

# **In-Class Breaks: The Importance of Taking a Break During Online Classes and Considerations for Break Activities**

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*This chapter discusses the importance of taking in-class breaks and the steps for how you might do this in your online classroom. Based on our combined experiences in the role of student, instructor, and classroom support, we offer our knowledge of essential considerations when planning in-class breaks. In addition, we provide suggestions for optional activities to complete during the break.*

## Teaching and Learning Goal

An in-class break can be a structured or unstructured time to pause the lesson plan and allow students to literally or figuratively step away from the virtual classroom. Giving students an in-class break can have physical, mental, and emotional benefits. For example, Peiris et al. (2021) observed that movement breaks improved engagement and productivity in the classroom among university students. Kogan et al. (2018) found that showing cute animal videos to a veterinary pharmacology course increased students' moods, engagement, and perceived understanding of the class content. Nair and Segal (2022) suggest that doing chair yoga together can reduce stress and increase concentration in the online classroom, and Segal (2022) has received positive feedback from her online graduate students about using short mindfulness activities in her classes. And Dunn et al. (2013) found that looking at nature from inside or looking at images or videos of nature reduced stress.

Adult learners have multifaceted needs and multiple roles, both in and outside the classroom. We have seen students as primary caregivers for children, parents, or other loved ones; students working full- or part-time and taking classes from their place of work or even in rare cases while in transit home from work; and students balancing the heavy demands of other school work, field work, and home life. These external factors may impede active engagement in the virtual classroom, along with challenges such as adapting to new technology (Smythe & Breshears, 2017), transitioning from being a working professional to being a student (Kleinke & Lin, 2020), or tiredness (Abu Bakar et al., 2017).

Acknowledging the complexity of these roles and being intentional about giving students time in-class to take care of their needs and adjust to the online classroom environment allows students to meet their obligations in and outside the classroom. Similarly, there are also benefits for

instructors to have breaks, as they also have personal needs that may arise during class.

The goals of having an in-class break include:

- Providing spaces for community bonding and encouraging student interactions;
- Preparing students to be more attentive, focused, and engaged for the rest of class (Keller et al., 2020; Peiris et al., 2021);
- Allowing students to prepare for activities in the remainder of class (skimming or refreshing themselves on the material);
- Giving students and the instructor scheduled time for bathroom breaks, coffee/tea/water refills, or caregiving check-ins without having to miss class content;
- Giving everyone a chance to stretch or relax, to relieve any body pain associated with being in front of a computer (Intolo et al., 2019);
- Providing time for the instructor to adjust the lesson plan if modifications are needed for the remainder of the class; and
- Allowing instructors to follow up on questions or chat comments they may have missed.

## Activity and Results

The emotional, social, and intellectual development of the student is amplified or hindered based on the classroom environment we create (Ambrose, 2010). As class breaks can be thought of as occurring outside the classroom or class time, we may not immediately consider the impact that breaks have on the overall climate of the class. However, the many decisions that inform the structure of class breaks may directly influence the overall climate of the class and ultimately impact student learning. There are many considerations to be mindful of when deciding the format of class breaks. Some key considerations that influence class climate are timing, structure, content, student voice, and class norms.

### Timing

Timing is essential for planning breaks in class. Ensuring that breaks are planned to occur at natural ports of exit that minimize disruption to the class content and are frequent enough to meet student needs demonstrates respect for students as learners and as individuals with lives that exist beyond the walls of the classroom. Poorly timed class breaks can occur when class breaks are delayed or when scheduled breaks are too short or go on for too long. When class breaks are poorly timed compromises must be made, either to the class content or to the students' time to address their personal needs. Subsequently, these compromises may be perceived as a lack of regard for either the class material or the students' needs, overall impacting the class climate.

When considering the length of the break compared to the amount of time spent on class content, our experience has been to provide a 10 minute break for every hour of class content. You may also want to ask the students if they prefer one longer

break or a few shorter breaks. At Columbia University's School of Social Work, most classes are an hour and 50 minutes long, and we found a 10 minute break after the first hour worked well in this setting. Depending on the duration of your class and intensity of the subject material, you may want to adjust break times accordingly. Breaks can also be used strategically in the class to optimize the learning experience. For example, holding a break after difficult topics or conversations could be a way to give students a chance to practice self care and allow the teaching team to be more intentional about coming back together. You may also want to adjust the timing of the break to be earlier if there are any logistical or technical difficulties you need to address.

