

Fishbowl Discussion

The Fishbowl Discussion format motivates students to complete class reading assignments and empowers students to be in charge of their own discussion.

Three or four students are randomly selected to sit in a small inner circle with the rest of the class seated in a larger outer circle. The small group conducts a 20-minute discussion with each other while the rest of the students listen, take notes, and later pose questions and comment on what they have observed.

What Are the Benefits?

The Fishbowl technique requires the instructor to take an observer role, empowering students to take responsibility for the discussion. Students build on their ability to effectively communicate with each other. The small group allows even the quietest students the opportunity to participate. The format also encourages deeper levels of conversation among the students in the inner circle.

Preparing for a Fishbowl Discussion

Assign an article(s) for students to read prior to class and explain the Fishbowl structure. Share your specific expectations (checklist or rubric) designed to assess both the students having the discussion in the inner circle and the students listening to the discussion and preparing to ask questions and share comments in the outer circle.

Facilitating the Fishbowl Discussion

1. Write student names on individual slips of paper and place them in a bowl.
2. Place four desks in an inner circle in the center of the room with the other desks in a circle around them.
3. Randomly pull four names from the bowl and have those students sit in the four center desks with the information they prepared for the discussion (based on your expectations). Remind both sets of students how you will be assessing the Fishbowl Discussion.
4. Give the students in the center circle 20 minutes to discuss the article(s), using their prepared materials. Limit your own talking so students feel empowered to listen attentively to one another and keep the discussion going.
5. After 20 minutes, ask students in the outside circle to appropriately contribute to the conversation using your expectations as a guide.

Strategies to Build Student Engagement in the Fishbowl

It can be a challenge to fully engage all students in both the inner and outer circles in the discussion. Here are a few strategies to help build motivation and engagement:

- Have students prepare a list of questions that could be asked about the assigned reading(s). Students in the inner circle will use them during their discussion, and you can collect them from students in the outside circle for grading.
- Provide a problem for students in the inner circle to solve using content from the reading(s). When they have finished their discussion, ask students in the outer circle to critique their problem-solving strategy.
- Provide articles that represent two different sides of an argument and ask students in the inner circle to debate the argument. Have students in the outer circle discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the argument.
- Make your expectations for students in both circles clear by providing a rubric or checklist and providing feedback early in the semester.
- Provide written feedback on what the students in the Fishbowl did well and what could be improved.
- Have students in the Fishbowl complete a self-reflection regarding their participation.