

# COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVES

Discussion Toolkit



**SOLUTIONS**  
**JOURNALISM**  
NETWORK

CREATED BY  
Solutions Journalism Network  
[www.solutionsjournalism.org](http://www.solutionsjournalism.org)

# COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVES

Welcome to the Complicating the Narratives discussion guide toolkit. We are honored by your participation in Solutions Journalism Network's educator community.

This toolkit contains a selection of classroom activities designed to improve student engagement with difficult discussions, based on a Solutions Journalism Network initiative called Complicating the Narratives (CTN). This project began in 2018 when SJN commissioned journalist Amanda Ripley for research, culminating in her essay "[Complicating the Narratives](#)." Ripley's work showed how journalists can learn from the strategies used by conflict mediators to produce more nuanced, inclusive reporting on contentious issues; as she explained, "complicating the narrative means finding and including the details that don't fit the narrative — on purpose." Rather than elevating a false sense of simplicity to achieve a cohesive story, a CTN approach leverages complexity as a tool for uncovering truth and reconciling inconsistencies. Ripley originally outlined six principles behind this approach:

1. Amplify Contradictions
2. Widen the Lens
3. Ask Questions that Get to People's Motivations
4. Listen more, and better
5. Expose People to the Other Tribe
6. Counter Confirmation Bias (Carefully)

In 2019, SJN built on Ripley's work to launch our full Complicating the Narratives (CTN) initiative. Our CTN work prioritizes reporting and producing stories in a way that provides valuable context, generates curiosity, and contributes to a deeper understanding about problems in our society. It challenges journalists' assumptions and requires the recognition of implicit biases. We have translated the foundational research into a set of resources and trainings for journalists that provide a more sensitized, humanized and nuanced understanding of people, which in turn encourages more productive ways to listen and ask questions. The work of addressing implicit bias, personal assumptions, and social problems is important for educators and students as well. Now, our CTN work is packaged to help educators promote fuller engagement and understanding in the classroom. These guides are intended to help students understand that every topic of discussion contains multiple nuanced points of view and ease some of the typical reluctance around engaging deeply with an unfamiliar perspective.

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# HOW CAN I USE THIS TOOLKIT?

These discussion guides contain three basic components.

1. Preparatory materials. A deep listening one-sheet encourages students to consider common barriers to full participation in classroom discussions, and provides helpful solutions to some of the most common challenges. An additional tip sheet for instructors contains suggestions on how best to adapt discussion-based activities for digital classrooms. These materials will improve participation and the quality of discussion, but they are not required to complete the in-class activities. If you want to supplement the preparatory readings, assign the original [Complicating the Narratives essay](#) and [the full list of CTN questions](#) in addition to the deep listening document.
2. In-class activity instructions. Each themed discussion guide begins with an overview of the topic and then provides detailed student instructions to complete the interview component.
3. Activity debriefing notes and customization options. Each guide also contains a secondary page for instructors including prompts to engage deeper reflection on the topic, debrief questions for the class to consider after completing the paired interviews, and suggestions for adapting the activity to a small-group format. These activities were created with a 50-minute class period in mind, but can easily be adapted for a longer session.

We encourage you to be creative in your use of these resources. The climate change discussion guide has obvious applicability to environmental studies, for example, but could also supplement discussions about the intersections between climate change and immigration, environmental racism, habitat loss, public health, and science communication. If you use any of our discussion guides in your teaching, we would love to hear about it! Please contact SJN's Higher Education Program Specialist, [Alane Presswood](#), with any questions or comments about the CTN Discussion Guides.

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# LOOPING: A DEEP LISTENING STRATEGY

Discussion is a valuable classroom tool. Barriers to good discussion, therefore, are also barriers to effective learning. But in the United States, our cultural norms tend to value calm and conflict avoidance over the challenges of engaging in difficult discussions. If we fear that clashes over controversial topics will damage our relationships with friends and family, it is natural to want to avoid them and that avoidance then carries over from private life into public life - including school and the workplace. One technique to help improve communication via deep listening is through a technique called looping, developed by the Center for Understanding in Conflict. The four steps of the process are as follows:

1. Listen with the intent to understand what your partner is saying.
2. Offer your understanding: communicate what you think they meant in language that conveys understanding.
3. Observe their reaction to be sure you got it; ask "does that sound right?"
4. Polish your understanding, correct what you got wrong by asking them what you missed, and finally encourage them to tell you more.

Looping clarifies misunderstandings and demonstrates respect, building a foundation for stronger conversations, especially during discussions of vulnerable or emotional topics. With this strategy in mind, let's explore some common problems that present barriers to good discussion and the corresponding solutions.

