

Middle Grades Review

Volume 7
Issue 2 *Personalized Learning for Social
Justice: From Theory to Practice*

Article 4

August 2021

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Recommended Citation

O'Donnell, M. (2021). Student Agency through Negotiated Practice. *Middle Grades Review*, 7(2).
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol7/iss2/4>

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Student Agency through Negotiated Practice

Meg O'Donnell, *Shelburne Community School*

Abstract

Using the James Beane's democratic approach, this article describes how a middle grades team supports students to choose topics within broad themes and learning pathways that suit their interests, skills, and needs as individuals. Using a series of instructional structures, the facilitators encourage students to engage in research, thoughtful discussions, courageous conversations, and carefully constructed writing processes, while also emphasizing curiosity, critical thinking, relationship development, and social activism. Within a standards-based learning environment the author walks the reader through a process which allows students to generate questions they want to investigate. Once students have generated their common questions, they review the Common Core State Standards and content standards for social studies or science. This process of democratic education has students taking the leadership role in planning curriculum and having teachers take on the role of facilitator. Ultimately, this article discusses how this process leads to student engagement, provides opportunities for reflection, and allows for students to achieve academic and personal goals while addressing issues for social change.

INTRODUCTION

For 25 years, I have taught on an integrated multiage team of three to four teachers, with 60 to 80 sixth through eighth grade students. This experience has fostered in me a lifelong love of learning alongside middle level students and colleagues. While I am certified in social studies and language arts, I am nationally certified as a middle level generalist and have taught as a generalist for most of my 25 years. Students were organized in multi-age prime groups of approximately 20 students as part of the team structure. Mini-lessons of project-based learning and literacy assisted students in their prime groups based on content of their integrated thematic units. Whole team daily meetings, and regular team building established and fostered a cohesive culture. In these structures, my colleagues and our students designed integrated thematic units using student questions in conjunction with national, state and local standards.

In most middle level classrooms, teachers ask students to ponder big ideas, to answer big questions: What are the effects of climate change? How are world cultures similar and different from one another? Who gets power and why? These are thought provoking questions that can engage learners in a dynamic inquiry process and generate student learning that is evident in unit assessments. Once complete, it is

then on to the next unit of study, the next big question posed by the teacher.

Instead, imagine those big ideas coming directly from students, where the unit of study, or better yet the *learning*, starts with student questions? Where student questions relate to topics and ideas they are genuinely wondering about *and* that relate to social justice, equity, the environment – topics we strive to address with students through our standards-based curriculum? What happens in our classrooms when we share the reins of designing curriculum with our students? How could students generating questions they have about their world lead to personalized learning? How could students generating questions they have about their world lead to authentic learning experiences? How could students generating questions they have about their world lead to their agency as learners, and ultimately agency as citizens?

Keeping students and their voices at the center of teaching is ambitious and essential to middle level practice. It is not a wholesale relinquishing of control over to students, but a democratic approach that puts students and teachers together creating engaging and impactful learning experiences and reflecting on learning through goal setting and student led conferences. By implementing such practices with conviction and intention, we can create

classroom cultures that foster student agency in their own learning and in addressing issues in the world around them.

Asking students to generate questions they have about themselves and their world is not an innovative idea. In fact, James Bean and Chris Stevenson re-introduced these ideas to middle level educators in the early 1990's (it had been around for many years before that), referring to the process as negotiated curriculum (Beane, George, & Stevenson, 1992). In negotiated curriculum, students and teachers build

