

A time for deep listening... Co-designing learning with students

Welcome to a new school year! As we anticipate in-person learning and students returning to a year that will look and feel more “normal” we recognize that so much has transpired and changed in the last year and a half. We need each other to make good transitions and create a place to belong and to contribute in our own unique ways. WE ALL HAVE A STORY, and we commit to listening deeply to each and every story we are privileged to hear. More than ever, all of us need a point of intentional reconnection. The relationships we build are foundational to the success of our students and community. In addition to the ongoing development of relationships and embedded opportunities to build social emotional and relational competencies, many schools have designed a specific time and space to teach social emotional skills, check-in, build community, and promote stability; a place to ground and be coached. Various topics and activities will find their home in this space and time, such as social emotional learning and development, problem solving, post-secondary planning, intervention and extension, community building and more. The Learning Alliance Plan will drive a conversation and personalized plan as a living document with regular checkpoints throughout the year.

Purpose of the Learning Alliance Plan

We will connect with every student, one-on-one, to listen, build understanding and trust, be creative, and develop an alliance plan and roadmap. The protocol may serve as an introduction or re-entry plan, and it is recommended that this conversation be held with every student within the first few weeks of school.

Teachers and students will discuss the student’s current situation and story, including social, emotional, and academic strengths, interests, and needs.

The plan is flexible and may be organized as a set of ‘rounds’ of questions to be utilized over the first several months of school as guided touchpoints. At minimum, the Alliance document should be revisited at least two additional times this year (semester and end of year), regularly monitored and modified throughout the year. This is *not* an interview to complete a form. It was intentionally developed as a conversation and connection instead of a survey. Story sharing is deeply personal. The goal is not to complete the blanks and check the boxes; the purpose is to listen and value the story of every student, to be creative together with the student and to re-imagine how we support each learner. Some students will be ready and eager to share, some will not. It will take time and trust.

Harness
narrative to
grow agency.

Vincent Perez, MPA

The art of listening

“It’s hard to transcend a combative question. But it’s hard to resist a generous question, we all have it in us to formulate questions that invite honesty, dignity, and revelation. There is something redemptive and life-giving about asking better questions” - Krista Tippett

Stories are
data with a
soul.

Vincent Perez, MPA

Remember, every student and their family possess unique experiences, identity, culture, opportunities, and assets. The pandemic has increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, fear, and sadness. We are full of feelings, and things are new for many as we anticipate returning to a more stable and typical school year. Several grades of students find themselves in key transition years. Tenth graders did not receive the expected welcome and ceremonial transition activities they would have traditionally experienced, and they

may feel just as new to the high school environment as ninth graders. Last year, students returned to school environments which looked and felt very different than previous years and will need to be taught and reassured as they find their place of belonging. We are on the journey together and the best place for us to start is by deep listening.

“Good listeners have a physical, mental, and emotional presence, and they know how to integrate all three”
(Judith Humphry, quoted in the Book of Beautiful Questions).

Asking these questions will make you a better listener

Just to be clear, are you saying _____? *At key points; repeat back a paraphrase of what you’ve heard.*

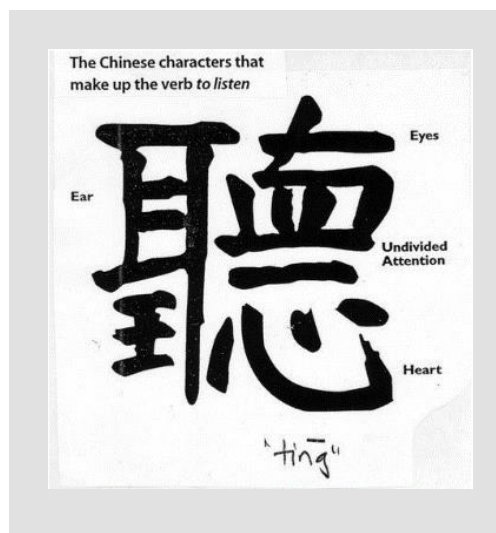
Can you explain what you mean by that? *This is a classic “clarifying” question used by interviewers to invite people to better explaining themselves (Tone is important: Go for curious, not puzzled or antagonistic)*

I imagine that made you feel ____, right? *A variation of How did it make you feel? (which sounds too much like a psychiatrist’s question).*

And what else?

