Fishbowl Discussion

Summary

Fishbowl is a strategy for group discussion especially suited to exploring global justice issues, working through dilemmas or seeking solutions. It is a useful structure for facilitating discussions on controversial or emotive issues.

There are 2 different roles for learners: those inside the 'fishbowl' actively discuss a topic, and learners outside the 'fishbowl' listen carefully to the discussion. Learners take turns in these roles, allowing opportunities to practice the communication skills of both a contributor and a listener. Reflection is built into the strategy as learners occupy the listening roles outside the fishbowl.

This activity works best when learners prepare ideas and questions for the discussion in advance. Fishbowl can be used as a precursor to research or writing activities because the discussion often opens up new directions, ideas or questions on a given issue.

Materials required

Set up a circle of chairs to form the fishbowl. Five or more chairs allow for a good range of perspectives, assuming there is enough time and space. Ensure there is enough space outside the fishbowl for the rest of the class to stand or sit in their role as listeners.

Steps

1. Select an issue, statement or question for discussion.
2. Divide learners into contributors inside the fishbowl and listeners outside the fishbowl. Alternatively allow learners the choice to pick their own roles.
3. Establish rules/guidelines with the class beforehand. Remind the class of the importance of respectful, safe and open discussion, as well as the need for trust in group scenarios. You may want to ask the listeners to identify certain points in the discussion, to record a summary, or to identify further questions or points for clarification.
4. Choose an approach:
    a. Timed discussion: allow contributors to discuss for 5 minutes with listeners only listening. Teacher announces 'switch', at which point learners change roles, listeners enter the fishbowl and contributors become the audience.
    b. Tap to join: when they want to enter the discussion, listeners on the outside tap the shoulder of a contributor who has already shared. These learners switch places.
    c. Multiple viewpoints: consider an issue or question from multiple perspectives. Split the class into 3 or 4 groups and give each group a perspective on the issue. For example, if the discussion is on climate justice, groups could represent the perspectives of climate activists, government officials, agricultural workers, oil company executives etc. Each group takes their turn inside the fishbowl to express their group's views. The other group listens. If time allows, they can then ask questions to explore or challenge the other groups views.

d. Opposing viewpoints: debate 2 opposing views on a topic. One group inside the fishbowl presents their argument, while the group outside the fishbowl listens to the opposing perspective. Groups then switch positions, facilitating opportunities for all learners to present, discuss and listen to a particular issue.

5. Reflection: ask learners to share what they learned about the topic and the process. This could be done orally or written on Post-its and stuck to a large sheet of paper on the wall with a heading 'Learnings' and 2 subheadings: 'On the topic' and 'From the process'. Encourage learners to evaluate the discussion process, what worked, what didn't, what could be improved?

More information

- Global Citizenship Education: Curious Teachers, Critical Classrooms, edited by Brighid Golden, see page 177 for Fishbowl
- Fishbowl Strategy from Facing History & Ourselves. Scroll to the bottom of the page for a 7.36 minute video of an educator discussing and demonstrating the method.
- 1 minute video from Edutopia on Fishbowl Strategy

"However intensely the things of the world affect us, however deeply they may move and stimulate us, they only become human for us when we can discuss them with our fellow men. (…) We humanize what is happening in the world and by talking about it, and in this talking we learn to be human"

Hannah Arendt *(1906-1975) German and American historian and philosopher and one of the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century.*