



Living the Questions: Approaches to a Life Worth Living

A Facilitation Guide

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Facilitation Guide for “Living the Questions: Approaches to a Life Worth Living”

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Author’s Note

Welcome. If you are here, it might be because you feel the tug of an inward question, a curiosity about what, ultimately, an education is for. Perhaps you have a vague sense of an answer to this question but it eludes your attempts to capture it in words. Perhaps you have the words, but your intuitions don’t amount to a coherent argument. If you are here, you might believe that your students, too, are similarly curious about the purpose of their learning, and that their curiosity is also shrouded in ambiguity, even doubt. If you are here, you might believe that your students are hungry for something more.

The question of what education is for is another way of asking what kind of education matters, which begs a more fundamental question: *What in life matters?*

This is not a question that we ask alone; we ask it in a chorus of voices from across time and space, cultures and traditions. We ask it along with history’s great philosophers, religious thinkers, saints, artists, activists, and ordinary folks alike. In a time characterized by increasing uncertainty and social isolation, when traditional sources of meaning and value have given way to epistemic disruption and existential disarray, it would *seem* as if we ask this question alone, if we ask it at all. In such a time, we need an education that is at once intellectually and morally formative, grounded in the pursuit of existential meaning and an ethic of truth-seeking, one that speaks to the Question. If you are here, you might believe that as well.

“Living the Questions: Approaches to a Life Worth Living” is designed to encourage high school students to seriously and carefully consider, from their own lived experience, perennial questions of meaning and purpose in order to discover and clarify their own beliefs and values. Students don’t do so alone but in conversation with an ensemble of voices and perspectives, both ancient and modern. It emphasizes

first-person engagement and participation in community that fosters true respect and recognition across important and enduring lines of difference. With the book *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most* as our guide, “Living the Questions...” invites students to grapple with ancient and modern texts and figures and practice rigorous introspection and intellectual discernment to articulate for themselves a provisional but authentic response to some of the most urgent questions of the human condition, chief among them *What does it mean to live a good life?*

In order to support students in the process, I’ve included in [this curriculum](#) a variety of contemplative and reflective exercises, embodied activities, engaging assignments, and varied assessments based on journaling, discussion, and oral presentation. By integrating and emphasizing the skills of meaning-making alongside traditional academic skills, students are empowered to both seek and create meaning in their lives; discern signal from noise; and become more flexible, courageous, and resilient in the face of an unpredictable world, a world that sorely needs them.

This facilitation guide aims to support you, the teacher, in implementing the course in a way that works best for you and your school context. It is an invitation to be a part of a community of educators, in both secondary and postsecondary education, who sing in the chorus of these questions. Here you will find descriptions of core pedagogical attitudes and instructional approaches, tips for particular methods and activities, and suggestions for potential challenges and setbacks along the way.

If you are here, the journey has already begun. I invite you to take the next step, together.

In Partnership,

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Course Description

“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.” — Rainer Maria Rilke

In this semester elective course open to 11th and 12th graders, students will develop contemplative habits of mind and critical metacognitive skills in pursuit of perennial questions about what makes a life worth living, questions such as *What matters most? What is a good life? What kind of life is worthy of our humanity?* Using as our text *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*, based on the acclaimed Yale course, we will delve into such questions and explore many responses from the world’s philosophical and religious traditions. Through the intentional practice of introspection, reflection, and deep listening— as well as conceptual analysis, argument, and vigorous discussion— we will begin to articulate for ourselves meaningful answers that will inform our sense of identity, purpose, and belonging. Students can expect regular reading and journaling assignments, student-led discussions, contemplative and creative exercises, and a final oral presentation.

Core Pedagogical and Attitudinal Approaches

Pursuit of Existential Meaning

- This course equips students for a life-long practice of discerning and living the answers to perennial questions of the human condition. Students are hungry for the opportunity to explore the many ideas, perspectives, and approaches to living a flourishing life from the world’s great cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions. This course provides them that opportunity within a carefully designed and scaffolded curriculum.
- What we’re aiming for in this course is *meaning-fullness*: the intentional pursuit of a life of meaning and purpose, entailing a vision of success achieved through one’s values and not at the expense of them. We want students to leave the class not necessarily with answers but with a clarified sense of purpose, self-defined goals, long-term intentions, and the skills of reflection and discernment to aid them on a journey that extends far beyond high school.

