Pathways Faculty Guide

1. Co-Creating a Learning Agreement with Students

The new HMS Pathways curriculum is grounded in the latest evidence and best practices in learning and teaching about medicine, critical thinking, compassionate care, and professional development. The HMS Academy Interest Group in Communication, Compassion, and Empathy has created this series of guides to assist faculty and students in creating an environment that provides optimal conditions for learning. This first guide addresses the creation of a learning agreement. The purpose of the learning agreement is to make explicit the spirit, values, and practices of learning together that will allow learners and faculty to maximize the benefits of the Pathways curriculum.

What it is, and why it’s important

Creating and maintaining shared conceptions of the learning agreement

Often called a “learning contract,” we have built on this idea to create a less formal and more fluid process of building a shared “learning agreement.” This encompasses a shared and co-constructed understanding of faculty and student needs, expectations, responsibilities, and roles, created through discussion and (in some cases) negotiation. Creating a shared vision of the learning agreement at the beginning of a session or class, and revisiting that agreement over time will help set the stage for a productive, efficient, and positive learning environment. This process has been shown to enhance student motivation, metacognition, self-directed learning, and learning climate.

On the next page, we describe an opening exercise using an “appreciative inquiry” approach (see Box, next page) to generate the elements for a learning agreement.

Elements of a learning agreement:

1. Learners’ needs/expectations
2. Faculty’s needs/expectations
3. Roles & responsibilities: who is doing what, how this will be decided?
4. Content: goals of the course or session, what will be discussed
5. Feedback: how, on what, when and how often will feedback in both directions occur? (Feedback from learners to faculty & faculty to learners)
Part I. An exercise to create a vision of an optimal learning environment

Ideally, this “appreciative inquiry” exercise should be done first with faculty only to provide them with a sense of what the students might experience. After faculty engage in this experience in a faculty development session, they can use the template below with students. This is written for the Case-Based Collaborative Learning (CBCL) model, where participants will discuss in teams of four students, but can be adapted for working in pairs only for a small group setting. Suggested language is shown in italics.

1. Introduction: It is important for us to discuss as a group how we will create a class experience that is both supportive and challenging, and that allows us individually and as a group to function effectively and to make this the best experience possible. We will start with some individual reflection and then group discussion about what makes a good learning environment.

Show slide (below) with instructions

2. 1-2 minutes. Think back to class in which you had a particularly good, or even great, classroom learning experience. Take a minute to make some notes for yourself to describe what the faculty or leader did, and what you and your classmates did, that contributed to this positive experience.

3. ~12 minutes. Now, in groups of four, take turns sharing your responses to the questions about what made this a good experience. Be as specific as possible—tell a story or give an example of your experience. Describe what the faculty did, what you as an individual student did, and what your classmates did, that contributed to this positive experience.

Sample Slide

EXERCISE

• (1-2 min) Recall a time when you had a learning experience that was very positive, even powerful or transformative. Take one minute on your own to remember this story and write some notes about it for yourself.

• (~12 min) In groups of four, take 3 minutes each to share the following:
  a. What did the faculty member(s) do to make this a good experience?
  b. What did you do to make this a good experience? What about your classmates’ behaviors, attitudes, and values?

• (~5 min) Now in your same group of four, identify the most important ideas that came out of your discussion. Have someone act as notetaker to write these down.

• (50 min) In the large group, each table will report out key points of their discussion. If another group has already mentioned something on your list, you don’t need to repeat it. We will write down these key attitudes, values, and behaviors in three categories: faculty, individual student, and group.

4. ~5 min. Now, in your same group, please summarize the key themes that came up for your group.

5. ~10-12 minutes. Let’s hear from each group, first about faculty behaviors, attitudes, and values, and then we’ll share what you as learners contributed to create a great learning experience.

6. See next page for discussion guidelines.
Part II. Moving from appreciative inquiry exercise to a shared learning agreement

1. Summarize the AI exercise.

Let’s sum up what we have so far. What have we learned from this discussion about what is important for you to have a positive learning experience?

Write key elements on board in three different sections (see figure below) listing ideas that pertain to faculty, individual student, and peers as a whole. Remember—these ideas are all from the perspective of the students’ experiences of their faculty, themselves, and their peers. You as faculty will have an opportunity to describe your needs and expectations later in the discussion.

