

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Teaching Technique 44

# Fishbowl

### ACTIVITY TYPE

- Active/Engaged Learning
- Discussion
- Reciprocal Teaching

### TEACHING PROBLEM ADDRESSED

- Lack of Participation
- Poor Attention/Listening
- Surface Learning

### LEARNING TAXONOMIC LEVEL

- Application: Analysis & Critical Thinking
- Integration and Synthesis
- Learning How to Learn

# Fishbowl

In *Fishbowl*, students form concentric circles with a small group inside and a larger group outside. Students in the inner circle engage in an in-depth discussion, while students in the outer circle listen and critique content, logic, and group interaction.

1

Clarify your teaching purpose and learning goals for the *Fishbowl*

2

Craft an open-ended prompt likely to generate multiple responses

3

Set assignment parameters, such as size of inner circle and chair placement

4

Develop a plan for learning assessment or grading (optional)

5

Communicate assignment instructions to students

6

Implement the technique

7

Reflect upon the activity and evaluate its effectiveness

# Step-By-Step Instructions

In this section, we provide you with guidance on each of the seven steps involved as you consider this technique.

## **STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS**

*Fishbowl* is a reciprocal teaching technique that emphasizes mutual exchange through dual student roles. Inner circle students are challenged to participate in a high-level discussion while the outer circle is asked to listen to the discussion and critique content, logic, and group interaction. This technique, therefore, serves two purposes: to provide structure for in-depth discussion and to provide opportunities for students to model or observe group processes in a discussion setting.

## **STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT**

Inside circle students discuss a prompt while outside circle students listen and observe. It is important to create an open-ended discussion prompt that relates to course learning goals and is likely to generate rich discussion. We provide further guidance on crafting discussion prompts in the **Support Materials** section that follows.

## **STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS**

As you set parameters, consider aspects such as:

- Whether you want to facilitate the inner circle discussion, sit with the outer circle, or separate yourself so that you can observe both circles.
- Whether you want one fishbowl or multiple smaller fishbowls, and the size of the inner circles. For one fishbowl, the inner circle generally consists of 3-5 students; for multiple fishbowls, the inner circle generally consists of 2-3 students.
- How you will move students into circles. If the physical constraints of the classroom do not allow movement of chairs into circles, consider having the inner circle of students simply sit in chairs and participate in the discussion at the front of the classroom.

## **STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING**

*Fishbowl* discussions are not typically graded, however, if you wish to do so, determine whether you will evaluate inner circle student contributions, outer circle student observations, or both. Then determine the criteria and standards you will use to evaluate the quantity and quality of students' contributions and/or observations.

# Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)

## **STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS**

- Ask students to form concentric circles for either a single or multiple fishbowls.
- Give students the following guidelines: only inner circle students will speak; outer circle students will be 'observers' and take notes on both content and group process; although observers will not speak during the *Fishbowl* discussion, they will have the opportunity to address any issues that arise in the follow-up discussion.
- Give students the prompt question for discussion.

## **STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE**

Provide sufficient time for the inner circle of students to discuss the prompt. Afterward, ask students to report out in a whole-class discussion, requesting that they address the content issues that arose and that they comment on group processes.

## **STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS**

When reflecting on the activity and how effective it was, consider the following questions:

- Did the technique match the course learning goals and objectives?
- Did it meet my goals for this learning module?
- Was it appropriate for the students?
- Did the technique keep the students engaged?
- Did it promote student learning?
- Did it provide me with information about student understanding?

If you answer yes to all or most of these questions, next consider how you might improve the activity for the next use.

# Support Materials

The materials in this section are intended to help you with the process of implementing this technique.

## **FISHBOWL SAMPLE PROMPT STEMS**

An effective *Fishbowl* discussion requires a good task prompt that is open-ended and can generate multiple responses. The table on the following page provides a selection of question or problem stems for crafting prompts that can be adapted to a variety of learning activities, including *Fishbowl* discussions.

