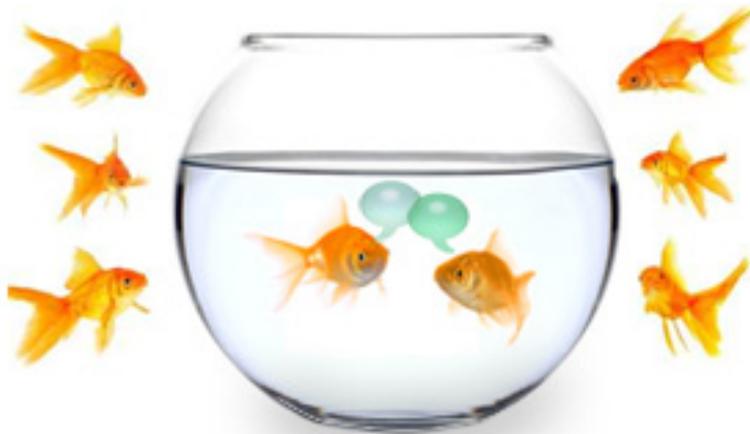


# HAND-OUT FISHBOWL DISCUSSION



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## General information

### What is a Fishbowl discussion?

*A 'Fishbowl' discussion is a form of dialogue that can be used to help large groups discuss a topic with each other.*

This hand-out offers information on how teachers can use the Fishbowl discussion as a tool to give students a say in how their education is developed and to voice how they experience their education.

Fishbowl discussions can be used in several ways at schools, but this hand-out explains the rules of a variant that is especially focused on gathering feedback from students.

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### When do you use a Fishbowl discussion?

- When you want a large group of people to have influence on the discussion of a smaller group of people
- When you want to stimulate a dynamic group process
- When you want a large group of people to actively take part in a discussion
- When you want to discuss a controversial topic
- When you want a group to observe, analyse and learn from the thinking process of others
- When you want an alternative to a traditional debate

## THE VOICE OF THE STUDENT; APPLYING THE FISHBOWL TO SITUATIONS AT SCHOOL

The way teachers work together in departments and the way they design education is focused on developing the best possible education for students. But how can you assess whether all that effort will achieve the teachers' desired result? One of the ways to assess this is by asking the students questions during a Fishbowl discussion.

The Fishbowl discussion described in this hand-out is not specifically focused on a discussion or the exchange of information (which this method is often used for), but on gathering information regarding educational objectives set by the teachers and/or departments.

### How can a Fishbowl discussion be used at a school?

- 1 As a means to invite a representative group of students to a Fishbowl discussion and to ask them about their experiences with and/or their opinions on things like:
  - Whether a department's objective has the desired effect on students
  - Whether students consider a lesson or series of lessons useful
  - The ideas the students have concerning the content of lessons, et cetera
- 2 As a means to get students to enter into a discussion with each other about a topic in class (activating didactics) for example as a substitute for a debate
- 3 As a means to have colleagues discuss several topics with each other

### **What is the added value of using a Fishbowl discussion at school?**

- You can use this method to ask students about their vision regarding pedagogical, didactic and educational topics.
- It gives teachers/departments the opportunity to catalogue the experiences/ideas of the students.
- It gives students the opportunity to reflect on the education they are receiving.
- A Fishbowl discussion can be used as a tool to measure to what extent an educational objective formulated by teachers/department affects the learning of students.
- A Fishbowl discussion can be used as an instrument to obtain feedback.



### **THE PREPARATION FOR A FISHBOWL DISCUSSION**

Select a discussion leader or invite an experienced discussion leader to moderate the discussion.

#### **Planning**

Depending on the topic and amount of people reserve 60 to 90 minutes:

- 15-30 minutes to prepare the team of teachers and the group of students (this can be done simultaneously)
- 30-45 minutes for the Fishbowl discussion
- 15 minutes for the evaluation

#### **Preparation of the teachers**

Prepare well for the Fishbowl arena and give the teacher ample time to prepare the following:

- 1 - The team determines the topic or goal for questioning the students
- 2 - The team determines whether the Fishbowl arena will be used to gain insights regarding backgrounds, to gain information, to gauge interest or as a measuring tool
- 3 - The team prepares open questions for the students based on the topic or goal

- 4- The team determines what will be done with the results of the Fishbowl discussion (what happens with the results afterwards?)
- 5- The team writes down the expectations and/or experiences regarding the approval/disapproval of students and indicates what behaviour and emotions they expect to see from the students (see figure 1).