First-Person Engagement

- This course is designed with contemplative, reflective, relational, and experiential pedagogical approaches in mind. You are encouraged to engage multiple modalities in relating abstract ideas and forms of reasoning so that students may internalize them in ways that are meaningful to them.
- Present yourself as authentically as possible and engage in the work alongside students. This entails modeling honesty, vulnerability, and skillful self-disclosure as you feel it is warranted. Students respond especially well to a guide whom they trust is with them on the journey.
- If you are inexperienced or uncomfortable with offering guided meditations, such exercises are optional; it is important for those leading such practices to have their own personal experience with them. However, if you want to experiment, there are now abundant resources available online, with scripts and videos, and you are encouraged to avail yourself of those resources in order to prepare. In Appendix A, I have included links to apps that can support an individual meditation practice.

Truth-Seeking Pluralism

- It is not your place to provide answers to the questions presented, nor should students be expected to have them. Instead, this course is intended to be a safe, intentionally structured space for authentic student inquiry, dialogue, and open-ended exploration.
- Intellectual humility, honesty, and curiosity are core to the course, for both students and teachers alike. Respectful disagreement is expected and encouraged.
- We seek to share and listen while also acknowledging important and enduring lines of difference. We are equals in this work, and as equals, we can still respect each other in disagreement in our common pursuit of truth.
- Remember the maxim: No idea is above scrutiny; no person is beneath dignity.

Community Participation

- It is important that students see themselves as part of a community of practitioners, colleagues in common cause. Continually reminding them– and

yourself– that we’re in this together, and that, in fact, we are the continuation of a lineage of students of life, helps to ground the course in a deep sense of time and belonging.

- You are encouraged to include guest speakers who exemplify some of the key ideas and perspectives offered in the text. Speakers with engaging life stories, from different walks of life, who seek to live according to their values and grapple with some of the same questions, make for memorable and inspiring learning experiences.

Establishing Norms

I like to begin any course by co-creating classroom norms with students. I sometimes frame the activity with a simple question, *“What makes for a good conversation?”* or *“What do you expect from yourself and others to ensure we have an inclusive space to share ideas and receive feedback?”* From there, I solicit student responses, abstracting a baseline of norms that we can all agree to. I’ll first capture their ideas on the board and then type them up as a contract, having each student sign it and posting it in the classroom. From time to time, we check in and review the norms to see if we’re living up to them or if any need to be amended or added. This is particularly useful after a challenging lesson or disruption in class. Sometimes I’ll begin with the following baseline norms and let students add to the list in generative small group discussions. However you go about it, investing time to co-create and establish classroom norms pays dividends throughout the course.

1. **Honor the time-** Be present and prepared. Make our work in each class a present-moment priority.
2. **Make room-** Listen. Really listen. Remember that while it’s important to use your own voice, it’s also imperative that we make room for everyone’s voice.
3. **Fail forward-** Take risks. Expect to make mistakes. Struggle, discomfort, and difficulty is often a positive sign that you’re learning.
4. **Remember Norm #4-** Don’t take yourself too seriously.
5. **Suspend judgment-** Set aside your judgements so we can listen to each other more fully.

6. **Respect silence-** After someone has spoken, it is appropriate to take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words. Treat silence as another member of the class.
7. **When things get tough, turn to wonder-** If you find yourself disagreeing with another, becoming judgmental, or shutting down, try turning to wonder: *"I wonder what led him to say that?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me?" "I wonder what she's feeling right now?"*

Consider the Physical Space

- Experiment with creating flexible seating arrangements that facilitate both discussion and reflection. Arrangements that allow for pairs to be combined and recombined into small groups of four or six, depending on the exercise, work best. That way, when there is a lull in the discussion, you can pivot to a think/pair/share exercise and build from there.
- You might consider creating a "reflection corner" with mindfulness resources such as mini Zen sand gardens, "Buddha Boards," hand labyrinths, and other tactile objects that promote grounding and embodiment. I've found it useful to designate areas and display student work and philosophical quotes nearby.

