



AN AWE-SOME MIND-MAP PRACTICE

“The epiphany of awe is that its experience connects our individual selves with the vast forces of life. In awe we understand we are part of many things that are much larger than the self.”

-Dacher Keltner

OVERVIEW

Students create mind-maps of a current academic concept, before and after experiencing an awe moment.

LEVELS

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- In combination with a mind-map/idea-web activity for any subject area
- Whenever you want to foster broader systemic thinking within a topic in class
- When students are working on locating themselves in larger networks or systems
- To help make students' thinking visible

TIME REQUIRED

- 30-40 minutes (can be split over multiple days)

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- Writing materials

- Poster board (optional, for group mind-map version)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Reflect on experiences that bring them awe
- Experience the impact of feeling awe on systemic thinking
- Begin to recognize the benefits of seeking awe in their lives

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Appreciation of beauty and excellence
- Spirituality
- Transcendence

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social awareness

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

PART 1: TRY IT OUT YOURSELF

- Take a moment to read through the practice and try it out yourself.
 - Create a mind map for something you are currently teaching in your classroom
 - Try one of the awe-elicitors listed under “The Awe Moment” for yourself. *Did you experience any feelings of awe? Any other emotions or sensations?*
 - Now, revisit the mind map and add to it. Do you notice a difference in your thinking? Did it become more expansive? Were you able to draw more connections? Could you see your place within this topic more easily?

PART 2: CONSIDERING VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON AWE

- Indigenous and aboriginal peoples have been the historical keepers of systemic and holistic thinking.
- Consider drawing some connections for your students between this awe practice and the traditional [practices](#) and [perspectives](#) from indigenous/aboriginal peoples of your area. For example, reverence and respect for nature and humans' interconnectedness with all living beings is a core tenet of many indigenous cultures. See [this interview](#) for a narrative account of this.
- [Culture](#), religion, and spirituality all have an influence on our experiences of awe. What perspectives do you bring with regard to this? How might you consider and make space for the cultural backgrounds of your students and their families in this practice, so no one perspective is privileged or assumed?
- Although less common, sometimes experiences of awe can be elicited by intense or tragic experiences (for example, some people experience awe during the death of a loved one). We suggest reviewing [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#) and [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#).

WHAT IS AWE?

- Awe is a distinct emotion we feel when we witness something vast that challenges our beliefs or understanding of the world.
- Feelings of awe have been known to be elicited by art, music, collective dance, nature, spirituality, great acts of compassion and humanity, and moments of life and death.
- Awe might be a new or abstract concept for students. It might help to tie it to the physical experience. Try describing it to students as a moment you felt goosebumps or amazed at how big or wondrous something is (like seeing a giant waterfall or an entire auditorium singing a song together).

INSTRUCTIONS

THE PRACTICE

- Step 1: The Mind Map:
 - Invite students to create a "[mind-map](#)" or "idea web" for a subject you are working on in class; especially a topic where students are situating themselves in a larger system or network. Each student can write a map or web for the same topic or pick their own specific aspect of something within the subject you are currently exploring. For example:
 - Where does our dinner come from (making connections between themselves and agriculture, industries, supermarkets)?
 - Map out how one individual decision (like recycling a can or not) impacts other people, other systems, the planet, etc.
 - Encourage them to make as many connections as they can think of.
- Step 2: An Awe Moment
 - Tell students:

- *Now we are going to try an activity that will help us think in a more interconnected way.*
- *Science shows that experiencing moments of awe helps us see connections and see ourselves as part of a bigger system.*
- You may need to first scaffold students in understanding what awe is. Posing some of these thought questions and definitions may be helpful:
 - *Have you ever heard of the word “awe”? What do you think it means?*
 - *Have you ever had an experience that left you overcome with wonder? That gave you goosebumps or made you feel amazed at how big something was or how small you are in comparison? Maybe seeing a giant waterfall or looking up at a tall building. Or watching a flash mob dance together, listening to a powerful piece of music, or seeing someone do something kind for someone else.*
 - *“[You feel in awe](#) when something takes your breath away. For example, a sky full of stars, an amazing sunset, or fireworks.”*
 - *Awe is an emotion we feel when we witness something vast (big) that challenges our thinking around our beliefs or understanding of the world.*
- Choose one (or more) of the following options, to elicit feelings of awe among your students:
 - Write a brief [awe narrative](#): A story about a moment you experienced awe.
 - Watch this brief “[Awe video](#)”.
 - Read this [Awe Story](#).
 - Go on an [awe nature walk](#).
- Brief check-in discussion questions:
 - *What did it feel like to experience that awe moment?*
 - *Did you notice any awe-like emotions or sensations (like goosebumps)? It is OK if you didn’t feel or notice anything resembling awe. Different people experience awe through different things.*
- Step 3: Try the “mind-map” activity again.
 - Ask students to create a new map or web on the same topic they created one for before. Again, encourage them to think of as many connections as they can.
 - **Suggested script:** Now we’re going to see if this awe experience will help us see more connections than we did before.
 - **Optional:** Invite students to create mind maps in small groups or as a whole class now on larger poster paper.

Note: Steps 2 & 3 can be done in another block or another day when you are returning to the same subject or curricular areas.

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

- For younger students or diverse learners (or just as an alternative), you can invite students to illustrate their awe experience using art.
- If you are exploring systems (for example, body systems, solar system, political systems) in your curriculum this year, consider using this exercise alongside a deeper investigation into systems. Some resources for exploring systems and companions to this practice can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

CLOSURE

- To wrap up this practice, invite students to share in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class. Have them reflect on all or some of the following questions:
 - *Did you notice a difference in your 2nd mind map? Were you able to come up with more connections after the awe practice?*
 - *Did you notice a change in your thinking about the mind map topic? If so, how did it change?*
 - *Could you see more ways in which you are connected to this system/idea?*
- More discussion extension prompts:
 - *What other things bring us awe?*
 - *What are some real-world topics or problems that could use more systemic thinking? (for example, climate change, poverty, food insecurity, homelessness)*

SOURCE

Practice inspired by works of [Dr. Keltner and colleagues](#)

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Did all students respond to the awe experience? If so, how do you know? If not, how did those students respond to the 2nd iteration of the mind map?
- What might you do differently next time to scaffold this exercise? Did you notice any barriers for students to experiencing awe?
- Can you think of some ways you might be able to incorporate more awe into your classroom?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Experiments](#) have demonstrated that when even brief moments of awe are induced, people report less of a focus on themselves and an expanded appreciation of humans' interconnectedness. For example, [in a series of 6 studies](#) of over 2,000 people, real world and lab experiences of awe led to people feeling a smaller sense of self—in other words, they felt like one part of a larger system.

Moreover, in a [study](#) of 1,545 people from China between ages 16 -71, researchers found that feeling awe on a regular basis was associated with greater prosocial tendencies, in part through an increase in feelings of connectedness to other humans and living things.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

When students experience awe they may be more able to appreciate interconnections and complexities of the world and move away from self-focused or limited beliefs—all foundational skills for transformative learning and [prosocial](#) citizens. For example, in two studies of over 500 mostly Dutch-speaking children between ages 8 - 13, children who watched brief movie clips that elicited awe were more likely to donate their research earnings to refugees than children who watched joy-eliciting or neutral clips.

TERMS OF USE

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With gratitude,
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