

On Yoga and Teaching Writing: What Faculty Members Could Learn From Yoga Instructors

After a long day of teaching and committee meetings, I look forward to my Thursday-night yoga class. The yoga studio is in the basement of a nondescript building on a busy city street. Taped on the door is a poster of Ganesha, the Hindu elephant god of transitions, and when I open that door I enter a new world. People speak in hushed voices as they remove their shoes and line up their yoga mats on the wooden floor. I sit on my purple mat and let the day's conversations about the state of student writing recede.

Tonight's class is a "Vinyasa Flow" with Lauren, one of my favorite teachers. As we begin our first set of Sun Salutations, I notice the man next to me struggling in Downward Dog. He's putting all his weight on his fingertips rather than his palms, breathing heavily and sweating profusely as his glasses slide down his nose. It's clear he's new to yoga, and I wonder how Lauren will help him.

As the 90-minute class progresses, Lauren calls out the Sanskrit names of the asanas and walks around the room offering gentle adjustments. When she reaches the man next to me, she presses his palms flat onto the mat, pulls his hip bones toward the ceiling, and runs her hand over his back to elongate his spine. She then moves on to assist other students, never once altering her calm instructions to "inhale, exhale." The man's Downward Dog still isn't perfect, but by the end of class, he's made many small changes just by watching the people around him.

As a yoga student and a writing teacher, I find myself thinking about that man who, as both a novice and an outsider, bravely joined an unfamiliar community to try something new. I've also been thinking about what Lauren did—and did not do—as a teacher.

The man clearly didn't know much about yoga, but she made only a few strategic adjustments and let him continue his practice. As a result, her actions welcomed him into the group and allowed him to experience yoga. Had she tried to "fix" everything—his breathing, hip rotation, alignment—she would have overwhelmed him with too much information and risked alienating him not only from her class but also from yoga itself.

Her pedagogical choices, in other words, reflected her larger intention of inviting students to become active participants in their own journey toward understanding yoga. I wonder what would happen if we in higher education adopted a similar mind-set. Consider the

corollary: If our larger intention was actually to invite students to become lifelong writers rather than college students passing a course, how might that shift the ways in which we read and respond to their writing?

Like many people who teach composition, I am routinely stopped in the hallway or at the copy machine by colleagues who bemoan the state of student writing (which is always perceived to be in perpetual decline). From the "invasion" of texting to plagiarism, student writing touches a nerve for almost every faculty member I encounter.

Implicit in their complaints are deeply entrenched assumptions about writing that persist despite over half a century of research on how we write. First among these is the assumption that writing is primarily a set of discrete skills (correct spelling, knowledge of documentation styles, fluency with punctuation) that should have always already been mastered along a receding line of accountability. In addition, many faculty members seem to perceive writing as separate from—rather than integral to—the knowledge and discursive organization of a discipline. Finally, faculty complaints about student writing reveal how removed many teachers can be from their own writing process. How often have they faced a blinking cursor or blank page unsure of where to begin?

Those mistaken assumptions perpetuate the belief that writing is merely a transparent means of *documenting* knowledge rather than a primary tool for *generating* thinking. As a result our focus is too often on the final product than on the process itself.

I first started practicing yoga more than 16 years ago as a physical antidote to the stresses of life as a graduate student in English. After hours spent with texts and ideas, the yoga class offered a welcome reprieve. However, I've now been doing yoga as long as I've been teaching writing and realize that the yoga class and the writing class actually have a lot more in common than I'd thought.

Both require a commitment to practice rather than perfection; reward risk-taking rather than hesitation; flourish with timely but limited suggestions that encourage rather than frustrate; are active all-at-once activities that are learned by doing; and remain difficult no matter how long you've been doing them.

I've come to see that the foundational principles of yoga—practice, active learning, and nonattachment—have actually shaped my orientation toward my students and their writing. Too often student writers are penalized for their unskillful performances. However, by taking the principles of yoga off the mat and into the classroom, we

could shift our evaluation of student writing in useful and humane ways. Such an approach doesn't require becoming a yogi or reading Patanjali in Sanskrit. All it requires is reframing our expectations of novice writers and keeping an eye on our larger intentions in the classroom.