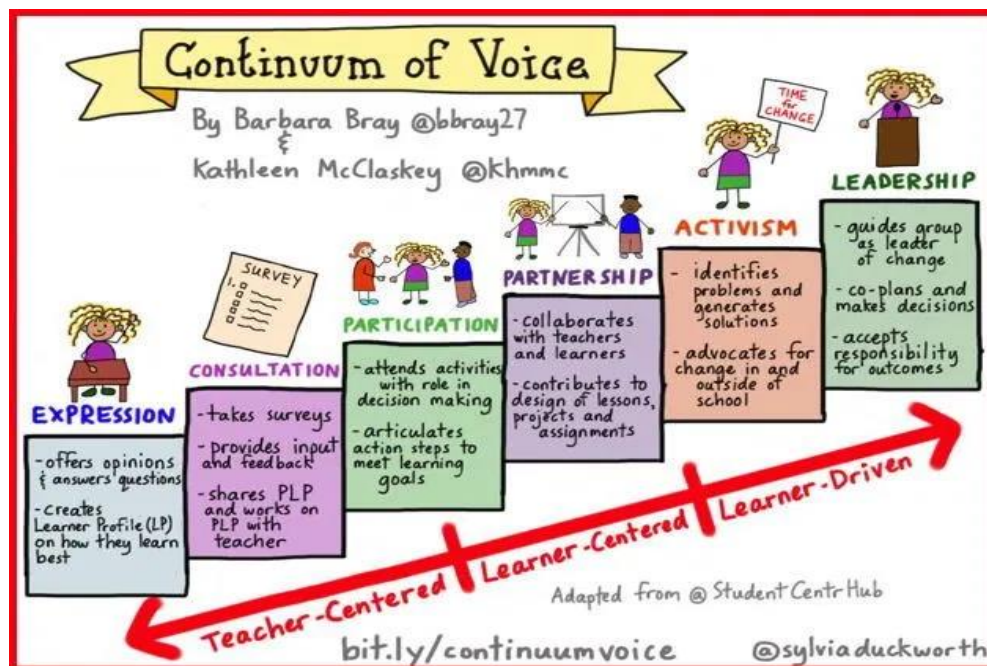
engaging relevant curriculum based on students' genuine questions. Teams and teachers have implemented various means of negotiated curriculum and democratic practices for years.

Overview

The process, described briefly here and in more detail below, is fairly straightforward. See Figure 1 for a Continuum of Student Voice that guides our team in planning with students. The goal each year is for our students to move toward activist and leadership roles.

Figure 1

Continuum of Student Voice



The process starts with students generating questions they have about themselves and the world, then we look for commonalities, then connect those common questions to topics to be addressed in a given year (the topics to be addressed in a given year can be related to a broad theme, like Change Over Time, or can be prescribed from course or curriculum requirements outlined by school or district). Students' questions helped to form the essential questions of our Know, Understand, Do (KUD) unit plans. Once students generated their common questions, they review the Common Core State Standards and content standards to be addressed in the given social studies or science unit. In small groups, students

brainstorm whole-group, small-group and individual activities that would help to address the given standards. They also consider resources (paper, people, web sources) that could be useful, as well as field experiences to help broaden the learning experience. Once all small groups have contributed to a public record of each category of theme planning, students "dot" vote to determine the activities to incorporate into the theme. Teachers then build the KUD, building activities and events that reflect student choice while maintaining accountability to the standards.

The Process of Student Voice in Curriculum Development

This process is a simple yet effective one, as it involves all voices in developing curriculum, including that of the teacher. It is collaborative; when I am witnessing the question generating process with students, I listen intently to their questions and share ones I ponder about, careful not to steer or control the process, but to share my own enthusiasm and interest in what they are wondering about. Students are encouraged to consider possibilities that are beyond a quick google search – access to information on current events, world issues and answers to queries posed on a smartphone have become ubiquitous. How do we help students still pose thoughtful provocative questions about what they want to learn about themselves and their world? Fortunately, with middle school students, their emergence into abstract thinking provides a perfect opportunity to pose and ponder these big ideas.

Prompting Resources

To prime the pump and get students thinking about some big topics before we ask them to write questions, we view a series of thought-provoking videos or montages of compelling information as part of our daily writer's notebook prompts. Students view and discuss videos such as *Did you Know, 2019* – loaded with statistics and facts about the pace of our changing world and the impact technology has on their future. We watch a *Power of 10* video, that shows the scope of scale from outer space down to atomic structure. We watch student news, and a favorite, the *Week-in-Rap* from Flocabulary. These prompts ponder big ideas and current events that sometimes we do not have time to consider in our presently over-scheduled lives. While we know our required curriculum does not involve all aspects of what is introduced in these video prompts, we do want students to ponder ideas greater than themselves. The point here is to help them wonder. We want them to think outside the box, long term, so when we do study say, our conflict unit, and look at past and present conflicts, we can help students make sense of how history informs the present and impacts the future. They can begin to wonder how scientists use different tools and theories to make sense of the simple and the complex. Posing thoughtful questions leads to other thoughtful questions. One year I had brought a group of students to

share the curriculum-development process to a group of college students and a question posed to my students was, "What if your question is not answered in the curriculum development process?" The student paused for a moment, looked puzzled, and answered, "Well, my questions keep changing. I don't have the same questions from year to year." It is not just about the question itself; it is about the invitation and opportunity to ponder the question.

