

Handout D: Using the Inner and Outer Circle Discussion Technique

This is a modified technique for a Socratic seminar. This technique is useful for large classes because it ensures that students are in a smaller discussion group, which can encourage discussion among reluctant or shy participants. Students take on the role of a participant in the Inner Circle (Group A) and an observer/facilitator in the Outer Circle (Group B). The groups switch half-way through the activity.

Encourage students to:

- have their reading(s) on their desks to refer to when they are speaking
- take notes during the conversation to demonstrate active listening
- refer to the author by name or the document by its proper title
- refer to other participants by name (e.g., “I agree with Gennie’s comment about...” or, “I’d like to challenge Tony’s point that...”)

Directions:

1. Divide students into an Inner (Group A) and Outer Circle (Group B) group.
2. The inner circle serves as the conversation panel, working from a list of discussion questions on the board. The teacher may establish these questions ahead of the discussion, use questions provided with a given activity, or ask students to generate questions before the start of the activity.
3. The outer circle observes and moves the conversation along by asking follow-up questions as needed, based on the inner circle’s participation.
4. All interactions must be courteous, with no one hogging the conversation. Ideally, the students are speaking to one another, making space for every student to participate, with no prompting from the teacher. Encourage more-outgoing students to invite quieter students into the conversation.
5. The teacher should intervene in the conversation as needed. The teacher’s role is to observe and keep notes about the quality of the conversation.
6. Halfway through the time allowed for this step, inner- and outer-circle students will trade places, and the conversation will continue with the new discussion panel. Students should avoid repeating comments and observations that have been previously mentioned.
7. Students may refer to the list of questions on the board to serve as a roadmap for the conversation. You may wish to have students work in the order the questions are listed the first time or two that you use this strategy. Later, students should be able to develop their own order of questions as the conversation flows in a more organic manner. As students become more familiar with the strategy, they will take more ownership of the conversation and need less coaching. Also, it is useful for the teacher to keep notes on which students were in Group A, and make them Group B next time, so that everyone has an equal opportunity to be in the first discussion panel.