After years of studying yoga I'm familiar with many of the postures, or asanas, but the longer I practice, the more there is to learn. Each asana has an almost infinite set of internal and external movements that requires attention: When I'm tracking my hips, I forget to breathe; when I'm focused on my breathing, I neglect to ground my toes into the floor; when I'm grounding my feet, I lose my focal point; when I lose my focal point, I lose my balance; when I lose my balance, I abandon my internal body locks and fall. If I tried to focus on every aspect of each asana all the time or at the same time, I would get overwhelmed. But if I waited until I'd mastered the discrete facets of each pose before I tried it, I'd never get to actually practice yoga at all.

Feedback from my yoga teachers comes in the form of both subtle physical adjustments and verbal praise ("that's a good choice," "listen to your own body") that reinforces practice rather than mastery. Instead of giving me a catalog of errors, they prioritize one thing for me to focus on: my breathing, for example, or the angle of my back foot in Warrior I. My experiences on the yoga mat have helped me understand what my students face when they write: I fall all the time in yoga, but what's important is the attempt itself and the ability to continually begin again.

Yet we don't often take that approach when it comes to our students. As teachers we tend to look for mastery in our students' writing and penalize them for errors rather than recognizing evidence of practice. But just like yoga, when writers encounter unfamiliar genres or ideas, their performance fluctuates wildly as they struggle to accommodate new knowledge.

As a writing teacher, I've learned to pay attention to the places where things fall apart in student texts—where the syntax breaks down or paragraphing stops—and to consider these as important attempts. From that vantage point, "mistakes" aren't mistakes at all; they're crucial evidence of a student's intention and opportunities for productive growth. I try to reward students for their attempts rather than pick at failures, and to encourage practice rather than instill a sense of fear or futility.

Writing, like yoga, is a continuing practice—not a definitive skill to be mastered once and for all. We can dedicate our classrooms to practice using activities like freewriting, drafting, and peer workshops. Dedicating time for writing as practice may seem a radical act, but it's one that recognizes that writing requires time, intention, and attention.

My yoga teachers display a level of mastery that's been gained by years of study and practice. When introducing a new asana, they model it and describe

its key components, but most important, they always demonstrate a range of modifications to choose from depending on students' varying levels of comfort, skill, and flexibility.

Likewise, successful academic writers have spent their lives studying how language works. Imagine if we welcomed novice student writers into our classes with that same spirit of choosing from a range of options that stretch you as a writer. Just as many yoga students can't put their legs behind their head (and never will), most student writers struggle to enter a scholarly "conversation" and contribute an original argument. But there is a repertoire of choices on the way to that ideal that help students develop confidence.

If our goal is to develop lifelong writers, then one of our most important priorities needs to be ensuring that our students want to write and see the value of caring about it. That means sparing novice writers a long list of errors and not overwhelming them with all the nuances of expert knowledge. It also means learning how to be present, as a teacher, with each writer on his or her own path as a learner.

Yoga is never about perfection or competition but rather about exploring the edges of your own abilities, even as they change from day to day. Practicing yoga is a continuing physical reminder that attachment to results can limit experimentation and overshadow the value of practice. In fact, to think in terms of mastery is antithetical to the purpose of yoga. One of my yoga teachers used to tell us that "if you're not able to smile right now, you're not doing yoga." Usually she said that while we were holding a difficult pose like Warrior II that required a combination of balance, strength, and persistence. Her comment always made us laugh, which had the added effect of helping us relax and lower our shoulders. As a class we had become so focused on doing the posture the "right" way that we'd furrowed our brows, clenched our teeth, and held our breath. In other words, we had become so fixated on the outcome that we were missing the moment.

Yoga has taught me that the most important thing is showing up and getting on the mat. Experienced yogis and writers alike recognize that. Although each day brings a new challenge, they've learned to trust the process. Moreover, they know that the practice isn't just a "warm-up" to the "real thing"—it is the thing itself. It's that sense of commitment to the practice rather than a fixed attachment to the final product that is most important for our students to learn, and for us to teach.

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