Example of whiteboard summary of AI exercise:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What makes a positive learning experience? (attitudes, values, behaviors)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Me (individual student)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I took risks to speak up even when I was not sure of the answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I was excited about the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I felt like it was ok to be wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I prepared ahead of time and was ready for discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty contribution</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• she was very enthusiastic and knowledgable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Made me feel like it was ok not to know the “right” answer right away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• He guided our discussion so we didn’t get too far off track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Made sure to sum up discussion and clarify areas of confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• cared about me as a person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• was accessible for problems and feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My peers/classmates</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• we worked together to solve problems—cooperated instead of competed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• were respectful of each other and faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I felt like it was ok to be wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• everyone prepared ahead of time and was ready for discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• didn’t make each other feel stupid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• cared about each other and knew we could turn to each other for support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Discuss AI exercise in terms of **key elements of learning environment**, specifically: student and faculty **needs & expectations, roles & responsibilities, content, and feedback**. (Some of these may have already been covered in other settings; if so, a brief reminder of these would be helpful at this point.)

Whatever of these components aren’t explicitly mentioned during the AI exercise can be teased out by the facilitator/faculty during the discussion. Faculty can also be listening for the components of the learning contract as people are speaking during the AI discussion because they can guide the conversation toward some of these key elements.

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### How we will create our learning agreement

#### Needs and expectations: all (faculty and students)

- come prepared!
- Be enthusiastic, be curious
- Ask for and give ongoing, specific, constructive feedback (about behaviors and work products not the person)
- Let each other know when something needs to be addressed
- Sum up discussion and clarify areas of confusion
- Be respectful
- Listen
- commit to being part of a community of learners
- know that the quality of your communication and practice of compassion with each other will set the stage for the quality of your relationships with colleagues, patients, and their families

#### Roles and responsibilities:

**Faculty**

- Provide structure in the classroom—timing, exercises, etc
- If I don’t know the answer to a question I will follow up on it in the next session
- Respect diversity and be inclusive in my language, behavior, and course materials
- Make course expectations clear

**Students**

- Take risks—it’s ok to be uncertain
- I will speak up if I tend to be quiet; listen more if I tend to talk a lot
- Work through problems instead of trying to get the right answer right away
- Make connections between what I am learning in this class with my learning in other classes and clinic settings
- Learn about and practice professionalism
- Take responsibility for my own learning—continually assess my learning needs and take steps to address them
- Ask for help when needed

**Class**

- we will share the workload
- Support each other
- Share the “floor”
- Be collaborative not competitive
- Address differences with peers and faculty with kindness and respect
- Ask for and give feedback to help each other learn
**Part III. Wrapping up: documenting and revisiting the learning agreement**

We have a good start on outlining how we will work together over the coming weeks and months. I will sum up our conversation today and organize it into sections that reflect our needs, expectations, roles and responsibilities, and feedback. I will post these on our class website so we can refer back to this or add to it as needed. I will check in with you over time to see how we are doing with this plan, and to discuss whether we want to make any changes or additions to this document. If you would like to discuss or revisit this please let us know and we will find time to discuss this in private or as a group.

Before we wrap up this discussion, I want to check in with you to see if you have any additional questions or suggestions. I am going to also post the Harvard University statement the is related to this discussion, as it fits with the ideas and values that we have articulated today.

**References**


Faculty may also want to refer to the Harvard University statement related to the learning agreement:

**Harvard University statement of mission and values**

https://hms.harvard.edu/departments/hms-community-values

Harvard University aspires to provide education and scholarship of the highest quality — to advance the frontiers of knowledge and to prepare individuals for life, work, and leadership. Achieving these aims depends on the efforts of thousands of faculty, students, and staff across the University. ...We owe it to one another to uphold certain basic values of the community. These include:

1. Respect for the rights, differences, and dignity of others
2. Honesty and integrity in all dealings
3. Conscientious pursuit of excellence in one's work
4. Accountability for actions and conduct in the workplace

The more we embrace these values in our daily lives, the more we create and sustain an environment of trust, cooperation, lively inquiry, and mutual understanding — and advance a commitment to education and scholarship, which all of us share.