

## Conducting a Fishbowl Discussion

The best classroom discussions involve all students working cooperatively to compare, present, and examine diverse perspectives with each other. A fishbowl is a type of discussion that helps students develop group participation and observation skills while *simultaneously* learning course content. In a fishbowl conversation, students are given a common engaging text (article, book, video, podcast, etc.) to discuss. Participants are split into two groups: an inner circle of discussants who are in the “fishbowl” and an outer circle of students who observe and critique the conversation in the fishbowl.

### Follow these steps to run a fishbowl discussion:

1. **Identify the question or topic to be discussed.** It’s often helpful to use a text (article, book, movie, podcast, piece of art, etc.) of some sort as a launching point for the discussion. Choose a text that will encourage engagement of multiple viewpoints.
  - 1a. [Optional]. Have students turn to someone next to them and discuss their ideas and opinions of the article for 1 minute each.
2. **Arrange seating in two concentric circles of equal numbers of seats.** In large classes, consider running two simultaneous fishbowls.
3. **Half the class will start in the inner circle (or the “fishbowl”). Their role is to discuss the text.** To get the discussion going, they may start with expressing some of the ideas they talked to their partner with in step 1a. Alternatively, you may ask a provocative question about the text to stimulate discussion. As instructor, your job is to listen. Only jump in if the discussion veers too far off topic, the conversation dies entirely, or to ensure that everyone has a chance to participate. Allow discussion for at least 5 minutes, but probably for not much more than 12-15 minutes.
4. **The other half of the class sits in the outer ring. Their role is to quietly observe the discussion going on in the inner ring.** They might jot down notes about the content or the pattern of the discussion. Consider having one or two students “map” the flow of the discussion.
5. **When the discussion comes to an end (or is stopped by the instructor), ask the students in the outer ring to comment on what they observed or to ask questions of those in the inner ring.** This is a great time to model how to ask questions or give comments.
6. **Groups switch roles.** Now the outer ring moves to the inner ring and vice versa. Continue the discussion with the new group of students in the inner ring while those in the outer ring quietly observe.

### *Variation one: The empty chair*

Include an empty chair in the fishbowl circle, so that if an observing student feels they absolutely must make a comment, they can move into the empty chair, make their comment, then return to their seat.

### *Variation two: Progressive fishbowls*

Have students rotate in groups through the fishbowl, either picking up the same topic of conversation where the last group left off, discussing what they observed in the other group’s conversation, or starting with a new topic.

*For help thinking through classroom discussion or other aspects of teaching and learning, contact:*

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