Buzz groups, pairs, and triads

How?

Buzz groups are simply groups of two or three students formed impromptu to discuss a topic for a short period. You can use them in a range of settings, as shown in the following examples.

At the start of a session or class segment:

> **"To start off, let's get into buzz groups for five minutes to find out your initial reactions to the readings I set for this week's class. Off you go."**

When a difficult topic or awkward moment have brought the class to a standstill:

> **"Well, that seems to have stopped us in our tracks. Let's try to tackle that in buzz groups for a few minutes and then come back to the whole group and try again once we've thought it through a bit more."**

Note that **triads** (threes) **are often more disciplined than pairs**, because it is harder to get off topic as a threesome – usually one person acts as a conscience and brings people back to the task. Pairs may give up more quickly. ("I don't really understand this." / "No, it's difficult, isn't it?" / "What did you do last night?")

Triads also appear more resourceful and rigorous, perhaps because at any given time, one of the three is neither speaking nor being directly spoken to, and can have an eye on the question or the task the group is meant to work on. Triads stay on task longer.

When?

- At the start of class.
- During a lull in class or when encountering and area of difficulty.
- Towards the end of a class if you want the feedback from the groups to shape the next class session.

Why?

- Once students have spoken "in private" as a buzz group, it makes them more likely to speak afterwards "in public" among the whole group.
- Buzz groups give students chance to check out their ideas in private before "taking the risk" of speaking publicly.
- They are very useful to get things going in a class and they build energy in the room.

Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

Two minutes each way

How?

Get students into pairs. They then take it in turns to think through a topic out loud, without interruption. **It is crucial that the listener not take pity on a struggling or silent speaker and bail them out.** The listener in the pair is only allowed to listen or to repeat the question/topic verbatim (especially if the speaker appears to get off-topic), but cannot comment in any other way.

After two minutes, the parties switch roles, such that the listener now becomes the speaker and vice versa.

Example topics include:

> Problems I'm having with this kind of calculation.
> My understanding of the social construction of race.
> Aspects of the law of tort that I need to clarify.
> Constructivism in relation to my own experience of learning.
> How I could go about this paper assignment.

You can increase the challenge by making the time longer: five minutes each way is very challenging work.

Be sure to keep time and let students know when to switch and when to end.

When?

At the start of a session, this kind of activity can gear students up for discussion.
During sessions, it allows for reflection and engages all class members.
At the end of a session, it can be used to summarize learning and to develop action plans.

Why?

- This activity pushes pairs to follow an argument further because there is no escape.
- It avoids the social collusion that enables us to escape difficult or complex issues, and it favors intellectual rigor.
- Students confront the limits of their understanding.

Two/Five minutes each way is based on a model from co-counselling.

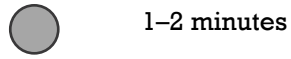
Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

Write–pair–share

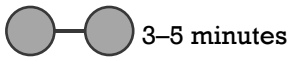
How?

This activity is often called "Think–pair–share," and the first stage is more effective if students have chance to write, rather than just thinking, so "Write–pair–share" is the more helpful alternative name.

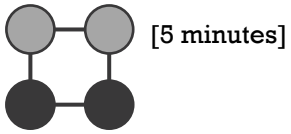
Pose a question to your group that requires higher-order thinking, such as application, analysis, evaluation, or creation.



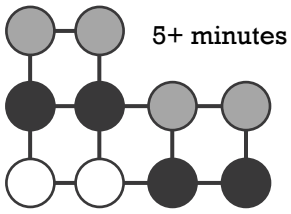
Write: Give your students a little time to write a response on their own.



Pair: Students turn to a partner to share their responses and test out their ideas "privately." This stage is more effective if you provide a "next step" in the question to push their thinking further.



[**Square**: An optional next stage—similar to the pyramid/snowball activity—is to combine pairs into fours. Again they have chance to test out their ideas in relative safety of a smaller group. This is cheesily referred to as a "Write–pair–square–share."]



Share: In this final stage, students share their responses with the entire class. You don't need to hear from every group, particularly if they have come up with the same kinds of responses.

Instead, elicit alternatives with prompts such as "Did any groups have a different way to address this problem?" This should keep the sharing portion of the activity interesting and worthwhile.

When?

- At any point in class. For instance, you can use Write–pair–share to review material, to apply a theory or model to a new context or case, and to reassure students that they are on the right track, without putting them on the spot (since that can make the learning environment feel less safe for some).

Why?

