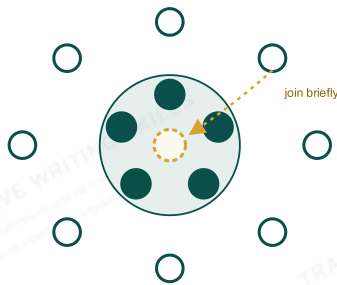


04 Fishbowl Discussion

Speaking and observing are separated so students can study effective discussion techniques — an inner circle talks while an outer circle watches, then the groups switch.

TWO CIRCLES & THE EMPTY CHAIR



● Inner circle — speakers

○ Outer circle — observers ➡ Empty chair

TEACHER INVOLVEMENT

Moderate — organizes circles, protects listening, runs feedback.

BEST EAP USES

Modelling academic discussion

Active listening

Peer observation

Analysing discussion strategies

Managing large classes

PREPARATION — OBSERVER CHECKLIST

All students get the same reading and question. Outer-circle observers track:

- Uses evidence · asks follow-up questions
- Paraphrases a peer's idea · disagrees respectfully
- Invites participation · clarifies an unclear point
- Summarizes the discussion

1

Explain the two roles

Inner circle discusses; outer circle listens, notes, evaluates the process.

2

Present the question

"What is the fairest way to decide which students need academic writing support?"

3

Inner circle talks

8–10 minutes, referring to the reading and proposing policies.

4

Observers watch silently

Each focuses on one speaker or one discussion skill.

5

Empty-chair option

An observer joins briefly to ask, add evidence, challenge, or clarify — then returns.

6

Stop & give feedback

Observers report behaviours, not personalities.

7

Switch roles

A new group enters the inner circle.

8

New challenge

"Consider cost, fairness, multilingual students, and disability — design a placement policy."

9

Compare rounds

Students identify what improved in round two.

WHAT FEEDBACK SOUNDS LIKE

"The group used evidence frequently, but several claims were not followed by explanations."

"According to the university retention study, students who received writing support were more likely to complete their first year."

TEACHER'S ROLE

- Organizes the circles
- Provides observation criteria
- Protects the outer circle's listening role
- Facilitates feedback
- Helps students separate language feedback from content feedback

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What did observers notice that speakers may not have?
- Which strategies improved the second round?
- Was the evidence explained clearly?
- How did active listening affect the conversation?

Rooted in mid-20th-century group-dynamics training, often traced to psychologist Kurt Lewin; the modern empty-chair format was popularized by Sam Kaner and Lenny Lind.

Design & EAP adaptation by Anita J. Ghajar-Selim with Claude AI help · © 2026 Transformative Writing Skills, LLC · transformativewritingskills.com · t.me/transformativewritingskills