

# Activity 3.8 Mapping Complexity

## (Fishbone Diagram)

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### Description

Complicated issues can overwhelm a discussion group. Discussants can feel daunted by the complexity of a topic or they can rush to a conclusion without fully exploring its complexity. Both approaches fail to constructively engage the topic. This activity introduces tools for mapping complexity.

### Learning Goal

- Successfully employ visualization tools to help discussion groups organize, structure, and discuss complex issues.

### Instructions (55 minutes)

<b>Set Up</b>	<p><b>Prepare for the Activity</b></p> <p>Select a scenario from the collection of <a href="#">What IF...Scenarios</a> or create your own based on a topic that is relevant for your group.</p> <p>Share the scenario as a handout or shared document.</p> <p>Share the <a href="#">Fishbone Diagram</a> as a handout or create copies of the file for each group and share electronically.</p> <p>Organize participants into small groups (4-6 ppl).</p> <p>Begin by introducing the learning goals of this activity.</p>	
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<sup>1</sup> **Citation for this activity:** Jack Byrd (2023). Mapping Complexity. In Hartman and Byrd (Eds), The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/activities/module-3>

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<p><b>Step One</b></p>	<p><b>Review the Scenario</b></p> <p>As a full group, invite a participant to read the scenario aloud while others read along. It may be helpful to share the scenario on an overhead screen if meeting in-person or use the share screen function if meeting virtually. Participants may also want to read quietly and have a copy to refer to details later in the activity. After reviewing the scenario, ask if there are any questions.</p> <p><b>Facilitator Tip:</b> Participants may ask for clarification or additional information; resist offering too much additional information. The next step is designed for the participants to imagine different dimensions and aspects of this issue.</p>	<p><b>5 min</b></p>
<p><b>Step Two</b></p>	<p><b>Discuss the Scenario in Small Groups</b></p> <p>In small groups, explore the following prompts. Identify one participant in each group to be the discussion facilitator and record notes on a whiteboard, flipchart, or shared document that can be viewed by everyone in the group. Discussion Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the key issue, concern, or dimension of this scenario? What's at stake?</li> <li>• What are the primary dimensions of this topic that we should consider?</li> <li>• Who are the stakeholders in this scenario? Who is affected? Who are the decision makers? Helpers? Influencers?</li> <li>• What are the benefits of the proposed policy or course of action? Costs? Trade-offs?</li> <li>• What is making us feel uneasy or uncomfortable? What is giving us pause? What unintended consequences should we anticipate?</li> </ul>	<p><b>10 min</b></p>
<p><b>Step Three</b></p>	<p><b>Fill in the Fishbone Diagram</b></p> <p>Provide each group with an empty <a href="#">Fishbone Diagram</a>. Ask each group's facilitator along with the other members of their group to fill in the diagram using the group's discussion of key dimensions and concerns. For example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In the head of the fish (light pink shape on the right), place a 1-3 word description of the primary issue or topic being discussed.</li> <li>2. Then identify the major dimensions of the issue (approx. 4-6 items). Place these in the boxes that form the body of the fish (green, orange, and pink boxes on the top and bottom).</li> <li>3. Then identify specific or more detailed aspects of each dimension. These form the bones of the fish (white boxes below each colored box).</li> </ol>	<p><b>20 min</b></p>

	<p><b>Facilitator Tip:</b> If the group is new to this activity, you can share parts of a completed diagram to help illustrate how to organize the different dimensions and aspects of an example scenario or topic.</p>	
<b>Step Four</b>	<p><b>Review and Discuss the Diagram</b></p> <p>Once their fishbone diagram is completed, ask each group to use it to identify contrasting and competing dimensions of the topic. Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When we look at this diagram, how does it help us to see the tension of the scenario?</li> <li>• Which part of this diagram seems most prominent or concerning?</li> <li>• Now that we are examining the scenario with this visual tool, what are we seeing differently? What could we add to this diagram?</li> </ul>	<b>10 min</b>
<b>Step Five (optional)</b>	<p><b>Share Diagrams with the Full Group</b></p> <p>If time permits, invite each small group to share their completed diagrams on the board or a wall and ask participants to walk around the room to review the diagrams. If meeting virtually, review them one at a time on a shared screen with the full group.</p>	<b>5 min (optional)</b>
<b>Step Six</b>	<p><b>Debrief as a Full Group</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the major dimensions and contrasts within your small group diagrams?</li> <li>• What are some common themes across the small groups? Which dimensions stood out most to you?</li> <li>• Where do you see the most contrast? Are there any outlier topics?</li> <li>• Now that you have a sense of all the diagrams, what's missing?</li> <li>• How does visualizing and organizing dimensions of this topic help us to better explore it together as a group?</li> </ul>	<b>10 min</b>

## Reflection Journal

- Think of discussions that you have been involved in that seemed to be “all over the place.” What was the outcome of the discussion? How could incorporating a Fishbone Diagramming exercise have improved the outcomes?
- What's another mapping approach you might use to help visualize the complexity of an issue? Demonstrate it using this topic or another topic.

## Practice Journal

This week, practice using a fishbone diagram on a topic relevant to your work, school, or home life. Think of a topic or issue that is somewhat complex. Try mapping it out. Reflect on how the diagram helped to categorize and order your thinking.

## Dive Deeper: Additional Resources

- Forthcoming

## Activity Cluster

[3.5 Seeking Divergent Thinking  
\(Surround the Topic\)](#)

3.8 Mapping Complexity  
(Fishbone Diagram)

[5.2 Developing an Awareness  
of Stakeholders](#)