- The writing portion is especially helpful for more introverted students who need to process ideas internally before they are ready to speak.
- The pairing stage allows testing of views. Studies have found that many misconceptions are corrected at this stage and that students learn better from one another than when hearing a correct or better answer from the instructor.
- Write–pair–share is an excellent back-up activity that you can introduce at virtually any point.
- This activity takes no preparation beyond devising a question.

Source: Vaughn, M. (n.d.). *Think-Pair-Share*. Handout for faculty at Elon University, Elon, NC.

Round

How?

As each student is going to speak in turn, you will ideally get the students to sit or stand in a circle. Rounds often work best when you provide the beginning of a statement and each student completes the statement. For example:

At the start of a session:

"What most confused me about the reading for today is…"
"What I've been reading since the last session is…"
"A question I'd like answered today is…"
"I hope today's session…"

During a session:

"One thing we have discussed that remains unclear to me is…"
"One idea to help us make faster progress is…"
"Something we seem not to have really tackled is…"
"I'd be happy to offer an explanation of…"

At the end of a session:

"What I've got out of today is…"
"Something I still don't really understand is…"
"What I now intend to read/practice/find out about/work on is…"
"Next class, I hope we…"

Note that rounds can feel threatening to students, especially in a large group, so allow students to say "Pass" when it is their turn. You may well find, though, that students quickly get used to rounds if you use them a couple of times and they might even suggest them.

When?

At any point in the class, depending on the purpose you are trying to achieve.

Why?

- Rounds need not take long – say, from a few seconds to 15 seconds per student.
- They allow the group to take stock, debrief, or set the direction of the class, and they provide useful informal feedback for you.
- Longer and slower rounds encourage intensive exploration and reflection (but can be intimidating).

Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

Line-up

How?

Devise two opposing or extreme statements on a (potentially controversial) topic. For example:

Climate change is the greatest threat to humanity	⟷	Climate change is insignificant compared to war
Method X is most appropriate to solve a problem	⟷	Method Y is most appropriate to solve a problem
Monetarism has greatly damaged the US economy	⟷	Monetarism has saved the US economy

Tell students which end of the room represents which statement (you might want to print/write the statements on paper to stick on the walls) and get them to create a physical line between the two in such a way that they are standing at the point that reflects their own view between the two statements.

Students need to talk to one another on the line to find out if they are in the right place, so this should generate lively discussion. If you find students clustering in agreement, then change aspects of the dimension or introduce a new variable, and have students consider subtler issues. For example, students are likely to change their position in the line in response to these economics line-ups:

Monetarism has damaged the US manufacturing base	⟷	Monetarism has saved the US manufacturing base
Monetarism has damaged the US public sector	⟷	Monetarism has saved the US public sector

When?

At the start of a class as a precursor to a discussion or to another activity (especially a fishbowl).
Midway or at the end of class to gauge views after a discussion.

Why?

- Line-ups ask students to share where they stand on a controversial issue. This tells you the range of views in the room.
- The discussion helps students generate their own questions to address in the whole group.
- Line-ups need only take two minutes and require minimal preparation.
- They work even with larger groups.

Suggestion: Use blank colored paper to indicate the ends of the line, then show the statements on screen in text of the matching color and towards same side of the room as the paper.

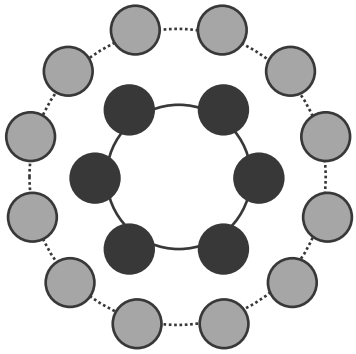
Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

Fishbowl

How?

Organize a small circle of chairs (the "fishbowl") to be occupied by students who will have a discussion, while the rest of the class either sits or stands in a larger circle around them, listening to the discussion (Figure 1). Be sure to have your discussion question(s) or topic(s) for the group ready in advance.

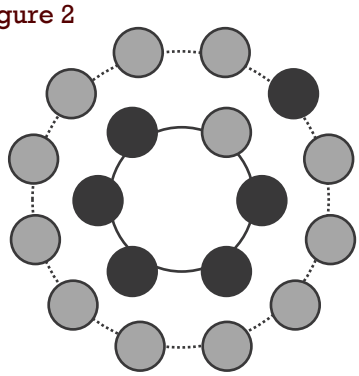
Figure 1



You can ask for volunteers to sit in the fishbowl; more extroverted students will likely agree, and it should lead to a lively discussion. More introverted students probably would not have readily joined the conversation anyway and at least have a more intense discussion to listen to. (You can also choose students if you prefer.)