## Structure

Secondary to getting the timing of breaks right is the structure, or lack thereof, for class breaks. Class breaks can be completely unstructured during which the class disbands for a period of time to take care of their own needs before rejoining to dive back into class content. However, some may choose to apply a structured approach to class breaks by providing an activity to engage in. While activities may be made available to students, it is important to inform students that structured break activities are optional and they should use the scheduled time as needed. Whether choosing an unstructured or structured approach to class breaks, we should continue to reflect on the unspoken communication of our decisions and how they influence the class climate.

One potential challenge with providing unstructured break time is regrouping as a class and bringing together students that are separately focused on addressing their personal needs. An option for bringing students back together from an unstructured break to continue on with the lesson plan is to facilitate a post-break energizer. A post-break energizer is a short activity that is completed collectively by the class and is intended to heighten the energy and re-engage students for the remainder of the class period. These activities are particularly effective during evening classes when students may be getting tired. "Count to 10" is an example of an activity that could be done when returning from a break (see **Image 1**). This involves students coming on microphone and counting to 10 without talking over each other where the only thing that can be communicated is the next number, no other visual forms of communication. When doing this activity in the course Staff Development, Coaching, and Training, students were smiling and laughing and they seemed more engaged for the second half of class after having this shared experience.

## Content

If choosing to incorporate structured class breaks, it is important to consider the potential influence of the content being introduced during the break. To enable students who engage in the structured break activities to view the class break as intended, a break, it is essential that the break content is not a critical learning opportunity in and of itself. In order for students to feel like they are free to step away and attend to any personal needs, the activities must be low stakes. It is also beneficial to give assurance to students that a learning opportunity will not be missed if they need to step away.

There are a variety of optional activities that can be used to fill the break time. When designing any activities, we must think about the abilities of our students, modifying the activity as necessary so all students can fully participate and engage in the activity if desired. Further consideration for break content should be given to screen time, as planning activities that encourage students to look away from their screen may help reduce fatigue. You may want to have a balance of break activities that involve looking at a screen and ones you can do away from the screen.

Screen-based activities may include watching a video together, such as a music video, videos from student groups at your university, or relaxing videos from online platforms. Activities that don't require a screen include listening to a song together, offering a guided meditation or stretching activity, or inviting students to chat using the microphone without looking at the screen.

## Student Voice

Consideration should also be given to student voice when planning in-class breaks, as incorporating student voice is a focus of trauma-informed teaching (Carello, 2018; Quiros, 2022). Seeking student feedback regarding the timing, structure, and content of the breaks may help to develop breaks that best suit the needs of the class, as every cohort of students is unique. Additionally, student voice may be incorporated into the planning of break activities by inviting students to design and lead

break activities. Allowing students to contribute by planning and leading activities may promote student ownership and encourage greater class engagement.

One way to elevate students' voices when designing the break is to invite feedback at the beginning of the course and at strategic moments throughout the semester, either through in-class polls (**Image 7**), Canvas (or other learning management system) discussion board prompts, private email, a Google Form, or other feedback mechanisms. For example, at the beginning of the semester you could have a series of polls asking for student input, including 1) at what point in the class they would like to have a break(s), 2) whether they want structured or unstructured break time, and 3) recommendations for break activities or content.

## Class Norms

Finally, creating class norms is an important component of planning in-class breaks. Establishing class norms can set a foundation for the overall class climate (Marquart et al., 2022). By including breaks in the class agenda at the start of each class and later signaling to the class when breaks are coming, students can anticipate when the break will take place and can create plans to maximize their use of the break time (see **Image 2**).

Another norm to consider is communicating the use of microphones, cameras, and status icons during in-class breaks. Status icons can be especially useful to gauge how many students are available to participate in break activities and to assess whether the full class has returned as the break comes to an end. For example, at the beginning of the break you may ask the class to indicate their status by selecting the red Stepped Away icon if they are moving away from their computer (**Image 8**) or by selecting the green Agree thumbs up icon to show that they have returned or are staying at their computer. When choosing to use a post-break energizer you may remind the class to update their status icon when they have returned to their computers and if students are ready to begin the energizer.

