

“This technique helped me grow”: Inviting Behavior and Perception Change Through Class Discussion
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We have all had the experience of looking forward to a brilliant classroom discussion only to find that it falls flat because students are too anxious to participate, one or two students monopolize the conversation, or the topic is so politically or socially charged that emotions around it are fragile. How, especially in classes like multicultural psychology, do we facilitate discussion around sensitive material in a way that is inviting and encourages behavior and perception change outside the classroom? Our preliminary data suggests the fishbowl technique has not only lead to an increase in participation and comfort in classroom discussions in multicultural psychology but has also led to students changing their behavior outside the classroom because of their experience in discussion and students report they learn and retain information from fishbowl discussions more so than traditional lectures. Let’s talk more about techniques, barriers, and facilitators to covering sensitive material with healthy classroom discussions.

PIE Discussion Questions:

- 1) What do you see as some of the biggest barriers and facilitators to managing classroom discussions around sensitive material?
- 2) What are your thoughts on implementing the fishbowl discussion technique in your classroom? What may be some of the barriers you could encounter should you choose to use the technique?
- 3) How do you manage your own discomfort facilitating certain discussions?
- 4) Many students struggle with discussion participation that includes respectful speaking AND active listening. What techniques have you found to be effective in encouraging both these forms of participation especially when the discussion topic is challenging (e.g. politically or ethically charged).

Fishbowl Discussion Technique:

- 1) The specifics of how the technique is implemented will depend on the make-up (e.g. number of students), constraints (e.g. class time), and culture (e.g. are students able to facilitate discussion without the professor in the circle) of the class.
- 2) Divide the class into two groups and arrange the groups in two concentric circles.
- 3) Someone on the inside circle (preferably two students) facilitate discussion with the inside circle while the outside circle students *listen only*.
- 4) Halfway through class time switch out the circles (but not the facilitators) so the students who were listening can now speak and the speakers are now required to listen without speaking.
- 5) Ideally the class sets ground rules for maintaining healthy class discussion and the professor sits outside the circle practicing Teaching with Your Mouth Shut (à la Don Finkel).
- 6) It is helpful to reserve debriefing time especially during the first few implementations of fishbowl technique to discuss students’ perception on what went well and ideas for future improvements.

Additional Thoughts

It is helpful if facilitators give the circle notice if they are about to switch out so students who haven't spoken up yet know their opportunity is closing.

Regardless of how much time you can allocate to the activity, be sure every student gets an opportunity to speak and listen.

I typically facilitate the first time so students get a feel for the process (and usually feel less intimidated and are more willing to volunteer to facilitate the next discussion).

To avoid students perceiving this as an exercise where the teacher gets to be lazy, tell them about the theory of the technique and why it's important they converse without your influence. If you were in the circle the dynamic would be completely different: they would expect you to manage silence, they may not want to contradict anything you say, you may inadvertently steer the conversation away from where it would have gone naturally. My students often say "I don't know but I think...". If I were in the circle, they would look to me for a moment of instruction and that's not what the fishbowl is for – better for them to share their point of view and hear their peers' response.

References

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