

Fishbowl Discussion

Type: Generating Ideas, Sharing Ideas



What Is It?

Participants in the “fishbowl” share opinions and discuss a topic while participants on the outside listen carefully.

Why Use It?

Encourages participants to be actively engaged in the discussion and to reflect on what was discussed

Helps participants discuss difficult or controversial topics

How to Use It

1. Select an appropriate topic for the discussion. It is best to use a question that does not have only one correct answer so that participants can discuss the issue from different angles.
2. Create a circle of chairs (the fishbowl) in the center of the room. You should have enough chairs for 6-12 participants to sit in the “fishbowl”. The rest of the participants should be able to comfortably stand or sit outside the “fishbowl.”
3. Tell the participants what topic or question they will be discussing. Give them a few minutes to consider what they will say in the discussion.
4. Assign 6-12 participants to start in the “fishbowl” while the other participants carefully observe the discussion and take notes. Explain that only the participants in the fishbowl are permitted to speak.
5. Give the participants in the fishbowl 5-15 minutes to discuss (depending on the complexity of the topic)
6. After the discussion, ask the whole group to reflect on how the discussion went and what they learned from it. This could be done individually (by writing down reflections), with partners, or as a large group.
7. If desired, switch participants and start another “fishbowl” discussion with new groups of speakers and observers. See variations below.

Trainer Notes

It is important to set ground rules before the discussion. For example: speak respectfully, give everyone time to speak, do not interrupt other participants.

Fishbowl for multiple perspectives: Divide the participants into several groups and assign each of them a position (for example, different historical figures, different demographic groups in a community, different stakeholder, etc.). Give each group the same question or issue to discuss, and allow them to discuss it in the fishbowl. Other groups observe and write down reflections or questions. After all groups have shared their views in the fishbowl, allow participants to share their reflections with a partner.

Variation

Fishbowl for two opposing positions: When there are two distinct positions or arguments, divide the participants into two groups (one in favor and one opposed to the topic / issue). Allow one group to discuss why they hold their position / view while the other group listens, and then switch.