**Image 1:** A screengrab of a post-break energizer activity called "Count to 10." Slide image used with permission from the Staff Development, Coaching, and Training Spring 2019 teaching team at Columbia University School of Social Work.

**Image 1 Alt-Text:** This slide is titled "Post-break energizer." The content of the slide includes the following text, "Count to 10 - Sounds easy, right? Our task is to count from 1 to 10 out loud, in random order, with each group member offering one number at a time. If two people say a number at the same time, the game stops and begins again with 1."

# Post-break energizer

Count to 10 - Sounds easy, right?

Our task is to count from 1 to 10 out loud, in random order, with each group member offering one number at a time. If two people say a number at the same time, the game stops and begins again with 1.

**Image 2:** Class agenda slide example indicating how to signal to students when the break will be held in regards to the content so students can manage their expectations and plan for the break time. Slide image used with permission from the Staff Development, Coaching, and Training Spring 2019 teaching team at Columbia University School of Social Work.

**Image 2 Alt-Text:** The title of this slide is "Agenda" and the following agenda items are listed out below: 1) Welcome, agenda, intro to this class format, media release forms; 2) Introductions, class policies, and community agreements; 3) Course objectives and course overview; – Break; 4) Social workers as trainers; learning organizations; training transfer; 5) Wrap up and reflections."

AGENDA	
1	Welcome, agenda, intro to this class format, media release forms
2	Introductions, class policies, and community agreements
3	Course objectives and course overview
--	<i>Break</i>
4	Social workers as trainers; learning organizations; training transfer
5	Wrap up and reflections

## Technical Details and Steps

The following steps outline how to facilitate a 10-minute structured optional break activity.

### Step 1: Design your in-class break activity and prepare materials

If you have decided to facilitate a structured in-class break activity, it will be important to prepare these materials prior to the start of class. If you plan on showing a video, you may want to embed the video into your presentation slides or prepare a dedicated Adobe Connect layout for your breaks. Alternatively you can upload a separate share pod and drag the pod from the presenter area to the class layout to start the video (**Image 4**). We would also recommend having the link available to share in the chat box so that students who choose not to participate in the break activity can watch the video later or for students who have to take care of other needs and want to start watching the video halfway through the break. If you are facilitating a stretching activity, guided meditation, or other non-video activity, include any material you may need in your presentation slides.

### Step 2: Move into the break

Announce to the students you will be moving into a break, sharing the duration, start time, and end time. We recommend posting what time you expect students back in the classroom somewhere consistently visible. If including the timing in the chat, there is the risk that students may lose track of it while chatting with each other. Therefore, we'd recommend either using the drawing function in Adobe Connect to write the time on a break presentation slide (**Image 5**) or to open a new note pod with the time stated in an area that will not be disturbed (**Image 6**).

