



thinking space

GOLDFISH BOWL

WHAT IS IT?

The Goldfish Bowl a tool for analysing and improving group discussion.

A group discussion is observed by several participants who are each looking at a particular aspect of group interaction: Do a few strong characters dominate? Does everyone get a chance to speak? What were the topics covered and what conclusions did they draw?

This activity makes explicit to learners the importance of speaking and listening and provides them with a frame of reference for improving the quality of future discussions.

RECIPE

- **No. of participants:** 10 - 30
- **Age of participants:** Any age, as long as they understand what they are being asked to analyse.
- **Preparation time:** 0 – 30 minutes which might include preparation for the central discussion and cutting out criteria for the outer group to focus on.
- **Delivery time:** 10 – 60 minutes
- **Materials:** Cards containing analysis for criteria; two circles of chairs; pens and paper.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

In a Goldfish Bowl, one group of learners sit in a circle in the middle while a second group sit in a circle around them. The central circle are the goldfish in their bowl; the outer circle are looking into the bowl. The central circle are involved in a discussion or activity while the outer circle do not participate in the discussion but analyse the central group and then report back.

Beforehand the facilitator prepares a series of cards containing criteria for the outer group to focus on. Each student in the outer circle picks one of these cards and makes notes on those criteria during the discussion.

During the activity the inner circle have a topic or problem to discuss. They conduct a dialogue, uninterrupted and following the enquiry conventions, for several minutes. Within their discussion the person who's spoken chooses who speaks next (please see 'Community of Enquiry' Tool).

Once the discussion has drawn to a close the outer circle report back on their findings. Then, as a group, the participants decide what does and doesn't work well in a discussion.

The two groups can then swap so that everyone has a turn at being the goldfish. The findings of the outer group feed into the overall picture that the whole group is forming of how a good discussion works.

HOW DOES IT WORK? (cont.)

Example questions:

Questions About Group Interaction

How many male students and how many female students speak?

Make a note of ways people show they are listening.

Questions About Language

Make a note of any words that cause confusion.

What language do participants use to build on what has already been said?

Questions About Individual Contributions

Which members spoke for the longest time without interruptions?

Which members try to include others? How do they do it?

Questions About Process

Make a note of any occasions when the group gets stuck.

Make a note of any occasions someone changes the subject.

Questions About Content

What were the main points discussed?

What, if any, conclusions did they draw?

TIPS

- The participants can decide the criteria for analysis themselves based on an initial discussion.
- Check that the students in the outer circle fully understand what their card is asking them to look for before you begin.
- Film the students taking part in a discussion and then later on ask them to watch the tape back as a Goldfish Bowl activity.
- The features of a good dialogue discussed by the students at the end of the activity can be put onto cards for future, repeated, Goldfish Bowl exercises. This method can be used by the students to regularly review and update their progress as participants in good dialogue.

FIND OUT MORE

- 'Community of Enquiry' Tool outlines how to help the inner circle have a focused discussion.
- 'Thought Experiments' Tool provides some thought-provoking stimulus for the inner circle.
- See 'Using Film' Tool.



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