If you want the outer circle members to be able to join in, then you can introduce a policy where they can "tap out" a student in the fishbowl with a tap on the shoulder and switch places (Figure 2). This allows students to join the conversation if they want to, and also to remove people who are dominating the discussion.

Figure 2



You can add further rules to suit your purposes, for instance:

> **No one can be tapped out until they have spoken once.**
> **No one can rejoin the fishbowl until everyone else has spoken.**
> **Each speaker needs to say something positive about any comment before they refute it.**

In a further variant, you split your students into three equal groups and assign three different readings before class. To start the class, Group 1 is in the fishbowl for 10 minutes to discuss its reading and what they understood from it, then the outer group is allowed to comment for a couple of minutes. Group 2 now sits in the fishbowl and the process continues.

Fishbowls can be sustained for a long time (say, 20 minutes), particularly if the question you pose is complex or contentious. It's also helpful to have a series of increasingly tricky questions so that you can move the discussion along if the conversation runs dry or if the students appear to have resolved a previous question.

When?

- At any point in the class, depending on the purpose you are trying to achieve.
- If you are seeking debate, then use a line-up activity first so you can pick students with differing views.

Why?

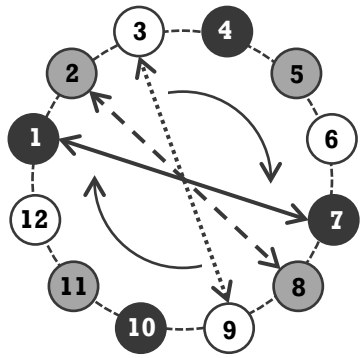
- A fishbowl allows for an intense, focused discussion on any topic you choose.

Sources: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
Vaughn, M. (n.d.). *Fishbowl*. Handout for faculty at Elon University, Elon, NC.

Circular interviewing

How?

Organize your students into a circle (either the full group or a subset if you want to shorten the activity).



One student (number 1 in the figure) interviews the student opposite (number 7) about an agreed topic for a minute or two. The roles then rotate one place clockwise such that student 2 interviews student 8. Continue rotating until everyone has taken both roles.

Circular interviewing can involve themes such as:

Find out what the interviewee has read that throws light on…
Find out what the interviewee would really like to discuss today.
Find out what questions the interviewee would like to be answered today.

When?

More useful early in a class as a way of prompting further discussion as a whole group.

Be careful about timing: If you do this with a larger group, then it can take a long time and may become dull.

Also note that it gets harder for students to come up with good questions as they move around the circle. While tricky, this may prove a good way to generate thought-provoking discussion questions for later in the class, rather than discussing only more basic questions that are easily resolved.

Why?

- Circular interviewing has the advantage of making students focus on each other. In comparison, rounds (see separate document) tend to lead students to address the professor each time.
- This activity also requires full participation, and everyone's voice is heard.

Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

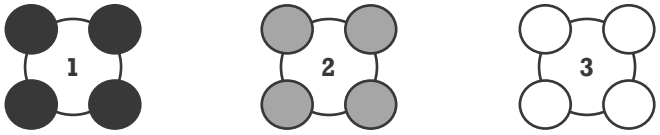
Cross-over or jigsaw

How?

Divide your lesson material into three chunks. Then split your students into three **home groups**, numbered 1, 2, and 3 in Figure 1. (Groups should have no more than six students, so if your class has more than 18 students [3 groups × 6 students], create smaller groups called 1a, 1b, 2a, etc.)

Each group is responsible for learning one of the three chunks of material – and for teaching that material to students from the other home groups. That material could be reading, podcasts, videos, and so on. Ideally, students would have read/listened to/watched the material before class.

Figure 1:
Home groups



In class, give each home group time to work together to share understanding of the material and prepare to explain it to students who are unfamiliar with it. At the end of the allotted time, students cross over into **learning groups**. Each group comprises one member from all the home groups (Figure 2).

Figure 2:
Learning groups



Students from each home group now have an equal amount of time to teach their material to their learn group. Remember to keep time and tell students when to switch to the next person. Circulate the room to check on understanding. At the end, you can review further or clarify misconceptions with the whole group.

When?

- Jigsaws/Cross-overs may take 45–60 minutes. Think carefully about how much material they will need to digest, how much time they'll need to prepare in their home groups and present in their learning groups. (Bear in mind that most of us tend to UNDERestimate the time needed.)
- This activity also works for debriefing syndicates and other group-work activities.

