Fishbowl

A Fishbowl is a simple discussion format designed for larger groups that brings movement and openness to traditional group discussions. Instead of relying on a fixed panel of speakers, participants can join and leave the discussion at any time, creating a dynamic exchange of ideas. This flexible format encourages diverse perspectives and promotes active participation.

Participation Depth	Participate
Project Phase	Onboarding
Goals	Understanding & Gathering Perspectives
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 - 3 Hours
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Hard-to-Reach Groups, Organised Actors
Group Size	Medium Group up to 30, Large Group from 30
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of a Fishbowl discussion is to create an open dialogue in which diverse perspectives become visible and

as many participants as possible actively contribute to the conversation.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Select or invite participants
Consider in advance which perspectives should be represented.

A diverse group of participants is particularly valuable, as it brings together different experiences and lived realities.

Depending on the topic, participants may include:

- subject-matter experts
- representatives of the public administration
- policymakers
- community initiatives
- directly affected residents

2. Define the topic and guiding question
Develop a clear and open question that encourages different perspectives.

The question should be easy to understand and invite discussion rather than allowing only a "yes" or "no" response.

Examples:

- "How should public space in our neighbourhood evolve?"
- "What are the key mobility needs in our community?"
- "How can youth participation be improved?"

3. Prepare the facilitation
The facilitation team should guide the discussion, balance speaking time, and ensure respectful communication throughout the session.

Prepare:

- opening questions
- possible follow-up questions
- prompts to deepen the discussion if needed

4. Prepare the room
Arrange two circles of chairs:

- a smaller inner circle
- a larger outer circle surrounding it

Each circle should typically accommodate around 6–10 participants.

Leave at least one empty chair in the inner circle so participants can join the discussion at any time.

Ensure that everyone can see and hear one another easily.

The atmosphere should feel open, welcoming, and as informal as possible.

Execution

1. Introduction to the method
Welcome the participants and briefly explain how the Fishbowl discussion works.

Explain the following rules:

- only participants seated in the inner circle may speak

- participants from the outer circle may join the discussion at any time
- once someone has finished speaking, they return to the outer circle to make space for others

Also introduce the discussion guidelines, for example:

- communicate respectfully
- allow others to finish speaking
- keep contributions concise

2. Starting the discussion
At the beginning, several participants take seats in the inner circle and start discussing the guiding question.

The remaining participants sit in the outer circle and listen.

The facilitation team opens the discussion with an introductory question or a short stimulus.

Possible opening questions include:

- "What concerns you most about this topic at the moment?"
- "What changes would you like to see in this place?"

The discussion can also begin with a short stimulus, such as:

- a photograph or map
- a short story or everyday scenario
- a quotation from previous interviews or participation activities

3. Joining the discussion from the outer circle
Participants in the outer circle may join the discussion at any time.

If an empty chair is available, they simply take a seat.

If all seats are occupied, they stand behind a participant in the inner circle. Once that participant has finished speaking, they leave the circle and the waiting participant takes their place.

This process keeps the discussion open, flexible, and dynamic.

4. Facilitating the discussion

Throughout the discussion, the facilitation team ensures that:

- a variety of participants contribute
- no individual dominates the conversation
- the discussion remains focused
- quieter participants are encouraged to take part

If necessary, facilitators may ask follow-up questions or summarise discussion points.

5. Bringing the discussion together
Towards the end of the session, the facilitation team summarises the key ideas, conflicts, and observations.

Participants are then invited to reflect:

- What was particularly important?
- Which perspectives are still missing?
- Which topics should be explored further?

The key points are documented.

Evaluation

1. Document the discussion
Immediately after the session, record:

- key statements
- points of conflict
- questions
- ideas

Pay particular attention to:

- recurring themes
- differing perspectives
- possible solutions
- unresolved questions

The documentation should be clear and well structured so that people who did not attend can easily understand the discussion.

2. Structure the discussion outcomes
Organise the contributions into thematic categories.

Grouping similar statements often helps to identify patterns.

This makes it easier to see:

- which topics were most important
- where conflicts exist
- where participants already share common ground

3. Share the results
Inform participants about what happens next with their contributions.

For example, provide:

- a summary of the discussion
- information about the next steps in the process

This increases transparency and demonstrates that participants' contributions are valued.

4. Define the next steps
Together with the project team or commissioning organisation, consider:

- Which topics should be explored further?
- Which ideas could be implemented in the short term?
- Which issues require additional participation or more detailed discussion?

A Fishbowl discussion is often used as an initial dialogue or to gather opinions before moving on to more in-depth participatory methods.

5. Reflect on the method
After the event, evaluate the process by considering:

- Did a diverse range of participants contribute?
- Was the guiding question clear and understandable?
- Did any individuals dominate the discussion?
- Was the group size appropriate?
- Did the facilitation work effectively?

These reflections can help improve future Fishbowl discussions.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- a wide range of perspectives should be made visible
- discussing controversial or complex topics
- encouraging open dialogue between the public, experts, and directly affected stakeholders
- involving large groups while still enabling active participation

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- concrete decisions or formal voting are required
- clear resolutions or final action plans are expected
- participants are uncomfortable speaking spontaneously or moving between seats
- the topic requires intensive work in small groups

TIPS

- Aim for a diverse group of participants to reflect different experiences and perspectives.
- Formulate an open and accessible guiding question that encourages a variety of viewpoints.
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The Fishbowl thrives on movement—frequent changes in the inner circle are encouraged. Participants may hesitate at first, so actively invite them to join the discussion.

- Encourage genuine dialogue rather than long individual speeches.
- Whenever possible, avoid using microphones so that no voices are unintentionally given greater prominence and everyone can participate on equal terms.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- formal decision-making processes where clear majorities are required
- situations in which concrete outcomes or formal resolutions are expected
- very small groups
- venues with poor acoustics or limited audibility

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/fishbowl