

Promoting Mental and Physical Health in Any Discipline

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I frequently attend and present at teaching conferences, many of which are virtual. At many of these conferences, there are multiple sessions that you can attend, one right after the other, with perhaps a 10-minute break between sessions lasting up to 8 hours in any given day. At one particular virtual conference, the organizers must have recognized the level of “zoom fatigue” that this can create, as they instituted a break room that you could visit which included advertisements from publishers, a place where participants could “online chat-mingle” with each other, and even a “puppy cam” where you can tune into a camera set to watch puppies play in a pen all day. This conference occurred during the pandemic where I was teaching all of my classes remotely and asynchronously using pre-recorded lecture videos and assignments that were set up in learning modules. These students would complete these learning modules throughout the quarter in Canvas, our learning management system here at UC Riverside. I recognized that there may be some value in having a virtual breakroom available to students, especially in an asynchronous online class that might not otherwise include a lot of social interaction.

Promoting student health has been a rising concern during and after the Covid-19 Pandemic, and there is some evidence to suggest that college students are struggling more with mental and physical health issues than in the past. A study of 373 campuses nationwide during the 2020-2021 school year found that more than 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem (Lipson, 2022). A different national survey suggests that about 3 out of every 4 students report moderate or severe psychological distress (American College Health Association, 2021). Additionally, there is research to suggest that most college students are not meeting physical activity guidelines (Bailey, et al.). In light of these issues, it might be worthwhile for instructors in higher education to promote healthy behavior among students, especially in areas that have been shown to increase cognitive ability.

In creating a virtual break room, I also wanted to create something that might help address some of the growing health concerns among college students with the idea that healthier students are more likely to be productive in the classroom. It was also my hope that completing the activities in the break room would help the student feel mentally refreshed and stimulate cognition. In the book *Learner-Centered Teaching: Putting the Research on Learning into Practice* (Doyle, 2011), there are three activities that are well-tested to show that they do enhance cognitive function: exercise, meditation, and some computer games. With that in mind, I have created optional virtual break rooms for my introduction to microeconomics class that center around these activities and also fall in line with the traditional Community of Inquiry (COI) learning model by increasing teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence in a remote learning course (Garrison, 2016).

Whether students take my introduction to microeconomics class in person or online, they will encounter learning modules that contain pre-recorded lecture videos (these serve as the lectures in an online class, but are also provided for those taking the class in-person to make up missed lectures), practice questions, a review session video, and a required module quiz. At the end of each learning module is an optional virtual breakroom that students can enter at any time while moving through the learning module. Each virtual break room contains the following four activities:

1. **An Exercise Break:** This consists of a short exercise challenge designed to get students up out of their seats and moving around. These exercise challenges can range from 1 minute to 10 minutes long and consist of links to YouTube videos that have been posted on the virtual

breakroom page with all credit given to the content creator. An example of this is the “Baby Shark Ab Challenge,” a series of core exercises choreographed to the popular children’s song, Baby Shark. As a way to increase my presence as an instructor (in-line with the Community of Inquiry learning model) and motivate students to complete the challenge, I also include a “Pass the Prof” section where I inform students of my score on the exercise activity and challenge them to beat it.

Here is the Baby Shark Exercise Challenge from the module 1 virtual break room: [Baby shark abs challenge!! - YouTube](#)

2. A Relaxation Break: The relaxation break is usually a breathing exercise, guided meditation, or yoga series designed to help students relax and lower their stress levels. Similar to the exercise break it is a link to a YouTube video with credit given to the content creator. Unlike the exercise break, there is no challenge to beat anybody as this is supposed to be relaxing and low stress.

Here is the relaxation break from the first virtual break room in my class: [5 Minute Guided Meditation For Relaxation | Calming Work Break Meditation - YouTube](#)

3. An Intellectual Break: For each module, I have created a digital escape room using Google Slides where students can click around the slides and find clues that they can use open the “locks” embedded in a Google Form. Students are told they can work through these alone, or in groups if they prefer, but are encouraged to time themselves and record their time in the class discussion board as a challenge to other groups. If students manage to solve all of the locks, they can receive a digital “I escaped” badge which they can post as proof that they escaped the room. The riddles the students have to solve and the clues they find in the room are all related to the material from that module, so students who engage in this part of the virtual break room will be interacting with the material in a way that will help them achieve the learning objectives for the course while simultaneously stimulate cognitive presence in the class. This is by far the most time consuming endeavor in creating these virtual breakrooms, as it involves coming up with a setting and story about why students are locked in the room, finding and embedding images in the Google Slide that serves as clues, and relating those clues to the material. That said, there is a website that offers instructors a step-by-step guide to creating their own digital escape room along with a lot of pre-formatted materials to make it a lot less time consuming for a small one-time fee: [40+ FREE digital escape rooms \(plus a step by step guide for creating your own\) - Ditch That Textbook](#)

