



QUESTIONS OF WONDER

"...Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

—Rainier Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

OVERVIEW

Students reflect on, write about, and share their personal questions of wonder about themselves, others, life and the universe, in service of creating a deeper sense of connection, meaning, and relevance in the classroom.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- *Note: This practice is designed to be used midway through the arc of a semester-long class or advisory*
- To build and deepen a learning community after a teacher has built relationships and trust in the classroom, and once social emotional skills have been developed
- To cultivate strong relationships between students, and to help them connect with one another beyond superficial roles and identities
- To create meaning, purpose, and relevance, as students make personal connections to universal themes
- To support students in building resilience during times of developmental and school-based transitions (e.g. making the transition into high school)

TIME REQUIRED

- Two sessions, 45 minutes each

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Note cards or paper (three for each student)
- Pen or pencils
- Timer
- Chime
- Handout of Questions of Wonder list for each student (generated in Session One by students)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Learn to value the importance of contemplation and asking questions
- Develop critical and creative thinking skills
- Build resilience and compassion by expressing and sharing their questions of wonder
- Discover commonalities with other students

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE FOR TEACHER/FACILITATOR

- Take a moment to consider your own questions of wonder—about yourself, others, and Life and the Universe—and how they are different now than they were when you were the age of your students.
- Consider the ways your questions of wonder have shaped your life, and be prepared to share a story with students about this.
- Additionally, review all the instructions to this practice and clarify your process. For example:
 - Who will help you with this lesson? Is there an interventionist you need to engage in case difficult material comes up? How will you follow up and connect this lesson to your content?

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Note: It is essential to scaffold this activity within a larger arc of community building over a semester.

When a teacher has developed a community of trust, this practice can be a powerful tool to deepen relationships in the classroom and support students to feel deeply connected to themselves, one another, and to school. A sense of connection and belonging is an important part of resilience and engagement.

Also, when we draw from the content of students' lives, we give them an opportunity to experience relevance. Personal connections to academic content create a positive emotional context that engages students in their learning in a unique way.

One way we can support students to more deeply connect with school is by doing activities that specifically address the inner life. We define the inner life as the essential aspect of human nature that yearns for deep connection, grapples with questions of meaning and purpose, seeks genuine forms of self-expression, and longs to learn and grow.

The inner life includes our emotions, questions, intuition, hopes, and dreams. And when the inner life is connected to the outer life, students feel engaged, recognized, and motivated. Inviting students' questions of wonder helps bridge the inner and outer life.

SESSION ONE (45 MINUTES)

- **Sample Introductory Script:** Please do not read this script verbatim, but adapt it to fit your community and the age group of your students. We also encourage you to bring your own style and language to this.
- Share with students the following overview:
 - *Today we are going to do an activity that invites us all to ask some of our bigger questions about ourselves and Life.*
 - *Over these weeks, we have built a community together and this activity will help us all understand more about what is living inside each of us. As learners, this is important to our understanding of ourselves, one another, and the themes we are exploring in our class.*
 - *So often we focus on learning content or taking information in. The root of the word for education is the Latin "educare", which means "to draw out"—and by that we mean that education is designed to draw out the wisdom in each individual.*
 - *You each have wisdom and this activity is designed to access that. It will also give us a chance to value questions, rather than answers. Asking good questions is essential to our learning and growth. (If appropriate, read the Rilke quote at the bottom of this page.)*
- Next, share with students the task:
 - *In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to anonymously write down our questions of wonder about ourselves, others, and Life or the Universe. Questions of wonder relate to the things we wonder about or feel curious, afraid, or excited about.*
 - *You will have a chance to write down questions about three different themes. You can write as many questions as you wish for each theme (suggested: 1-4 questions), but please try to write at least one under each heading.*
 - *We will take 15 minutes in silence to do this writing. I will then collect these questions and anonymously type them up.*
 - *We will then do a readout of the questions next week, and have a chance to discuss the themes we hear and share our responses to these questions of wonder.*
 - *No one will be answering these questions—these questions are just for us to consider.*
 - *So, as we prepare to write our questions of wonder, consider:*

- *What are the things you wonder about when you can't sleep at night, or when you're waiting for the bus, or running around the track?*
 - *What do you wonder about yourself and your own experiences?*
 - *What do you wonder about others?*
 - *What do you wonder about life or the universe?*
- Finally, share the following guidelines with students:
 - *We'll make every effort to preserve anonymity when we type these up for you all to see.*
 - *If you use names, we will change them when we type up the lists to X, Y, or Z.*
 - *If you use profanity, we will change it to a (!) sign.*
 - *Please do not write a question that relates to a particular person in our classroom or school. These are designed to be broader questions about human nature and life.*
 - *Additionally, if there are any questions that could be hurtful or offensive to certain groups of people, we will pull those out of the reading.*

Gathering the Questions of Wonder

- Give each student a pen and three large notecards and ask them to write three topic headings, one on each sheet: Questions About Myself, Questions About Others, and Questions About Life Or The Universe.
- Students will be given 15 minutes in silence to anonymously write their questions of wonder. Make sure students have enough physical space around them to feel a sense of privacy.
- Let students know that after they complete this activity, you (or a colleague who does not know your students' handwriting if you want to create another layer of anonymity) will type up the questions and read them aloud next week. (*Be sure to create a handout of these questions--the Questions of Wonder list--for students in the next session.*)
- Ask students if they have any questions about the activity, then have students spread out into different areas of the room (or, if this is not possible, just push their chairs out so there is a bit more space between them).
- If you need to, find quiet places for particularly talkative students to sit.
- Discourage students from showing their questions to each other as they are writing them.
- You may wish to play quiet music during the writing time.
- Give students 15 minutes to write their questions.
- Encourage them to write at least one question under each heading and assure them that they can write as many questions as they want.
- Let them know that if they have questions about the activity they can raise their hands and you will come around to assist them.
- Give them a five-minute warning before stopping the writing activity.
- When time is up, collect the notecards and put them in a folder for safe-keeping.
- For those who finish early, put the Rilke quote below on the board and invite the students to read it and write about the prompt.