Creating and Curating Self and World Questions

A favorite, albeit somewhat nerve-wracking activity for a small group of seventh or eighth grade students is to be at the center of Self and World Questions fishbowl. Once we have viewed these videos over the course of several days, we pull students into a large group for the fishbowl process. Four or five students sit in a small circle in the center of the room, while the rest of the team sits in a circle around the students in the center. The task for the students in the center is to simply discuss topics that come to mind, and essentially think aloud, sharing what they observe happening in their world (local, national, international), speculating as to why things are the way they are, and hypothesizing what they will become. Fishbowl students can ask a guest from the audience to sit in on their discussion or provide a new topic to discuss. As this conversation is happening, the audience is generating their individual self and world questions. We separate questions into the two categories of self and world to help foster an understanding that we often have as many questions about ourselves and our bodies/minds as we do about our world. This honors the idea of where students are at developmentally, being responsive to their need for sense making.

For an individual assignment, students are expected to go home and generate more self and world questions (about 10 for each category). They come to school the next day and we ask them to share their world questions in small multi-age groups. Each group generates a list of common questions and they capture them on a public record; they repeat the process the next day for self-questions. Students share out their questions to the team in another whole team meeting, further gleaning common questions across the whole team. Then, we sort common questions to the curriculum topics to be addressed in that year's cycle, sometimes circling back to our question list for matches.

This collaborative process allows students to see and sort self and world questions related to a common theme, and increases participation by provoking deeper discussion, debate and consensus on best-fit questions. Their questions help to guide our enduring understandings for each theme.

In addition to finding common self and world questions, students consider big overarching ideas and determine a thread that will connect and bridge all of our topics for our learning for the year, grounding the learning across multiple disciplines, and seemingly unrelated topics. For example, as we studied cultures, earth science, geography, and ecology, with a common lens of learning experiences that focused on how these disciplines have evolved or changed over time, we noted that the big idea was *Change Over Time*. This helped students to see the interconnectedness of learning, and that when we can make connections across disciplines, meaningful learning takes place. It is possible this concept of an overarching idea could help structure specific content areas, or a humanities approach.

Here is just a sampling of some of their questions. These questions were pulled from their common self and world questions related to conflict. While one could argue that not all the questions here definitely connect to conflict standards, it is a place where students see some connection.

- Why do we make the decisions that we do?
- Why do people fight over their beliefs? Why do people get mad about other's beliefs?
- What would our world be like without conflict?
- What influences a conflict between people or places (countries)?
- How will war affect our future?
- How does world conflict impact our daily lives?
- How do our actions impact our future?
- Will there be a WWII? If so, when? What will be the cause?
- How close are we to a major conflict with North Korea?
- How have actions from the past changed my life?
- How does Social Media affect my friendships?

- How do my friends affect who I am and who I will be in the future?
- How does my name affect the way that people think about me?
- Do I have anything in my past that affects me today?

Developing Negotiated Curriculum

Once this process is complete, we are ready to build and implement our thematic unit. Students review the curriculum standards to be addressed on that topic. Students provide their input to the theme development process by suggesting activities and experiences that might help to answer some of their guiding questions. As expected, they prefer as much experiential learning as possible; they want to work with their friends and they want to see the relevance in what they are supposed to learn (standards) with what they want to learn (common questions). In small groups, they research possible sources, common reads, potential consultants, or experts from nearby universities that can enhance the experience.

As teachers, we use their questions, posed in authentic student language and phrased in meaningful ways, as the enduring understandings for our unit design, using the understanding by design framework from Wiggins and McTighe (2005). The Know, Understand, Do unit, or KUD unit, is fleshed out with whole group, small group and individual expectations; we develop weekly goals that will provide the necessary learning experiences to address the content and the literacy components for that theme. Each day when teachers meet during our common planning time, we fine-tune the schedule, design lessons, and determine resources and tools to best access the standards, and to build assessment opportunities to gauge progress toward the standards. We implement standards-based assessment practices that use learning targets to align student work with and accountability to performance-based graduation requirements. The process of generating self and world questions has remained relevant with the evolving emphasis on standards-based education.