### Step 3: Return from the break and lead a post-break energizer or continue with the class session

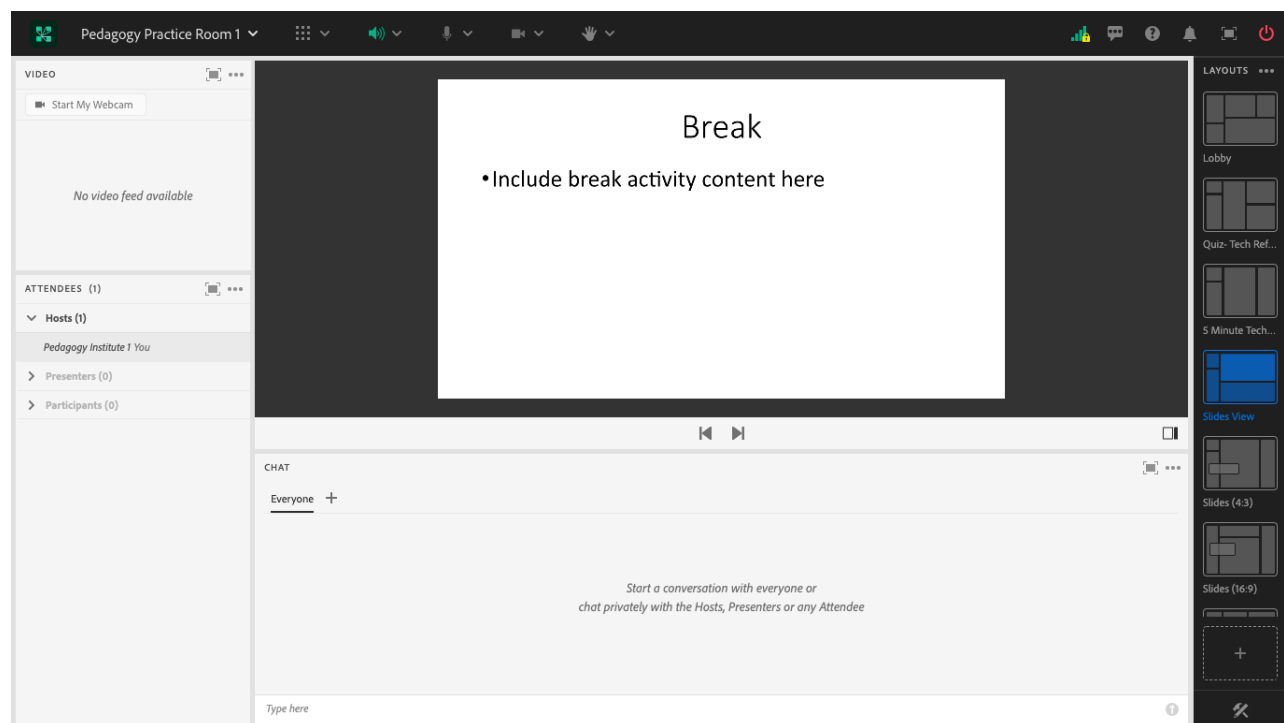
Following the break, assess whether the class is ready to jump back into the class content or if a post-break energizer is needed to bring the focus of the class together. It may be helpful to have a few activity options ready so you can make a decision in the moment. The decision to employ a post-break energizer will likely be influenced by the structure of the break.

Whether or not a post-break energizer is implemented, using transition statements, such as “welcome back,” can help signal to the class that the break has fully come to an end and the focus will be shifted to the class content. This could also be an opportunity to remind students to update their status icon.

## What this looked like in Adobe Connect

**Image 3:** Adobe Connect classroom displaying break activity content on a share pod in the main room. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

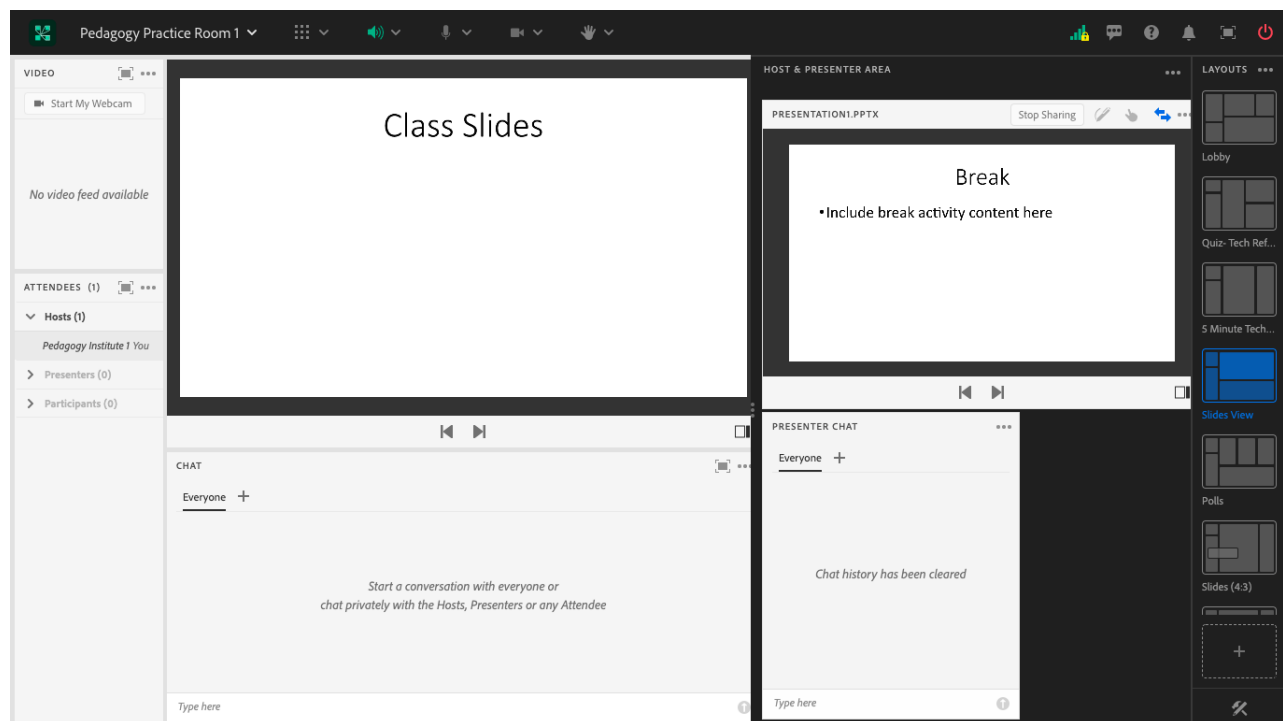
**Image 3 Alt-Text:** This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom shows a large pod along most of the top of the screen, showing the slides presentation. The slide in this pod says “Break” in the header and “Include break activity content here” in the body. Below the slides, there is a chat box taking up the width of the slides. Along the left side of the screen are a narrow video pod, with an attendees pod below.



