

FEATURE

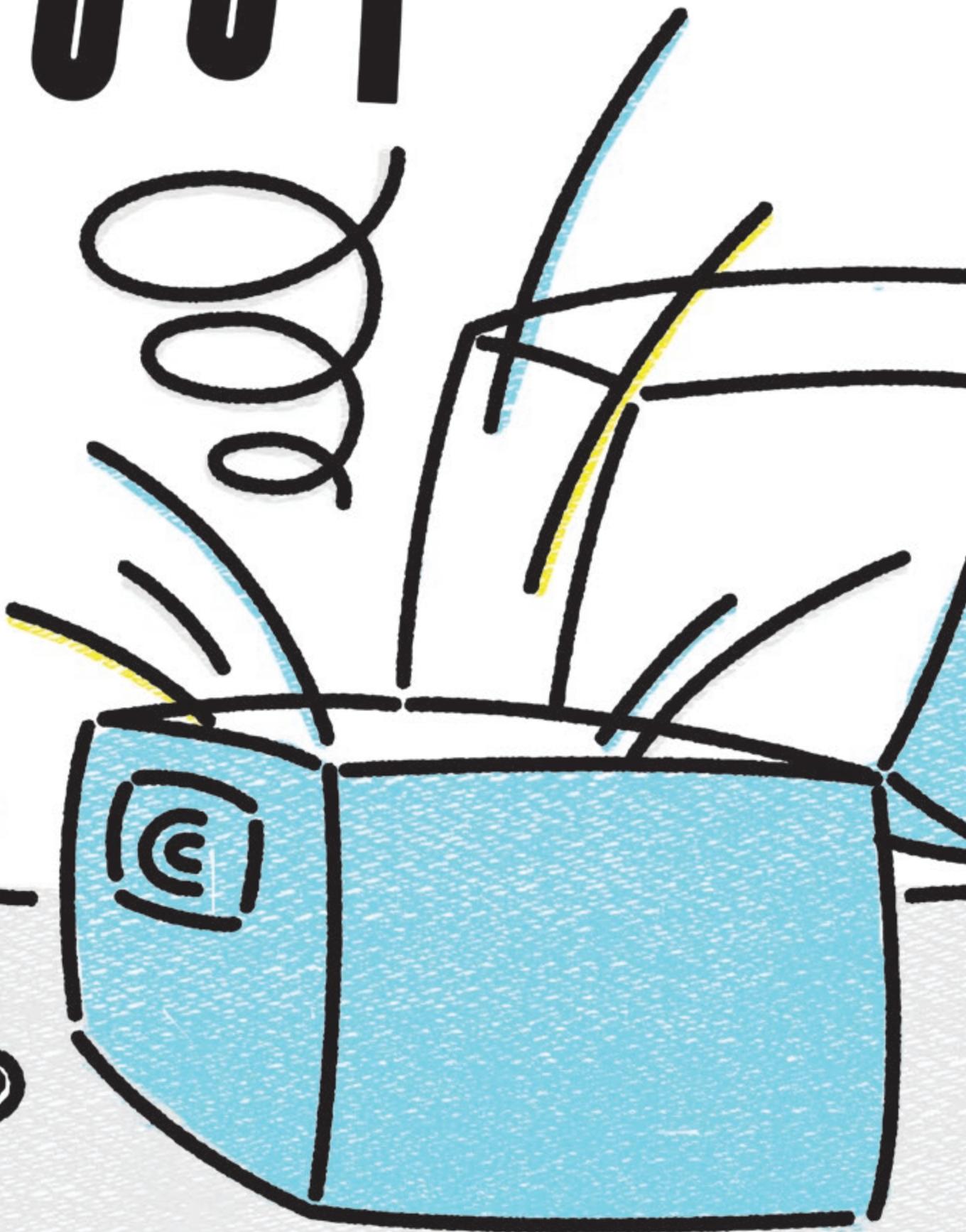
CURATING BREAK BOKE

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K O U T

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In the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners*, one of the six Common Beliefs central to the school library profession is: “Learners should be prepared for college, career, and life” (2018, 12). A large part of that Common Belief is that student success depends on so much more than traditional academic merits. Soft skills, like the Inquire and Collaborate Shared Foundations in the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners*, are not always easy things to teach in a traditional classroom setting, but new tools and innovations have made it easier—and more fun—to combine these skills with existing curriculum. Breakout boxes are one of these exciting innovations.

What Are Breakout Boxes?

Breakout boxes are similar to the escape rooms that have popped up all over the country in the past few years. In an escape room, you and your friends are locked in a room and given a scenario and a time limit. You must work together to solve a number of puzzles to get out of the room before time runs out. Breakout boxes center around boxes, each locked with one or more different locks. Boxes can be used to play an infinite number of games; each game includes a scenario and a time limit. Learners must work together to solve the puzzles and unlock the boxes before time runs out.

