

Crowd Sourcing

Imagine bringing into your school library *Harry Potter*, the main characters of *The Maze Runner* and top scientists – and all that students want to do is break out.

It's all part of the escape room mania sweeping schools and libraries, which involves collaboration and critical thinking to solve a series of puzzles and challenges while learning.

While there are many variations of escape, or breakout, rooms, they all involve a series of word and number problems usually connected by a story.

Although an escape room activity can take a long time to plan and set up, Sandra Bebbington, a consultant with the Quebec Ministry of Education's English Sector Services, has a long list of reasons why they are worth the effort.

"It encourages active learning, helps youth and adults work on soft skills," said Bebbington during a session at the February Ontario Library Association Super Conference where she presented with Julian Taylor, a librarian with the Quebec ministry. "It allows for grit, the opportunity to fail in a low-risk environment."

Bebbington said, in an email interview, that she has always been interested in how play and games can facilitate learning. She started attending escape rooms with friends and family and discovered a movement to bring them into schools.

"My colleagues and I went to an introductory PD session and I have been building and facilitating escape room scenarios at schools, in libraries, community events and conferences ever since," she said.

The narrative is important to making the breakout activity work. "Research has shown that skills and concepts are better learned when done in the context of a narrative, particularly one that they can relate to," Bebbington said.

She has put together break out activities based on *Harry Potter* and *Maze Runner* novels, as well as the movie, *Elf*. Some of the activities can be physical – students need to demonstrate a skill before moving to the next clue – or digital.

"This type of activity also allows for the learning of both content and skills at the same time," she said. "For example, breakouts can be used to introduce a topic or help you close up a unit with practice and reinforcement."

And the learning doesn't stop for Bebbington. "I have yet to explore digital breakout/escape rooms. That's my next goal!"

Bebbington's Top Tips for a Planning a Successful Breakout Activity

1. Walk through the activity after you have put it together to ensure it makes sense, check for mistakes or catch any missing elements.
2. If you are going to evaluate the students, let them know what you are evaluating.
3. Have a discussion with the group afterwards so that students can have a chance to reflect on what worked and what didn't. This is important for the students to process what happened and great feedback for you.
4. Establish rules from the start and stick with them. For example, make it clear this is a collaborative activity and participants must work on things together.
5. Don't fill the locked boxes with prizes. The satisfaction of resolving the problem or puzzle should be the reward.
6. Drop hints if participants are struggling. Don't wait for them to ask for help.
7. When building an activity, remember it isn't meant to be linear. For example, include something in Activity A that participants won't need until Activity C. Creating an organizational chart with sticky notes helps.
8. Laminate clues and activities so that they can be used again.
9. To help create clues, look for tools such as ciphers, newspaper clipping templates, cryptexes and various word and number puzzles.