Building Trust

- It helps to build trust with low-stakes sharing activities before deeper personal reflection. This will help illustrate and allow students to practice the co-created classroom norms. It may help to practice various discussion protocols, such as think/pair/share, fishbowls, or the Socratic Seminar roles with low-stakes questions before scaling up to higher-stakes, higher-order questions.
- As the teacher, modeling appropriate vulnerability and openness in both low- and higher-stakes contexts will help students acclimate to the tone and expectations of the class. Throughout, consider periodic check-ins about the emotional impact and circle back to the co-created norms as necessary.
- Lastly, it is appropriate to create opportunities for non-academic connections, allowing students to connect with and share about their favorite shows, songs, memes, sports teams, or any other authentic interest. This, too, goes a long way to build trust among students while also demonstrating the relevance of the course to their lived experiences.

Core Instructional Methods

Relational Journaling and Your Turn Assignments

Journaling serves as a cornerstone of this course and the primary contemplative practice, helping students develop introspective skills, reflective habits, and preparing them for meaningful discussions.

Relational Journaling

- Students are required to have a paper journal or sketchbook for class, in which they will journal based on the daily assigned readings and prompts. These journals are *theirs* for the long-haul; they are encouraged to write as if their future self will find it interesting and useful. They are encouraged to be both honest and thoughtful in their writing, while not sharing what they would be uncomfortable with me reading.
- Their entries are to be at least a page in length and are sight-checked daily for participation points. Every two weeks, I collect the journals to provide personalized feedback, usually on post-it notes, so that my comments don't become a permanent part of their journal. I usually don't read every entry, nor do I read in too close a detail; this is both to honor their privacy and respect boundaries. However, I do try to get a sense of themes that emerge and comment on those in general terms, often relating to my own experiences. I have found that this practice really helps to build deep and lasting connections with students and increases their investment in the practice.
- You might consider offering journaling time at the beginning/end of class periods as well, as a means of preparing the ground for the work of the day or consolidating thoughts, reactions, and impressions at the end of class.
- If you have more than one section of the class, consider staggering the collection of student journals so as not to overwhelm yourself with comments. This will allow you to offer more thoughtful comments for individual students without feeling rushed or resorting to canned and cliché responses.

“Your Turn” Assignments

- These are more formal journal entries that are typed and sometimes involve other creative or hands-on activities and related assignments. Students are encouraged to reference their journals to inform their responses and should compose these assignments in a Google Doc, submitting them in a class Google Folder on the assigned date.
- I’ve developed this [grading rubric](#) as a basic assessment tool that you can adapt as you see fit. I approach these assignments as formative assessments of student learning and engagement and will give students the opportunity to re-write or edit their initial submissions based on my comments, which I include in the Google Doc.
- I ask students not to delete or mark my comments as complete until the end of the semester and encourage them to reply to them in kind as a way of building an ongoing dialogue. This way, they have a record of their thoughts and can trace the development of their thinking over the course of the semester. This will help with both the Socratic Seminars and especially with their final Oral Presentation.

Socratic Seminars

Five Socratic Seminars punctuate the course, at the end of each unit of study, to deepen understanding through collaborative dialogue and class discussion. As an oral, summative assessment, it allows students to courageously demonstrate their understanding and point of view in a spirit of generosity and non-judgment. I use a [self-assessment tool](#) for students to evaluate their own engagement in the seminar, either as facilitators or participants, and incorporate their self-assigned score into my own assessment of their engagement. By encouraging student self-assessment, we encourage metacognitive awareness, which is key to developing self-awareness and a deepening a sense of interiority.

