

H-13: Active Listening-Student Fishbowl-multicultural

Student Fishbowl

This activity requires 60-90 minutes.

Purpose:

Fishbowl activities force participants to actively listen to the experiences and perspectives of a specific group of people. A student fishbowl gives pre-service and in-service educators an opportunity to hear the experiences, ideas, and critiques of current students while giving the students an opportunity to be active in the dialogue on multicultural education and education transformation.

Preparation:

The only major resources needed for this activity are current K-12 students. If possible, the number of students in the fishbowl should be roughly equal to the number of participants in your class or workshop. At least 10 students should participate in the fishbowl. If your class or workshop focuses on a particular educational level (i.e., early childhood, secondary, etc.), you should try to find students at that level to participate. A useful strategy for finding fishbowl participants is to tap into local schools.

To prepare for the actual fishbowl dialogue, ask the fishbowl students to sit in a circle in the middle of the room. Your class or workshop participants, or the "observers," should sit in a larger circle around the fishbowl students.

Instructions:

The following steps will set the ground rules, then initiate and process the dialogue for the student fishbowl activity:

1. One important ground rule must guide the participation of the observers: During the course of the fishbowl, observers are not allowed to speak. Their job is to listen and learn from the fishbowl students. Mention that the observers will have an opportunity to discuss any issues that emerge in later processing dialogue.
2. If possible, assign one of the fishbowl students the role of facilitator. It will be her or his responsibility to ask questions, facilitate the fishbowl discussion, and make sure everyone has an opportunity to talk. If necessary, you can play the role of facilitator.
3. The topics to be discussed by the fishbowl can be developed to be relevant to your course or workshop. For the most part, fishbowl participants should have an opportunity to take the conversation where they want - or need - it to go. If it becomes necessary to push the conversation along, possible prompts include the following:
 - o What are your favorite things about school?
 - o What aspects of your school do you feel should be improved?
 - o What can your teachers do to help you learn better?
 - o Share a story about when one of your teachers did something that made you feel especially included in the learning process.
 - o Share a story about when you felt you were especially excluded from your own learning process.
 - o Who is your favorite teacher? Why?
 - o Who is your least favorite teacher? Why?
 - o What do you feel is the role of school in your life?
 - o What do you feel should be the major goals of schools?
4. Make sure everybody in the fishbowl has an opportunity to talk.

5. Allow the fishbowl discussion to continue for at least 30 minutes. You can allow it to continue longer if time permits.
6. When the fishbowl discussion winds down, divide the combination of your participants and the fishbowl students into small groups of 6-10. This will provide the observers an opportunity to ask for clarification on comments made during the fishbowl. Instruct the observers that they are not to invalidate or question the students' experiences or perspectives. They should use the small group discussions only to learn more from the fishbowl students. Allow at least 30 minutes for small group discussions.
7. After small group discussions, call everyone back together. This will be the final processing discussion. A variety of questions can guide this conversation:
 - o To the observers: Was it difficult to not respond to the fishbowl students' comments during the fishbowl? Why?
 - o To the fishbowl students: How did it feel to share your feelings about school, knowing that these teachers were listening closely?
 - o To the fishbowl students: Do you usually have opportunities to share your perspectives on school and your education?
 - o To the observers: Did you hear anything from the fishbowl that surprised you?
8. To wrap up the entire exercise, pose a final question, giving everyone an opportunity to answer: What is one thing you have learned from this experience?

Facilitator Notes:

A few simple strategies will help you facilitate this activity smoothly. First, remember that this activity is as much about reminding teachers that students are their most important resources as it is about teaching. As mentioned above, it is thus crucial that observers show maximum respect to the fishbowl students by following the silence ground rule. It may take some effort to enforce this ground rule, as many teachers are not fully ready to play the role of learner from people who may be their own students. Consider writing something on the chalkboard or newsprint pad such as "We are all teachers. We are all learners."

Student fishbowl discussions are usually most successful when they are informal. Remember that the fishbowl students have not had an opportunity to develop comfort with the participants of your class or workshop.

A noticeable level of tension is often evident in the room as teachers learn about their own possible deficiencies from students, and students try to respectfully critique the people who they have been taught to trust and respect. A variety of strategies can be used to ease the tension, ranging from starting with a fun icebreaker to serving snacks.

Note: This activity was adapted from [Awareness Activities](#), part of the [Multicultural Pavilion Internet Project](#). Special thanks is extended to Bob Covert and the Multicultural Education team at the University of Virginia.