



CONVENE & CONNECT

Convening is the art of bringing the community (of practice) and relevant stakeholders together to connect members and engage them in meaningful conversations. The diversity of a community and a risk-free and inclusive environment help develop conversations and engage members.

Start small, create the conducive environment to convene and network people.

Proper community management to ensure diversity of views, prioritize equity for access to opportunities and resource and where everyone feels they belong and can actively participate.

Diversified, equity and inclusiveness environment where there is diverse representation, fairness and everyone feel valued and heard.

Activities oriented to developing the practice – Fishbowl

WHAT

Fishbowl

The fishbowl is essentially a leaderless process that stimulates active participation by a large group in a focused conversation.

WHY

This is a well-known conversation format, known by different names, which we have used often to create an engaged conversation when the group is too large for a conversation among everyone and when the fragmentation of going into small groups is an obstacle to a shared experience. We have used it for various types of conversations, case clinics, and storytelling. It is also used to give a voice to diverse opinions on controversial subjects.

HOW

The format is to form a small inner circle for the active conversation and a large outer circle for witnessing it. The idea is to create a constant exchange of people between the two circles, so that it is not a panel with an audience, but a flow potentially involving everyone.

In physical settings, a small number of chairs (usually 4–6) form the inner circle in the middle of the room and everyone else sits in an outer circle. Online, we have used turning video on to create the inner circle and video off for others.

At first, a few people sit in the inner circle to initiate the conversation, usually the people who asked a question, presented a problem, or proposed a topic. It is also useful to include an initial interlocutor. They start talking. If someone else wants to say something, they have to join the conversation in the inner circle. They get up physically and join the inner circle. If the inner circle is already full, they tap on someone's shoulder in the inner circle to ask them to leave and go back to the outer circle. Online they turn their video on, asking someone to turn theirs off. In most versions of the activity, there is no limit to how many times you can join the inner circle.

There are two important and strict rules, which many people are tempted to break and which may need to be enforced by a facilitator:

- You cannot shout from the outer circle. The only way to say something is to join the inner circle.
- Once you are in the inner circle, you stay there until someone asks you to leave. The idea is to engage in a conversation, not to say your bit and get out (which some people seem to want to do).

And obviously, people should not tap the shoulder of someone in the inner circle who has not yet had a chance to speak.

Note that if there is a facilitator, their role is to enforce these rules and not “facilitate” the conversation. People in the inner circle do that. Sometimes it is helpful to use a talking stick to manage taking turns in the inner circle. We have used a microphone as a talking stick when the group is large. It is important that people can hear well in the whole room, especially because people in the inner circle have their backs to those behind them in the outer circle. You do not want people to have to turn to the outer circle to make their contribution to the conversation audible. The conversation should be happening in the inner circle and people should be talking to each other there.

Variations

Half circles. There can be some discomfort with the idea of being in the inner circle and turning your back to the “audience.” But they are not an audience, they are part of the conversation. So, we have always pushed for the format of two concentric circles, which we find works best in creating the joint focus we want and making the flow of people easy. However, if the discomfort seemed culturally too high, we have relented and also done it in the form of a half inner circle with the outer circle in front. It feels more like an audience and does not quite have the same feeling of everyone together in conversation. And it is important to set the chairs so that it is easy for people to quickly get up and join the conversation.