## SAMPLE TASK PROMPT STEMS

For crafting compelling questions in a *Fishbowl*

QUESTION TYPE	PURPOSE	EXAMPLE
<b>Exploratory</b>	Probe facts and basic knowledge	What research evidence supports ___?
<b>Challenge</b>	Examine assumptions, conclusions, and interpretations	How else might we account for ___?
<b>Relational</b>	Ask for comparison of themes, ideas, or issues	How does ___ compare to ___?
<b>Diagnostic</b>	Probe motives or causes	Why did ___?
<b>Action</b>	Call for a conclusion or action	In response to ___, what should ___ do?
<b>Cause &amp; Effect</b>	Ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events	If ___ occurred, what would happen?
<b>Extension</b>	Expand the discussion	What are additional ways that ___?
<b>Hypothetical</b>	Pose a change in the facts or issues	Suppose ___ had been the case, would the outcome have been the same?
<b>Priority</b>	Seek to identify the most important issue	From all that we have discussed, what is the most important ___?
<b>Summary</b>	Elicit syntheses	What themes or lessons have emerged from ___?
<b>Problem</b>	Challenge students to find solutions to real or hypothetical situations	What if? (To be motivating, students should be able to make some progress on finding a solution, and there should be more than one solution.)
<b>Interpretation</b>	Help students to uncover the underlying meaning of things	From whose viewpoint or perspective are we seeing, hearing, reading? What does this mean? or, What may have been intended by . . . ?
<b>Application</b>	Probe for relationships and ask students to connect theory to practice	How does this apply to that? or, Knowing this, how would you . . . ?
<b>Evaluative</b>	Require students to assess and make judgments	Which of these are better? Why does it matter? and, So what?
<b>Critical</b>	Require students to examine the validity of statements, arguments, and conclusions and to analyze their thinking and challenge their own assumptions	How do we know? and, What's the evidence and how reliable is the evidence?

**Source:** Davis, 1993, pp. 83–84; McKeachie, 1999, pp. 51–52 and reprinted from *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* by Barkley, Major, and Cross (Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2014), p. 41.

# Online Adaptation

This section is intended to help you with the process of implementing *Fishbowl* in your online class.

## **IMPLEMENTING A SYNCHRONOUS FISHBOWL**

For use in a synchronous session:

- Decide between using video or chat.
- Give the prompt and ask two to three students to discuss the prompts while the other students listen or read the chat. Then, ask the rest of the class for comments.
- Consider preparing a number of discussion prompts and then choose a new set of two to three students to discuss each prompt while the remaining students observe.

## **IMPLEMENTING AN ASYNCHRONOUS FISHBOWL**

For use in an asynchronous session:

- Create a prompt and identify which students will participate in the Inner Circle, whether you want students to observe both the content and process, and determine grading criteria.
- Establish a time frame. For example, Inner Circle students will discuss for one week; Outer Circle students will discuss the following week.
- Create two forums, one labeled “Inner Circle” and the other “Outer Circle.” Consider setting up the Inner Circle forum so only those students can post responses.
- If students in the Inner Circle need prodding or if the discussion needs redirecting, send participants a private message.
- During the Outer Circle discussion segment, leave both forums open so that those students can switch back and forth to read postings.

# Technique Template

Following are two templates to assist you as you think through how you might implement this technique in your own class. The first is a completed template, providing an example of how a Professor adapted *Fishbowl* in their course, *Administration of Higher Education*. The second is a blank template for you to fill out to tailor this technique for your course.

# Technique Template

Sample *Fishbowl* Completed Technique Template:

Content from *Collaborative Learning: A Handbook for College Faculty*

*Administration of Higher Education*

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Course Name

## **COURSE CHARACTERISTICS**

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

*This is a graduate-level seminar that is taught as a blended course. Some of the course content is online and used as the basis for active learning activities in class.*

## **STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS**

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

*The professor engaged students in whole-class discussions on a regular basis, but she wanted to vary the form of the discussion to keep the course interesting.*

## **STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT**

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

*After several weeks exploring the origins and purposes of higher education, the professor wanted the class to discuss in what ways higher education was, and was not an industry.*

## **STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS**

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

*To prepare for the Fishbowl, the professor divided the class in half and asked the students in one half of the room to form pairs and participate in a Think-Pair-Share, responding to the prompt: "In what ways is higher education an industry?" She had the students in the other half of the room also form pairs, but they responded to the prompt: "In what ways is higher education not an industry?"*

#### **STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING**

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

*The professor's goal was to provide a framework to engage students and produce a substantive, in-depth discussion. She was not interested in assessing or grading the activity.*

#### **STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS**

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

*The professor believed that the task was uncomplicated and clear and so simply gave instructions to students verbally.*

## STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

*After students had shared and discussed their ideas in the preparatory Think-Pair-Share, she selected four students (two students from each side) to participate in a Fishbowl discussion in the center of the room while the remaining students critiqued discussion content and group processes. The professor then engaged the class in whole-class discussion, asking observers to contribute additional insights on either content or process.*

## STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

*The professor was pleased with the results and felt the Fishbowl had accomplished both of her goals:*

*1) to engage students in discussion in a novel manner, and*

*2) to have students participate in an in-depth discussion of the ways higher education is and is not an industry.*

# Technique Template

This template is intended for use when planning to implement ***Fishbowl*** in your class. Fill in the blanks below, and use the information provided elsewhere in the Instructor’s Guide to assist you in your thinking.

