

Session 2 Teacher Deep Dive

Creating a fertile learning setting

"Training in mindfulness is all about meeting the experience of the present moment. This requires receptivity, which in turn calls for two qualities: an open mind, free of assumptions and presumptions, and the silencing of concepts, comments, and stories—in other words, the usual verbal noise of the mind."

-Rob Brandsma

Learning comprises far more than simply absorbing information or mastering a skill. The process of learning itself can be transformative. **Participating in learning** can change the way students think, act, and learn in the future.

The following components of a fertile learning setting take time, consistency, and practice on the teacher's part, and may be naturally met with students' eagerness, hesitation, and/or resistance. These are not ways to "set up" your class, but rather teaching practices for you to follow and develop during every session.

Openness

If we want students to adopt a posture of openness to learning, which is another way of saying being open to "not-knowing" (Brandsma, 50), then teachers must serve as both models and encouragers of openness. Mindfulness is about creating space for the present moment. Individuals will vary in what they must work toward clearing away in order to make space—intrusive thoughts, negative self-talk, anxiety, depression, loneliness.

Clearing a space doesn't mean avoiding the issues we face. It simply means seeing ourselves clearly, without judgement, as observers. Instead of being wrapped up in anxiety, for example, we can practice noticing it, feeling where it settles in the body, and curiously witnessing its effects on our thought patterns. We may also encourage students to clear away entrenched beliefs, preconceived notions, presumptions, and easy answers.

To help students cultivate openness and beginner's mind, you can:

- Strive for answers that are flexible rather than "correct." When students ask, "Is this the right way?" you can choose to avoid a simple "Yes" or "No." Instead, offer openness with, "How does it feel to you?"; "Does it help you feel grounded and present?"; "What would getting it right feel like to you?"
- Encourage students to be curious about their own questions and help them explore why they're asking and what their questions can teach them. "That's interesting. What makes you ask at this moment?"; "Let's explore where that question comes from and how we can find an answer"; "Tell me more about your curiosity about this topic."

- Reward questions, not-knowing, curiosity, and vulnerability. As class facilitator, your rewards come in the form of affirmation, connection, and mutual vulnerability. When you tell students you appreciate their question, that their question has helped the class dig deeper, that you share their confusion, or that you have also experienced the same struggle, a connection is forged and students will feel encouraged to repeat or try new acts of openness.

Silence

Silence and stillness are not only spaces that allow for learning but are the very things that bring about learning to new practitioners of mindfulness. “Silence is the most widely used ‘form,’ or transmitter, of the unformed, of openness” (Brandsma, 51). Often, we avoid silence by trying to fill it with voices, busyness, music, or other stimulation, simply because it feels uncomfortable at first.

To help students cultivate comfort and openness to silence, you can:

- Tell students when you are offering silent space for them to practice, breathe, think, or reflect. Prepare them adequately, then let them openly reflect on the experience in pairs or groups.
- Acknowledge the discomfort and encourage self-acceptance.
- Encourage students not to fill silence with inner dialogue, ruminating, or worry. Use your presence and your voice to bring students back to attention when they appear uncomfortable or distracted.
- Reassure students that silence is necessary, good, and nothing to be feared. Practice will help cultivate tolerance and resilience.

Process

While students come with a variety of personal goals in mind, from lessening anxiety to enhancing decision-making, the class focus should be on the process and practice of mindfulness, rather than simply the results. In truth, you can’t control or guarantee results for students.

To help students return their focus to the process and practice of mindfulness, you can:

- Remind students that concentrating on results takes away from the key tenet of mindfulness, which is the present moment.
- Encourage self-acceptance. It’s normal to desire change and results. Allow students to witness their thoughts without judgment.
- Remind students that a strong mindfulness practice is actually the key to results.