**Image 4:** Adobe Connect classroom layout with the presenter-only area open, showing how to have a separate share pod with the break content ready to drag into the main classroom area at the start of the break. The presenter-only area is not visible to students. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

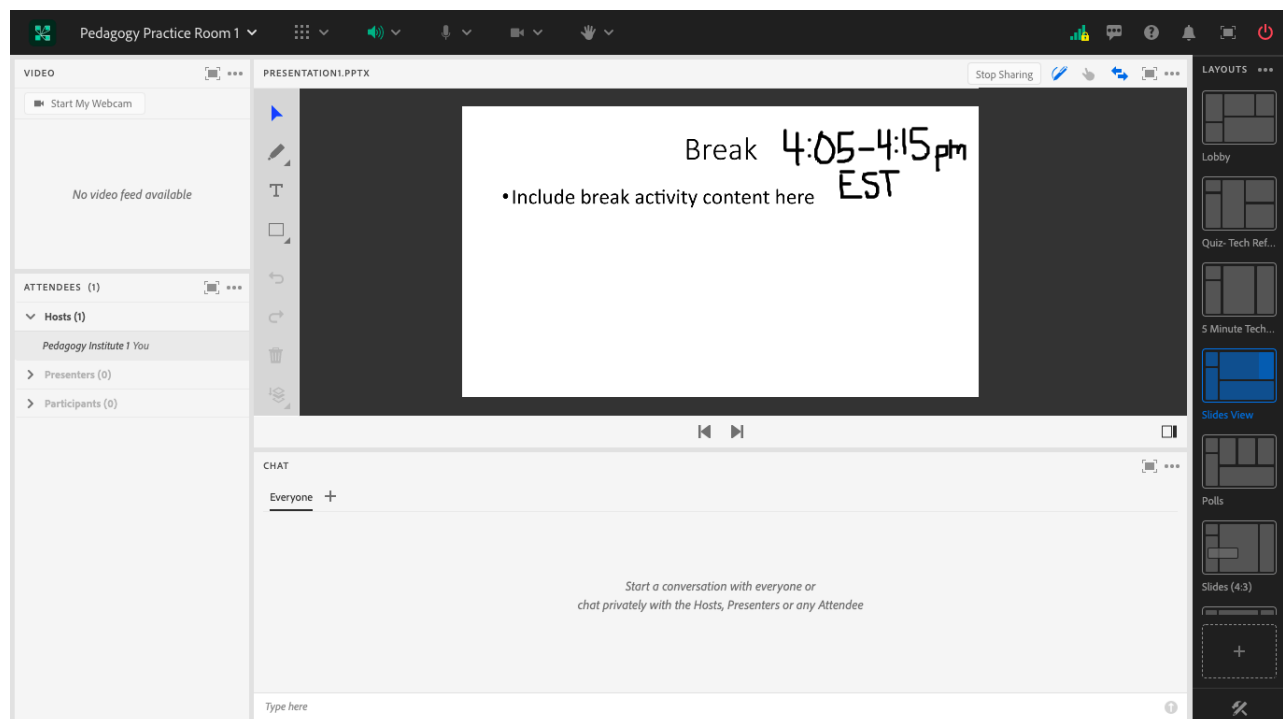
**Image 4 Alt-Text:** This screengrab of the Adobe Connect platform shows the classroom in two thirds of the screen on the left and the presenter-only area for a third of the screen on the right. In the classroom, there is a large pod along most of the top of the screen, showing the slides presentation. The slide in this pod says “Class Slides.” Below the slides, there is a chat box, and along the left side of the screen are a narrow video pod and an attendees pod. In the presenter-only area there is a share pod on the top with a slide with the title “Break” and the content saying “Include break activity content here.” Below the slide is a presenter chat pod that is blank, where the teaching team can communicate privately during class.