Breakout boxes can help students engage with classroom content by gamifying it. By incorporating a high-stakes scenario and time limit, breakout boxes mimic the scenarios students find in video games and escape rooms. Educators can add in a competitive aspect when using breakout boxes by splitting classes into smaller teams. Breakout boxes can also incorporate physical games to bring movement into instruction. Students may be required to explore a room and discuss problems with their peers, making breakout boxes a student-centered learning experience.

When leading a breakout box game, the school librarian serves as a guide on the side, giving hints as needed but otherwise staying out of the game play. Students are completely in control of how the game plays out, and this control makes them more invested in the outcome. The focus on student control combined with the emphasis on physical movement and gamification makes for more engaged students.

Why the School Library?

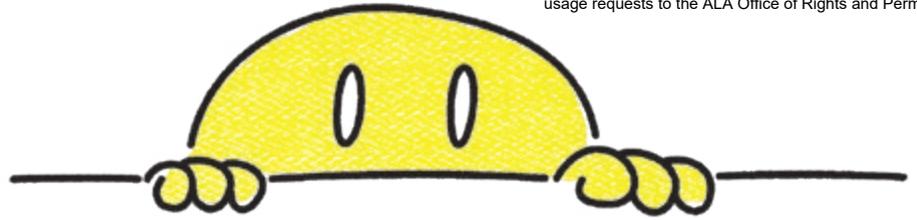
Why should the school library invest in breakout boxes as part of its collection development? Breakout boxes fit the school library’s mission to curate “resources and technology to foster inquiry and scaffold mastery of skills necessary for

learning to progress” (AASL 2018, 62). Breakout boxes can teach and reinforce collaboration and inquiry, two Shared Foundations in the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners*; the boxes can also foster other important soft skills like resilience and perseverance. Students work in teams to complete the mission, meaning they must learn to “work effectively with others to broaden perspectives and work toward common goals” (AASL 2018, 85). As different clues are found, team members learn to communicate what they have and how it fits into the game. They also learn to recognize their peers’ diverse talents when solving the puzzles. Breakout boxes also enable students to “build new knowledge by inquiring, thinking critically, identifying problems, and developing strategies for solving problems” (AASL 2018, 36).

The games used with breakout boxes are built based on students’ existing knowledge; the games place that existing knowledge in a new context. Students must think critically in order to apply their existing knowledge to the new context presented by the breakout box and solve each puzzle, meeting AASL learner standard I.A.2. By using the reflection questions that are often included with the game set-up instructions, students can reflect on their own experience and the feedback of their peers to improve for future games, meeting AASL learner standards I.C.3 and I.D.4. In addition, students develop resilience and perseverance as they work under pressure and sometimes fail to solve a puzzle or even the entire game.

Curating breakout boxes into the school library’s collection also fits perfectly with the school librarian’s role as teacher leader and collaborator. Breakout boxes are adaptable to any age and subject area, making the school library the perfect place

BREAKOUT BOXES CAN HELP STUDENTS ENGAGE WITH CLASSROOM CONTENT BY GAMIFYING IT. BY INCORPORATING A HIGH-STAKES SCENARIO AND TIME LIMIT, BREAKOUT BOXES MIMIC THE SCENARIOS STUDENTS FIND IN VIDEO GAMES AND ESCAPE ROOMS.



to offer these resources for the entire school community. Kits can be created by school librarians or purchased pre-assembled from BreakoutEDU; the kits usually include a large box, a small box, a hasp, an invisible ink pen, a UV flashlight, and five reprogrammable locks. The newest kits from BreakoutEDU also include reflection cards, red lens viewers that allow facilitators to hide clues underneath a colored pattern, and additional reprogrammable locks.

Because each lock in a breakout box is reprogrammable, the boxes can be combined with other boxes in any order or combination to fit any class; puzzles also can be made to be more difficult or easier depending on the age of the players. Games can be created for specific content areas and used to reinforce skills and concepts being taught in everyday classroom instruction. Breakout boxes are particularly useful to introduce a new unit or to review and test comprehension at the end of a unit. They can even be used as team-building exercises for faculty and staff.

BreakoutEDU has hundreds of pre-made games for every subject area and grade level, so educators or school librarians can just print the materials and play. While some of the pre-made games require a platform subscription, many are freely available. Educators upload their own creations to the BreakoutEDU site every day. You can also find many ready-made games on Teachers Pay Teachers and through Pinterest.

In addition to the physical games, breakout boxes can be created and played for free digitally. BreakoutEDU provides access to ready-made, digital-only games through its database and has a screencast tutorial to help create your own digital game with Google Sites: <<https://sites.google.com/site/digitalbreakoutjb/how-to>>.

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Breakouts in My Library

At my school, we use breakout boxes in three ways: in the classroom, in the school library, and in our school's summer day camp.