It is worth noting that no matter how many times I have participated in this process with students, it continues to surprise me that themes and content areas that emerge from their questions are universal. I have participated in this process with students from a variety of school and community settings through professional development experiences, and every time we arrive at similar common themes. They want to know about disease and health issues, they want to know about money and how it works, they want to understand why people fight in the name of religion, they want to know what their future holds, and what factors make us similar with one another and what makes us distinct and unique. Not only are they pondering these big ideas, like many adults wonder about, but we find connections between their common questions and the content areas we are expected to address in a given year.

The Deeper Dive

It might help to take a walk through a specific example of how a theme was designed off student questions, and how the theme helped our team address a common social issue for middle schoolers. For our theme on conflict, we used student input to steer the direction of the theme, and used a framework that allowed us to address a prevalent issue with adolescents: cyber bullying. It turned out that students on our team had been perpetrators and victims of cyber bullying (the question from their self and world process above *How does Social Media affect my friendships?* connects directly with this issue). With bullies and victims came bystanders and upstanders. We saw a direct connection between the theme we were about to engage in, U.S. involvement in 20th century conflicts, and how conflict was playing out for our students in real time.

We wanted a process that would help students see how bullying originates and festers, and how

individuals and groups can be both victims and aggressors; how doing something and doing nothing is still impactful in a conflict. The roles can be dynamic and fluid. We recognize that in society we have dealt with bullies and victims throughout history. Individuals and groups choose to go to war or engage in a conflict for a variety of reasons; understanding the reasons and the roles played reveal the complexity of conflict and can empower agency or change. We can empower students to be informed citizens, to understand these dynamics in personal and political conflict and make choices accordingly.

We used the student generated guiding question, *How does perspective influence the way groups and individuals deal with conflict?*, and the structure of aggressor-victim, upstander-bystander to provide a framework for our theme. Learning targets that focused on cause and effect, perspective taking, relationships and writing using claim-evidence-reasoning were assessed throughout the unit. We posed questions about who holds the power in such conflicts, and whose stories are told and retold without considering other perspectives?

Students read a variety of novels in small groups. The novels selected were ones whose characters fell into the roles of aggressor-victim and upstander-bystander. *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *The Revealers* by Doug Wilhelm, *Number the Stars* and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry provided accounts of the human story behind conflict. Students used an organizer from the conflict unit to address character conflict in the novel they read.

Figure 2 is an example of a student's self-assessment reflection on the relationship target they chose to connect their learning to. This demonstrates the connection this student made to the complexities of the bully cycle roles and the characters in the book they read, *The Outsiders*. The student's responses are in bold.

Figure 2

Reflection of Student Work on The Outsiders and a Learning Target

Task One:

- Identify a work sample completed during the past two weeks to anchor this reflection. This should be something that has meaning for you - something that challenged you or allowed you to express your learning in a powerful way. *UPLOAD AN IMAGE OR LINK, DESCRIBE THE WORK SAMPLE YOU IDENTIFIED, AND EXPLAIN THE REASONS YOU SELECTED IT.*

Book Group Signpost Task -


- **I chose this task because I think I did a good job connecting to the essential question, *How does perspective influence the way groups and individuals deal with conflict?* I looked at each role in the "bullying cycle," and connected to one character, explaining how they demonstrate each one at some point.**

Task Two:

- Read through the Transferable Skills Learning Targets, and identify the skill / target that most closely aligns to the reason you are reflecting on this work. *INCLUDE TRANSFERABLE SKILL TITLE.* Copy the target and scale in the space below.

Informed and Integrative Thinking

B. Identify main and supporting ideas, patterns, trends, clues and relationships in sources of information.

			
I can identify main ideas from a source.	I can identify details that support the main idea.	I can recognize patterns, trends, and clues in sources to understand the author / creator's purpose.	I can make connections between main point and supporting ideas / patterns to evaluate sources.

Task Three:

Carefully review the learning scale connected to this transferable standard. Your reflection should connect to the evidence (work sample) you identified, and also speak to your progress with this skill in a general sense. *EACH BULLET REQUIRES SEVERAL SENTENCES TO ANSWER COMPLETELY. SEE SAMPLE in ABOUT CLASSROOM TAB.* Where are you on the scale? (Describe your skill set; NOT the number!)