- Small groups of 3-5 students will facilitate each seminar based on the entire unit, taking turns posing questions and shaping the contours of the discussion based on the preceding readings and activities.
- Student facilitators are encouraged to utilize the Unit Objectives and Essential Questions for guidance and scaffolding.

- Each facilitator will have the opportunity to prepare notes in advance, featuring ideas, questions, and quotes from the assigned readings and from their own journals and assignments.
- Participants will offer their original ideas, build on or challenge others' ideas, and raise questions of their own in response; facilitators will ensure a thorough exploration of ideas from multiple perspectives, making sure all participants contribute.
- Following the discussion, facilitators and participants will engage in a self-assessment process where they will evaluate their own contributions and facilitation skills based on predefined criteria. This method aims to develop critical thinking, self-reflection, listening skills, and leadership abilities.
- Among the small group facilitating the discussion, it might be helpful for students to take on particular roles, each with certain responsibilities, so that each facilitator has a focus. The following is based on the Peer Leadership Roles for small group sessions in the Leadership and the Good Life course at West Chester University, part of the Life Worth Living Network:

- ☐ **Host:** Break the awkward silence at the beginning of the conversation by sharing a related joke, meme, quote, poem or song lyric. (1-2 minutes)
- ☐ **Presenter:** Share your top five takeaways from the assigned readings and other materials, including exercises and activities. You may use a Google Slide for this. This should be a synthesis rather than a summary (3-4 minutes)
- ☐ **Discussion Question Generator/Facilitator:** Generate a list of questions based on the objectives and essential questions from the unit and share them with your group in advance. Ensure that everyone in the class has a chance to speak and be encouraging to those who are reticent to do so. (Throughout the discussion)
- ☐ **Perspective Taker:** Bring new and relevant perspectives into the discussion, *e.g. According to X, what does it mean for life to go well? What does Y have to say about what it means to be human?* This may require prior research to identify perspectives outside of the readings and materials if necessary. (Throughout the discussion)

- **Meaning Maker:** In the last 5 minutes or so of the discussion, answer the question, “What will you keep thinking about when this discussion is over?” Then share a relevant closing quote, poem, or song lyric. (4-5 minutes)
- Take time post-seminar to debrief, using journaling or Exit Ticket reflections to capture insights, somatic or mindfulness-based, to surface physical and emotional responses, or just time in informal, unstructured conversation. To paraphrase John Dewey, the learning is not in the experience but in the reflection on the experience.

Creative Expression

The course incorporates various creative elements to engage different learning modalities. By turning to art and creative expression- drawing, painting, recitation, dance, storytelling- we not only allow students to demonstrate their understanding in personally relevant ways, but we also encourage them to access deeper parts of their being, beyond words and concepts, to foster meaningful connections and personal insight. Sometimes drawing and other forms of visual and tactile representation are utilized to simply retain and enhance students’ attentions and provide a sense of novelty to stoke their interest. Regardless of the motivation, turning to art and encouraging student creativity is highly recommended.

- When appropriate, consider providing examples of other students’ creative responses that meet expectations for helpful modeling.
- Gallery walks are especially useful for sharing visual understanding and soliciting authentic peer feedback, especially if they are done on large posters or otherwise displayable around the room. Post-It notes are a good way for students to share their comments and questions; I often ask them to write on the sticky side so that other students can’t see what is written and don’t feel the pressure to conform or simply copy what someone else has already said. It is sometimes helpful to use a feedback protocol when doing this activity, with different color Post-Its for each sentence stem, e.g. “*Something I like is...*” and “*Something I wonder about is...*” Another simple protocol is “OCQ”: *Observation, Connection, Question*.

- Try to allow flexibility in expression while maintaining focus on the content of the lesson, be it a reading, video, discussion, or something else. This is an opportunity for students to balance individual creativity with substantive philosophical engagement, a skill that is enormously important for both the course and beyond.