I have a total of four breakout box kits that I can lend to teachers for use in the classroom. While teachers were slow to use the kits at first, they are starting to pick them up more and more each year. If I see a game that matches what teachers are working on in class, I'll approach them and offer to help them make it happen. During school professional development days, I also facilitate sample breakout games for teachers so they can play a game to see how it works and how they might work it into their classroom. While I have not had the chance yet, I would love to do a team-building game in a faculty meeting to further advertise the benefits of breakout games to our teachers and administrators.

In the school library, I have used breakout games for library orientation with sixth and ninth graders. It is fun and interactive and gets students moving around the school library to explore right away. I also hold programs after school or during lunch a few times a year for students to play breakout games with their friends. Some school librarians have created breakout clubs where students play breakout games and create their own games.

Over the last few summers, I have run a weeklong breakout camp as part of the school's summer day camp. Throughout the week, students complete several breakout games, and they work together to create their own games. At the end of the week, teams get a chance to lead their game with the other campers.

Next Steps

If you're ready to jump into the world of breakout games, here are a few things I recommend for your next steps:

- **Create a free account at BreakoutEDU.com.** As I mentioned above BreakoutEDU has tons of pre-created games, and you do not even need a kit to start working with digital games. Accounts on the site are free to create, and while some games require a paid subscription, all user-generated games are free. You can search the database by subject area, grade level, and type of game. Through the portal, you can access tons of library-based games focusing on all aspects of information literacy, from general library skills to games that help teach intellectual freedom, copyright, digital citizenship, and more. You can also find free tools to help you and your students create your own games.

WHATS IN A BREAKOUT KIT?

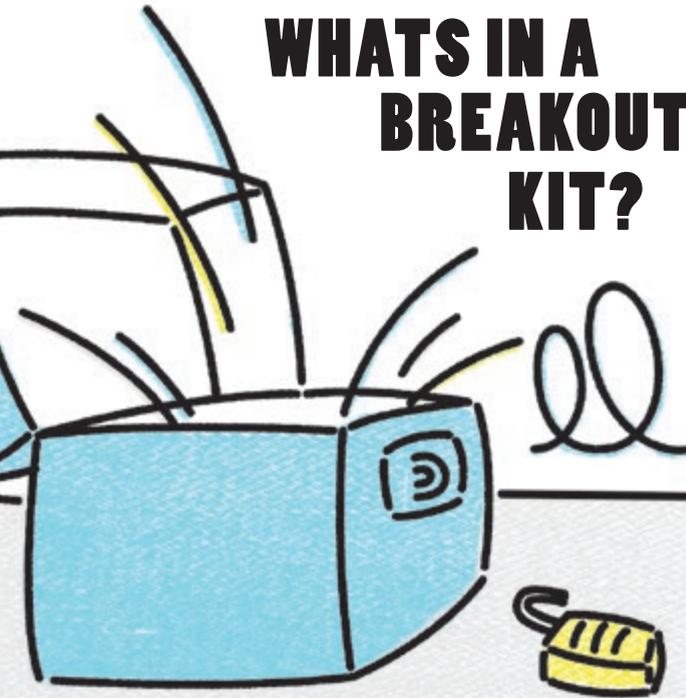


Figure 1. Components of a breakout box.

- **Join the breakout community on Facebook** where facilitators from all backgrounds and levels share advice and resources: <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/breakout-edu>>. The group provides tips on how to run games and how best to store locks and boxes, and it offers help if you get stuck in a game. There are groups for specific subject areas and even one specifically for librarians, but the general group is the most active.
- **Get a kit.** Anyone can purchase a pre-assembled kit from BreakoutEDU or create their own. Basic kits need a large box, a small box, a hasp, a three-digit lock, a four-digit lock, a word lock, a direction lock, a key lock, a UV flashlight, and an invisible ink pen. Just make sure that all the locks are reprogrammable.
- **Pick a game.** Start with an easy game to help you and your students get used to the process. For many students, especially those who are older, it might be a totally new

way of thinking. Remember that you can find ready-made games on BreakoutEDU, Teachers Pay Teachers, and Pinterest.

- **Just play!** The best thing educators can do to help students be successful with breakout games is to just let them play. The games are, after all, student-centered, so students need the chance to take the lead.

Breakout games are a valuable tool to help us teach important inquiry and collaboration skills. Their adaptability makes them useful for absolutely everyone in school, even administrators, and the accessibility of free games, digital-only games, and a vast network of professional peers makes them work for every library, regardless of budget. With breakout games, school librarians can provide a resource that helps their school community create more engaged learners as well as build students who are well-prepared for their next steps in life.



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is currently the head librarian at the Webb School of Knoxville. She previously published a

chapter in *The Small or Rural Academic Library: Leveraging Resources, Overcoming Limitations* and served as a blogger for ALA's Programming Librarian. She received her MLIS from the University of Alabama. She is a member of AASL and the Association for Independent School Librarians, and she serves on the conference planning committee of the Tennessee Association of School Librarians.

Work Cited:

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