



Take a Breath: Yoga and Meditation in the Developmental Classroom

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Teachers of developmental education are familiar with non-traditional students who are balancing innumerate stressors in their lives, in addition to the overwhelming stress of college. Stress relief methods like yoga and meditation are essential life management tools in helping new college students succeed, not only in their education but also in their careers and personal lives. When incorporated into a first-year seminar class, yoga and meditation can offer students healthy stress relief in order to successfully pursue their academic goals, in addition to offering lifelong stress management.

Yoga and meditation have enjoyed increasing popularity in the United States as stress relief methods and alternate forms of spirituality. Recently, mindfulness methods like yoga and meditation have found a place in health care centers, businesses and even schools. I use yoga and meditation in a first year seminar course at the community college where I teach, and I've seen many positive results.

For the fifteen years I've been in the classroom, I've seen my students struggle with stress management, time management and grit. At the community college where I teach, there are two campuses that attract different types of students (one is more urban and diverse, whereas the other is more homogeneous and traditional). Both populations are full of young adults and not-so-young adults who are trying to balance too much at once: children, jobs, classes, and social lives. What they all seem to have in common is the need for a toolbox of management skills necessary for that kind of balancing act. I teach my students in developmental classes how to create schedules, how important sleep is, how taking fewer classes might mean more success for them as students. Some listen, and most do not, because they cannot see immediate results.

A few years ago, as I was struggling professionally with these issues, I was working on my own stress by practicing yoga. Eventually, I became a yoga teacher and am in the process of becoming a professional yoga therapist. It was not until one fateful day that I discovered my professional and personal lives were about to meet: in a first-year experience class, I was teaching about the stress response, as I always do, when I realized that the yoga and meditation I teach outside the classroom directly affected the stress response and could fit seamlessly into the lesson. On a whim, I led the class through a short, seated yoga sequence and meditation. That moment started me on a

path to find a way to incorporate mindfulness into all my classes.

What is yoga?

Yoga can be many things to many people. It is ancient and has many roots. I study yoga as an ancient system of life management that includes physical poses (asanas) that were designed to prepare the body for meditation. The earliest yogis struggled to stay still during long periods of meditation so they developed the asana to stretch the physical body, distribute energy throughout the body and warm up in preparation for the stillness required during meditation. Many people in the West are familiar with the physical poses they may see at a yoga class in their gym. Some are even familiar with meditation, either through personal practice or a led practice. For many people who study yoga, the eight limbs of yoga will lead to nirvana. Those limbs include the physical poses, meditation, guidelines for living that require the followers to be non-harming and compassionate. Others just want a good workout!

What is the stress response?

All of us have a hormonal stress response designed to protect us from danger. Sometimes referred to as the "flight or fight" response, the stress response is a way of preparing our bodies to perform quickly or strongly in moments of grave danger. When danger is sensed, cortisol is released throughout the body to slow digestion, increase heart rate and blood pressure, and shut down any non-essential organ function while the heart and lungs get ready to act. This response is exactly what we need to escape a hungry bear or lift our children out of a sinking car. Our bodies, however, do not always know the difference between a hungry bear or a traffic jam. The hormonal response is the same, and in our modern, stressful lives, some of us are constantly in a state of stress emergency. Our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems are meant to work in concert and in balance. When they do not, we start to feel the physical manifestations of stress: high blood pressure, digestive issues, depression, and sleep interruptions. The parasympathetic nervous system keeps those symptoms in check, and practices such as

yoga and meditation directly and immediately trigger the parasympathetic nervous system.

Yoga in the Classroom

I am certainly not the first person to use yoga and meditation in the classroom. There are educators using yoga and meditation in their classrooms, and researchers studying the effects of a regular yoga practice built into the school day. In an article published in *Teaching Tolerance*, Lisa Ann Williamson describes an elementary school teacher in Atlanta who used yoga to tame her chaotic third-graders. Chelsea Jackson taught her students a few poses and simple breathing exercises and found positive results including “fewer fights and arguments among students; better student decision making; increased self-awareness and self-esteem; improved concentration and retention; and more efficient use of class time” (Williamson, 2013). In the same article, Williamson introduces Tara Guber, who started a school-wide yoga initiative in her Los Angeles school and found that after offering yoga to students three times a week, the teachers recognized that the best time to test students was immediately after yoga practice, when they could be guaranteed “calm, relaxed—but focused—students” (Williamson, 2013).

Lisa Morgan, a language acquisition teacher, has used yoga in second language acquisition for many years, citing the natural connection between yoga poses and the Total Physical Response method of learning a language. Moving the body while learning vocabulary can trigger a stronger response from the brain, and yoga lends itself naturally to that process. Morgan says, “it was clear that the class in which I taught English through yoga was more fun and relaxing than the traditional class, not only for the students but also for me, the teacher” (Morgan, 2015).

Sat Khalsa is a teacher and researcher at Harvard Medical School who has studied the effects of yoga and meditation on children, adolescents, and adults in both school settings and professional settings. In one of his studies, he offered yoga classes to adolescents in a secondary school and compared those students to others who took traditional physical education classes. Some anecdotal evidence from students who participated in the yoga classes that show positive improvements include students feeling a relaxing effect of the yoga, being able to cope with stress more effectively, an improvement in mood, and feeling more centered (Khalsa, 2016).

Methodology

Many of my colleagues ask how I implement yoga and meditation on top of the many and varied other responsibilities we have in the classroom—namely curriculum!

