Microlabs

Developed by Julian Weissglass for the National Coalition for Equity in Education based at the University of California, Santa Barbara; adapted in the field by educators.

Purpose
Microlabs addresses a specific sequence of questions in a structured format with small groups, using active listening skills.

Time
About 8 minutes per question — this works best with a series of no more than 3 questions.

Group Format
Form triads — either with the people you’re sitting near, or find others in the group you don’t know well. Number off within your triad: 1, 2, 3.

Facilitation
The facilitator should spend time developing a sequence of questions that are appropriate for the purpose or focus of the conversation. The questions should be ones that are important to the group, and that spiral in depth from first to last.

The facilitator says, “I’ll direct what we will talk about. Each person will have 1 minute (or, sometimes, 2 minutes, depending on the group and the question) to talk about a question when it’s their turn. While the person is speaking, the other 2 in the group simply listen. When the time is up, the next person speaks, and so on. I’ll tell you when to switch.” Emphasize that talk has to stop when you call time, and conversely, that if the person is done speaking before time is up, the triad should sit in silence, using the time to reflect.

It’s nice to have a chime to ring to indicate that time is up.

Process
After instructing the group, read the first question aloud (twice). Give everyone time to think or write in preparation. Then, tell people when to begin, and then tell them when each 1-2 minute segment is up. On the first question, begin with person #1, then #2, then #3. Then read the next question aloud. On the second question, begin with #2, then #3, then #1. On the third question, begin with #3, then #1, then #2.

Debrief
• 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?
• How might your conversations have been different had we not used this protocol?
• What are the advantages/disadvantages of using this activity? When would you use this protocol?
• What would you want to keep in mind as someone facilitating this activity?