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**Course Name**

## **COURSE CHARACTERISTICS**

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

## **STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS**

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

## **STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT**

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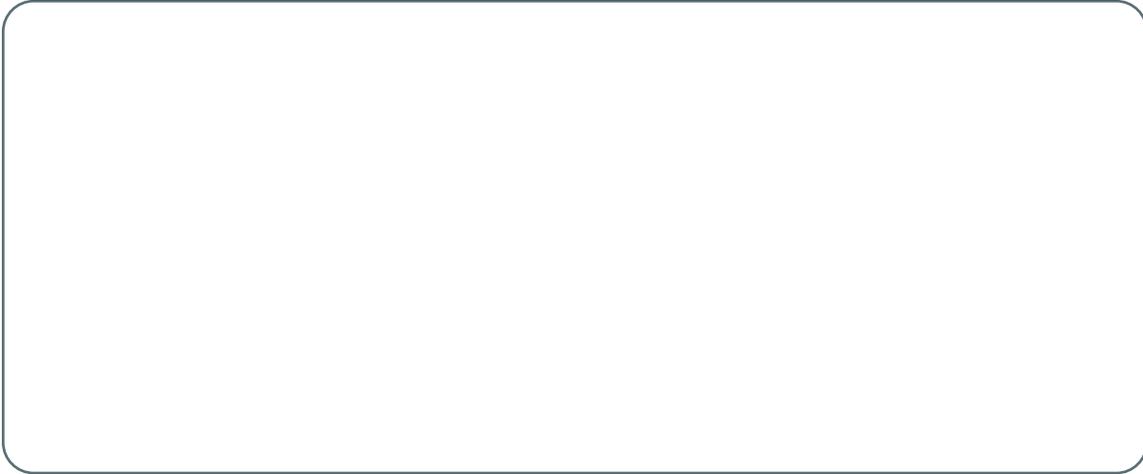
## **STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS**

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?



#### **STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING**

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?



#### **STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS**

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?



## **STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE**

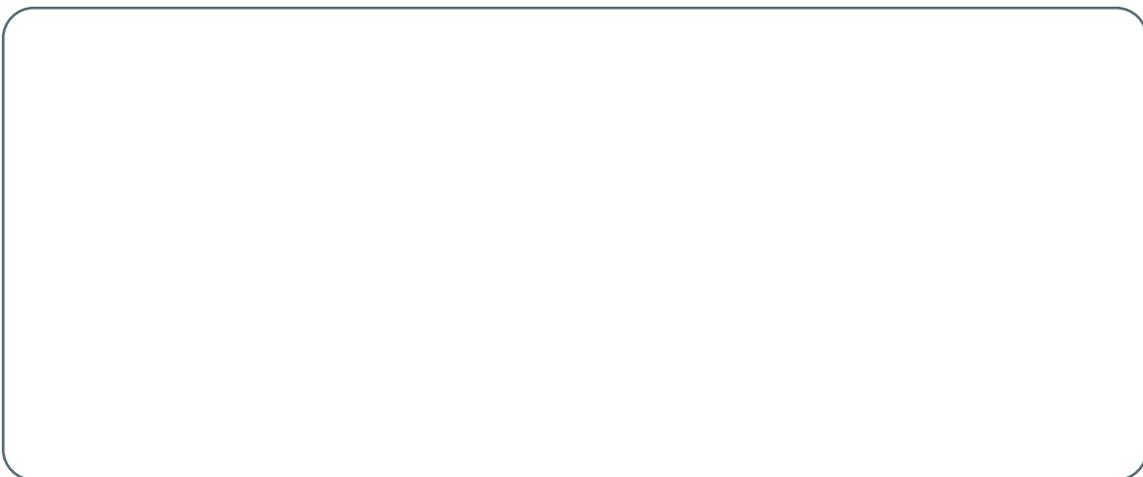
How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?



## **STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS**

*Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.*

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?



# References and Resources

## PRIMARY SOURCE

Content for this download was drawn primarily from “Collaborative Learning Technique 9: Fishbowl” in *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley & Major, 2014), pp. 201–205. It includes material that was adapted or reproduced with permission. For further information about this technique, including examples in both on campus and online courses, see the primary source.

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., K.P. Cross (2014). *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

## CITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Tiberius, R. (1995). *Small group teaching: A trouble-shooting guide*. Toronto: OISE Press. P. 25.
- Kagan, S. (1990). The structural approach to cooperative learning. *Educational Leadership*, 47(4) 12-15.

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