

# THE TALKING STICK



## THE TALKING STICK

---

### SUMMARY

**College is loud. Group chats buzz constantly. Class discussions move quickly. Social media rewards speed. Opinions form in seconds. Responses are immediate. In an environment like this, most people listen for one reason: to respond.**

**But healthy relationships—and healthy communities—are built differently. They are formed when people listen to understand.**

This lesson challenges students to examine how they listen—and how their listening habits either build belonging or break it. In a college community, influence begins not with speaking louder, but with listening better.

**“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”**

— Epictetus

For generations, the Indigenous Peoples of the United States and Canada—also known as First Nations—have held fast to cultural practices that center respect, balance, and intentional communication. There is much we can learn from their ceremonies, customs, and community structures.

In several tribes of the Pacific Northwest, a longstanding tradition developed to facilitate respectful communication in gatherings, councils, and storytelling circles. These gatherings often take place in a circle—a shape holding deep cultural and spiritual significance. Circles represent balance, equality, the four cardinal directions, the four seasons, and the ongoing rhythms of life. In a circle, no one stands at the front. No one is behind. Everyone is equal. Within these circles, an item is passed from person to person. It may be elaborately carved, brightly painted, or adorned with fur, leather, or feathers. It may also be simple and unadorned. The materials, colors, and craftsmanship carry meaning for the one who created it and the community who uses it.

This item is known as the Talking Stick.

While practices vary among Indigenous groups, a general protocol is widely recognized: the person holding the Talking Stick is the only one allowed to speak. Everyone else listens—quietly and respectfully.

After the speaker finishes, the stick is passed around the circle, giving each person equal voice and time. No one is required to speak; they may simply pass the stick. If someone chooses to speak, it is customary in many traditions to introduce oneself first. Often, an elder speaks first, honored for wisdom and experience.

There is no interrupting. No repeating what has already been said. No checking phones. No side conversations. The key element is respect. Contrast this with how most conversations unfold today:

- People interrupt mid-sentence.
- We often mentally prepare our counterpoint.
- Some even scroll while someone talks.
- We tend to assume we already know what the other person means.

Listening to respond is transactional. Listening to understand is relational.

The Talking Stick tradition reveals something profound: communication is not about dominance. It is about balance.

Communication researchers identify several unhealthy listening patterns that fracture community:

- Judgmental listening – jumping to conclusions before someone finishes speaking.
- Selective listening – hearing only the parts we agree with.
- Impatient listening – interrupting the moment we disagree.
- Egocentric listening – focusing only on what we plan to say next.

The Talking Stick eliminates these habits by design. It forces patience. It requires presence. It protects dignity.

Research in communication studies confirms what Indigenous communities have practiced for generations: when individuals feel heard, trust increases, defensiveness decreases, and collaboration improves. When people feel dismissed, they become reactive and rigid.

Belonging is not created by agreement. It is created by understanding.

The Talking Stick reminds us: you cannot build community if you are not willing to slow down long enough to truly hear someone else.

<b>Listening to Respond</b>	<b>Listening to Understand</b>
Plans my reply.	Seeks their meaning.
Counters quickly.	Pauses to clarify.
The goal is to win the debate.	The goal is to strengthen the relationship.
Hears my view.	Hears the whole picture.
Controls the conversation.	Creates space for others.

When students consistently practice listening to understand, several outcomes emerge (supported by communication and psychology research):

- Increased trust in relationships (Rogers, 1957; Weger et al., 2014)
- Greater empathy across differences (Davis, 1983; Brownell, 2012)
- Reduced defensiveness during conflict (Rogers, 1957; Gottman, 1999)
- Stronger collaboration in teams (Edmondson, 1999 – psychological safety)
- Deeper sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995 – need to belong)

Listening to understand does not weaken your voice. It strengthens your influence.

**Pause here. Invite each person to identify one row in the chart that challenged them. Why?**

## REFLECT AND RESPOND

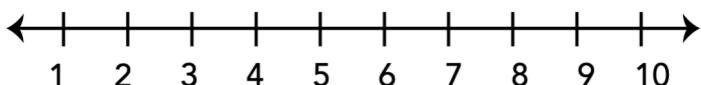
Take some time individually to write your answers to these questions. Afterward, the group should spend 5-10 minutes sharing and discussing their answers.

- 1. Do you tend to listen to respond or to understand? How can you tell?**
- 2. When have you felt truly heard by someone? What did they do?**
- 3. What makes it difficult to slow down and really listen in college culture?**
- 4. How might better listening improve your current relationships?**

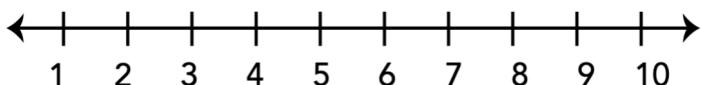
## SELF ASSESSMENT

Rate Yourself (1, never true of me – 10, always true of me):

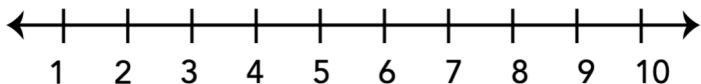
- 1. I remain engaged when I disagree with someone.**



- 2. I resist interrupting, even when I feel strongly.**



- 3. I ask clarifying questions before making assumptions.**



Pause here. Take a few minutes to share why you rated yourself the way you did in each of the above.

## CASE STUDY:

### THE GROUP PROJECT SPIRAL

Four students were assigned a semester-long group project worth 40% of their grade. At first, meetings felt productive—everyone was polite, ideas were flowing, and the deadline felt far away. But once real decisions had to be made, tension surfaced.

Alex wanted structure—clear deadlines, shared folders, task assignments. Jordan valued creativity and flexibility and didn't want the project to feel "boxed in." Priya noticed the tension but avoided speaking up because she didn't want to make things worse. Mateo, frustrated that nothing felt settled, started sending long, corrective messages in the group chat late at night.

Soon, meetings felt different. People interrupted each other. Comments became sharper. Eye contact disappeared. Instead of asking questions, they defended positions.

The project wasn't falling apart because they lacked ability. It was unraveling because no one felt understood.

Each person was listening for flaws, not meaning.  
Listening to defend, not to learn.

A professor noticed the strain and stepped in with one simple rule for the next meeting:

Before responding, each student must summarize the previous speaker's point with "What I heard you say was..."—and then ask, "Did I get that right?"

At first, it felt awkward. Slower. Almost forced.  
But something shifted.

People leaned in. Clarifications replaced assumptions.  
Tone softened. Even when they disagreed, it felt less personal.

The disagreement didn't disappear—but the defensiveness did. The group stopped trying to win and started trying to understand.

The turning point wasn't better talent. It was better listening.

## **REFLECT AND RESPOND:**

- Which student do you relate to most?
- How might the conflict have escalated if no one slowed the conversation down?
- What would change in your relationships if you practiced summarizing before responding?

## TAKE ACTION

This week:

- Choose one conversation where you will intentionally practice listening to understand.
- Ask at least two clarifying questions before offering your opinion.
- Reflect afterward: Did the conversation feel different?

Community is not built by the loudest voice in the room.

It is built by the person who makes others feel heard.

**“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”**

— Stephen R. Covey