The Problem: unfair expectations. Discussion participants who occupy a minority space, whether as a person of color, an LGBTQ person, an immigrant, a person with a disability, or any other protected category, might be viewed by classmates or instructors as a spokesperson for the entirety of that identity group.

The Solution: recognize every student's individuality by addressing discussion participants by name and respect that they are not obligated to divulge personal details. The viewpoint of any individual is only representative of their own lived experience.

# LOOPING: A DEEP LISTENING STRATEGY

The Problem: internal distractions. You think of the perfect response to someone else's comment, but they are still speaking. Rather than listening to the rest of their statements, you spend the next few minutes mentally rehearsing your own response.

The Solution: respect the movement of the discussion and your peers' contributions by staying present in the moment; let go of the "perfect" response and trust that you will have your opportunity to respond.

The Problem: external distractions. Unlimited access to social media and other digital technologies means that Americans spend the majority of our working hours attempting to multitask - but splitting your attention between two or more tasks simultaneously reduces your cognitive capacity.

The Solution: devote your full attention to important conversations. Put your phone or computer away (or close unnecessary tabs/windows). In addition to increasing your processing abilities, this conveys respect to your communicative partners, setting a foundation for better interactions.

The Problem: emotional reactions. We often find ourselves falling into emotional reactions that prevent reasoned discourse when we feel threatened by someone's perspective. Anger, grief, betrayal, and sadness can be triggered by discussions on topics that are closely tied to cultural or religious beliefs, including end-of-life care, bodily autonomy, substance use, and intimate relationships.

The Solution: listen to what is said as it is said instead of assuming you already know where a thought is headed. Practice a grounding activity like note taking to keep your attention on the arguments being made instead of becoming defensive. Emotions are powerful tools for bonding in social groups and feeling empathy for other people's problems and experiences; our goal isn't to suppress them, it is to be aware of how they shape us.

The Problem: fear. Fear of judgment or failure persuades you to stay silent rather than risk saying something embarrassing or incorrect. Alternately, students might fear that emotional or vulnerable revelations will be shared beyond the boundaries of the classroom without their consent.

The Solution: Review your classroom's standards for appropriate behavior during discussions and seek clarification on which topics and assignments will be up for discussion; these strategies can reduce participation anxiety. If you are uncomfortable sharing vulnerable details, consider engaging with the perspective offered by classmates instead, asking them to elaborate on their perspective. Instructors should impress upon students the importance of not discussing their peer's discussion contributions outside the classroom.

These problems are common! Most of us grapple with one (or all) of them at some point. Establishing standards for trust and respect via tools like looping can go a long way to improving group discussions, both within and outside of the classroom.

# STUDENT DISCUSSIONS IN THE DIGITAL CLASSROOM

In many ways, the techniques that make for a good discussion in a face-to-face classroom will also make for good discussion in a digital classroom. What digital classrooms make abundantly clear, however, is that some structures and norms that worked implicitly in traditional classrooms need to be made explicit over Zoom or similar platforms.

## Acknowledge the platform.

- Much discussion has been had across the internet regarding camera requirements during class; while having the camera on increases interpersonal connections, it also penalizes students with unstable internet connections and raises privacy concerns. Whatever you decide for your own classes, be clear and consistent.
- Monitor the chat box and let students know that contributions to discussion made in writing will be valued and included.
- Disclose to students when they are being recorded and if/how recordings will be stored.

## Provide scaffolded opportunities for students to build their thoughts.

- Give students time to write out their thoughts before beginning discussion.
- Consider a 2-4-8 structure. This format begins with students discussing a question in pairs; after a few minutes, pairs partner up (so four students are discussing the same question); after a few more minutes, have those small groups pair up.
- Help students see the purpose of each level - for example, the pairs analyze a basic aspect of the problem, the groups of four discuss a more complex issue, and the larger groups allow students to focus on reactions and build on suggestions.
- Incorporate looping as a best practice in your group discussions; during the 4- and 8-person groups especially, remind students to loop the contribution of the student who just spoke before adding their contribution to the conversation.

## Encourage participation.

- Assign students roles in discussion groups to get them started (discussion leader, time keeper, note taker...) Giving each student a turn as discussion leader builds skills in critical reasoning, synthesis, and empathy.
- Frame the discussion. If students are uninterested in the problem or the process of solving it, the discussion will stall and become a slog for instructors and students. To motivate students, help them find personal relevance or connect to a larger context.
- Help students reflect on the discussion process and integrate their experience into the larger arc of the course. Ask students to explain how the discussion changed their understanding, assess the quality of the discussion, or evaluate their own contributions.

