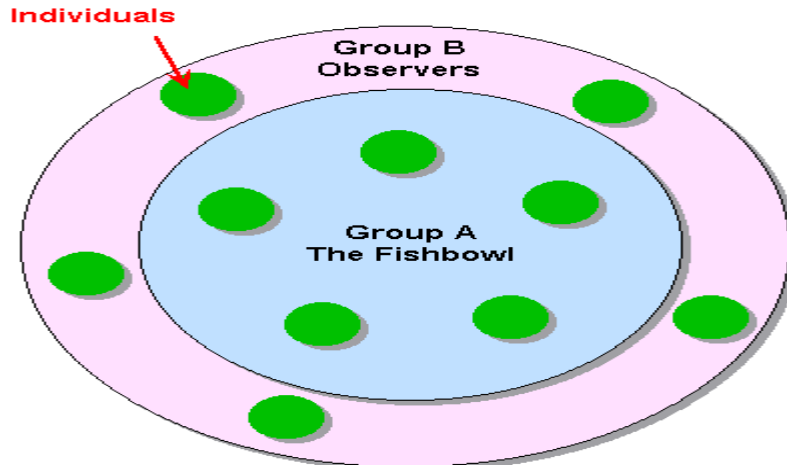


THE FISHBOWL



The “fishbowl” is a teaching strategy that helps students practice being contributors and listeners in a discussion. This strategy is especially useful when you want to make sure all students participate in the discussion, when you want to help students reflect on what a “good discussion” looks like, and when you need a structure for discussing controversial or difficult topics. Fishbowls make excellent pre-writing activities, often unearthing questions or ideas that students can explore more deeply in an independent assignment.

Steps for the Strategy

Selecting a topic for the “fishbowl”

- Almost any topic is suitable for a fishbowl discussion. The most effective prompts (question or text) do not have one right answer, but rather allow for multiple perspectives and opinions.

Setting up the room

- Classroom chairs are arranged in a “fishbowl,” two circles, one inside the other.
- As students enter the room, the teacher assigns students to one circle. Sometimes teachers place enough chairs for half of the students in the class to sit in the fishbowl, while other times teachers limit the chairs in the fishbowl. Typically six to twelve chairs allows for a range of perspectives while still allowing each student an opportunity to speak. The observing students often stand around the fishbowl.

The inner circle is then given about eight minutes to discuss a statement related to their reading – and to relate the statement both to the reading and to contemporary life. The observing students often stand around the fishbowl.

Preparation

Like many structured conversations, fishbowl discussions are most effective when students have had a few minutes to prepare ideas and questions in advance.

- Students would have already explored this idea in their journals.

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Discussing norms and rules of the discussion

- The ground rules are simple: State an idea and support it with evidence; agree with the speaker and add additional evidence; disagree with a speaker and offer evidence.
- Each student in the outer circle spend the eight minutes listening to the discussion and making notes on the interaction of their “fish.” Some teachers provide students with a worksheet to make note taking easier and more precise.

Rules for the fish

1. State your idea and support it with evidence from the reading.
2. Agree with the speaker and offer additional evidence to support idea.
3. Disagree with the speaker and offer evidence to support your point.

Rules for the fish watchers

1. Listen carefully to your fish.
2. Take notes on your fish’s contribution to the discussion.

Throughout the discussion, students tally each time their “fish” contributes an idea, describes feelings, paraphrases, expresses support or acceptance, encourages others to contribute, summarizes, relieves tension by joking , or gives direction to the group’s work.

After eight minutes, students exchange places, those in the inner circle become observers in the outer ring, and those in the outer ring become the inner ring “discussers” of the second focus statement. At the end of the class, students reflect on the fishbowl as a discussion strategy.

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MY FISH:	NAME:
Contributes to discussion	How:
Provides personal response	What:
Paraphrases previous speaker	What:
Summarizes	What:
Provides direction/focus	How:
Supplies humor/tension break	How: