

## Session 1 Teacher Deep Dive

# Creating a Safe Learning Environment

*"In mindfulness training, the learning moment is one of "falling awake," so to speak. It's a moment of seeing clearly, of insight, and of receptivity to a deeper knowing, in combination with the ability to integrate this experience."*

*—Brandsma, 18.*

The most important thing to remember is that the learning environment is complex and dynamic. Often, classrooms get reduced to students who absorb information, or teachers who present information. These two-dimensional reductions neglect the multiple kinds of interaction that happen in a live classroom—students have relationships with each other, with the teacher, with the material, and with the personal lives they bring into the classroom. It's important to think of the classroom as a **setting** that influences those present and is in turn influenced by every person.

Your role in this setting takes on many names: teacher, guide, coach. While you may not be their mental health professional, learning mindfulness will necessarily bring up positive and negative emotions, sensations, and thoughts—all of which will impact a student's capacity for learning. Consider the many different functions you serve, just within a single 90-minute class:

- Provider of new information
- Time keeper
- Meditation guide
- Keeper of safe space
- Inquiry guide
- Adjudicator of disputes
- Discussion facilitator
- Emotional regulator
- Challenge presenter
- Problem solver
- Provider of support and encouragement

In the course of any class session, your role may include even more functions, and you will necessarily adapt to the needs and challenges that arise. Adaptability will be one of the key skills you lean on, develop, and grow.

Among the many unique characteristics that students bring to the classroom are learning style (see Part 2), personality, educational history, cognitive strengths and weaknesses, and others. In a way, you won't be teaching a class of students so much as guiding every student along their individual journey of discovery, practice, growth, and change.

Two additional personal factors will influence how students learn and how you might respond to their needs. The first is students' **personal style of paying attention** (Brandsma, 23). Over the course of a

lifetime, individuals learn, practice, and receive reinforcement from focusing on particular aspects of themselves, their environment, and others. Individuals can tend to focus on problems, solutions, words, images, colors, sensations, others, themselves, shapes, sounds, differences, similarities, function, beauty, action, abstract thoughts, and a host of other aspects that make up their subjective reality.

Our personal style of paying attention has been practiced for a long time and is, in part, determined by personality, making it only somewhat flexible. As a teacher, you can be conscious of each student's style and offer multiple ways of presenting information to capitalize on more than one style. For example, during a guided meditation, you can offer language that taps into various styles by asking students to notice whether the sensation in their feet is heavy, bright, connected, disconnected, smooth, a particular color, etc.

The second factor is striking a ***balance between the needs of the individual and the group*** (Brandsma, 25). In reality, there is no way to lead a class through completely different, individualized mindfulness journeys. In the interest of time, space, and your own capacity, the class has to function as a group. Which means that at any given time, some may feel less ready, less capable, bored, distracted, or otherwise "off" from the group. It's simply the reality of learning in a group environment, and it can serve as fertile ground for personal growth. When an individual's learning attributes don't match instruction or group needs, it can serve as a positive challenge to adapt, ask for help, do some extra work outside of class, or find another solution to move forward.

The bottom line is that no student will align perfectly with the group all the time and you can't cater to every individual need at all times. Likely, you will find yourself toggling between prioritizing individual needs and group needs, perhaps multiple times during a single session. Here are some quick tips for striking a good balance, and for teaching in general:

- Offer times to work together or communicate via email outside of class. Just be careful hold health boundaries with your time, space, and availability.
- Encourage students to journal daily or weekly, and perhaps share their thoughts with you to begin a strategy conversation.
- Offer to connect students as accountability partners who can help each other outside of class time. Encourage students to be careful about their personal boundaries and let you know if they encounter any problems or concerns.
- Allow students some time flexibility whenever possible—can they stay after class to finish a meditation? Can they have a flexible break time? Can they pause a meditation that isn't working and journal instead while the class finishes up?
- Encourage ongoing self-assessment and reflection. Have students talk and write about their learning needs. The content of the class can include mindfulness research, meditation techniques, and students' own progress.