## Preemptively address concerns.

- Set clear expectations for why the activity is happening and how it relates to previously discussed course content and goals.
- Explain how the activity will be assessed. Are you aiming for a certain amount of time for each student to actively participate? Are you more concerned with quality or structure of response? Are you only assessing a final reflection or output? Being explicit with these expectations will guide students' energy in the right direction and mitigate some fear.



# Complicating the narratives on climate change

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“Climate change” refers to all identifiable, measurable differences in the state of the climate that persist for long periods of time for an extended period of time, including both natural shifts and changes caused by human activity. Consider where you might be likely to find strong opinions about climate change and related courses of action. Governmental organizations like the Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S. or the United Nations internationally are responsible for negotiating research, funding, and policy decisions on the topic. Farmers and agricultural workers discuss how warmer seasons impact their crops. Energy officials and utility companies have an interest in how climate change affects heating and cooling practices. Conservationists and zoologists are tracking how animals are forced to adapt to climate-induced changes in their habitats. All of these people (and many more) are interacting with the same topic from diverse positions, with a correspondingly varied set of opinions and experiences; news and media coverage of the topic will rarely reflect the interests of all of these stakeholders at the same time.

In the interest of complicating the narrative about climate change, complete the following activity with your partners. First, using only your existing knowledge (no external research) take two minutes and write down your personal stance in response to the following statement. There are no right or wrong answers here; be honest.

“Climate change is the most important issue facing our society today.”

In your assigned pairs, decide which student will speak first. The speaker has three minutes to present their views, uninterrupted by the listener. After this initial overview, the listener has ten minutes to engage with the speaker. Start by looping the speaker’s perspective back to them, checking for clarification, and asking for more details where necessary. When the listener has demonstrated an accurate understanding of the speaker’s response, they may then begin to ask the following questions. Remember that the goal of this interview is not to attack your partner or demonstrate why they might be wrong, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how and why they have arrived at their specific position.

1. How important is climate change to you personally? Why?
2. Which life experiences have shaped your views on this topic?
3. What would you like people who disagree with you on this issue to understand about you and your perspective?
4. In the U.S., climate change is the issue that has the strongest partisan difference in opinion between Democrats and Republicans. What do you want to understand about people with whom you disagree?
5. Imagine for a moment that you got what you wanted in regards to legislation or action regarding climate change. How would your daily life be impacted?

After completing this interview, switch roles and repeat the process. Once both partners have completed each role, your instructor will bring the entire class back together for discussion.



# Complicating the narratives on climate change

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**Instructors:** To conduct this interview activity in pairs, ask each student to respond to the statement “climate change is the most important issue facing our society today” on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). You will perhaps want to remind your participants that the question being asked here is not whether they believe climate change is real, but whether they consider it the most pressing issue we are currently facing. You can either collect these responses on paper in the first few minutes of class, or with a digital poll prior to meeting for the day.

Pair the students, coupling students with oppositional responses. The more disparate their positions are, the richer the discussion will be, but this will work if both partners are in the middle of the scale as well. Before breaking the students into pairs, give them each a few minutes to write out their positions in response to the statement. If they are struggling to respond, encourage them to consider:

- What they know about the causes of climate change
- What they know about the impacts of climate change on a local or global scale
- What they have been told about climate change by influential figures in their life
- What kind of media coverage they have seen on the topic (including fiction)

Next, distribute the student activity guide and break the class into their assigned pairs. Remind students of the ground rules for these conversations:

- Listening should take priority over speaking
- Discussions are about understanding, not fixing, sympathizing, or debating
- All disclosures made within the classroom should remain confidential
- Provide time cues for the students: each ‘speaker’ has three minutes to discuss their views followed by 10 minutes of interview questions from the listener. Encourage pairs to elaborate on their answers or ask follow-up questions if they fall silent. Remind them that they are practicing their ability to hold a difficult conversation, not being tested on their expertise.

After both interviews have concluded, bring all students back together and debrief:

1. How did this exercise in deep listening make you feel?
2. Which role in the interview was more challenging for you (speaker or listener)? Why?
3. When was the last time you engaged in a face-to-face conversation on a challenging topic?
  - a. How did you feel after that encounter?
  - b. How did it differ from the process we followed today?
4. What do you think prevents people from complicating the narratives in daily life?
5. What did you learn about your partner’s perspective that surprised or intrigued you?
6. Did you learn anything new about your own perspective on the issue?

To continue the activity at home: assign any of the [SJN teaching collections](#) on climate solutions to students as homework following this classroom activity. Use the pre-existing discussion questions, copy and customize the questions on your own, or ask students instead to write 2-3 paragraphs explaining how the articles in the collection build on the knowledge they gained in their classroom discussion.