Here is an example of a digital escape room from chapter 1 in my class: [Module 1 Virtual Escape Room - Google Slides](#)

4. A Social Break: A final piece of the virtual breakroom is what I have labeled “The Good Vibes Discussion Board” where students can post anything they like including their score from the exercise challenge, their time escaping the digital escape room, or any stories or anecdotes that they have that relate to the material from the chapter covered in the learning module. This is designed to increase social presence in line with the traditional COI framework, and

this part of the break room is more often utilized by students when I teach remotely and there are fewer outlets for social communication.

Many instructors might be wondering what the student reaction is to these virtual break rooms and if they are worth the cost, especially since they are currently optional. Every term, I employ a midterm teacher evaluation where I ask students how the class is going and what I can do to improve it. When I first rolled out these virtual breakrooms, I added this question to the midterm teacher evaluation:

“For this class, I have added a virtual breakroom to each module that contains an exercise challenge, a relaxation break, a virtual escape room that corresponds to the information in each module, and a discussion board. Have you explored the optional module breakrooms yet? If so, what was your favorite part? If not, why not?”

Do you like having a virtual break available, or do you feel like it just clutters up the module in an already busy class?”

The responses have been varied, but usually the student reaction is much more positive than negative. Here are some representative responses from students, including the good, the somewhat bad, and everything in-between:

Positive Student Responses

- “I have explored the virtual breakrooms. I like the exercise break. It is a welcomed addition to the module. They are always placed at the end of the modules making it hard for anyone to confuse them with any assignments we have for the week.”
- “The relaxation breaks, escape rooms and exercise challenges are a great mood booster especially when I feel overwhelmed.”
- “Having a virtual break is very important because learning for hours without breaks can be very draining and makes it harder to focus over time.”
- “I have looked through these virtual break rooms and I thought this was really nice and it should be something all professors implement into online learning platforms. It kind of gives students a safe space to relax and take a breather.”
- “I usually just watch the relaxation break videos. I have not explored the other activities because I mostly find interest in the relaxation videos...”
- “I have and enjoy the relaxation breaks, I like having the option available for when I need to take a break”
- “I have used the exercise challenge. Since I am an athlete here I wanted to try it out and it was pretty fun. Yes I like having a virtual break, it is very helpful to just not think about schoolwork.”
- “I have checked out the try not laugh challenge video with exercise, I found that to be very entertaining. At the same time, I get to do some exercises along the video to take a break from sitting in front of the computer.”
- “I have done an escape room and it was fun. They’re study games and I enjoy them so.”
- “I think it helps because sometimes all of us need a little boost, so it can be fun just to have a discussion board where people can talk about whatever they want.”

Somewhat Negative or Mixed Student Responses

- “I have not explored the module, I feel timid to explore it. This virtual breakout room is new to me and I have never had a module like this.”
- “I feel like this gives me a little more anxiety, because of the way that I approach the modules: If the module block is longer, I feel a little more overwhelmed. If it is shorter, I feel like the module is more doable. So, I know that the work isn't any more or less, but in terms of mental preparation and a placebo effect, seeing shorter module blocks make me happier :)”
- “I feel it just clutters up the module in an already busy class”
- “I tried the first breakroom from the first module and feel it's an interesting and unique material to add onto the class. Although it does clutter up the module a bit, I think it's a nice addition to the class. Perhaps instead of including the breakroom inside each module, make a separate section in the modules tab for just breakrooms.”

Finally, here are some interesting responses from students who have not tried out the virtual breakroom, but still seem to appreciate that it exists.

- I love the idea of having a virtual breakroom set up; however, I haven't used it yet because I haven't had much downtime. I love having it available though.
- I have not used it yet because I was unsure of what it was. I really like that we have the option and it's just a fun addition to this class. Just having this kind of thing included makes the class feel more inviting.
- I have not checked it out yet. I feel like I definitely should check it out though. I feel like just having it available is good.
- I haven't used the breakrooms because I haven't felt the need to, but I think it's a really cool option to include and it makes me feel that the professor cares about his students.

Overall, I would say that the virtual breakroom has been a positive addition to the class. Some students who utilize these break rooms really enjoy it while hopefully reaping some health benefits along the way, but interestingly, even those students who have not found the time to engage with this optional part of the course still seem to appreciate the fact that it is there because it demonstrates that the instructor does care about their students' well-being. I would encourage instructors to play around with the idea of including a virtual breakroom in their course, as it might improve student health, enhance the obtainment of learning objective, and perhaps even increase student evaluation scores.

Works Cited

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