

Tool 55: Fish Bowl

Aim of the tool

Facilitating large group discussions on controversial issues and sharing the expertise of group members.

When to use it?

Commitment stage, especially useful if the topic asks for one conversation instead of break-outs.

What is a Fish Bowl?

The fish bowl tool enables the facilitation of large group dialogue by focusing on a small group discussion in an inner circle while the rest of the group listens and observes from the outer circle.

It can be used as an alternative for traditional debates or panel discussions and offers a highly dynamic setting to discuss controversial issues and share expertise. When the people in the middle are public officials or other decision-makers, this technique can help bring transparency to the decision-making process and increase trust and understanding about complex issues.

Sometimes the discussion is a “closed conversation” among a specific group. More often, one or more chairs are open to “visitors” from the outer circle who want to ask questions or make comments. An open fish bowl enables the dynamic participation of the entire group.



Source: NVC Peace and Conflict Studies

Although largely self-organizing once the discussion gets underway, the fishbowl process usually has a facilitator or moderator. The fishbowl is almost always part of a larger process of dialogue and deliberation.



Source: Open fish bowl sketch by Marcel van Hove

Materials and setting

- A few chairs in an inner circle, surrounded by larger circle(s) of chairs
- Try to enable easy access to inner and outer circle
- Flip charts to write key issues can be helpful

How to facilitate a fish bowl

- After a general introduction on the fish bowl technique, a selection of experts (or participants with experience) on the selected theme is invited to the inner circle.
- Explain the process, the objectives and the issue that will be discussed.
- The facilitator should make sure the outer circle always observes silently. They can prepare questions and comments so that they are ready to move into the inner circle.
- Participants are allowed to switch between the inner and outer circle to either contribute or observe.
- Once the topics or the time allocated have been covered, the facilitator should summarize the discussion and open the floor for a debriefing, after removing the inner circle of chairs.
- During the debriefing, review key points, interesting comments and the group's feelings regarding particular issues. Participants must be allowed to develop their own conclusions and express themselves freely.
- Providing the participants with an overview document of the lessons learned and a list of key resources can be helpful after the exercise has ended.

Learn more

King's College London blog: Fishbowl discussions:

<https://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/activelearning/2019/05/04/fishbowl-discussions/>

Utrecht University: Fishbowl technique. Available [here](#)