- Where are you on the scale? (Describe your skill set; NOT the number!) **I think I am in the place where I can, "recognize patterns, trends, and clues in sources to understand the author/creator's purpose."** I think I am in this place because I am able to pick up on signposts and perspectives in the *Outsiders*, in order to get at a deeper meaning of the plot and of the characters.
- Make specific connections to the work sample.

A specific example of that is when I can connect one character, Darry, to 3 out of the 4 "bully cycle" roles. When I connect him to upstander, aggressor, and victim, I am able to look at different layers of his character, picking up on what demeanor and meaning S.E. Hinton wanted him to have in the plot.

Bullying of any kind is a painful and pervasive issue, and it seems no matter how much time we dedicate to discussing it with students, the behaviors continue. I am not suggesting that as a result of this theme, we eliminated bullying issues on our team altogether. I can say grounding the work in their genuine questions, honoring their voice in the process, and connecting historical events to a topic relevant to their life provided a platform for us to discuss, analyze and build empathy for one another.

Process of Student Voice in Assessment Practices

It makes sense here to talk about assessment practices, specifically student-led portfolio conferences. How does this commitment to student voice in the curriculum development process align with assessment practices? At the very core, the guiding principle is the same – honor student voice. By regularly asking for student input in the design of what we study, it makes sense that we emphasize the power of their reflection on that learning. This happens in several ways:

- Asking for student input on learning partners and on small group partners helps us better understand interpersonal dynamics of how students work together;
- Asking for self-assessment on most learning tasks, with a justification as to why by finding evidence of where they see themselves on a learning target;
- Weekly emails home;
- Planning for and conducting student led conferences.

These last two practices are explained here in more detail. We ask students to reflect each week in an email home to their parent or guardian and their teacher every Friday. The email has a particular format: a greeting, a description of a success they experienced and/or a challenge they grappled with that week, a note about upcoming events or announcements from the team, and sometimes an additional reflective

prompt (provided to students earlier in the week so they can anticipate and start crafting a response). This regular reflection helps connect their learning to bigger ideas – transferable skills or habits of learning – and prepares them for future reflection processes (the portfolio). This communication is also invaluable for teachers. Not only am I finding out what is working for a student, I am given an insight on personal triumphs I might not know about through daily classroom teaching – scoring the winning soccer goal, earning the next belt in karate, volunteering through a church or community group at a food shelter. I get a peek into the lives my students lead outside of school. The more I know, the more responsive I can be, and certainly this is true for any issues or concerns that are shared. We know it can often be easier for a student to write a concern or stressor than it is to share it in person. I can respond, problem solve, and ease their mind (and often their parents). I often find I adjust my plans or strategies based on the feedback I receive from students over the weekend. It is a continuous improvement cycle. The Friday email communication and update, with guidelines and assessed to the communication learning target, is a formal means of communication and a perfect way to prepare students for the real world. By doing this consistently each week, with feedback from teachers as needed, they are well prepped to reflect on their trimester as a whole.

Each trimester, students prepare for a conference in which they will convey their learning to their parents or guardians, and a primary teacher through a portfolio. The portfolios are a vehicle for students to reflect on a trimester's worth of work, to identify areas of success and challenge, and to create goals for the next trimester based on those areas of challenge. To prepare for this conference, students are asked to reflect on their trimester's work by responding to such questions as identify something you are proud of, something you found challenging, etc. We provide students with different tools to help organize and manage their work and reflections. Gathering the work and keeping it in a folder or binder, or creating an online doc or slide show, help to provide the structure of the portfolio. Documents and

templates with reflective prompts help to support reflection; sometimes students use sticky notes on specific pieces of work to be sure to highlight that sample when discussing their work at the conference. Before the actual conference, we have students sit with a partner and review their portfolio (this is especially helpful when experienced students help novice students). Having students answer their peer's questions about their work is perfect practice for the potential questions their parent or guardian might ask. They are now ready for the actual conference.

