

## Session 6 Teacher Deep Dive

# Guided Inquiry

By now, you've led several formal practices with your students as well as guided reflection exercises, journaling, and discussions. You may have noticed varying reactions and levels of engagement to the reflection portion. Sometimes it can be challenging to make meaning of an experience in the immediate wake of new sensations. Other times, students will experience marvelous breakthroughs or insights.

When we talk *about* an experience, we are in the realm of ***inquiry***. The basic premise of inquiry is to take a real, often recent experience, and look closely at it. Inquiry involves:

- Questioning
- Reflecting
- Exploring
- Investigating
- Seeking knowledge
- Looking for insight
- Openness to different perspectives, interpretations, and meanings
- Expanding self-awareness
- Confronting doubts
- Sitting with discomfort or difficulty

*Inquiry starts where individual meditation ends. Exploring practice experiences jointly as a group gives participants access to richer meaning and insight than would be possible through personal perception alone. Inquiry adds to individual practice experiences through recalling, deepening, and broadening, creating a framework that supports and extends what individuals perceived, often latently, during the meditation.*

- Rob Brandsma, 102

You may have noticed that this curriculum has already been asking you to engage in ***inquiry-based learning***. This is when you help students learn through their own experience, rather than simply presenting facts. Inquiry-based learning happens when we ask students to practice a new kind of meditation, then help them make meaning of the experience together—in a safe, welcoming, nonjudging, and empathetic environment.

There are different levels of inquiry-based learning. On one end of the spectrum, we have Confirmation Inquiry, which aims to lead students to results that are already known. For example, a science teacher allowing students to experiment with a variety of chemicals so that they can “discover” different reactions. On the other end, we have Open Inquiry, which allows students to both pose their own questions and conduct their own independent research to find answers. This approach works best when

students already have a strong foundation of subject knowledge. For example, when a senior History student gets to ask and answer their own research question on an era they have already studied.

Between these two approaches lies Guided Inquiry, which you are encouraged to use with your students. Guided Inquiry gives students some structure, background, knowledge, questions, and direction before allowing them to lead their own inquiry process. They receive a set of terms, a claim, an example, and then enter an experience that will help them explore—openly, without any preconceived outcomes.

### *Benefits of Guided Inquiry in Mindfulness*

#### ***Helping reduce over-identification with our experiences.***

“When people strongly identify with an experience, their speech will be heavily impregnated with that experience. Instead of saying, ‘There is fear,’ they equate themselves with the experience: ‘I’m afraid’” (Brandsma, 119). Labeling our experience, especially if new, helps create distance between the self and the experience, which in turn allows us to see that experiences do not consume us, nor do they last forever.

Questions to help students describe experiences:

- What is the feeling? (Note “the feeling” instead of “your feeling” already helps students not to over-identify with the experience.)
- What is the sensation?
- Where is the feeling located?
- What is the sensation connected to?
- Can we look at the emotion?
- Can we bring the attention to something else for a moment?

#### ***Gaining new insight and expanding self-awareness.***

Connecting a present experience to past experiences—by comparison, contrast, finding patterns, etc.—often leads to new insights about our own tendencies, behaviors, fears, and associations. For one student, gaining insight (with the help of a teacher’s questions) can look like this:

“I felt a strong craving for something sweet during the practice. I wasn’t hungry, but my mouth was watering. The experience began with thinking about stress. I felt the stress in my jaw. Stress is an empty feeling in my stomach. It’s not real hunger, but I want to feed it. I associate stress with a feeling of emptiness, which leads me to a pattern of eating.”

Questions to help students expand self-awareness:

- Do you see this experience in other parts of your life?
- What have you done in the past in response to this sensation?
- Where did the feeling begin?
- Do you recognize the feeling from anywhere else?
- How do you usually respond to this sensation?
- What do you associate with this feeling?

***Finding deeper connection with others.***

"... Recognition within the group is a powerful way of helping individual participants see that they aren't alone in struggling with this difficulty. Broadening the scope in this way also gets the other participants involved and creates a learning experience for them, as well" (Brandsma, 121). Connecting with other members of the class, with the teacher, and with the broader context of all humanity can be a healing experience. It can provide relief from isolation, normalization, empathy for self and others.

Questions to help students see their experiences as connected to others:

- Does this seem like a common/universal experience?
- Does this seem like something others might struggle with?
- Has anyone else experienced this? (directed toward the whole room)
- Do you know of anyone else who has experienced this? How did they respond?
- What would be a nonjudgmental response?
- What would a friend say in response to your experience?

***Finding new responses for future experiences.***

"Insight is most valuable when it has implications for the future" (Brandsma, 137). In order for learning to change us, we must apply it to our future actions and choices. This doesn't necessarily require a specific plan or strategy, but more of a shift in our approach to the moment.

Questions to help students clarify insights for future use:

- What could be a good response if this happens again?
- What didn't work for you this time?
- What would you want to see yourself do in a future situation?
- What would you want to do differently in a similar situation?
- What can you imagine yourself doing next time?