To adapt for small group discussion: if you would rather conduct this exercise with your entire class, ask the students to rank their response to the statement and then split them into one “agree” group and one “disagree” group. Give the groups 10 minutes to create a “group statement” explaining their position. Have a spokesperson from each group present the statement and then facilitate the interview questions as a moderator.

# Complicating the narratives on pandemic management

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In the span of just one month - January 2020 - the novel coronavirus and accompanying disease COVID19 went from a localized concern in Wuhan, China to a WHO-declared global health emergency. Throughout the following months, government, public health officials, and epidemiologists worked around the clock to identify the ways in which the virus spread and what steps should be taken to combat the pandemic; mask-wearing, social distancing, comprehensive hand-washing, and staying home as much as possible emerged as best practices for reducing the spread of the virus. Even with protective measures, by November 2020, the global coronavirus death toll rose to 1.3 million people; nearly one-quarter of those deaths were citizens of the United States. Unlike other countries around the world (New Zealand, China, Germany, France, Spain, Israel, Iran, Italy, Denmark, and more) the U.S. never instituted a nationwide requirement for quarantine or lockdown, instead choosing to allow local and state governments to regulate public health measures.

In the interest of complicating the narrative about pandemic containment, complete the following activity with your partners. First, using only your existing knowledge (no external research) take two minutes and write down your personal stance in response to the following statement. There are no right or wrong answers here; be honest.

“The U.S. should have instituted a national lockdown to combat the spread of COVID19.”

In your assigned pairs, decide which student will speak first. The speaker has three minutes to present their views, uninterrupted by the listener. After this initial overview, the listener has ten minutes to engage with the speaker. Start by looping the speaker's perspective back to them, checking for clarification, and asking for more details where necessary. When the listener has demonstrated an accurate understanding of the speaker's response, they may then begin to ask the following questions. Remember that the goal of this interview is not to attack your partner or demonstrate why they might be wrong, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how and why they have arrived at their specific position.

1. What is dividing us on the issue of how to combat the spread of COVID?
2. How do you decide which information to trust?
3. What was oversimplified about the debate over how to address the pandemic?
4. Where do you feel torn?
5. What do you know about the other side's position? Does any of it makes sense to you (why or why not)?

After completing this interview, switch roles and repeat the process. Once both partners have completed each role, your instructor will bring the entire class back together for discussion.

# Complicating the narratives on pandemic management

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Instructors: To conduct this interview activity in pairs, ask each student to respond to the statement “The U.S. should have instituted a national lockdown to combat the spread of COVID19” on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). You can either collect these responses on paper in the first few minutes of class, or with a digital poll prior to meeting for the day.

Pair the students, coupling students with oppositional responses. The more disparate their positions are, the richer the discussion will be, but this will work if both partners are in the middle of the scale as well. Before breaking the students into pairs, give them each a few minutes to write out their positions in response to the statement. If they are struggling to respond, encourage them to consider:

- What do they know about the impacts of the virus on an individual body?
- What do they know about the impacts of the virus on a social or economic level?
- What have they been told about the pandemic by influential figures in their life?
- What kind of media coverage they have seen on the topic (including fiction and satire)?

Next, distribute the student activity guide and break the class into their assigned pairs.

- Remind students of the ground rules for these conversations:
  - Listening should take priority over speaking
  - Discussions are about understanding, not fixing, sympathizing, or debating
  - All disclosures made within the classroom should remain confidential
- Provide time cues for the students: each ‘speaker’ has three minutes to discuss their views followed by 10 minutes of interview questions from the listener. Encourage pairs to elaborate on their answers or ask follow-up questions if they fall silent. Remind them that they are practicing their ability to hold a difficult conversation, not being tested on their expertise.

After both interviews have concluded, bring all students back together and debrief:

1. How did this exercise in deep listening make you feel?
2. Which role in the interview was more challenging for you (speaker or listener)? Why?
3. When was the last time you engaged in a face-to-face conversation on a challenging topic? How did you feel after that encounter? How did it differ from the process we followed today?
4. What do you think prevents people from complicating the narratives in daily life?
5. What did you learn about your partner’s perspective that surprised or intrigued you?
6. Did you learn anything new about your own perspective on the issue?

To continue the activity at home: assign any of the [SJN teaching collections](#) on pandemic responses to students as homework following this classroom activity. Use the pre-existing discussion questions, copy and customize the questions on your own, or ask students instead to write 2-3 paragraphs explaining how the articles in the collection build on the knowledge they gained in their classroom discussion.

To adapt for small group discussion: if you would rather conduct this exercise with your entire class, ask the students to rank their response to the statement and then split them into one “agree” group and one “disagree” group. Give the groups 10 minutes to create a “group statement” explaining their position. Have a spokesperson from each group present the statement and then facilitate the interview questions as a moderator.

