

FISH BOWL STRATEGY

Retrieved from <http://tolerance.org>

Fishbowl is a strategy for organizing medium- to large-group discussions. Students are separated into an inner and outer circle. In the inner circle or fishbowl, students have a discussion; students in the outer circle listen to the discussion and take notes.

This engaging and student-centered strategy builds comprehension of complex texts/ideas while developing group discussion skills. In the “fishbowl,” students practice responding to multiple viewpoints. Observations from students in the outer circle provide insight into what makes for effective small-group discussions. Research supports the use of fishbowls as an effective way to engage students with a range of abilities and in multiple settings.

STEPS:

1. Choose a central topic or text. Develop an open-ended question to start the discussion. If using a text, students may read the text before hand or the strategy may be used to introduce the text (i.e., create a question that makes the central them relevant to the students).
2. Ask for or select 4-5 volunteers to be in the “fishbowl.” Only the students in the fishbowl are allowed to talk. After a class demonstration with one “fishbowl”, there can be several “fishbowls” organized in the classroom to ensure that all students are engaged.
3. Instruct the outer circle to remain quiet, observe and take notes on the content and process of the inner circle’s discussion.
4. The first few times, play the role of the facilitator yourself. Once the process is familiar, select a student facilitator. The facilitator does not participate in the discussion, but poses questions along the way to prompt deeper discussion and to ask sure everyone inside the fishbowl has a chance to talk.
5. At first or with younger students, identify the focus of the discussion and provide text dependent questions for students to answer during the fishbowl discussion.
6. Allow the conversation to progress where students take it. Rotate students in and out of the fishbowl throughout the course of the discussion. Set up a procedure ahead of time so students know to expect this rotation. Allow the fishbowl discussion to continue for at least 15- 20 minutes, depending of the students’ age.
7. After all students have rotated through the fishbowl, divide the class into small groups and invite students to debrief. Students can use their observations from the outer circle to highlight strengths of the discussion and make suggestions for ways to engage each other more meaningfully. The following discussion starters may facilitate the conversations:
 - *What did you observe during the discussion of the text?*
 - *What is one thing you heard that is similar to your point of view?*
 - *What is one thing with which you disagree?*

- *How did you feel while on the outside of the fishbowl?*
 - *How did you feel while on the inside of the fishbowl?*
8. Wrap up the process with a full class discussion about the discussion. Pose a final question and give everyone an opportunity to talk to a partner. After this discussion, you may have the students do a quick write answering the guiding question.
 9. Add these specific questions to scaffold the experience for Emergent Bilinguals:
 - *Observer question:* What helped you understand the information that was being shared (context or non-verbal cues, use if L1, etc.)?
 - *Fishbowl questions:* How do you feel knowing that peers were listening to what you were saying? What do you wish you could have said more clearly or what point do you wish you could have made in your first language?

SAMPLE FISHBOWL GUIDING QUESTIONS:

Observers:

- Was it difficult to not respond to the fishbowl students? Why or why not? If so, what kinds of comments did you want to respond to?
- Did you hear anything from the fishbowl that surprised you?
- What helped you understand the information that was being shared (context or non-verbal cues, use if L1, etc.)?

Fishbowl students:

- How did it feel to share your feeling/thinking about the text knowing that your peers were listening closely?
- Do you usually have opportunities to share your perspective on _____?
- What do you wish you could have said more clearly or what point do you wish you could have made in your first language?