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Fishbowl Experience

Many of you may be familiar with the “fishbowl” activity as a way to teach certain skills and ideas. It has proven an effective teaching/learning activity for all disciplines, but from my observation it is under utilized in the classroom. Perhaps that is because the fishbowl is sometimes difficult to pull off effectively in terms of assessment and organization. To do such an activity, teachers need to balance the activity between the students within the fishbowl and the observers of the fishbowl experience. In this tip, taken from “Tomorrow’s Teaching and Learning,” Stanford University’s online forum for scholars of teaching and learning, we learn how to use a fishbowl effectively for teaching students not only the skills and techniques of how to participate critically in an online discussion group, but how to listen, learn, and give feedback to groups who serve to demonstrate an idea, skill or problem.

FISHBOWL ACTIVITY

Fishbowl activities allow students to practice a skill while being observed by others. The idea is to provide a safe container where mistakes can be made and performance critiqued in a professional and supportive way. Fishbowls can be set up with a small group interacting with the instructor or the group simply interacting with one another around skill development, while the remaining students observe. Critical to the success of fishbowl activities is that the observing students not share their reflections right away, but give the students in the fishbowl an opportunity to demonstrate what they know. Being silent and observing are important skills taught through this exercise and ones that active, engaged learners may have some difficulty mastering. Learners often note that it is more difficult to be outside the fishbowl observing than it is being a member of the group being observed. They may even express frustration with the process and find difficulty in understanding what is gained by observation. It becomes the instructor's role to ensure that the sanctity of the fishbowl is maintained and to process those frustrations and questions at the appropriate time to help achieve the desired outcomes. The following is an example of a fishbowl activity used to help students learn how to facilitate an online group.

You will participate in a group-facilitation "fishbowl" activity in Units Five through Eight. Groups of five will be established by the instructor(s) and each group will be assigned a unit that they will be responsible for discussing and facilitating. Each member of the group is expected to facilitate for one day while the remainder of the group participates in the discussion. During the fourth week of the course, each group is responsible for communicating with their group members to determine who will take responsibility for facilitation on what day of the assigned week. That group will, in essence, be in the "fishbowl" while the remaining learners are responsible to be key observers of the process. There will be a discussion topic created where the remaining learners can ask process-oriented questions, such as, "John, don't you feel that your questions could have been better worded to elicit a stronger response?" The last day of

each discussion week will be a debriefing session for all learners. The instructor will also act as an observer and will provide a summary of the reflections of the observer group as well as an evaluation of the group in the fishbowl at the end of each week. The instructor will also interact with the groups that are not in the fishbowl in the discussion area for reflections. Discussion of the previous week's reflections will likely be occurring at the same time that the facilitation for the current week is happening. We will repeat this process in Unites Five through Eight.

This is clearly an intensive process and requires that the group in the fishbowl be online everyday during their facilitation week. The observers need to check in at least three times during the week and also need to keep a journal of observations in order to debrief effectively at the end of each week. You will be very tempted, as an observer, to jump into the discussion. The journal, therefore, will also assist you in maintaining your "silence" as you observe during each week.

Assessment Tips

*Fishbowl activities can be somewhat tricky to assess. The instructor can observe the activities of the group in the fishbowl and assess those directly, but the observations of the remaining members of the group may be difficult to determine. Having the observers turn in their weekly journals as well as posting reflections that are evaluated by the instructor can alleviate this difficulty.

*Observers should be encouraged not only to reflect on what they observed during the week, but also to assess the performance of the group in the fishbowl, either through their posted observations or through weekly e-mails or private messages to the instructor.