



## Bias Bite #3: Dichotomous Thinking

BY SUE JIN KIM

### Overview

This mini-lesson is designed to help your students recognize and better understand dichotomous thinking. This cognitive shortcut can help with quick decision-making by simplifying complicated issues into manageable categories; however, this bias can also lead to oversimplifications that can reinforce biases and even lead to extreme views.

The following activities will guide students in an exploration of how dichotomous thinking works, when it happens, and most important, how to recognize it in themselves. By developing this self-awareness, students can become more open to different perspectives and engage in more thoughtful, civil discussions both in and out of the classroom.



## Driving Question

Why is it so difficult for us to hold 2 opposing ideas in our mind at the same time?

## Objectives

- Explain the bias.
- Provide examples of the bias in practice.
- Construct strategies for overcoming and dealing with the bias.

## Materials Needed

- The story of the Chinese Farmer or the “‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Are Incomplete Stories We Tell Ourselves” video
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

## Bias Description

Dichotomous thinking, also known as black-and-white thinking or all-or-nothing thinking, is the tendency to view things in extreme, binary terms, often ignoring the possibility of nuance, shades of gray, or a spectrum of possibilities.

### PROS AND CONS OF THE BIAS

#### Pros

- Quick decision-making
- Simplifies complex issues into manageable categories

#### Cons

- Can lead to oversimplifications and inaccuracies
- May reinforce biases
- Can lead to extremist views about people and the world

### REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF THE BIAS

- A student believes that not getting into the top-choice college means that the student is a failure, refusing to recognize options beyond the binary.
- A student assumes 1 disagreement with a friend means that the friend is an enemy and not a true ally.
- A person categorizes music as either cool or uncool without acknowledging the nuances and complexities of different genres.

## Learning Activities

### OPEN

Have students write the name of the day's bias and the driving question on their Mental Notes graphic organizer.

### ACTIVATE

Read the story of [the Chinese Farmer](#) or watch the first minute of "'Good' and 'Bad' Are Incomplete Stories We Tell Ourselves" (stop at 1:02 of the second video).

#### Ask:

- What are examples of when you've framed situations into a good/bad binary?
- In what situations would it make sense to create binaries? In what situations does it not make sense or serve us?
- What are other examples of the good/bad (all/nothing) binary that you observe in schools, or in the greater community?

### EXPLAIN

- Describe dichotomous thinking to students.
- Explain that dichotomous thinking occurs for the following reasons.
  - Our brains are wired to take shortcuts.
  - We tend to engage in confirmation bias by seeking out information that supports our preconceived notions and ignore information that doesn't.
  - We often use another bias called the availability heuristic (which we will talk about in later lessons) in which we overestimate and exaggerate information that we can easily recall.
- Tell students that they can effectively deal with dichotomous thinking in the following ways.
- Actively seek out contradictory evidence or different perspectives when forming opinions.
- Notice when others may frame situations within a "good/bad" binary.
- Practice "both/and" thinking, where you consider the positive and negative aspects of a situation.
- Engage in regular self-reflection and be willing to acknowledge the limitations of your own knowledge or biases.
- Be willing to explore multiple angles and perspectives on complex issues.

A faint, light gray background graphic consisting of a network of interconnected nodes and lines, resembling a molecular structure or a web. The nodes are circles of varying sizes, and the lines are thin and gray, creating a complex, geometric pattern across the entire page.

## **DISCUSS**

Divide students into groups and have them discuss the following questions:

- In what situations can dichotomous thinking be helpful? Harmful?
- When have you seen this bias in action?
- When are people most susceptible to this bias?
- How can people recognize when they are being affected by this bias?
- What are some ways to overcome and deal with this bias?
- What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what ways can our awareness of this bias improve our relationships with others?

## **SYNTHESIZE AND CLOSE**

Ask each group to share out what they discussed for at least 1 of the questions. Revisit the driving question and make sure each student has responded to the driving question in their Mental Notes for the day.