

Fishbowl

Overview:

A smaller group of students sits in an inner circle to discuss a topic while the rest of the group sits around them in an outer circle to listen and observe the process.

Purpose:

The Fishbowl discussion protocol is a peer-learning strategy in which some students are in an outer circle while a smaller group of students are in an inner circle. In all fishbowl activities, both those in the inner and those in the outer circles have roles to fulfill. Students in the center model a particular practice or strategy. The outer circle acts as observers and may assess the interaction of the center group. *You may elect to use the Fishbowl discussion protocol as a way of teaching another discussion protocol that you will engage your students in during a future lesson.*

Application: When and where can I use it?

Fishbowls can be used to assess comprehension, to assess group work, to encourage constructive peer assessment, to discuss issues in the classroom, to learn how to engage respectfully in peer discussions, or to model specific techniques such as literature circles, or Socratic Seminars.

Getting Started: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

Students should know the focus of the discussion ahead of time so that they have the opportunity to prepare. Depending on the age group of the students, the task, and nature of the discussion, student preparation could take a few minutes or a few days.

Arrange the chairs in the classroom in two concentric circles. The inner circle may be only a small group or even partners. Explain the activity to students and ensure they understand the roles they will play. You may either inform those who will be on the inside ahead of time so they can be prepared or just tell them as the activity begins. Alternatively, you can ask for volunteers to start in the inner circle. The group in the inner circle interacts using a discussion protocol, applying a strategy, or following the "script" of a role play.

Students in the outer circle should be given a list of aspects of group interaction they should silently observe and be prepared to comment on – for example, whether the group members use names to address each other, whether they take turns, whether they encourage everyone to participate, the types of questions they ask each other, etc. The focus can vary depending on the intent of the discussion.

Following the conclusion of the discussion, engage the class in reflecting on the process with students who were in the outer circle providing constructive feedback to help all students engage more successfully in the next class discussion.

Make sure all students have a chance to be part of both the inside and outside circle at some point, though they do not all have to be in both every time you do a Fishbowl activity.

Variations:

- ❖ Each person in the outside circle can have one opportunity to freeze or stop the inside students. This person can then ask a question or share an insight.
- ❖ Have each student in the outer circle observe one student in the inner circle (you may have to double or triple up, depending on the relative sizes of the inner and outer circles). They may be asked to observe for the number of times their assigned student participates or asks a question, etc. Immediately after the fishbowl discussion, the observer provides feedback to the student they observed.
- ❖ Leave a few empty chairs in the inner circle at the start. Students in the outer circle have the opportunity to “tap into” the inner circle when they feel they have something they need or want to contribute to the discussion. Students in the inner circle then can also have the ability to tap out, moving to the outer circle to be an engaged observer.

See this Instructional Move in action:

[60-Second Strategy: Fishbowl Discussion - Bing video](#)

[Using a "Fishbowl" for Discussions: Classroom Management Tricks of the Trade - Bing video](#)

Read more about this Instructional Move:

[How I Use Fishbowl Discussions to Engage Every Student \(weareteachers.com\)](#)

[Fishbowl | Facing History and Ourselves](#)

[How to Organize Fishbowl Discussions for Your Students \(kidskonnnect.com\)](#)

References: EL Education: Classroom Protocols