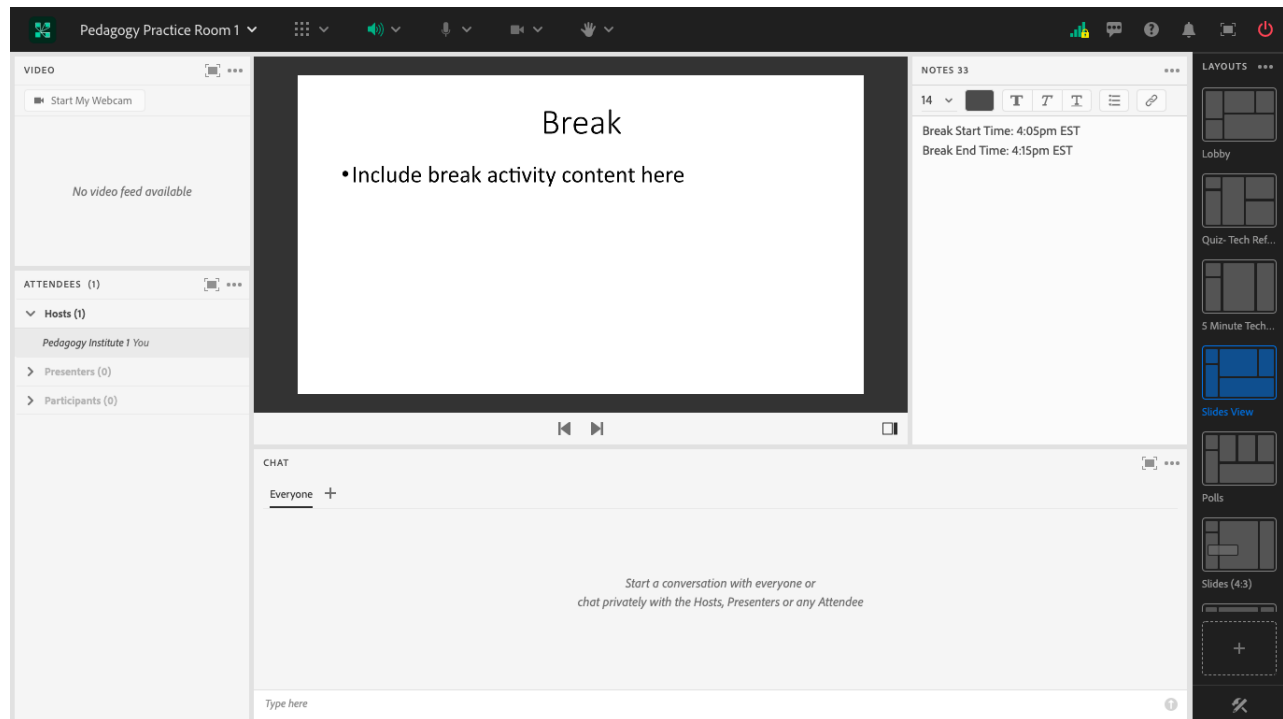
**Image 5:** Adobe Connect classroom layout showing the designated in-class break time drawn on the presentation slide using the drawing function. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 5 Alt-Text:** This screengrab shows the same Adobe Connect classroom as Image 3, with large slides along most of the top of the screen. In text that is written using a mouse and the Adobe Connect drawing tool, the slide says “4:05-4:15pm EST” next to the word “Break” on the slide.



