

# Partner Fishbowl: A Structure to Start and Deepen the Conversation

Melissa Kagel, Vermont

**T**he Vermont Center of Activity has been piloting a format for doing “fishbowl” protocols that we would like to share. A fishbowl refers to an arrangement where a larger group of participants is broken into an inner and outer circle with the inner circle actively participating in the protocol and the outer providing feedback. The fishbowl can be used with any of the NSRF protocols.

The Partner Fishbowl is a variation of this method that we have found to get all participants to be more active in the protocol, to provide a higher level of safety for the presenter and participants, to be an excellent way to introduce the use of protocols and to be effective for pushing the conversation deeper during protocols.



How does it work? As the name implies, everyone participating in the protocol - presenter, facilitator, and participants - is paired with a partner. Each pair has one member sitting in the inner and one member sitting in the outer circle at any given time; each participant pair decides which of them will start where (though the presenter and the facilitator will necessarily be in the inner circle). During the protocol, the facilitator stops the conversation at certain points and has the partners consult with each other. Pairs can switch circles during these stopping points if they so desire. We have found the partner fishbowl to work well with

both beginning groups who are using the protocols for the first time, and for experienced groups hoping to push the conversation deeper.

## **Partner Fishbowl for Groups New to Protocols**

With new groups, the aim of the partner fishbowl is to familiarize the group with the protocol and to allow reflection on how to effectively engage in the protocol. During the protocol, the facilitator, who should be an experienced CFG member, stops the protocol at each major transition and asks the partners to together prepare things such as probing questions, responses to describing student work rounds, or points to be made in a conversation.

Only the person sitting in the inner circle is part of the conversation when the protocol recommences, but the time with the partner helps beginners to figure out what is appropriate and effective to say during a protocol.

Another advantage of the partner fishbowl for beginning groups is that the presenter can get support, preferably from an experienced CFG member. While the participant partners are discussing responses, the presenter's partner should find out how the presenter is responding to the feedback, help the presenter to clarify his/her learning from the protocol, and make any requests of the facilitator to increase the utility or safety of the protocol. This is a very helpful resource for people who may not be accustomed to having their work critically examined by peers.

Participants beginning to use protocols have remarked that the partner

fishbowl was very helpful in their learning about how to participate in a protocol effectively and that the collaboration with a partner reduces the stress of doing protocols.

## **Partner Fishbowl for Experienced Groups**

The partner fishbowl is also an effective way to push experienced groups to deepen the conversation. With an experienced group, the facilitator asks the partners to consult with each other about what questions or comments might push the conversation deeper at different points during the protocol. We have found this practice to add significant depth to the ensuing conversation because everyone involved in the protocol is focused and proactive about this goal.

The facilitator's partner should help the facilitator make decisions about how to lead the protocol with an emphasis on getting to the harder questions. The role of the presenter's partner is critical in experienced groups because pushing the conversation deeper involves a greater risk for the presenter. The partner gives the presenter, through frequent check-ins about comfort level and learnings, the necessary support so that participants can push harder. Another advantage of a partner for the presenter is that it allows the facilitator to concentrate his/her efforts on deepening the conversation as the presenter's needs are met by someone else. In my experience as a facilitator, being relieved of the duty of assuring the comfort of the presenter has helped me to lead protocols more effectively.

We hope you will try out this way to structure protocols and we would love to hear about other uses groups find for it. ■

*Melissa Kagel can be reached at [nissa@vermontel.net](mailto:nissa@vermontel.net)*