

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.

Encouraging Student-to-Student Interactions

Use the following techniques to limit your own talking and encourage student-to-student interactions.

Stance	Purpose	Examples
Confirming	Ask other students to confirm or comment on the previous student's response or comment.	"Maria, do you agree with what Hassan said?" "Jean, what do you think about that?" "Dave, when you heard Robert make that comment, what were you thinking?"
Checking	Collect different responses to the same question or problem.	Ask the same question several times in a row without commenting on individual student responses.
Reflecting or Restating	Distribute the student's turn and input throughout the class; make the response available for comment, agreement, or disagreement.	"What I think I hear you saying is . . . Is that right?" "Don't let me put words in your mouth..." "Am I hearing you correctly when you say...?"
Redirecting	Direct student questions back to the class or to specific members of the class.	"In response to Jamal's question to you..." "That's a good question. What do the rest of you think about that?"

Hatful of Quotes

Follow the steps below to engage students in the Hatful of Quotes exercise:

1. Review the assigned readings for class and select five or six quotes that are intriguing and thought-provoking and will prompt meaningful discussion.
2. Type out the quotes, and print enough copies so that each student will receive one quote. Multiple students will receive the same quote.
3. Place the quotes in a hat and have each student choose one.
4. Instruct students to read the quote and write down their thoughts about it.
5. After 2 or 3 minutes, have students volunteer to share their quotes and thoughts.
6. Continue until all quotes have been read and all students have participated.

Benefits of the exercise

- It makes mandated participation as stress free as possible.
- The quotes provide meaningful content to focus the discussion.
- By listening to a variety of voices, students are provided with multiple viewpoints about the content.

Suggestions for facilitation

- Select quotes that support and uncover the key concepts you want students to address.
- Facilitate the discussion by making connections between student responses and pointing out different opinions.

"You're giving them something specific to respond to rather than just saying 'What do you think about the reading?' And those who are comfortable speaking typically go first, and they're the ones who will have original thoughts. And those who find it difficult to come up with a response are really helped because several people will already have addressed the quote they have in their hand, so they can wait 'til the end of the exercise, and then they can talk about other students' previous responses to the quote; they don't actually have to talk about the quote itself. So I found that's a good way to get reluctant contributors to be involved in discussion early on. And key to hatful of quotes is it gets participation from everybody."

(S. D. Brookfield, personal interview, December 2015)

They Say—You Say

The following chart will help you respond to students based on how they reply to your questions and what your goals are for responding.

Student Response	Your Goal	Question Stem
No students respond to your question.	Elicit responses by supporting students and guiding them to share an answer.	1. Repeat the question.
		2. Rephrase the question. (Add a statement before the question to establish context.)
		3. Reduce the question. (Ask a smaller version of the question or break the question into parts.)
A student provides the correct answer.	Give approval of the student's contribution and provide meaningful insight into the type of answers you're looking for to others.	Praise the thinking behind the answer: "Yes, you're on the right track because..."
A student provides the correct answer, but there are other possible answers.	Encourage another student to extend or add to the answer.	"You have uncovered an aspect of the reading. Could someone add to this thinking?"
The student's answer is unclear.	Coax more out of the student and to help him/her uncover the assumptions being made.	"How might you modify your answer if you took into account...?"
		Rephrase the answer and ask if that was what the student meant: "So what I heard you say was you think the author was not being clear in his/her description? Is that correct?"
The student's answer is incorrect.	Lead the student to discover his/her error.	"Yes, but if you come to that conclusion, don't you also have to assume...?" "I'm not sure I'm following your thinking here. Could you please clarify your thoughts?"

Concept Exploration: Pique Student Interest

The three steps in the cycle of active learning are to:

1. assign students an activity that has them explore a new topic or concept;
2. introduce or teach the topic using a microlecture, text, or video; and
3. give students an assignment that requires they apply what they have learned in an authentic setting.

Think-Pair-Share

We can teach more effectively by capturing and maintaining student attention. This can be accomplished by posting a thought-provoking problem, question, video, or quote related to the learning goals and then having students reflect upon the concepts. This activity can be the first step in the Active Learning Cycle.

The Think-Pair-Share activity is a great way to engage students in exploring new content or a new concept. For this activity, assign pairs to discuss their responses to the content you shared with the class. Exploring ideas with their peers helps students raise questions and develop greater curiosity to learn more about the topic.

The box below demonstrates the steps a biology instructor takes in using a Think-Pair-Share activity to pique student interest.

1. Post the following quotation in the class discussion forum: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” —John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*
2. Pair students up. If there is an odd number of students in your class, you can assign one group of three students. Ask students to discuss with their partner(s) either by email, chat, text, or phone.
3. Ask students to discuss in their assigned pairs what they believe to be the meaning of this statement. Ask them to provide examples of when this is true or not true. Have each pair post a joint response to the quotation in the discussion forum by a certain date and time before you post the lesson resources.
4. Create a video (or presentation during a synchronous class) to review some of the students’ responses and then move into the second step in the Active Learning Cycle (Concept Introduction). In this example, the instructor may begin teaching about the Sahara dust that blows across the Atlantic Ocean and fertilizes the Amazon Rainforest. Without the phosphorus in the Saharan dust, the soil of the Amazon would not have enough nutrients to sustain the rainforest. The instructor may then explain how this exemplifies the John Muir quotation.

Sources

Nilson, L. B., & Goodson, L. A. (2018). *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research*. Jossey-Bass.