

Strategies that Work by Peter Pappas

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Fishbowl Discussion

Overview:

Do you have difficulty managing a class discussion with 30 students? Do you feel like certain students dominate in large group settings making it hard to get everyone involved and staying on task? Consider using a fishbowl discussion format. This strategy allows you to have an intense discussion with only half of your class while the other half observes and analyzes the interactions.

1. For a class of 30, prepare 15 fishbowl index cards and 15 goldfish index cards. Place the cards in a basket and ask students to draw cards randomly.
2. Students who draw goldfish cards will form the inside circle. They will be the ones to have the discussion. Warn them in advance that they will be carefully observed and data will be collected on their discussion.
3. The students who pull out fishbowl cards will form the outside circle. They will be observing only. It is like they are peering into a fishbowl and watching the goldfish. These students will complete a data gathering sheet.

Students in the outer circle have a job to do:

To keep students in the outside circle attentive, give them a task that requires them to focus on the fishbowl discussion:

1. If you started the discussion by generating a series of questions, have the outer-circle students create T-notes or 2-column notes. Questions go in the left column, the answers the fishbowl generates go in the right column.
2. Students who aren't in the fishbowl can do two-column notes of the discussion. In the left column they write at least three important ideas that the group discussed. In the right column they write their own response to each idea. Minimum credit for just accurately recording topics; better credit for actually responding, best credit for responding in a thoughtful way that shows they have read the book.
3. Assign each of the students in the outer circle a member of the fishbowl. The student from the outer circle writes a transcript of everything "their" student says. When the discussion is over, photocopy the transcripts. Highlight the originals to show good ideas or questions that the fishbowl student came up with. Give the photocopy back to the outer-circle student and give feedback on how thoroughly they kept track.
4. Have outer-circle students keep track of the types of comments the fishbowl members make – ? if they ask a question, C if they make a connection, I if they make an inference, T if they use specific text to answer a question or make a comment, P if they make a prediction. (These notes can give students feedback on the variety of the comments they make.)
5. Have students in the outer circle write a journal response to the discussion.

Fishbowl Discussion Variations

1. Entire class comes with sticky note questions. In groups of four, they reduce down their group questions to the best three. These are put on the chalk board and the fishbowl revolves around these questions. The fishbowl is still student lead.
2. Teacher leads discussion around class questions. Teacher is leader of fishbowl and sits in fishbowl. This works great with underclassmen.
3. Warn students ahead of time that you will choose 8 at random to be in the fishbowl when the day for discussion arrives.
4. Make the fishbowl voluntary – only students who want to be in the fishbowl pull in their desks – but they have to show you their sticky notes or other evidence that they're ready to discuss.
5. Fishbowl role-play: Choose four famous individuals that are associated with the subject to be studied. Students research the positions of the four speakers in advance.
 - The fish bowl consists of four speaker chairs placed in the center of the room.
 - Only those students sitting in these chairs may contribute to the discussion. All others will patiently and quietly for their turn to sit in those chairs.
 - When you move into the chair, you have an opportunity to contribute to the current discussion of the group or when that topic becomes exhausted, to bring up a new topic.
 - You may only bring up one issue or make your point once per sitting (you cannot stay in the bowl forever and dominate the discussion).
 - You may only join the fish bowl a second time after everyone has had a chance to join it for their first time.

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