

Defining | US

PODCAST LEARNING COMPANION

Our podcast companions expand learning beyond the walls of schools and organizations by bringing crucial conversations to the leaders, educators and organizations that matter. Use this guide to promote critical reflection, deeper discussion and meaningful connections among adults and youth around the topics that are Defining US.

VOICES OF CHANGE

A Podcast with Stacey DeWitt

INSIDE EPISODE 13: "Laboratory of Life"

Join the conversation as Stacey DeWitt and Joshua B. Pedersen, Director of 211 at United Way Worldwide, shine the light on the ways in which we can all come together to build trust, provide dignity for ourselves and others, while finding solutions to complex issues in our communities.

[LISTEN TO THE PODCAST](#)

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MEET JOSHUA B. PEDERSEN

Joshua has worked and volunteered in the nonprofit industry for over 25 years. He led the implementation of the 211 service throughout Utah, has served as Director of Services for the Utah Food Bank, as Vice President of United Way of Northern Utah, as CEO of United Way of Frederick County, Maryland, and as President & CEO of 211 Maryland. Today Joshua works as the Director of 211 at United Way Worldwide. Joshua has served on multiple boards including the Frederick County Healthcare Coalition, Catholic Community Services, West Valley City's Cultural Arts Foundation, Murray City Arts Council, the Utah State Commission on Volunteers, Salt Lake Community College Thayne Center for Service & Learning, and as board president for both the Utah Nonprofits Association and Maryland Nonprofits Association. Today he is a Commissioner on the Maryland Governor's Commission on Service & Volunteerism and is a Trustee for the Ausherman Family Foundation. Joshua has a bachelor's degree in communication from Weber State University.



LISTENING AND REFLECTING

Use this learning companion to dive deeper into the episode topic, with suggestions for asynchronous listening, engagement and experiences that offer opportunities for reflection, connection and commitment.

WAYS TO LISTEN

Use the podcast transcript to increase engagement by following along and highlighting words, phrases, or concepts that stand out in the conversation. Take notes in the margin of reflections, connections and questions and consider these three methods for listening:

1. Open Listening - Listen to the podcast to simply notice and note the words, phrases and moments in the conversation that spark emotion and connections
2. Focused Listening - Listen to the podcast with a focus on the Moments that Matter using the time stamp and topics from the "Podcast Notes"
3. Reflective Listening - Listen to the podcast with a focus on critical self-reflection, using any or all the reflection questions below

CRITICAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

BEFORE YOU LISTEN:

1. What experiences have you had that connect to this topic?
2. What do you hope to learn from listening to this episode?

AS YOU LISTEN:

1. What is the primary purpose of the United Way 211 program, and how does it serve the community?
2. Can you describe a specific scenario in which someone might call the United Way 211 hotline for assistance? What kinds of services might they be seeking?
3. How does the United Way 211 program contribute to disaster response and recovery efforts in communities?
4. Explain the concept of meritocracy. What are the key principles underlying a meritocratic society?
5. In your opinion, to what extent does meritocracy exist in American society today? What are some examples of meritocratic systems or institutions?
6. What are some of the key factors that contribute to poverty in America, both in terms of individual behavior and systemic circumstances?
7. How might the interplay between personal choices and external factors (circumstances) affect a person's experience of poverty in the United States?

AFTERWARDS:

1. What about this discussion resonated with you?
2. What questions or ideas would you like to explore further?
3. What conversations will you have or immediate actions will you take to create change in our own sphere of influence?

EXPERIENCES THAT ELEVATE THE LEARNING

The following experiences are intended for use with leaders, educators, parents and those working in educational organizations. The purpose is to promote critical reflection, connection and commitment toward action. They should be used and adapted based on the individuals, group dynamics and organizational context of the learning.

EXPERIENCES TO PROMOTE CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

Reflect on Important Moments in the Conversation

Use the timestamps within our [podcast notes](#) to find and re-listen to the most powerful moments in this episode, then write about your own perspective, experience, and insights.

