

FISHBOWL

The art of active listening and of observing

The Fishbowl is a method that facilitates dialogue between experts, exposing others to their knowledge and expanding the collective understanding of a subject. During the session, knowledgeable persons/speakers (the fish) become the focus of attention and discuss a series of directional questions. They are surrounded by a larger group of listeners and observers (the bowl). A variation of the method allows participants to move from the bowl to the fish, to share the opportunity of speaking and listening among all participants.

Purpose: Online socialization, Knowledge construction

Group size: < 20

Duration:
30 min - 1 hour


Multilanguage fit: no

USE THIS METHOD:

- Foster dynamic participation and conversation
- Share expertise while avoiding lengthy presentations
- Build skills in listening, storytelling, pattern-finding, questioning, and observing
- Use as an alternative to traditional debates or panel discussions.

Level of interaction:
high

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STEPS TO APPLY THE METHOD: _____

Preparation

1. Identify and define the purpose of the learning activity and the topic to discuss.
 2. Prepare a short input of 5-10 minutes to set out the general outline of the discussion.
 3. Prepare a set of questions for the end of the learning activity.
 4. Based on the purpose of the learning activity and participants' characteristics, define whether to plan an Open Fishbowl session (variation 1) or a Closed Fishbowl session (variation 2).
 - *Open Fishbowl*: As the session starts, a couple of 'visitor spaces' in the inner circle are free. Participants (from the bowl) can join the inner circle (as fish) voluntarily, one at a time to occupy a visitor space. A visitor space must become available for a fish to join. The discussion continues with participants frequently entering and leaving the Fishbowl. Participants have more than one opportunity to move to the inner circle.
 - **Closed Fishbowl**: As the session starts, all spaces in the inner circle are occupied. Some participants are the speakers (fish), and the rest of the participants are listeners and observers (the bowl). The speakers enter the inner circle and speak for some time about the topic. When the time has run out, or no new points are added to the discussion, they leave the fishbowl, and a new group takes over the fish's role to become speakers. The new group picks up the previous discussion. This may continue until all participants in the larger group have spent some time in the fishbowl.
 - Note: This approach is only appropriate when all participants have at least some prior knowledge of the subject.
 - Identify 2 to 3 subject-matter experts or experienced participants and brief them on the Fishbowl process.
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5. Define the tool you will use, familiarize yourself with its functionalities, and prepare the online space. No breakout rooms are required.
 - Only cameras and microphones from participants in the inner circle (the fish) and the facilitator are enabled for the session.

Delivery

Start the learning activity

1. Brief the participants about the purpose, the topic, and the procedure of the learning activity.
 - All participants gather in the main room. Participants will be speakers (the fish) or listeners and observers (the bowl). Explain the selected Fishbowl variation.
 - Variation 1:
 - Participants joining as fish in the visitors' space can:
 - stay between 1-5 minutes.
 - make one substantial statement or comment.
 - only enter the inner circle by changing position with the one on 'the visitors' space.
 - Listeners and observers prepare questions and comments and move into the circle when ready.
 - Variation 2:
 - Participants are split into two or more groups. One group becomes the fish, and the others the bowl.
 - Facilitator and fish discuss until the allocated time is over or no new points are added to the discussion.
 - A new group joins as fish and continues discussing the previous issue.
 - All groups have the opportunity to be speakers and listeners and observers.
 - For both variations:
 - Only participants in the inner circle and the facilitator can speak. Cameras and microphones are disabled for all other participants.
 2. Present a short input of 5-10 minutes to set out the general outline of the discussion.
 3. Divide groups as per chosen variation and start the Fishbowl.
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4. Encourage discussion, keeping it only among the inner circle.
5. Debrief the session.
 - Invite all participants to activate their cameras for the rest of the session.
 - Ask the set of questions prepared in step 3.
6. Conclude the learning activity by summarizing the discussion.
 - Debrief and review key points, interesting comments, and the group's feelings regarding particular issues.
 - Allow the learners to develop their own conclusions and express them freely.
7. Provide an overview document of the lessons learned and key resources for the participants after the learning activity.

Recommendations

- A Homogeneous Fishbowl includes participants with similar opinions or experiences, providing evidence and logic to support a cohesive perspective. This variation helps avoid wasteful disagreements at the early stages of the discussion and elaborates a clear concept for debate throughout the learning activity.
- A Heterogeneous Fishbowl requires one person representing each divergent viewpoint to be in the inner circle. The facilitator must carefully manage the debate to ensure that it is productive and examines the full variety of opinions equally.
- Multiple Fishbowls can address issues with large groups or when language barriers exist between participants. Assign a moderator to each Fishbowl to record the reflections, and provide them with clear instructions and support during the learning activity. Select representatives from each Fishbowl to form a new central fishbowl after the first discussions. Decide according to the composition of the group if the debriefing would be more effective within the large group or back in the original multiple fishbowls.

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