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Fishbowl Discussions

Class discussions should involve all students, not just those who are vocal and always likely to respond, and they should result in more student-student interaction patterns rather than student-teacher patterns (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990). Therefore, the best discussion strategies are those that enrich understanding of disciplinary topics through the exchange of multiple viewpoints and enlist the participation of virtually every student (Larson, 1999). One such strategy is the fishbowl discussion (Green, 2000). This strategy is well labeled because it involves one group of students looking in on another smaller group of students in a manner not unlike watching fish through the clear glass of an aquarium. The small group carries on a conversation about the issue or topic while the outside group listens and prepares questions and comments for the discussants. These roles are frequently rotated so as to

ensure all students play an active part in discussing, listening, and questioning.

STEP BY STEP

1. Identify a focus for class discussion. Typically, The more controversial and charged the issue, the greater level of engagement on the part of students. Thus, a topic in science such as the water cycle for students living in arid and semi-arid parts of the country might be considered from an environmental perspective resulting in the following issue: *The region needs to increase the volume of potable water in order to develop and expand. How can this be done without upsetting the current ecological-balance?*
2. Ask students to turn to a neighbor and talk about their ideas and opinions related to the issue. Tell students to take notes on their discussion. Allow enough time for a reasonable exchange of ideas and viewpoints, which can be determined by moving around the room to monitor and facilitate.
3. Demonstrate the format and expectations of a fishbowl discussion. This is best accomplished in a "dry run" of the activity. Ask for four or five

volunteers to sit around a table or a cluster of desks in the middle of the room. Have the other students gather in a circle.

4. Get the discussion started by telling the discussants sitting in a cluster to talk among themselves about the ideas and opinions they raised when conversing with a partner.

5. Tell the other students to listen carefully to their classmates while they engage in a small group discussion and take notes or jot down questions to share afterward.

6. Allow the discussants to talk for 5 minutes or so, getting involved only if the discussion dies or to ensure everyone is contributing and taking turns.

7. When the small group finishes or is stopped, ask the other students to make comments on the discussion they observed and/or ask questions of the discussants. This is an ideal time to model appropriate comments and questions.

8. Gather another small group of volunteer discussants, and continue to the fishbowl process until all students have had the opportunity to be inside the fishbowl and they are clear about their roles and expectations.

APPLICATION AND EXAMPLES

An English literature teacher began reconsidering his role as interrogator during a typical class discussion when he noticed it was causing most students to mentally retreat. In order to maximize participation, he began searching for an alternative discussion strategy that created a context for students to reflect, converse, share, and critique in an atmosphere of mutual respect. When he discovered and began using the fishbowl approach he soon found that it allowed students to plumb the depths of a topic by inviting them to explore and challenge their various points of view on the topic. It also stimulated critical thinking and engendered interest in and motivation for learning. And, perhaps most important, it demonstrated to his students that their input was desired and respected.

He set up a fishbowl discussion with his students around an issue in a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* they had just read. He first organized a closed circle of five desks in the middle of the room, then randomly called on five students and asked them to sit in the specially arranged desks. He asked the remaining class members to

gather around the group seated in the middle, then posed a question for that group: *What if Hamlet had not killed Polonius? Could he have saved himself from a certain life of tragedy? Please explain.* While the five students began proposing different possible outcomes of the play and offering rationales, the others were asked to watch and listen quietly. Some suggested the Danish prince might have left his homeland forever; others speculated he could have rallied an army against the treacherous king; still others were sure Hamlet's personality was so flawed he would have met a tragic end, regardless. At this point, the teacher elicited reactions to the small group discussion from those students watching from the outside. This approach allows those students looking in on the discussion to critique and assess the ideas of the fishbowl discussants. The teacher then selected a new group of five students and asked them to discuss a new but related question. (Brozo & Simpson, 2003).

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