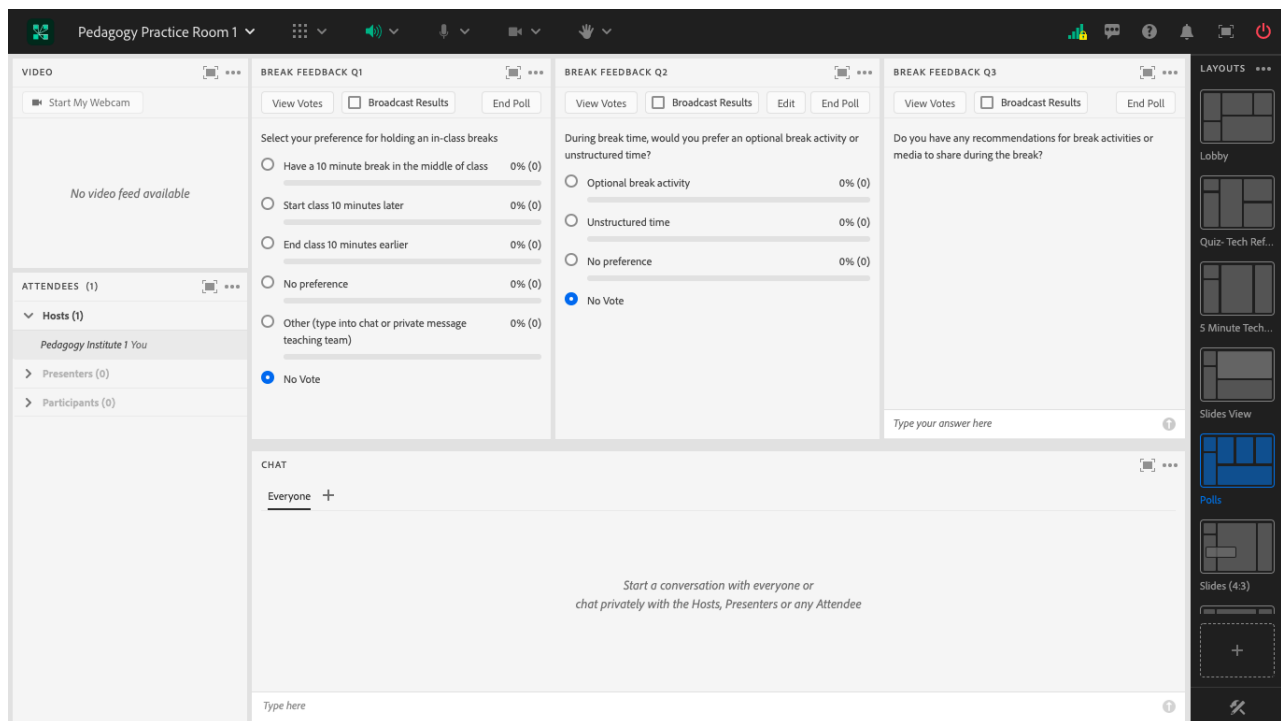
**Image 6:** Adobe Connect classroom displaying break activity content in a share pod and a note pod stating the start and end times of the break. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 6 Alt-Text:** This screengrab shows the same Adobe Connect classroom as Images 3 and 5. The difference is that to the right of the “Break” slide is a narrow note pod that has the text, “Break Start Time: 4:05 pm EST” and “Break End Time: 4:15pm EST.”



