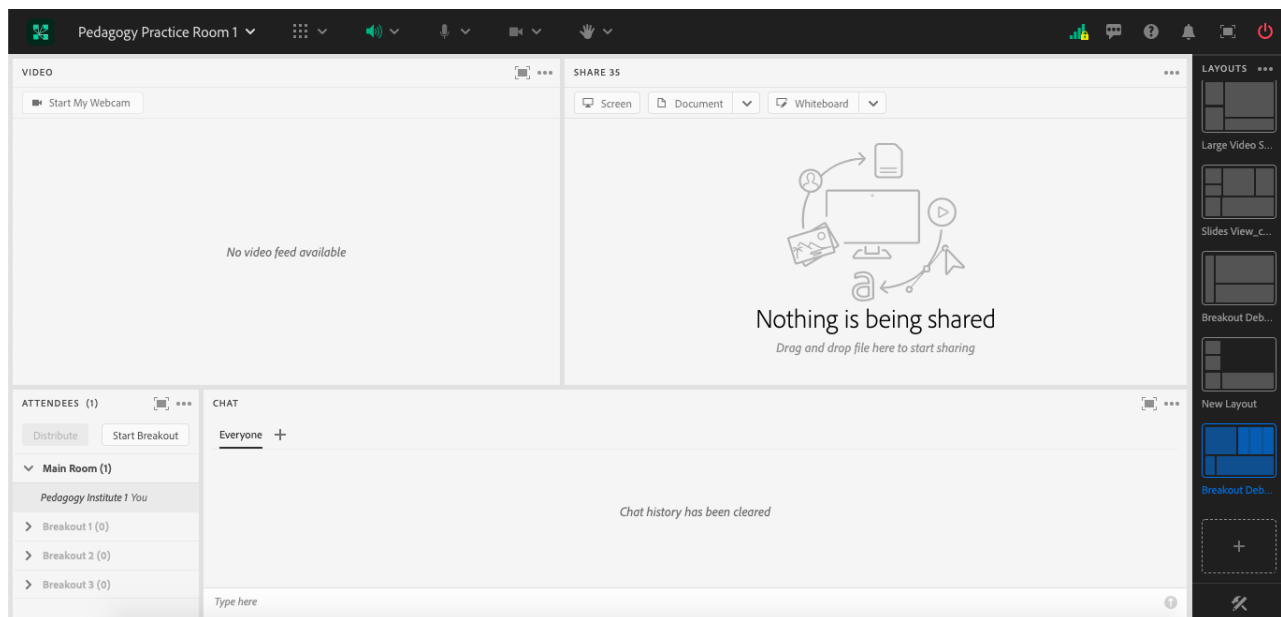
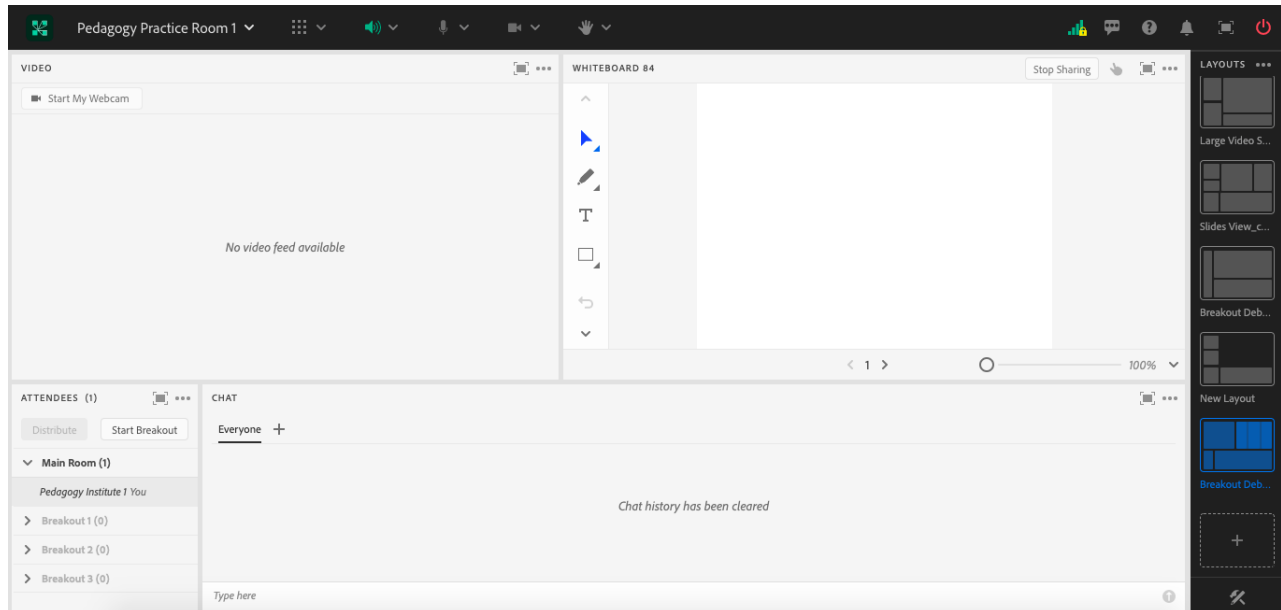


Image 7: Adobe Connect classroom showing possible debrief layout with a large video pod and a share pod with a whiteboard to draw on. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

Image 7 Alt-Text: This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom shows a large video pod in the top left of the screen. In the top right of the screen is a large share pod with a whiteboard uploaded. Below these pods is a chat pod running across most of the layout, and to the left of the chat pod is a narrow attendees pod.



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Elise Verdooner

Columbia University

Elise Verdooner, a Fulbright Scholar and returned Peace Corps volunteer, has worked in international development for eight years. She is the former Executive Director of TEEEM, a global nonprofit organization focused on health, education, and economic empowerment in Ethiopia, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Cambodia, Mongolia, Slovakia, and Peru. She holds a master's degree in social work from Columbia University with a focus on social enterprise administration and international social work and a master's degree in global affairs from the University of Notre Dame. As a Fulbright Scholar in India, she is researching international social welfare, corporate social responsibility, and culture. Elise started as a Teaching Associate at Columbia University School of Social Work in 2019 before transitioning to Adjunct Faculty in 2022. As a youth development volunteer with the Peace Corps in Botswana, Elise worked on organizational capacity building, HIV prevention and outreach, and gender equality initiatives. Elise is a member of National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) New York City Chapter and the Immigration and Global Social Work Committee. She is a member of the Network for Social Work Management (NSWM) and was the 2019 recipient of the NSWM Mark Moses Distinguished Fellowship Award, which is presented annually to one exemplary practitioner or academic working in the field of social work management. She publishes and presents on topics of international development and teaching with technology.



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