Multi-Text Exploration

The syllabus incorporates diverse philosophical and religious texts beyond the main course book, including primary source texts, videos, and podcasts. While the authors skillfully weave and present many ideas and perspectives throughout the text, providing useful and appropriate historical and cultural context to ground the reader's understanding, you may feel it necessary to provide more context in order to highlight particular themes. Utilizing primary sources found in books and online sources is often helpful in doing so; likewise, including supplementary and complementary texts- including video, podcasts, and other media- is encouraged to both deepen understanding and further student engagement.

- In my experience, students respond well to purpose-fit graphic organizers for comparing and contrasting different ideas and perspectives. This may be useful when diving into a chapter or reading in which many figures and differing theories are presented.
- Consider jigsaw activities for complex readings, wherein individual or small groups of students are responsible for a different section or aspect of the reading. Then in class, they must share a summary of their part of the reading, in their own words, in order for their peers to get a fuller understanding of the whole reading.

In Appendix B, I've included poems, songs, and short readings, organized thematically according to each unit, that can be used to begin classes as a moment of centering and that can be connected to the assigned and in-class readings; perhaps you'll find them useful. You're encouraged to use literary and artistic works that resonate with you for centering or supplementary purposes.

Oral Presentation

As the final summative assessment and culminating experience of the course, students will deliver an oral presentation articulating their responses to the “Your Turn” questions from Unit 5, drawing on the totality of their personal insights and understanding from throughout the course, in a presentation of a coherent, if provisional, vision of a life worth living.

- The presentation will be approximately 7 minutes in length and will mark the culmination of their work in this course. For planning purposes, ensure that you block enough time across class periods. Of course, you may have to adjust the length requirement depending on time constraints and other conditions. Keep in mind that concision helps to clarify value priorities.
- This is an opportunity for students to publicly articulate how they intend to live the questions they encounter throughout the course. It is also an invitation to be supported and held accountable by a community of practitioners, which in and of itself can be a transformative experience.
- [Here is a basic grading rubric](#) for the Oral Presentation, which you are encouraged to adapt as you see fit.

Unit-by-Unit Overview

Each unit is organized according to a section of the book, with a different chapter assigned each week. Plan your reading schedule according to your own particular school calendar and the appropriate number of pages per class period for your students. I aim for ~5 pages of reading per class period and assign the relevant journal questions for each reading assignment, which they respond to in their journals. Those questions and their responses serve as the basis for the lesson of the day. I invite students to read and journal ahead of the schedule if that works for them but to remember the focus of the upcoming class period will be on particular pages and questions.

The “Your Turn” assignments are due at the end of each chapter, roughly once a week. For those assignments, students usually have more agency in which questions they

want to focus on. “Your Turn” assignments are typed in their ongoing class Google Doc and are graded according to [this rubric](#).

The additional in-class activities and exercises are included as supplemental and complementary to the readings and class discussions. They are included to emphasize or build upon certain ideas or themes, give students the opportunity to engage in embodied learning, and reinforce community norms and trust. Feel free to pick and choose as you see fit!

Below is a brief overview of each unit, highlighting key themes and activities, with links to more detailed descriptions. More details can be found [here](#).

Unit 1: Diving In (Weeks 1-3)

Themes: Introduction to contemplative practice, course objectives, and essential questions

Key Activities:

1. Journal Setup & Expectations

- Create a structure for initial journal entries
- Encourage students to personalize their journals with designs, drawings, and stickers. Spend some time in class doing this as a community building exercise.
- Establish routine for journal sharing/response

2. Object Sharing Exercise

- For the "four objects" activity, create a sharing circle with clear time limits
- Prepare prompting questions to deepen student reflections
- Consider photographing objects with student explanations for documentation or all student objects together, to reference throughout the semester

3. Team Tower Challenge: Planning, Building, Reflecting

- [See instructions](#)

Unit 2: The Depths (Weeks 4-7)

Themes: Responsibility, evaluation, and moral concern

Key Activities:

1. Cultural Exploration

- For cultural and religious exploration (e.g. Muhammad and Islam, Confucius and China) provide additional context with short in-class readings, brief lectures, and/or video
- Consider inviting guest speakers from diverse backgrounds to tell their stories from a first-person perspective
- Create respectful parameters for discussing different religious perspectives (e.g. use of “I statements,” emphasis on descriptive instead of normative language)

2. Media Analysis

- Structure the popular culture artifact analysis with specific criteria in mind (e.g. source, voice, narrative, audience, implicit vs. explicit messaging)
- Consider creating small groups focusing on different media types and develop a format that allows brief sharing of insights and connections to text, especially contrasting values and visions of the Good Life.

