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Fishbowl

Rationale:

The “fishbowl” is a teaching strategy that helps students practice being contributors and listeners in a discussion. Students ask questions, present opinions, and share information when they sit in the “fishbowl” circle, while students on the outside of the circle listen carefully to the ideas presented and pay attention to process. Then the roles reverse. 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.

Procedure:

Step one: 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. The fishbowl is an excellent strategy to use when discussing dilemmas, for example.

Step two: Setting up the room

A fishbowl requires a circle of chairs (“the fishbowl”) and enough room around the circle for the remaining students to observe what is happening in the “fishbowl.” 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.

Step three: Preparation

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

Step four: Discussing norms and rules of the discussion

There are many ways to structure a fishbowl discussion. Sometimes teachers have half the class sit in the fishbowl for 10-15 minutes and then say “switch,” at which point the listeners enter the fishbowl and the speakers become the audience. Another common fishbowl format is the “tap” system, where students on the outside of the fishbowl gently tap a student on the inside, indicating that they should switch roles. See the variations section for more ideas about how to structure this activity.

Regardless of the particular rules you establish, you want to make sure these are explained to students beforehand. You also want to provide instructions for the students in the audience. What should they be listening for? Should they be taking notes? Before beginning the fishbowl, you may wish to review guidelines for having a respectful conversation. Sometimes teachers ask audience members to pay attention to how these norms are followed by recording specific aspects of the discussion process such as the number of interruptions, respectful or disrespectful language used, or speaking times (Who is speaking the most? The least?)

Step five: Debriefing the fishbowl discussion

After the discussion, you can ask students to reflect on how they think the discussion went and what they learned from it. Students can also evaluate their participation as listeners and as participants. They could also provide suggestions for how to improve the quality of discussion in the future. These reflections can be in writing, or can be structured as a small or large group conversation.

Variations:

1) A fishbowl for opposing positions

This is a type of group discussion that can be utilized when there are two distinct positions or arguments. Each group has an opportunity to discuss the issue while the other group observes. The goal of this technique is for one group to gain insight about the other perspective by having this opportunity to listen and formulate questions. After both sides have shared and listened, students are often given the opportunity to discuss their questions and ideas with students representing the other side of the argument.

2) A fishbowl for multiple perspectives

This format allows students to look at a question or a text from various perspectives. First, assign perspectives to groups of students. These perspectives could represent the viewpoints of different historical figures, characters in a novel, social categories (e.g. young, old, male, female, working-class laborer, industrialist, peasant, noble, soldier, priest, etc.), or political/philosophical points of view. Each group discusses the same question, event or text representing their assigned perspective. The goal of this technique is for students to consider how perspective shapes meaning-making. After all groups have shared, students can be given the opportunity to discuss their ideas and questions with peers from other groups.

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