The origins of the word *assess* means “to sit by” and that is exactly what happens when we sit with a student and their family: we celebrate their evidence of learning over the course of the trimester and discuss those areas that need intentional practice. Together, we craft goals for the next trimester, which will become the focus for students' learning – and Friday emails – over the course of the following trimester. This all happens in a safe and respectful environment. We offer a variety of times to allow for families' busy schedules, and have even used FaceTime when a parent was out of town or not able to attend in person. In some instances, we have a student share their portfolio with a trusted adult at school – it could be the principal, a guidance counselor or English learner instructor, or a former teacher. The student witnesses the human resources here to support them on their learning adventure, and they trust us to support and hold them accountable. They build the skills necessary to take responsibility for compiling and organizing their work, honestly evaluate their work habits and behavior, reflect deeply on their successes and challenges, and set new goals based on their understanding of their current needs.

This process is one that requires teachers to wear many different hats – part parent, part counselor (for children and sometimes parents), cheerleader, and boundary holder, resource creator, humorist, and education consultant. Above all else, a solid listener, who must attend carefully to the dynamics between student and parent and remember that the goal is to provide the tools and structures necessary for the student's progress and ultimate success. Sometimes, parents' perception of what school should be may seem in contrast to what we know pedagogically is right for adolescents, and in those cases, we do our best to educate and inform parents of why and what we are doing.

For most families, they acknowledge how well we know and understand their children and are grateful for our time and constant constructive feedback to help students grow into productive young adults.

Takeaways

The overall significance here is that by asking students first what questions they have about themselves and their world, and then seeing the topic of their questions resonate in what the state standards deem important, helps solidify that what they want to know matters, and that others think it matters. If we had approached the theme with the standards first, and then asking for their input, the authenticity of their voice and genuine questions would be less impactful, less personalized. This process is simple, easily manageable, and a powerful affirmation that student input matters.

The evidence of classroom practices firmly grounded in a democratic approach allows students to advocate for themselves. Learning is collaborative through the negotiated curriculum development process, personalized through the portfolio process, and engaging through the relevance of issues drawn from the world around them. How learning is shared at portfolio conference steers goal setting and leads to personalization.

A foundation of middle level teaching practice is honoring student voice in the development of curriculum. We know this from *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) and from countless educators and professors who instill the concept of the democratic classroom into their classrooms. We know this from the myriad of examples of project-based learning, curriculum integration, and negotiated curriculum. When we teach in a manner that is firmly grounded in this approach to learning, we are fostering and promoting a democratic classroom that can be traced back to progressive leaders of middle level practice. What is important, or what matters, is that we believe that what and how we are teaching is making a difference to the students with whom we interact. This is evidenced by their engagement, reflection and commitment to their learning.

Negotiated curriculum does not mean educators

have to throw out their curriculum or give the reins of running a classroom entirely over to students. Nothing could be further from the truth; negotiating is not either or. It is together; it is we. What is powerful and impactful is the idea of establishing partnership with students. By having students pose personal questions about themselves and their world, their voice is woven into the fabric of the curriculum. As teachers, we are accountable to state standards, and have curricular expectations. Students' genuine wonderings often align with what they are expected to know. They want to understand why and how world wars start and how their outcomes are relevant still today. They want to know why wars are waged in the name of religion. They want to know the impact of greenhouse gases on the climate, animals and human populations, and they want to know what careers will be available to them in the future. When we listen to our students' genuine questions, we hear not just their voices, but we honor their intellectual curiosity, their passions and concerns. And if we allow their questions to direct the learning, students are empowered to use their voices not only in the classroom, but in their communities as well.

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RESOURCES

[CVU learns:](http://cvulearns.weebly.com/)

<http://cvulearns.weebly.com/>

[Did you Know, 2019:](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTMO6NZOyDQ)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTMO6NZOyDQ>

[Hopes and Dreams Template for](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Gn2EQc6jP8q7RLuF9RkFrK5bRYBmqfySAUYWVoCFL7Q/edit)

[Conferences:](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Gn2EQc6jP8q7RLuF9RkFrK5bRYBmqfySAUYWVoCFL7Q/edit)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Gn2EQc6jP8q7RLuF9RkFrK5bRYBmqfySAUYWVoCFL7Q/edit>

[Sample of Common Questions for](https://docs.google.com/document/d/11rQMCxoWqCBBYzkd-doJw5SRT5yFMXcJ8GmaZSYaMko/edit)

[Conflict Theme:](https://docs.google.com/document/d/11rQMCxoWqCBBYzkd-doJw5SRT5yFMXcJ8GmaZSYaMko/edit)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/11rQMCxoWqCBBYzkd-doJw5SRT5yFMXcJ8GmaZSYaMko/edit>