Some schools are using the already existing physical education space, and others are carving out time during class. I primarily use the first few moments of class to center and focus my students using a few poses and breathing exercises. Students remain seated the whole time, so we can work within the confines of any classroom setting. In the past, I’ve used the first few minutes of class to give a writing prompt as a way to focus energies (I am a writing teacher, after all). I certainly do not think my students need less writing practice now, but I see greater focus when I use yoga or meditation. As an added bonus, I see that the students respect those first two minutes of class more now: the late-comers are much more quiet and quick about settling down in class if we’ve started our meditation than they used to be if we had started with a writing prompt. They seem to respect these yoga moments more.

I start by having students begin to “center themselves” by turning off their phones, clearing off their desk tops, moving the coffee or water bottles to the floor, finding a comfortable way of sitting, and closing their eyes (if students do not want to close their eyes—and many veterans or anyone with PTSD will not feel comfortable closing eyes—I ask them to take their gaze down to their desks to eliminate distractions and the urge to peek at their classmates). I close the classroom door, and stand in the front of the room. I sometimes may shut off the overhead lights, unless doing so would make it too dark in the room (I want centering, not snoring!) I verbally cue students to uncross legs, place feet flat on the floor and rest the palms of the hands either in their laps or on the desks. We take a few breaths, not forcing or lengthening them, but just noticing them. I do this with them, so they don’t feel rushed. I then ask students to deepen their breaths, and to notice their belly expanding with that deep breath. After a short hold, we exhale slowly. After a few rounds of deep breathing, I lead them through some seated asana, or physical poses, including neck rolls, arm raises, cat/cow, and leg stretches. I try to offer many alternate poses and if any student wishes to simply sit quietly at his or her desk during this, they are more than welcome to do so. What no student can do is play on his or her phone during this time.

Sometimes, as an alternative to the asanas, I will lead students through a short meditation. I set the stage the same way: lights low, remove distractions from desktops, comfortable posture. I start by cuing deep belly breaths. Then I may ask students to think of a color that represents peace and clarity to them—I tell them that for me that color is the color of the Caribbean Sea, a clean turquoise blue. Then I ask them to imagine that color as a ball of light that grows in their chests each time they take a deep cleansing breath. With each exhale, I tell them to imagine a gray, smoky fog leaving their bodies. The gray smoke

represents their stresses, their aggravations, and their fears. The color in their chests represents their bliss and peace. The goal during this short meditation is to grow that ball of color in the chest, and to exhale all the fear and negativity.

Another meditation involves a place. I ask students to think of a place where they feel most relaxed—I tell them that for me that is the beach. I ask them to remember all the details of their place, including the smells, the sounds, the sights. I tell them to picture themselves there, in that place, right now. Then, I ask them to tune in to how their bodies feel, as they imagine being in that place.

In the First Year Experience class, when we discuss the stress response, I lead the class through a much longer yoga sequence, incorporating some standing poses, and a longer meditation session. The

yoga poses used in the classroom, along with the verbal cues, are included in the appendix to this article.

With all the discussion in higher education today about resilience and student success rates, there is a place for complementary methods like yoga and meditation. Our students are facing innumerable pressures as they work toward academic completion and success. Far fewer of our students, especially at the community college and developmental level, fit the mold of traditional student; instead, they attend college in addition to working, raising a family and caring for elders. Without the proper tools to manage stress and to focus the mind, those students find themselves drowning in worry and falling behind in their studies because they lack the skills to train their brains. Yoga and meditation are two skills that can be taught to students to help them more successfully manage the many stressors they face.

References

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Appendix

Yoga Poses for the Classroom

Sit with feet flat, legs uncrossed (*cue students to move cell phones, coffees, etc. out of the way*)

Rock back and forth on the sit bones so you are balanced between them

Hands can rest on the desk in front of you, or your thighs (palms up for energy, or palms down to feel more grounded)

Imagine a string attached to the crown of your head, gently pulling you into a straight posture

Chin can be slightly dipped toward the chest

Eyes close...or gently gazing down on the desk or floor in front of you

Take an inhale through the nose...draw the breath through the four corners of the lungs, all the way down to the belly

Feel the belly expand slightly

Exhale slowly through the nose

Take a few breaths, slowly, at your own pace

Imagine you are inhaling cooling, cleansing breath

Imagine you are exhaling anxiety or stress

Gently let the left ear fall toward the left shoulder...not pushing, just letting gravity work

Take a few moments to feel your neck stretch

Inhale the head back up to center

Gently let the right ear fall toward the right shoulder...not pushing, just letting gravity work

Take a few moments to feel your neck stretch

Inhale the head back up to center

Gently let the chin drop toward the chest, taking a few moments to feel the back of the neck and maybe the tops of the shoulders stretch

Inhale the head back up to center

Take your left hand and rest it on your right knee...gently twist at the waist

Inhale your spine up toward the sky...exhale deeper into the twist

Take a few breaths here

Come back to center

Take the right hand and rest in your left knee...gently twist at the waist

Inhale your spine up toward the sky...exhale deeper into the twist

Take a few breaths here

Come back to center

Reach arms up to the sky

Wrap your right fingers around your left wrist, lifting and pulling to the side

Feel the opening in the side of your body

Move to the other side, lifting and pulling

Feel the opening in the side of your body

Return hands to thighs or the desk

Take another inhale...deep down into the belly

Now, exhale through the mouth

Bring movement into fingers and toes

Gently open eyes

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