

Open Fishbowl

The **Open Fishbowl** is a dynamic discussion method in which a small group of students sits in an inner circle to discuss a topic, while one **empty chair** remains available for any observer to join at any time. When someone enters, a current participant leaves, ensuring continuous rotation and inclusive dialogue.

Complexity : 

Group size: small to large

Format: online, on-site

Learning objectives / benefits

- Engage in **critical thinking**, analyzing arguments and assumptions.
- Strengthen **ability to articulate and defend** ideas.
- Practice **constructive dialogue and perspective-taking**.

Implementation

- **Preparation:** Choose an open-ended topic or case. Students might need to prepare for the discussion.
- **Arrange the room:** create an inner circle with an empty chair and an outer circle. Alternatively, place a row of chairs in the front of the class that will work as an inner circle.
- **Introduce the rules:** explain how the method works, and address the importance of respectful communication
- **Define the roles:** assign who will start in the inner circle. You can also assign a role to the participants on the outer circle (evaluate the discussion, write down key arguments)
- **Conduct the discussion:** The teacher has a moderation role, asking guiding questions, but not participating directly.
- **Debrief:** Summarize the discussion and highlight key learning points. Here, the outer circle can share their findings.

Recommendations

- Discussion works best when the students are **interested in the topic** and have high motivation to share their opinions
- Allow **voluntary rotation** rather than forced turns for more authentic contributions.
- Use **rubrics or checklists** to help observers focus their attention.
- Students may hesitate to take the open chair—consider **warm-up** activities.
- **Discussion can drift** without careful facilitation. Having a few questions ready can help keep the conversation focused and engaging.

Further reading

Centre for Academic Teaching and Learning (2023) [Fishbowl Method](#) Teaching and Learning Collection.

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