

Facilitation Difficulty: 

 45 min.

 Any size, divided into groups of 3*

 No preconference

Purpose – To introduce a topic, an idea or a specific concept. To team-build and democratize participation. To affirm ideas and build communities while addressing specific content issues. Microlabs uses reflection and active listening skills to surface initial thoughts that participants have around a topic and develop a common understanding among the group. It also affirms individuals' ideas and asks participants to withhold judgment.

Group size – Any size group, divided into triads. (*If group doesn't divide equally, see Option on next page.)

Preparation – Review the Microlabs Suggested Questions document, and then select or craft three good questions around the topic to be explored. Chart the questions in advance, one (or one set) per page, and do not reveal more than one question (or set) at a time. Bring a timer, and ask attendees to bring writing materials for their notes.

Facilitation tips – Adjust the times in rounds if you are working with students. Fifth graders, for example, may only be able to speak for 40 second periods and long silences can be agonizing for them.

Possible pitfalls – This protocol requires strong facilitation and front-loading, as well as carefully crafted questions. You must stick to the protocol structure without straying, front-load carefully, and debrief, especially if the group is unfamiliar with protocols.

Steps:

1. **Divide** – Silently count the total group and divide by 3 so you know how many triads will be formed. Instruct participants to count off by the number of triads that will be formed. (3 min.)
2. **Setup** – Have participants gather into their triads (equipped with paper and a pen) and sit in a close circle with their knees pointing inward. Each triad chooses who will be person #1, #2, and #3. (2 min.)
3. **Introduce** – Describe the process. *“I will soon be showing you a series of three charted questions or question sets, one at a time. Once I read the question to you, you will have two minutes to silently write some notes answering this question. Then, each of you will have one to two minutes to talk about your answer when it's your turn. While you are speaking, the other two in your triad must simply, silently listen. Others do not speak at all—not even to ask a question. When the time is up, the next person speaks, and so on. I will be timing this protocol for everyone.”* Emphasize that they must stop speaking when their time is up, and conversely, if the speaker falls silent before their time is up, the others should sit in silence, using the time to reflect. You may also tell them that person #1 will not have to answer first in every round. (5 min.)
4. **Read** – Read the first question or question set aloud (twice), and give everyone two minutes to silently write in preparation for round 1. (2 min.)
5. **Round 1** – Prompt person #1 to share, with about 90 seconds to speak. When time is up, prompt person #2 to speak, with equal time. Repeat a third time for person #3. (About 5 min.)
6. **Round 2** – Read the second question. After two minutes of silent writing time, begin with person #2, then #3, then #1. (7 min.)

7. **Round 3** – Repeat the previous step, and this time, begin with person #3, then #1, then #2. (7 min.)
8. Debrief – (10 min.)
 - *What did you hear that was significant? What key ideas or insights were shared?*
 - *How did this go for you? What worked well, and what was difficult? Why?*
 - *Did any groups sit in silence? How did that feel? Why do you think it felt like that?*
 - *How might your conversations have been different had we not used this protocol?*
 - *What are the advantages/disadvantages of using this activity? When might you use this protocol in your work?*
 - *What would you want to keep in mind as someone facilitating this activity?*

***Option for groups not divisible by three:**

Many times groups do not divide neatly into triads, but the Microlabs can still be run, and will take a few minutes more. Here's a way to run this protocol if you wind up with one or two quads in addition to your triads. When it's time for person #4 to speak, the groups of triads will have "group talk" time. That means that they will get about 90 seconds each round to discuss meaningful points openly with each other. The rounds will look like this:

Round 1 – Follow the same instructions, but Person #1 goes first, then #2 and then #3. While #4 talks in the quads, the triads engage in group-talk.

Round 2 – Person #2 goes first, then #3, then the next person (for the triads, it will be person #1; for the quads, #4). While #1 talks in the quads, the triads engage in group-talk.

Round 3 – #3 goes first, then the next person (for the triads, person #1; for the quads, #4), then the next person (for triads, #2; for quads, #1). While #2 talks in the quads, the triads engage in group-talk.

If you need to use this option, add these questions to the debrief section and add a few minutes to debriefing:

- *For the groups that did have group-talk, how did it feel have even a little bit of time for a discussion? Did it deepen your understandings of others' thinking?*
- *For the groups that didn't have group-talk time, how did that feel? Do you feel as if you "missed out" on something?*