# Complicating the narratives on youth political participation

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During the 2020 elections, for the first time, Millennial and Gen Z voters were equivalent in number to Baby Boomers and older generations. By 2036, Millennials, Gen Z, and the rising youngest generation will comprise 60% of the electorate. These voters are the most diverse cohort in American history, and they lean significantly more liberal than older generations (even compared to the political preferences of previous generations at the same age). Young Americans turned out for the 2018 and 2020 elections in numbers that reversed a fifty year long pattern of decline. At the same time, the youngest sitting senator is 40 years old (Josh Hawley, R-Missouri) and only 6% of the elected members of the House of Representatives are Millennials, leaving the voice and perspective of young Americans underrepresented in federal government.

In the interest of complicating the narrative about youth political participation, complete the following activity with your partners. First, using only your existing knowledge (no external research) take two minutes and write down your personal response to the following statement. There are no right or wrong answers here; be honest.

“How politically active are you, and how much of an impact do you think your individual political actions have?”

In your assigned pairs, decide which student will speak first. The speaker has three minutes to present their views, uninterrupted by the listener. After this initial overview, the listener has ten minutes to engage with the speaker. Start by looping the speaker’s perspective back to them, checking for clarification, and asking for more details where necessary. When the listener has demonstrated an accurate understanding of the speaker’s response, they may then begin to ask the following questions. Remember that the goal of this interview is not to attack your partner or demonstrate why they might be wrong, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how and why they have arrived at their specific position.

1. Which experiences have shaped your views on politics?
2. What is oversimplified about this topic of youth political participation?"
3. What do you already know and what are you searching to understand about the people who hold different political views (democrat/republican, conservative/liberal, leftist, libertarian, independent...)?
4. Is there anything about how the media portrays you or people with similar views to you that feels inaccurate? Please explain.
5. What would be different in your life if more people agreed with your political position?

After completing this interview, switch roles and repeat the process. Once both partners have completed each role, your instructor will bring the entire class back together for discussion.

# Complicating the narratives on youth political participation

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Instructors: To conduct this interview activity in pairs, ask each student to respond to the question “how politically active do you consider yourself to be?” on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being not active at all and 5 being as active as possible). Note that students are defining what “active” means for themselves - this should be completely self-determined. You can either collect these responses on paper in the first few minutes of class, or with a digital poll prior to meeting.

Pair the students, coupling students with oppositional responses when possible. The more disparate their positions are, the richer the discussion will be, but this will work if both partners are in the middle of the scale as well. Before breaking the students into pairs, give them each a few minutes to write out their positions in response to the statement. If they are struggling to respond, encourage them to consider:

- Whether they are registered to vote
- If they vote in midterms/local elections/run-off elections
- If they have ever been to a city council meeting, town hall meeting, school board meeting, or related event
- If they have ever donated money or canvassed for a political figure
- What forms of political news they consume and what their feelings are about that news

Next, distribute the student activity guide and break the class into their assigned pairs.

- Remind students of the ground rules for these conversations:
  - Listening should take priority over speaking
  - Discussions are about understanding, not fixing, sympathizing, or debating
  - All disclosures made within the classroom should remain confidential
- Provide time cues for the students: each ‘speaker’ has three minutes to discuss their views followed by 10 minutes of interview questions from the listener. Encourage pairs to elaborate on their answers or ask follow-up questions if they fall silent. Remind them that they are practicing their ability to hold a difficult conversation, not being tested on their expertise.

After both interviews have concluded, bring all students back together and debrief:

1. How did this exercise in deep listening make you feel?
2. Which role in the interview was more challenging for you (speaker or listener)? Why?
3. When was the last time you engaged in a face-to-face conversation on a challenging topic? How did you feel after that encounter? How did it differ from the process we followed today?
4. What do you think prevents people from complicating the narratives in daily life?
5. What did you learn about your partner’s perspective that surprised or intrigued you?
6. Did you learn anything new about your own perspective on the issue?

To continue the activity at home: assign the [SJN teaching collection](#) on putting youth in charge of public spending or [this one](#) on the youth vote as homework following this classroom activity. Use the pre-existing discussion questions, copy and customize the questions on your own, or ask students instead to write 2-3 paragraphs explaining how the articles in the collection expand the knowledge they gained in their classroom discussion.

To adapt for small group discussion: if you would rather conduct this exercise with your entire class, ask the students to rank their response to the statement and then split them into one “agree” group and one “disagree” group. Give the groups 10 minutes to create a “group statement” explaining their position. Have a spokesperson from each group present the statement and then facilitate the interview questions as a moderator.