3. Flourishing Brand *Shark Tank* Activity

- [See instructions](#)

4. Drawing Your Moral Circle Reflection Exercise

- [See instructions](#)

Unit 3: Bedrock (Weeks 8-9)

Themes: Worldviews and philosophical foundations

Key Activities:

1. Stoic Meditation Practices

- Consider using [these guided scripts](#) for the two Stoic meditations

- Create safe, quiet environment for practice, setting the tone by turning off or dimming the lights and using a bell or chime to mark the beginning and ending of the meditations
- Debrief by offering reflection prompts connecting practice to daily life

2. The Integrity Tower

- Explore different philosophical perspectives on the Good Life—Stoic (Virtue), Utilitarian (Affect), and Confucian (Circumstance)—through a hands-on game highlighting the importance of integrity, consistency, and coherence in one's life vision
- [See instructions](#)

3. Order, Ordering, Things Ordered

- Structure this complex conceptual exercise with clear instructions
- Consider using visual aids or physical manipulatives
- Develop scaffolded questions moving from concrete to abstract

4. Gallery Walk: "Really Big Picture"

- Create display space and viewing protocol
- Provide specific feedback prompts for peers
- Document creations for reference throughout course

Unit 4: Facing the Limits (Weeks 10-13)

Themes: Failure, suffering, and finitude

Key Activities:

1. Video Discussion Facilitation

- Prepare specific discussion points and questions for each video resource, emphasizing connections to the readings
- Create graphic organizer viewing guides to focus student attention (e.g. following the OCQR protocol- Observation, Connections, Questions, Reflection)
- Consider breaking longer videos into segments with discussion breaks by using EdPuzzle

2. Anchors and Compasses Exercise

- Provide metaphorical framework for identifying stabilizing factors in one's life

- Create template for identifying personal anchors/compasses
- Facilitate connections between student experiences and philosophical texts

3. Sand Mandala Demonstration

- If possible, create simple mandala as class (with colored sand, colored pencils, or chalk) or invite demonstration, if possible
- Connect explicitly to concepts of change and impermanence
- Develop reflection prompts on beauty, impermanence, and attachment

Unit 5: Back to the Surface (Weeks 14-15)

Themes: Insight to action, change, and community

Key Activities:

1. Practice Sessions

- Structure guided meditations with clear framing and debriefing to help focus on the goals of the sessions
- Create adaptations appropriate for diverse student needs, especially for students with learning plans
- Connect explicitly to concepts of practice, habit formation, and accountability to community

2. Final Presentation Preparation

- Provide clear rubric and exemplars (if possible)
- Schedule milestone check-ins leading to presentation (i.e. outline, first draft, run-through practice)
- Create supportive peer feedback opportunities through peer evaluation rubrics and notes of affirmation shared at the end of the class

A Note on Assessments and the Role of Grades

How we teach teaches; it follows that how we grade teaches, too. When teaching for inner growth and transformation, assigning grades to student work can seem arbitrary at best, and counterproductive at worst. However, this is a high school course, and in most high schools, students receive scores and grades as a measure of their effort, comprehension, and performance; of course, we are not apart from this. That said, I

invite you to approach the evaluation of your students' work and understanding differently, in a way that aligns with the aims of the course.

For one, I suggest emphasizing formative assessments and allowing grace for revisions. While due dates and accountability are important, some flexibility is warranted, especially with respect to journaling. Relational feedback, in the form of both handwritten and typed comments, is especially powerful in this context. Feedback can be narrative in nature and first-person in perspective; this helps to build trust and connection with students and demonstrates your investment in their growth. Remember, we want to inspire authentic and intrinsic interest in this work and foster the development of skills and habits for lifelong learning and reflection.