Why?

- Jigsaws/Cross-overs require ALL students to play the role of rapporteur, rather than having one spokesperson, so engagement levels are typically higher.

NOTE: You have to do a little doubling-up if the number of students isn't divisible by three. Plan this in advance of the session so that you are prepared.

Sources: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
Vaughn, M. (n.d.). *Jigsaw*. Handout for faculty at Elon University, Elon, NC.

Poster tour

How?

In groups, have students work on a task that they need to report back on via a poster (either on a flipchart sheet or whiteboard). Examples include:

> **Report on your lab experiment results.**
> **Present your own legal arguments for and against viewing corporations as people.**
> **Summarize your reasons for viewing *Midnight's Children* as a picaresque novel (group a)/ a *Bildungsroman* (group b)/ a magical realist novel (group c).**
> **Distill the key points from the Enron case study you read.**
> **Propose a more efficient process for collecting this type of data.**

Alternatively, you can use a poster as a way of feeding back on another activity (e.g. a syndicate or pyramid).

Once posters are completed and posted on the walls, students simply tour them. To add interactivity to this segment, you could:

- Have one member of each group stay with their poster to answer questions.
- Put blank paper next to each poster so that others can pose questions or comments and the creators of the poster can respond to them later.

When?

- At the end of a group task.

Why?

- Posters can be quick and effective for sharing findings, especially when groups have been doing different things.
- Since this format it used for sharing research at many academic conferences, students will also be practicing a useful academic skill.

Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

Pyramid or snowball

How?

Pyramids, also called snowballs, involve students working solo, then in pairs, then fours (or sixes), and finally as a whole group in a plenary.

A key part of your task as the instructor is to create instructions for each stage and facilitating the plenary portion. You may want to make the questions you pose at each stage build on one another so that you move, for instance, from the concrete to the more abstract, from the simple to the more complex, from small-scale to large-scale, etc.



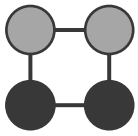
5 minutes

Working **alone** might involve reading a case study or other text or starting to solve a problem. It lets students generate some ideas on their own and have material to discuss before pairing up.



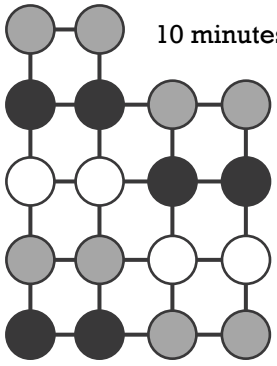
15 minutes

Pairs can risk being exploratory and tentative without being "exposed" to the whole group. The ideas from the solo portion start to grow.



30 minutes

Most of the real work happens in the **fours** or sixes. These groups are a good size for involving everyone and developing a range of views. Students typically feel open to sharing their ideas because they have tested them already in their pairs.



10 minutes

In the **plenary** portion, which involves all the groups, you can pool ideas from each of the groups in turn or can have an open discussion. This works in groups of up to about 24, though they might feel more mechanistic with larger groups.

Students want to know a little about what the other groups think, but not too much; and students who volunteer to speak might not say anything too illuminating. On the other hand, they do provide the instructor the opportunity to take the discussion to a higher level and to challenge the students' ideas.

When?

- A pyramid could take a large chunk of your class time.
- Be careful not to overuse this method without varying it.

Why?

- Pyramids can be a successful way of leading into a larger group discussion.
- The initial stage can help more introverted students participate.
- Students do the vast majority of the intellectual work once you have devised the right set of questions to lead them. This can be satisfying to observe. At the same time, it may make you feel redundant; it's worth reminding yourself that if they are engaging with the material, then they really are learning more.

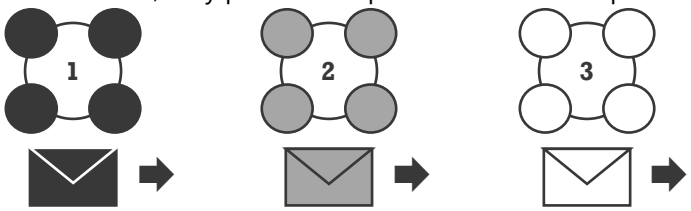
Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

Send-a-problem

How?

