

Inquiry Spiraling

by Rob Hart (@philophonica)

Inquiry Spiraling (I.S.) is a cooperative social game for developing collective intelligence. The basic steps of I.S. are designed to:

- bring curiosity to the surface and make it contagious
- grow the group's *negative capability* (the ability to "stay in the question" without grasping for pat answers)
- center the group's focus on question formulation (as opposed to premature solution making)
- engage participants in weaving multiple threads into a shared story of meaning

As a **modular** game, Inquiry Spiraling can be combined with other social games/activities. Since it reveals shared curiosity and primes intrinsic motivation, it makes for a great *onramp* – it can spark energetic dialog that fuels another practice.

The I.S. module was originally designed to be an onramp for Ria Baeck's "Collective Presencing" practice (short summary: take turns, speak to the whole group, and center the group's attention on a topic/theme/question). It's possible to imagine other group practices (e.g. Guy Sengstock's "Circling") also benefitting from an Inquiry Spiral onramp, but I've not tried them yet. Regardless of which modules you're testing together, the group needs to be somewhat versed in those modules in order to practice them effectively.

In this piece, I'll take the reader through the steps of Inquiry Spiraling, but it's best to **enact** them with a group and not simply read over them alone. I'd encourage you to suspend any judgment and see the following steps as more of a primer than a complete instruction manual.

The Steps of the Spiral

0. Optionally, a facilitator may guide the group through a self-inquiry meditation – I find that starting out this way leads to a richer discussion later on. This is best done in an unhurried way, with plenty of silence between each spoken instruction. Let the group know they'll need something to write with (or a blank window to type in).
 - "first, close your eyes, and bring attention to your body: notice how it feels to be breathing... notice what thoughts are arising... how you're feeling... notice each sensation as it happens."
 - spend several moments like this, patiently reminding the group to rest in awareness, watching experiences arise and pass away. gentle guidance can help the group maintain openness without getting distracted or lost in thought.

- begin to invite curiosity: "turn your attention toward the unknown. notice your sense of curiosity. what are you wondering about? ...what has been holding your interest lately? ...consider the last week or so: what loose threads have you been tugging at? ...what topics or questions are most alive for you? ...what feelings do you notice around these questions? Fun? ...Fear? ...Hope? ...Judgment?"
- prompt the listener to begin drawing their ideas into focus: "Take a moment and write down a question that encapsulates these interests. This question doesn't have to be for the group – just an anchor point for your own reflection. See if you can distill your curiosity into the one question that feels most alive to you right now."

Next, the Inquiry Spiral itself. The "spiral" means it's recursive – in each turn and in successive rounds, the group will return to the questions that have emerged so far and use them as scaffolding for deeper inquiry.

1. Take turns speaking. Each person takes one turn per round.
 - Go in popcorn order. The basic guideline for popcorn order is, "speak when you feel called." (It may help to have an experienced Inquiry Spiraler go first).
 - Your turn begins with an agreed-upon signal, such as picking up the "talking piece" or saying "I'll go next." It ends when you sum up your share with a question and "put down the piece."
 - The optimal turn length seems to be around 2-3 minutes – long enough to go deep, short enough to be interesting. Depending on the group's size and schedule, they may decide on a formal time limit per share. The facilitator can keep time and notify the speaker with a DM when 30 seconds are left / time's up.
2. When it's your turn, you have the floor; nobody will interrupt or silence you, so you have the freedom to pause, wonder aloud, and take risks with the unknown.
 - As you've been listening to others share, your curiosity may have evolved since the beginning of the round – so allow what's most alive *right now* to propel your exploration, even if it isn't what you planned to say a moment ago.
 - As with Collective Presencing, speak to the entire group rather than addressing an individual – though it's fine to reference another person's turn when bringing your own ideas to the group.
 - End your turn with a question. As in the meditation, see if you can distill your curiosity *at this moment* into a single query.
 - If you're doing I.S. online, type your question into the chat once you've left the floor. This will build a thread of questions for the group's reflection. If you're practicing in meatspace, the facilitator can write down the question at the end of each turn.
3. As an active listener during others' turns, bring your focus to three areas:
 - A. **receive the current speaker as they are** (hearing them without judgment)
 - B. **watch the group inquiry take shape** (note the relationships between different ideas shared by different participants)

- C. **allow your own curiosity to evolve** (see if you can let go of planning your next share, filling in ambiguities, and other fixations).
4. After everyone has shared once, the facilitator will end the round by re-centering the group on the accrued list of questions.
- "Take a moment to read over the questions everyone offered. Reflect on what you recall most about the different shares. What's most alive about them now?"
 - "Notice not only how an *individual* question piques your interest, but also how some of the questions seem related to each other. What does the bigger picture seem to be about? What sort of inquiry is this collective intelligence building?"
 - After a momentary pause for reflection, round 2 begins (go back to step 1).

Theoretically, the group can keep spiraling for many rounds, but there tends to be a point where the questions are well-developed and worth discussing more freely. After 2 or 3 rounds, the facilitator may straw-poll the group to see whether they want to go for more rounds or segue into another practice.

Options After the On-Ramp:

- Collective Presencing
 - each speaker addresses the entire group
 - "picking up the piece" signals the group when turns begin and end
 - the group still centers its attention on a topic or question (perhaps one of the questions that emerged from Inquiry Spiral), and the facilitator may help re-center the group if they sense the thread has been lost.
 - the other rules are nullified – there are no more "rounds" or any one-turn-per-person limit. turns don't have to end with a question. time limits are lax or nonexistent – shares can be as short or long as the group will reasonably tolerate.
- Informal roundtable
 - "having the floor" becomes fluid; people may interpose questions or remarks (in good faith)
 - Turn-taking is a courtesy rather than a rule; those who feel most engaged about a discussion may carry it forward a few paces before others have joined in.
 - Diversion from the initial topic is allowed if the group embraces the new direction
- Circling (intersubjective meditation)
 - "having the floor" is gone; intuition and interest guide the sharing process entirely
 - the focus follows the group's attention in the present moment (avoiding story, judgment, abstraction, persuasion, or discursive thought)
 - each speaker shares only their first-person, inarguable truth (I feel X, I'm noticing Y, it seems to me that Z). this helps prevent labeling or imposing on others (you're being X) or making blanket claims that lead to quibbling or semantics (X is true for everyone; we're basically all Y; when you get older you'll learn that Z)

- this is by far the most restrictive modality listed; it removes a great deal of possible dialog from the menu, but opens participants up to deep mutual understanding. it also takes the most practice for it to become natural.
- the analogy to meditation is quite direct – the quality of mind that it evokes is clear, present, and free – yet it can be said that "shared meaning" or "shared reality" is still the goal of the practice, making intersubjective relating a primary target.