SESSION TWO (45 MINUTES)

Questions of Wonder Readout

Note: if you have another teacher or staff member who is available, it is wonderful to have a couple of different voices read the questions.

- Ask students to come together in a circle. Tell them (use your own words, if possible):
 - *I'm going to read aloud the questions of wonder that you all wrote last week. It's a privilege for me to read these questions.*
 - *We need to create a respectful atmosphere so that all of your questions can be honored. Even though they're anonymous, any comments or laughter would be very hurtful to the person who took the risk of writing this question.*
 - *I will read all the questions you wrote with the exception of any that in some way are inappropriate for the classroom or could be hurtful to others, for example, express bigotry. (You may also choose to exempt those that are sexually explicit as well – if so, let the students know about this choice.)*
 - Remind the students that you have changed any identifying names in the questions to X, Y, Z, etc. Ask students to refrain from making comments.
- Introduce the first category, "Questions About Myself" and begin reading the questions in that category.
- Read slowly, pausing between each question, as you are seeking to honor their questions with your tone of voice.
- If you have a teaching partner, alternate reading the questions so that there is a change in voice (every 5-10 questions).
- Pause a second between each question.
- Let your students know when you are changing categories and moving to "Questions About Others" and then finally to "Questions About Life, the World, the Universe".

Dialogue (3-5 minutes)

- Invite five to ten students to comment by asking:
 - *Let's hear from a few people: What's it like for you to hear these questions? What themes do you notice?*
- *Note:* In the debrief, refrain from saying "I still have all these questions myself."
 - An alternative way of expressing this feeling is: "Many of these questions are important to me today, but I find that I ask them at a different level than when I was a teenager. I have learned the answer to some of these questions."
 - Provide an example, such as: "I now know who I'm going to marry and what I'm going to do for work. There are other questions I am still learning about. And sometimes the answers to these change over time."
 - Assuring students that they will live into the answers to their own questions in their own way and in their own time can be very supportive.

Reflection and Prioritizing (5-10 minutes)

- Pass out the Questions of Wonder List and ask students to write their names on their copy.
- Have students circle or star three to five of the questions they are most interested in exploring in class or in their own lives.

- These may or may not be questions they wrote and they don't ever need to disclose whether they wrote the questions they are interested in or not.
- Let them know you will be collecting their copies of the Questions so you can see what themes and questions are most interesting to this class.
- Additionally, let them know the group will have an opportunity to share their selected questions out loud in a moment.

Sharing Circle (20 minutes)

- Ask students to speak one-by-one in a circle about the following prompts:
 - *What one to three questions are you most interested in exploring either in this class or in your own life?*
 - *What was it like for you to hear these questions?*
 - *What themes did you notice?*
- Use a timer, and, depending on the number of students you have in your class, let them know they will have up to 30 seconds to a minute to share. If you have a small class or more time, you can extend this up to two minutes for each sharing.
- *Note:* Click here for more in-depth instructions on Sharing or Community Circles.
 - The key to a successful sharing circle is to have students speak one by one with no cross talk or interruption.
 - It is also essential that you time the sharing and let them know you will be doing so.
 - Students always have the option to pass and not speak if they do not wish to participate in that way.

CLOSURE (5 MINUTES)

- Close by thanking the students for sharing their questions so authentically.
- Let them know how you plan to follow up. Will you connect this to a content piece later? Will you give them an opportunity to do a piece of writing on these themes?
- Have each student share a single word expressing a feeling or thought they are leaving with.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Take some time to reflect on the comments from your students and notice the ways this practice has impacted your learning community.
 - Is there more openness between students? A greater willingness to take risks?
- Consider how you can build on this momentum in your SEL practices and content.
 - Is there a piece of writing, a chapter, an article, a film/video, or book you can connect this to? Is there a writing project that you can create from this? How can you weave the themes that emerge from this activity into your classroom conversations? If a particularly challenging topic comes up, such as suicide or sexual assault, how can you bring an interventionist in to support your students?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

One of the key tasks of adolescents is to develop their identity--or who they are and who they want to be. The process involves exploration first, as teens try new activities to help them learn what values and goals are important to them. Eventually they commit to a set of values, which then guide their choices and worldview. Indeed, [studies](#) have found that people with a strong sense of identity show more reflection, resilience, autonomy, and competence when making life decisions.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Especially in the adolescent years, when developmental changes naturally ignite different kinds of inquiry and questions about identity, creating a space for such conversations is often just the antidote for isolation, boredom, and feelings of disconnection. After hearing each others' questions, students often remark: "Now I don't feel so alone" and "I can't believe you people asked these questions."

The questions of wonder help students drop social masks—and in doing so, foster new possibilities for authenticity and meaningful learning. This activity also helps teachers bring the most committed "saboteurs" into the fold of community.

SOURCE

Exploring Our Questions of Wonder: this activity is excerpted from [PassageWorks Institute's *Journey into High School*](#) transitions curriculum designed to support the transition from middle to high school. You can also read more about this practice in Rachel Kessler's book [The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School](#) (ASCD, 2000).