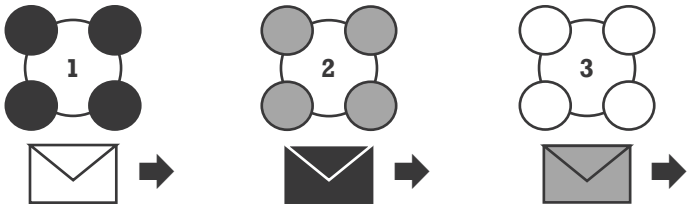
STAGE 1: Divide your students into groups. Hand each group a folder or envelope with a problem written on the outside. Each group has a different problem related to the topic you've been working on in class. The groups then have to generate as many solutions or answers to the problem as possible and to write them all down. At the end of the allotted time, they put their responses in the envelope and pass it to the next group.

Stage 1



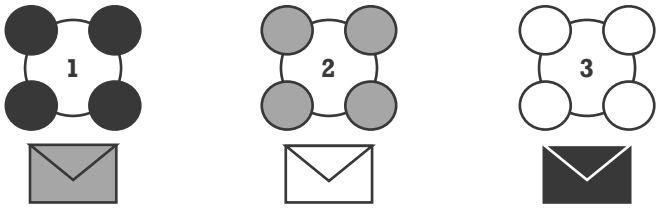
STAGE 2: With a new problem to resolve, each group repeats the previous activity *without looking at the previous group's suggestions*. At the end, they put their solutions into the envelope and pass it to the next group.

Stage 2



STAGE 3: In the final stage, the envelope is with a third group. This group opens the envelope, reviews the previous groups' solutions, consolidates them where necessary, and adds any new ones it thinks of. When the students have finished, reconvene the whole class to review, further discuss, or prioritize the solutions.

Stage 3



When?

- At any point in the class. This activity will take some time, especially if the questions are complex.

Why?

- Send-a-Problem engages everyone in problem-solving and can be a good form of rehearsal or practice for the kinds of problems students will face in graded assignments.

Source: Vaughn, M. (n.d.). *Send-a-Problem*. Handout for faculty at Elon University, Elon, NC.

Syndicates

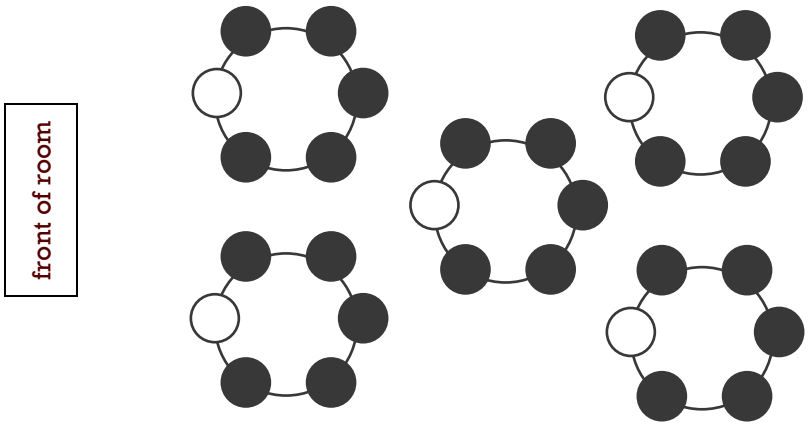
How?

Syndicates are when teams of students are working in parallel (and sometimes in competition with one another) on the same task: analyzing a case, studying an artifact, preparing a proposal, and so on.

At the end, teams usually present the outcome of their work to the whole group. A competitive element to completion and presentation of the groups' work may increase some students' motivation and engagement with the activity.

Your role is to design suitable tasks for students to work on in teams of up to eight (four to six is more ideal), and to brief the teams clearly. Your students may need additional materials or resources to complete the task, so have those ready, too.

Ensure that there is one empty chair at the board end of each table (the empty circles in the figure below) so that you can easily join each group without disrupting them and so that the group can see the board more easily. You then circulate around the room and join a group as needed.



Presentations at the end can be a risk. To avoid a dull sequence of samey or poor oral reports when teams present their conclusions/ analyses/designs, etc., consider a different format (such as poster presentations or a pecha kucha limited to 5 or 6 slides), or use another active learning technique for sharing the groups' output, such as a fishbowl or a jigsaw/cross-over.

When?

- Typically this will take a full class session. A syndicate might be a good practice run for an assessed group task or individual assignment.

Why?

- Syndicates allow students to work on complex problems in groups with a degree of assistance from the instructor.
- They can be a good way to promote students' higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.

Source: Gibbs, G. (1995). *Discussion with more students*. Oxford Centre for Staff Development.