

Teaching and Learning
Iyengar Yoga
in a University Setting

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Introduction

A few years ago, the University of Victoria expanded its curriculum in Physical Education to include a credit course in Iyengar Yoga. The course is taught in partnership with the Iyengar Yoga Centre of Victoria. From January to April 2006, Leslie Hogya taught twenty four undergraduate students in a 13 week session. The group came to the dance studio in the Ian Stewart complex every Tuesday morning for a two hour class. I joined this class as an assistant teacher as part of a directed study towards my undergraduate degree. Teacher trainee, Karen Dayton also participated as an observer and class photographer.

Leslie Hogya holds an internationally recognized Junior Intermediate III Certificate in Iyengar Yoga. I completed my Introductory Level I/II certificate in 2005. The students came from a range of academic programs: 10 from Physical Education; 6 from Kinesiology; 2 from Education; and one student each from Recreation and Health Education, Psychology, Economics, Humanities, Philosophy, and English. Most of the students were new to yoga: 17 students declared no experience with yoga, 3 reported limited experience, and 4 reported having had some yoga classes before.

The course provided a variety of learning opportunities and settings for the students. They attended 12 classes at the University; had a special class at the yoga center where they explored the ropes and many props that were not available in the university setting; were visited by a guest teacher in their university class; and were required to attend at least one regular class at the Iyengar Yoga Centre on their own. Students documented two of these experiences on a standard response form for part of their course mark.

This paper documents the students learning journey. The analysis is based on the student's response assignments and final reflective papers as well as my experience as an observer and teaching assistant in class. The following section of this paper explores some of the key themes that emerged in the students' response forms. These themes are illustrated with clustering of selected excerpts from the students' learning journals. These excerpts offer an insider's view of the Yoga class, emphasizing the cultural meaning of the Yoga class for the university students.

Learning through experience: Student Response Forms – Key Themes

Developing Body Awareness

A major theme that ran throughout the journals had to do with the learning process. Students developed new understandings of their bodies, and how to use them. The emerging body awareness came as a surprise to some students who were making new discoveries about the bodies they had lived in for years.

Key words enabled my mind to understand what I was doing and my body to be able to do it; I learned that your body changes from day to day and that yoga makes you more aware of them; Truly aware of my body for the first time; Learning to understand how my body moves; Becoming more aware of my posture; I learned so much about my own body today for once I was truly aware of it; I came to a new understanding about how my height affects the way I do the poses; I gained a new understanding in muscle memory; I learned

by noticing my body's symmetry [that]...one side will operate in a dominant fashion; hearing different methods of how to push myself really challenged me to go deeper into stretches and learn to understand to a greater extent how my body moves.

Student Response Forms

As student's awareness developed, they began to trust their ability to recognize their own capacities and limitations. Students also began to recognize how the conditions of a given day affect their capacity and limitations. With this developing trust in their self-awareness they were able to deepen their experience of poses and to recognize that there is something to be learned from facing one's personal limitations. Working with this developing knowledge they began to discover abilities they didn't know they had.

Yoga is a means to increase one's personal understanding of your body as a whole; it is a way to recognize your own limits; learning to trust my body; how much and how far the body can go; I can trust my body more than I normally would; if I trust my body and push myself just a little bit further I can achieve a lot more with each posture; learning the capacity of my body; I learned its limitations and its tendencies and discovered poses I never imagined I could complete; aware of my limitations and tendencies; I came to understand that a particular pose might be different depending on other factors in your life. I think you have to accept where you are for that day. Through this experience I realized how intense and active yoga can be. ...I found myself sweating and my body stretching in ways I never knew possible. Today's class forced me to push my limits and I gained a new respect for yoga.

Student Response Forms

Connecting the Flow of Learning

Students perceived a flow in their learning that helped them connect one pose to another. As they experienced the poses and their understanding of that experience deepened, students began to see the foundations of Iyengar yoga in the relationship of the poses and the progressive manner in which they are taught. They were able to make associations between the learning in different classes, and the experience of having different teachers working with these same foundations helped to consolidate their understanding of the consistency of the teachings.

Understanding the poses lead into each other; Many poses are progressions into other poses; flowed one asana to another; the poses were once again taught in a progressive manner by which the teacher moved through them almost in a sequence. It seemed that each pose led into the next; There is a relationship between foundation of all the poses, even when props are used; I observed a focus on balance and symmetry...especially accentuated during the foundation poses, resulting in a very effective transition into the poses we were moving into; the poses were taught in a progressive

manner where each pose led into the next one; associations between previous poses improved my memory of the poses and reminded me of previous classes.