# Complicating the narratives on defunding the police

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The call to defund the police is a call to decrease the budgets, size, scope, and power of police departments while investing into alternative community safety models and wellbeing services (anti-homelessness, healthcare, education, drug rehabilitation, affordable housing, etc.), with the ultimate goal of divesting entirely from the current policing system. The dual focus of the demand is imperative: this is not just about slashing police budgets, it's about investing in resources and creating separate systems of safety responsive to specific communities' needs. New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, when asked what an America with defunded police departments would look like, responded "It looks like a suburb. Affluent white communities already live in a world where they choose to fund youth, health, housing etc more than they fund police. These communities have lower crime rates not because they have more police, but because they have more resources to support healthy society in a way that reduces crime." Opponents of the initiative maintain that defunding would further harm communities most vulnerable to crime, and suggest reforming existing structures of policing that conform to standardized national regulations, including explicit guidelines for officer training and reporting use of force in the field.

In the interest of complicating the narrative about police reform, complete the following activity with your partners. First, using only your existing knowledge (no external research) take two minutes and write down your personal response to the following statement. There are no right or wrong answers here; be honest.

"What is the most significant interaction you have had with the police, and what do you think their role is in a community?"

In your assigned pairs, decide which student will speak first. The speaker has three minutes to present their views, uninterrupted by the listener. After this initial overview, the listener has ten minutes to engage with the speaker. Start by looping the speaker's perspective back to them, checking for clarification, and asking for more details where necessary. When the listener has demonstrated an accurate understanding of the speaker's response, they may then begin to ask the following questions. Remember that the goal of this interview is not to attack your partner or demonstrate why they might be wrong, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how and why they have arrived at their specific position.

1. How does telling this story make you feel?
2. Where does that feeling/response come from?
3. How important is the topic of defunding the police to you personally? Why?
4. What's the question on this topic that you think nobody's asking?
5. What do you think the people who hold the other view really want?
6. Where do you feel personal conflict on this topic? What makes you feel torn?

After completing this interview, switch roles and repeat the process. Once both partners have completed each role, your instructor will bring the entire class back together for discussion.

# Complicating the narratives on defunding the police

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**Instructors:** To conduct this interview activity in pairs, ask each student to respond to the statement “law enforcement officers cause serious harm to American communities” on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). You can either collect these responses on paper in the first few minutes of class, or with a digital poll prior to meeting for the day. Note that this prompt is different from the prompt that students will be discussing once they are in pairs.

Pair the students, coupling students with oppositional responses. The more disparate their positions are, the richer the discussion will be, but this will work if both partners are in the middle of the scale as well. Before breaking the students into pairs, give them each a few minutes to write out their positions in response to the statement. If they are struggling to respond, encourage them to consider:

- Whether they see themselves reflected in the make-up of the local law enforcement
- What they know about the history of law enforcement on a local or national scale
- What they have been told about law enforcement by influential figures in their life
- What kind of media coverage they have seen on the topic (including fiction)

Next, distribute the student activity guide and break the class into their assigned pairs.

- Remind students of the ground rules for these conversations:
  - Listening should take priority over speaking
  - Discussions are about understanding, not fixing, sympathizing, or debating
  - All disclosures made within the classroom should remain confidential
- Provide time cues for the students: each ‘speaker’ has three minutes to discuss their views followed by 10 minutes of interview questions from the listener. Encourage pairs to elaborate on their answers or ask follow-up questions if they fall silent. Remind them that they are practicing their ability to hold a difficult conversation, not being tested on their expertise.

After both interviews have concluded, bring all students back together and debrief:

1. How did this exercise in deep listening make you feel?
2. Which role in the interview was more challenging for you (speaker or listener)? Why?
3. When was the last time you engaged in a face-to-face conversation on a challenging topic? How did you feel after that encounter? How did it differ from the process we followed today?
4. What do you think prevents people from complicating the narratives in daily life?
5. What did you learn about your partner’s perspective that surprised or intrigued you?
6. Did you learn anything new about your own perspective on the issue?

To continue the activity at home: assign the [SJN teaching collection](#) on defunding the police to students as homework following this classroom activity. Use the pre-existing discussion questions, copy and customize the questions on your own, or ask students instead to write 2-3 paragraphs explaining how the articles in the collection expand the knowledge they gained in their classroom discussion.

To adapt for small group discussion: if you would rather conduct this exercise with your entire class, ask the students to rank their response to the statement and then split them into one “agree” group and one “disagree” group. Give the groups 10 minutes to create a “group statement” explaining their position. Have a spokesperson from each group present the statement and then facilitate the interview questions as a moderator.