Figure 1, Inventarisation diagram approval/disapproval

APPROVAL		DISAPPROVAL	
Behaviour	Regarding: Teacher objective	Behaviour	Regarding: Teacher objective
* * * *	* * * * *	* * * *	* * * * *
Emotion		Emotion	
* * * *		* * * *	

**Preparation of the students (15-30 minutes before the start of the Fishbowl discussion)**

It is important to create a safe environment for the students where they can speak freely! This is accomplished by having the discussion leader prepare the students beforehand by informing them of the format and topic of the discussion.

Therefore the following is important:

- 1 - Explain to the students how a Fishbowl discussion exactly works
- 2 - Prepare the students for the topic the team of teachers is going to question them about
- 3 - Explain to the students what will be done with their input and the status that input has
- 4 - Have the students fill in the expectations diagram. In this diagram they have to indicate their general behaviour in relation to the objective when they approve of it, and what kind of emotion it evokes. And then they have to do the same for when the students disapprove. (see figure 1)
- 5 - The discussion leader has to discuss the diagram with the students and add their contribution (see figure 1)
- 6 - During the Fishbowl discussion the diagrams of both the students and the teachers are out of sight. After the session the diagrams can be used as a topic of discussion during the evaluation. For example, by comparing them or by using them to check if all the topics that the teachers and students find relevant have been discussed.

**CONDUCTING A FISHBOWL DISCUSSION**

**Roles**

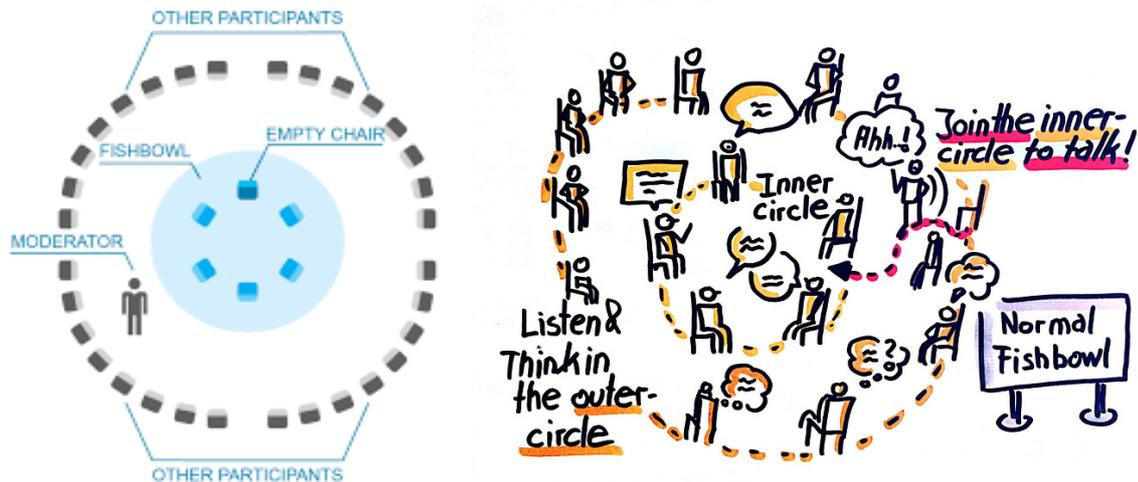
- 1 - An observer to take minutes and summarise the discussion at the end
- 2 - A discussion leader to monitor the discussion, keep track of time and to lead the evaluation/feedback discussion at the end
- 3 - The participants who are seated in the outer circle to observe the participants and the discussion in the inner circle. They share their findings by giving feedback during the evaluation

## The setup

- Create an inner circle and an outer circle (see figures 2 and 3)
- The inner circle consists of three to six people and an empty chair
- The outer circle consists of five or more people

The empty chair is intended for teachers who want to ask the students questions. When the teacher has received an answer to their question, they leave the inner circle to make way for the next teacher with a question.

Figure 2 and 3, the setup for a Fishbowl discussion



## Rules

- Formulate open questions. After asking an open question, you can ask follow-up questions to clarify things (be to the point)
- Let everyone finish
- Do not start a discussion (the discussion leader will keep a close eye on this)
- Do not get stuck on one question, take 3-5 minutes per question or topic
- The participants in the outer circle are there to listen and observe and not to join in on the discussion in the inner circle
- The discussion leader only monitors the format, not the content

## Evaluation

- The minute taker summarises the discussion
- The expectation diagrams are discussed briefly
- The observers/teachers give feedback on the Fishbowl discussion
- The students give feedback on the discussion and the questions
- Students and teachers give feedback on the Fishbowl discussion as a tool
- The teachers inform the students what they plan to do with the information and when they plan to give feedback to the students