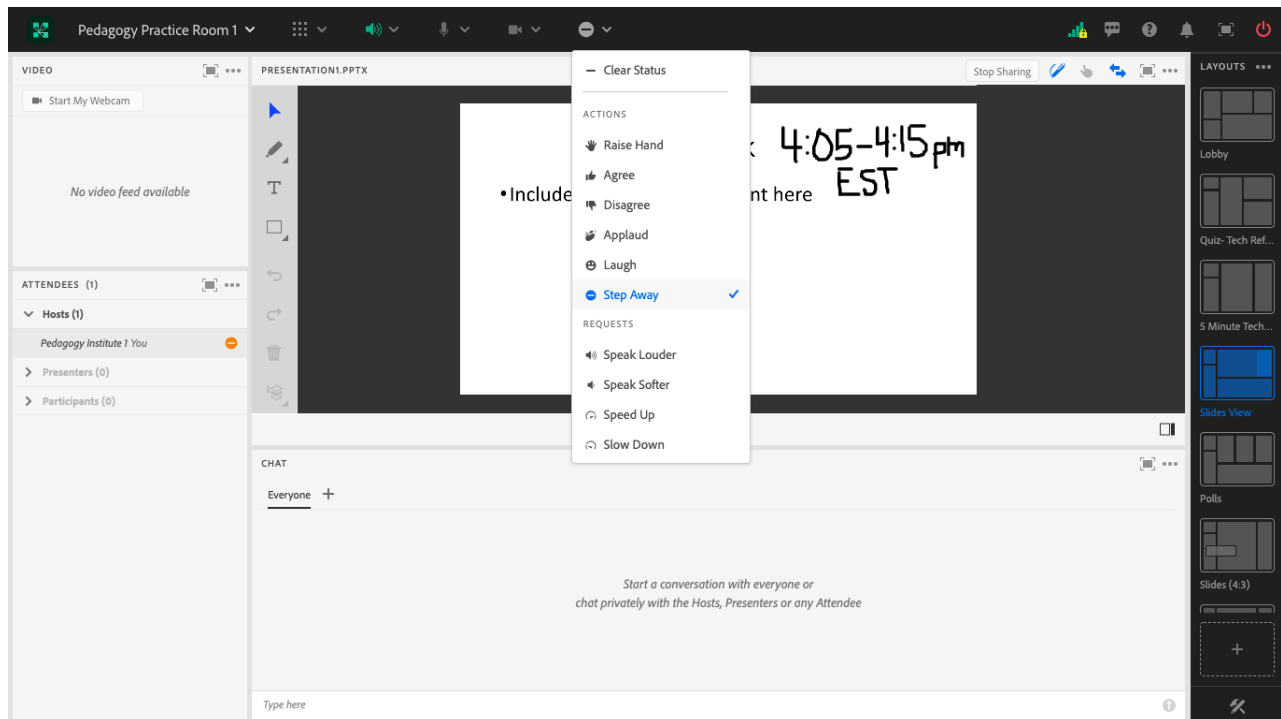
**Image 7:** Adobe Connect classroom layout with poll questions which can be used when seeking student feedback on in-class breaks. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 7 Alt-Text:** This screengrab of the Adobe Connect classroom shows three poll pods along the top of the screen. The poll “Break Feedback Q1” prompts “Select your preference for holding an in-class break” and the multiple choices responses include “Have a 10 minute break in the middle of class,” “Start class 10 minutes later,” “End class 10 minutes earlier,” “No preference,” “Other (type into chat or private message teaching team),” and “No Vote.” The poll “Break Feedback Q2” asks, “During break time, would you prefer an optional break activity or unstructured time?” Multiple choice responses include “Optional break activity,” “Unstructured time,” “No preference,” and “No Vote.” The poll “Breakout Feedback Q3” is a short answer question which asks, “Do you have any recommendations for break activities or media to share during the break?” and there is a blank space to type responses. Below the poll pods there is a chat box taking up the width of the polls. Along the left side of the screen are a narrow video pod and an attendees pod.



**Image 8:** Adobe Connect classroom layout showing how to change your status icon to indicate that you have stepped away from the computer. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 8 Alt-Text:** This screengrab shows the same Adobe Connect classroom as Images 3 and 5. The difference is that disrupting the view of the slide presentation is the drop down menu for the Adobe Connect status icons. The first option at the top of the menu says "Clear Status." Underneath is a series of options under the label "Actions," which include: "Raise Hand, Agree, Disagree, Applaud, Laugh, Step Away." Following these options is another section in the menu labeled "Requests." The options under "Requests" include "Speak Louder, Speak Softer, Speed Up, Slow Down."



# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Matthea Marquart for allowing us to use her Staff Development, Coaching, and Training course for inspiration and examples. We would also like to thank Professor Steven Schinke for his mentorship, guidance, and support. His legacy continues to inspire this work.

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