# Complicating the narratives on collaborative problem solving

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"At their best, group projects provide a rich spectrum of educational benefits. They support course content by challenging members' pre-existing conceptions, encouraging creative problem solving, providing opportunities for deeper comprehension, and facilitating interaction with deeper, more complex problems. They also enrich interpersonal and professional skills, including time management, task delegation, conflict management, social accountability, and various methods for establishing a group identity. And yet, group projects remain a consistent source of interpersonal conflict and anxiety among college students, despite instructors' efforts to persuade their classes about the need to be able to work in randomly assigned groups throughout their professional careers. And it is certainly true that without proper design and implementation, group projects backfire, disincentivizing meaningful engagement and collaboration and creating additional difficulties for students and instructors.

In the interest of complicating the narrative about group work, complete the following activity with your partners. First, using only your existing knowledge (no external research) take two minutes and write down your personal response to the following statement. There are no right or wrong answers here; be honest.

"The ability to work well in groups is a critical skill in both college classrooms and the workplace."

In your assigned pairs, decide which student will speak first. The speaker has three minutes to present their views, uninterrupted by the listener. After this initial overview, the listener has ten minutes to engage with the speaker. Start by looping the speaker's perspective back to them, checking for clarification, and asking for more details where necessary. When the listener has demonstrated an accurate understanding of the speaker's response, they may then begin to ask the following questions. Remember that the goal of this interview is not to attack your partner or demonstrate why they might be wrong, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how and why they have arrived at their specific position.

1. What is oversimplified about this issue?
2. What experiences have shaped your views on this topic?
3. What feelings are present for you during this discussion? Where do those feelings come from?
4. What do you think the people who hold the other view really want?
5. What do you wish you knew about people who held the opposite view?

After completing this interview, switch roles and repeat the process. Once both partners have completed each role, your instructor will bring the entire class back together for discussion.

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Instructors: To conduct this interview activity in pairs, ask each student to respond to the statement “the ability to work well in groups is a critical skill in both college classrooms and the workplace” on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). You can either collect these responses on paper in the first few minutes of class, or with a digital poll prior to meeting for the day.

Pair the students, coupling students with oppositional responses. The more disparate their positions are, the richer the discussion will be, but this will work if both partners are in the middle of the scale as well. Before breaking the students into pairs, give them each a few minutes to write out their positions in response to the statement. If they are struggling to respond, encourage them to consider:

- What kinds of groups, clubs, teams, or projects they have participated in
- What their previous experiences working in groups has been like
- What role they feel they fulfill in groups and teams
- What kinds of group collaboration they have personally witnessed from other adults
- Whether or not they have ever been taught how to work well and communicate in groups
- What kind of media coverage they have seen on the topic (including fiction)

Next, distribute the student activity guide and break the class into their assigned pairs.

- Remind students of the ground rules for these conversations:
  - Listening should take priority over speaking
  - Discussions are about understanding, not fixing, sympathizing, or debating
  - All disclosures made within the classroom should remain confidential
- Provide time cues for the students: each ‘speaker’ has three minutes to discuss their views followed by 10 minutes of interview questions from the listener. Encourage pairs to elaborate on their answers or ask follow-up questions if they fall silent. Remind them that they are practicing their ability to hold a difficult conversation, not being tested on their expertise.

After both interviews have concluded, bring all students back together and debrief:

1. How did this exercise in deep listening make you feel?
2. Which role in the interview was more challenging for you (speaker or listener)? Why?
3. When was the last time you engaged in a face-to-face conversation on a challenging topic? How did you feel after that encounter? How did it differ from the process we followed today?
4. What do you think prevents people from complicating the narratives in daily life?
5. What did you learn about your partner’s perspective that surprised or intrigued you?
6. Did you learn anything new about your own perspective on the issue?

To continue the activity at home: assign the [SJN teaching collection](#) on cultivating collaborations to students as homework following this classroom activity. Use the pre-existing discussion questions, copy and customize the questions on your own, or ask students instead to write 2-3 paragraphs explaining how the articles in the collection expand the knowledge they gained in their classroom discussion.

To adapt for small group discussion: if you would rather conduct this exercise with your entire class, ask the students to rank their response to the statement and then split them into one “agree” group and one “disagree” group. Give the groups 10 minutes to create a “group statement” explaining their position. Have a spokesperson from each group present the statement and then facilitate the interview questions as a moderator.