With both formative and summative assessments, it is important to grade holistically, focusing more on what the student included and did well than what was left out or undone. For the final presentation, it is especially important to emphasize that students aren't expected to have a complete understanding or demonstrate a perfectly coherent philosophy of life. Indeed, they may finish the course with *more* questions than they had at the start, and that would be a *good* outcome! What is important is that they, in their own way, demonstrate their ability to speak honestly and authentically in community about their journey of discernment throughout the course, articulated within the structure of the assignment. [This basic rubric](#) focuses on content, delivery, and personal integration in a holistic manner and can be amended to highlight different points of emphasis.

Below is an overview of the types of assessments included in the curriculum, with some helpful tips for implementing them.

Formative Assessments

1. Journal Reviews

- Sight-checks each class period
- Bi-weekly collection journals for relational feedback, providing written dialogue on Post-Its in addition to grading for completion
- Focus on quality and depth of reflection rather than length or "correct" answers

2. Discussion Participation

- Track contributions using simple checksheet or roster list, noting the quality of contributions in shorthand
- Evaluate listening skills alongside speaking
- Provide periodic feedback on participation patterns as necessary

3. “Your Turn” Assignments

- Typed journal assignments that may include creative or hands-on components, submitted via Google Docs to a shared class folder by a given due date
- Students are encouraged to reference their journals to support their responses and to view these assignments as ongoing reflections
- Use a flexible grading rubric as a formative assessment tool, offering feedback directly in the Google Doc and allowing revisions
- Students are asked to keep all teacher comments visible until semester’s end and to reply to them, fostering an ongoing dialogue that supports growth and prepares them for Socratic Seminars and the final Oral Presentation

4. Exit Ticket Reflections

- Use targeted questions to gauge understanding of key concepts (e.g. *“What resonated most with you from X?”*, *“What surprised you about Y?”*, *“What will you continue thinking about after class today?”*)
- Ask for “muddiest point” or lingering questions
- Have students connect concepts to personal experience through storytelling or by locating an emotional or physical response in their body
- Use responses to adjust and inform subsequent lessons

Summative Assessments

1. Socratic Seminars

- End-of-unit student led discussions questions
- Connections across readings and discussions
- Application to lived experiences and personal takeaways
- Self-assessment of growth in understanding

2. Creative Projects

- Create clear rubrics balancing creativity and conceptual understanding, emphasizing effort and attention to detail, not artist talent
- Consider using self-evaluation tools
- Encourage public sharing when appropriate

3. Final Presentation

- Use a holistic rubric that addresses content, delivery, and personal integration
- Peer feedback component, perhaps focusing on highlighting student gifts rather than evaluatory information
- Documentation for future reference; consider creating "time capsule" element for later reflection

Differentiation Approaches

It's important to create an inclusive space where all students can thrive. These strategies help to promote equity and deepen understanding for all learners in your classroom. Below are some notes on what has worked for me.

Reading Support

To support diverse learners in the classroom, you can differentiate instruction by providing vocabulary guides for key philosophical terms, helping students access complex ideas more easily. Offering audio or video versions of texts helps accommodate different learning styles and support students with reading challenges. Creating reading partnerships encourages peer collaboration and mutual support, while offering alternative texts at various reading levels ensures all students can engage meaningfully with the material.

Expression Options

Differentiation in the classroom can be strengthened by allowing students to respond to journal prompts in multiple formats, including graphic representations that demonstrate authentic understanding. By offering choices for visual, written, or verbal processing we respect diverse learning styles and supports deeper engagement. Flexible groupings based on students' learning preferences foster collaboration and adaptability,

while striking a balance between structured prompts and open-ended exploration encourages creativity and personal connection to the material.