The “AWE” question may be the best way to draw out deeper insights—and keep you in listening mode.

Berger, Warren; *The Book of Beautiful Questions*, pg. 116



Becoming the Coach

Now more than ever, students need connections. Advisory and classroom teachers will become coaches and champions. A coach does not imply an expert; a coach is someone who listens, asks questions, connects, and inspires. You, as the coach, will not and cannot have all the answers, but you will act as a connector and a checkpoint.

“Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them” John Whitmore, in *Coaching for Performance*.

<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/coaching.html>

Most teachers feel comfortable and confident in this role and, we all can get better, be intentional, grow, access support and be graceful with ourselves and others.

Introducing the Learning Alliance Plan to students:

As the student's advisory coach, this Learning Alliance will form the basis for building a relationship, promoting a student's agency, and providing a supportive network. You may want to introduce this activity to your advisory students as a group. It may be helpful to allow students to schedule or select a time to meet with you. Plan for about 30 minutes per student.

Please share this with students as you begin your conversation:

"In this learning alliance plan we'll be focusing on who you are as a person and learner, which means we will want to share some information with your other teachers that may be helpful. As we talk, many times students bring up difficult situations and we want to support you with that in the best way possible. If there is any concern for a person's health or safety, including yourself, we must get help."

Using the Learning Alliance Plan Tool

- Listen intently, with curiosity, allow space and silence
- **Start by asking the question in Bold:** The italics follow-up items are provided if needed. The more open-ended our questions can remain; the greater our student's voice becomes. Please adapt the wording of the question if necessary.
- **Their Story:** take brief notes as you listen to the student. Reminder: this information will become part of the student record, take notes that are helpful while maintaining a student's privacy.
- **A Co-created Response & Plan:** Prompting questions and considerations are included in this column to promote idea generation. They are intended to assist you talk through a student's unique circumstance, agency, voice, preferences, and contribution to our classrooms and school community.
- At the conclusion of the conversation, you will have the opportunity to develop some actionable follow-up steps based on needs, interests, and strengths of the student.
- It is helpful to take notes but ensure that it does not distract from being fully present and listening to the student's story.
- This is a Word document so that you can type or print and handwrite notes.
- Tell the student you are taking notes and that the goal is to get to know them and develop a plan together.
- Share this plan summary with other teachers and trusted adults. [Learning Alliance Plan Shared Summary](#)
- A word about confidentiality and **Student Safety Concerns:** Please share the statement below about the limits of the privacy of this conversation. You will decide together with the student what will be important to share with other teachers to include them on the team.
- Remember, this is not about filling in each box, it is about listening and hearing a student's story, and empowering a student's agency to co-create a plan for a successful school year.

When Stories Get Tough... and Other Resources

Please share this with students as you begin your conversation:



“In this learning alliance plan we’ll be focusing on your learning, which means we will want to share some information with your other teachers that may be helpful. As we talk, many times students bring up difficult situations and we want to support you with that in the best way possible. If there is any concern for a person’s health or safety, including yourself, we must get help.”

If you are concerned that the student may be at risk for suicide, please refer the student to your school’s mental health provider ASAP. If there is imminent danger, call 911.

Additional resources for crisis level needs that require an immediate response:

- Emergency/Police/Fire - 911 or 444-7000
- Mental Health Crisis – Aspen Pointe Crisis Center – Call 844-493-TALK (8255), Text TALK to 38255, Walk-in 24/7 at 115 South Parkside Drive

Some circumstances may also result in a mandatory reporting situation. Use this link to access D11 tools and training for mandatory reporters. (INSERT LINK)

In addition to completing mandatory reporting processes, please communicate safety related concerns to your school’s administration and counseling staff

- [50 Thought Provoking Questions](#)
- [How to Start an Open Ended Question](#)