# Complicating the narratives on leadership skills

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The definition of “leadership” is subject to much debate in both scholarly literature and more casual discussions; is a leader primarily responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of an organization? Are they more of an inspirational figure, like a coach or cheerleader? Is a leader required to have high-level visionary or strategic goals for the people or groups under their direction? Such flexible definitions can benefit organizations and groups that need to tailor the definition of leadership to their unique demands, but too much room for interpretation can also lead to confusion regarding roles and responsibilities, a lack of purpose, or even serious ethical challenges. Furthermore, the way we define leadership impacts how we understand who has the capacity to become a leader. If leadership is viewed mostly as a result of intrinsic qualities like charisma, then it is something that must be watched for and cultivated in select individuals (and seriously likely to be impacted by social biases surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and ability). If leadership consists of learned skills like organization, teamwork, crisis management, empathy, and strategic thinking - all things which can be taught - then the questions shift to when, how, and where those skills should be taught. Can you teach leadership in a classroom, or does it need to be learned “on the job?” How much experience needs to be accrued in a given field or activity before leadership becomes a viable option? Despite decades of debate on the topic, these questions continue to gain importance as employers and educators wrestle with the importance of ethical development, mentorship, human relations skill development, and theoretical versus practical learning opportunities.

In the interest of complicating the narrative about leadership education, complete the following activity with your partners. First, using only your existing knowledge (no external research) take a few minutes and write down your personal response to the following statement. There are no right or wrong answers here; be honest.

“All U.S. high school students should be required to learn foundational leadership skills before graduation.”

In your assigned pairs, decide which student will speak first. The speaker has three minutes to present their views, uninterrupted by the listener. After this initial overview, the listener has ten minutes to engage with the speaker. Start by looping the speaker’s perspective back to them, checking for clarification, and asking for more details where necessary. When the listener has demonstrated an accurate understanding of the speaker’s response, they may then begin to ask the following questions. Remember that the goal of this interview is not to attack your partner or demonstrate why they might be wrong, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how and why they have arrived at their specific position.

1. What is oversimplified about the concept of leadership?
2. What experiences have shaped your views regarding the responsibilities of a leader?
3. What’s one question related to the teaching of leadership that you think nobody’s asking?
4. What feelings are present for you during this discussion? Where do those feelings come from?
5. What do you think the people who hold the other view really want?
6. What do you wish you knew about people who held the opposite view?

After completing this interview, switch roles and repeat the process. Once both partners have completed each role, your instructor will bring the entire class back together for discussion.

# Complicating the narratives on leadership skills

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Instructors: To conduct this interview activity in pairs, ask each student to respond to the statement “leadership skills should be taught to all U.S. students as early as possible” on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree). You can either collect these responses on paper in the first few minutes of class, or with a digital poll prior to meeting for the day.

Part One: Pair the students, coupling students with oppositional responses. The more disparate their positions are, the richer the discussion will be, but this will work if both partners are in the middle of the scale as well. Before breaking the students into pairs, give them each a few minutes to write out their positions in response to the statement. If they are struggling to respond, encourage them to consider:

- Who comes to mind when they imagine a great leader?
- What positions of leadership they have occupied and what responsibilities those positions entailed
- How were they prepared for any of those positions of leadership? How did that preparation impact their performance?
- What characteristics have been demonstrated by “bad” leaders in their lives (however they might define that)
- What are some common characteristics of leadership as portrayed in film and television? Do they agree or disagree with those portrayals?
- What has their academic work (including this class) taught them about leadership training?

Next, distribute the student activity guide and break the class into their assigned pairs.

- Remind students of the ground rules for these conversations:
  - Listening should take priority over speaking
  - Discussions are about understanding, not fixing, sympathizing, or debating
  - All disclosures made within the classroom should remain confidential
- Provide time cues for the students: each ‘speaker’ has three minutes to discuss their views followed by 10 minutes of interview questions from the listener. Encourage pairs to elaborate on their answers or ask follow-up questions if they fall silent. Remind them that they are practicing their ability to hold a difficult conversation, not being tested on their expertise.

After both interviews have concluded, bring all students back together and debrief part one:

1. How did this exercise in deep listening make you feel?
2. Which role in the interview was more challenging for you (speaker or listener)? Why?
3. When was the last time you engaged in a face-to-face conversation on a challenging topic? How did you feel after that encounter? How did it differ from the process we followed today?
4. What do you think prevents people from complicating the narratives in daily life?
5. What did you learn about your partner’s perspective that surprised or intrigued you?
6. Did you learn anything new about your own perspective on the issue?

Part Two: Return students to their pairs and assign each pair one story from this [SJN collection](#) on innovative approaches to teaching leadership. Students are to read the story and work collaboratively to come up with a short group statement that a) summarizes the story; b) explains what the example in the story can contribute to their ongoing discussion of leadership; and c) describe how the story impacted the position that they described in part one of this activity. (Has their opinion changed? How did they incorporate the new knowledge into their existing thoughts?) Finally, student pairs will report back to the group.