Potential Challenges and Further Considerations

Effective differentiation also involves anticipating challenges related to student engagement, sensitive content, and time management. Depending on maturity levels, students vary in their willingness or readiness to engage in vulnerability, personal reflection, and abstract inquiry. It is important to be both prepared and flexible enough to change course and support individual students as necessary.

This course aims to balance academic rigor with personal relevance to foster meaningful participation. It is important to emphasize that sensitive topics— such as suffering, failure, death, or discussions of religious belief and cultural values in general— must be approached with care and respect, recognizing that they may intersect with students' lived experiences and familial traditions.

Managing classroom time requires thoughtful pacing to include reading, discussion, and reflection while also remaining flexible for emergent questions and varying processing speeds. While this curriculum offers a highly structured reading schedule and various activities, we should never feel as if we have to “cover” everything. Indeed, this curriculum must be adapted to the students in the room and the constraints of reality for authentic engagement and learning to happen. I invite you to let go of the notion of *covering* content.

We're in this Together

This course offers a unique opportunity for students to engage with fundamental questions about meaning, purpose, and values. The teacher-as-facilitator approach should balance structured exploration with personal discovery and academic understanding with practical application. By creating a supportive community of inquiry, you have a powerful opportunity to help students not only understand philosophical and religious concepts but begin developing their own thoughtful approach to living a flourishing life by internalizing them in personally relevant ways.

This is a tremendous privilege, one that should be taken seriously, although we shouldn't take *ourselves* too seriously in the process!

Remember, you matter, your life matters, to your students and well beyond. And you're not alone in this work. Stay in touch (mlostracco@penncharter.com) with questions, concerns, and ideas, and refer to the incredibly rich [Life Worth Living website](#) for more helpful resources and continued inspiration.

Here. We. Go.

Appendix A: Resources for Contemplative Practice

- [The Tree of Contemplative Practices](#)
 - A rich taxonomy of varied practices, ranging from movement to generative to ritual/cyclical and more! Note that all the various practices featured herein are rooted in community and awareness. I think that's particularly important to keep in mind when offering such opportunities for practice.
- I recommend the [Healthy Minds](#) and [Waking Up](#) apps for their quality and comprehensiveness, and the [Headspace](#) YouTube channel for helpful, visually compelling guided meditations.

Appendix B: Poetry, Songs, & Short Readings for Centering

- Unit 1: Diving In
 - [It is a Pleasure to be a Student](#)- Ringu Tulku Rinpoche
 - [The Real Prayers Are Not the Words, But the Attention that Comes First](#)- Mary Oliver
 - [Keeping Still](#)- Pablo Neruda
 - [Pied Beauty](#)- Gerard Manley Hopkins
- Unit 2: The Depths
 - [Proverbs](#)- Grace Paley
 - [Who Killed Davey Moore?](#)- Bob Dylan
 - [I Know My Soul](#)- Claude McKay

- [Hope is a Warrior Emotion](#)- Nick Cave
- [Traveling Through the Dark](#)- William Stafford
- [Different Ways to Pray](#)- Naomi Shihab Nye
- Unit 3: Bedrock
 - [The force that through the green fuse drives the flower](#)- Dylan Thomas
 - [Once the World Was Perfect](#)- Joy Harjo
 - [A Ritual to Read to Each Other](#)- William E. Stafford
 - [Wild Geese](#)- Mary Oliver
- Unit 4: Facing the Limits
 - [All the Difficult Hours and Minutes](#)- Jane Hirshfield
 - [Torso of Air](#)- Ocean Vuong
 - [Grief Calls Us to the Things of This World](#)- Sherman Alexie
 - [every time i ever said i want to die](#)- Andrea Gibson
 - [The Pond at Dusk](#)- Jane Kenyon
- Unit 5: Back to the Surface
 - [Good Bones](#)- Maggie Smith
 - [This is Water](#)- by David Foster Wallace
 - [On Finding Your Purpose and Living a Meaningful Life](#) by Hunter S. Thompson
 - [For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet](#)- Joy Harjo
 - [Vocation](#)- William Stafford
 - [Valentine for Ernest Mann](#)- Naomi Shihab Nye