

The Fishbowl

The Fishbowl method allows you to explicitly teach a variety of social skills. It is one way to shine a light on the specific social skills that can either move a discussion forward or shut it down. The Fishbowl offers the class an opportunity to closely observe and learn about social interactions. You can use it in any content area.

We often ask ourselves, “How can we possibly teach students to have thoughtful conversations, to ask open-ended questions, to appreciate other students’ ideas, or to put their own ideas on the table?” For me, the fishbowl method is one way to approach these issues. In my overview (see “SEL Overall Plan”), I’ve included a list of ideas to consider under the direct-instruction construct. Most often, you’ll want to combine these ideas in one way or another. You can teach any one of the skills listed under the direct-instruction construct using the Fishbowl method.

Note: This is a cooperative-learning structure for a small-group discussion or a partner discussion. Spending time on this method is an investment I believe will yield a more productive, efficient, and engaging classroom environment down the road.

Here is how you do the Fishbowl method:

1. Before engaging in a fishbowl lesson, you should outline the goals or rubric.
 - a. We may use discussion goals as the target, a component of our working agreements (see “Developing Working Agreements,” “Implementing Working Agreements,” and “Our Working Agreements”), or something specific from class we’ve noticed needs improving.
 - b. If you’ve discovered a pattern in the classroom you need to address, list goals and you’re ready to go.
 - c. Students must have an idea of what they’re shooting for.
2. The entire group discusses the goals the class will focus on.
3. Give a thought-provoking problem or question for all individuals to consider and work through privately. This could be an article to read, a math model to build, a story problem to solve, a piece of artwork to consider, and so on. Make sure students have a product or idea to share (notes, questions, solutions) when they’re done. This accountability is important, because discussions are richer when participants have an investment in their ideas.
4. When you feel that the students are ready to move on, announce that the class will be taking a “field trip” to observe a single team or pair of students engage in a discussion about their ideas.
 - a. Again, the purpose of this activity is to model, practice having, and closely assess a discussion so that in the future, students will understand the skills they need to independently participate in and lead productive discussions of their own.
 - b. The whole process of students moving around the classroom and positioning themselves is also part of the lesson: Can everyone see? Can everyone hear?
 - c. Make sure the audience knows you will hold them accountable for sharing their observations. I often use equity sticks (a cup of sticks with each student’s name on one) to increase audience accountability.
 - d. As students become more adept at the discussion process, you can use the same Fishbowl activity to demonstrate high-quality discussions in regard to content. In other words, the content and students’ thinking can become the focus (the products rather than the process). Of course, the hope is that students will work on both content and discussion skills at any given time, but we must develop their skills to get to that point.
5. The class gathers around the team.
6. Thank the team for being in the Fishbowl, and acknowledge the students’ nervousness about being watched. Then, remind your students of the goals. These will vary depending on your class and where they are in the process. Discussion goals might cover how to

- a. begin the conversation in a fair way.
 - b. make sure all students get to speak.
 - c. ask open-ended questions.
 - d. invite team members into the conversation.
7. Remind the students in the audience about their job as observers: They need to note examples of when their peers in the discussion group are following the rubric and when they're not. And the observers need to record anything else important they see and be ready to share it.

This is an ongoing process, and it takes time for students to develop the social skills necessary to have a thoughtful and sometimes disagreeable discussion. The Fishbowl sheds light on those specifics and allows students to notice the particular behaviors and skills that are either helpful or detrimental to the process.

Have the team begin its discussion. Once the team has completed the discussion, allow them to assess themselves according to the established goals and mention anything else they've noticed. Ask the audience for comments: First, what did the team do well? Second, what could the team members do better? Let students make final comments.

Thank the Fishbowl team for its work. Keep your comments fairly neutral. Mention any specific comments you feel the team or audience members have missed. Have students return to their own teams.