- Can you recall a time when you empathized with someone who faced challenges or discrimination that you haven't personally experienced? How did that experience influence your perspectives and actions?
- In what ways do you believe you can use your privilege (whether it's privilege related to your identity, education, or resources) to advocate for those who may not have the same advantages? Are there specific causes or issues you feel compelled to support?
- How do you define dignity and hope for yourself? For others? What specific actions or circumstances make you feel hopeful and dignified?

PRIVILEGE WALK

Exploring the complexity of meritocracy can be a thought-provoking task. Meritocracy is the idea that people should be rewarded based on their abilities and efforts, and is often critiqued because it does not account for systemic barriers such as poverty, racism, sexism, etc. The purpose of this exercise is to reflect on your personal privilege as a first step to considering meritocracy in our society.

Have a small group of participants stand in a line as you read a series of statements (e.g., "Take a step forward if you've never worried about where your next meal will come from"). The statements should highlight various aspects of privilege and disadvantage. After each statement, participants take a step forward or backward accordingly. This activity helps illustrate how factors beyond merit can influence opportunities.

STORYTELLING AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

As a facilitator, first model the process of sharing your personal stories related to experiences with meritocracy, privilege, or disadvantage. Next, invite participants to share personal stories or anecdotes related to their own experiences with meritocracy, privilege, or disadvantage. Encourage open dialogue and reflection on how these experiences have shaped their perspectives.

EXPERIENCES TO PROMOTE BUILDING DEEPER CONNECTIONS BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS AND THE LEARNING

BUDGETING EXERCISES

With small or large groups, give participants hypothetical budgets with varying degrees of resources. Some budgets should be funded by limited resources, while others may be funded by larger amounts. Ask participants to make financial decisions based on their budget, needs, and wants. As a group, discuss the challenges of budgeting when resources are scarce and explore how behavior and circumstances can influence financial outcomes.

COLLABORATIVE ART OR CREATIVE PROJECTS

In a small or large group, encourage participants to create art, poetry, or narratives that express their understanding of the interplay between behavior and circumstance in poverty. Share and discuss the resulting creations.

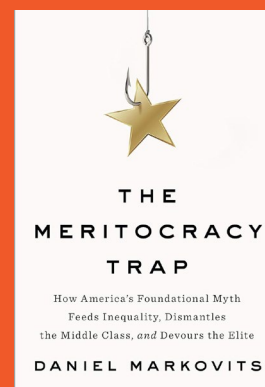
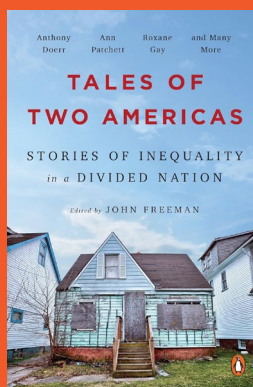
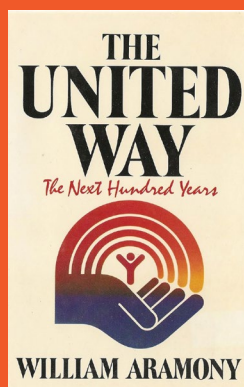
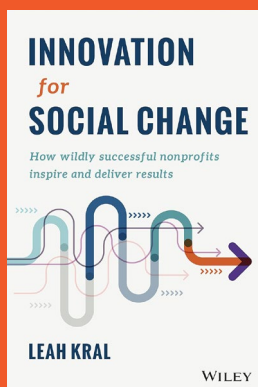
DEBATE: POVERTY AS A RESULT OF BEHAVIOR AND CIRCUMSTANCE

Pedersen discusses the idea of poverty as a result of both behavior and circumstance. Host a debate where participants argue whether poverty is primarily a result of innate factors (nature) or external circumstances (nurture). This can spark thoughtful discussions about the complex interplay between individual choices and systemic factors. Return to the podcast to dissect Pedersen's view on the topic, and the social responsibility to our fellow man.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Identify a public policy related to poverty, such as welfare programs, minimum wage laws, and affordable housing initiatives. Discuss and analyze this policy and explore how it can affect both behavior and circumstances for people in poverty.

INDEPENDENT READING AND BOOK CLUB RECOMMENDATIONS



RELEVANT RESOURCES:

- Children's Defense Fund: [Ending Child Poverty Now Toolkit](#)
- Children's Defense Fund [Blog](#)
- United Way: 211.org

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