Student Response Forms

The Environmental Effect: Field Trip to the Iyengar Yoga Centre

In addition to their University class, students had two opportunities to visit the yoga center; once as a guest at any of the regular Level One classes, and another time as a group on a special Sunday field trip. In the regular class visits students had a chance to experience not only the yoga class, but the community who make up the Iyengar Yoga Centre. In the special field trip class students explored working with the props in depth. They learned what ropes, ponies and bolsters could add to the yoga experience.

A common theme in the students' comments referred to the effect of the yoga centre environment on their experience and understanding of the practice. They found the peaceful environment provided a kind of refuge where they could relax and be calm; and they noticed that this environment facilitated the spiritual side of the practice.

Relaxing practice; relief, not stress, a kind of a refuge, nice pace, quiet, calm; peaceful atmosphere; quietness; spiritual; a peaceful environment; surrender; it made me feel relaxed and calm; More spiritually structured though still relaxed ... environment was more conducive to the spiritual side of yoga; I immediately noticed the atmosphere...everything was very relaxing and it was a very warm atmosphere to be in; People seemed very relaxed... relaxed.

Student Response Forms

The calm that students experienced at the yoga center did not subdue them into a state of tapas (inertia), but rather infused them with a sense of well being that arose from the vibrancy of the positive relationship. The combined calming and energizing effects of the environment allowed them to experience their practice in a more focused way.

Really positive energy there; healthy atmosphere; energy was strong peaceful vibrant and united; it was easier to focus because you could not help but be in a better spiritual state; a welcome and positive experience; positive; more concentrated; balanced and healthy atmosphere focused my mindset away from school and accentuated my exercise.

Student Response Forms

The sensory experience of visiting the yoga center was largely influenced by the physical surroundings. Photos of the Iyengars on the walls indicated to the students a sense of purpose. The presence of the library reinforced the understanding that the space was truly devoted to the purpose of yoga. These details contributed to the students' ability to focus on their practice.

Dedicated to yoga, pictures of Iyengar, the library, specialized facility; I liked the smaller size and warmth of the room; more yoga

like than at UVic; the room to practice in was more relaxing and the props were better; the brick, windows; the space allowed more focus; the class differed in my mindset, as having the pictures [of the Iyengars], quietness and the balanced and healthy atmosphere focused my mindset away from school and accentuated my exercise; there are pictures on the wall of yoga poses; the library.

Student Response Forms

Students recognized that extending outward from the physical space is a diverse community that makes up the population of the center. They appreciated the sense of this community as well as its diversity.

The yoga centre seemed to have its own little community of members who shared their practice together, which made it a welcome and positive experience. friendly people; A wide variety of people and at various levels; the students are a lot more focused; the participants had a much greater range in abilities, age, and ethnic background.

Student Response Forms

Addressing the Needs of Individual Students

Students recognized that the diversity of the community meant that teachers had to be prepared to address a wide range of needs based on different abilities, and states of health or injury. They appreciated that within these diverse abilities, everyone was able to do the poses with the help of modifications. Though the UVic students were a youthful and athletic group, some of them were dealing with injuries or health problems of their own. These students benefited from learning to modify their own poses both at the university and at the yoga center.

The teachers are very experienced; instructors are aware and conscious of each participant's differences; the class consisted of people of all ages from 17 to 65... The ability levels within the class were very diverse; the instructor was able to identify those who may need to vary certain asanas, and accommodate them accordingly; teacher offered variations, varying levels to accommodate abilities; poses taught so all were capable of doing them; poses were taught with variations so those who may have troubles (e.g. injuries) could feel comfortable in what they could perform; teachers are good at making the class appropriate for their students; each experience allowed me to adapt various poses if necessary and allowed me to progress at a comfortable and relaxed manner [person working with an injury].

Student Response Forms

One unique aspect of the yoga center experience was the opportunity to use a wide range of props for the first time (the equipment in the studio at UVic is limited to wood blocks, foam blocks and straps). The special class at the yoga center occurred after the students had been coming to class for 2 months. By this time they were familiar with the

poses and their capacity in them. They were well prepared to open up their experience to the world of props and the new ways that props allowed them to explore the boundaries of their capacity.

Pose enhancement with the ropes and other props showed the depth to where yoga stretches go to the next levels; props facilitated optimal practice; learning to open and stretch using the ropes; I felt my chest open using the ropes.

Student Response Forms

While props allowed some students to extend their experience and understanding of certain poses, they provided welcome support and relief for those who were dealing with injuries and other challenges. The bolsters were very much appreciated by more than one of these students.

Props were used to focus on certain aspects of the pose, ensure better performance, or used for those who have injuries; a variety of props allowed extensions and simplifications to the poses; the ropes and pony were a great experience for me as I was able to focus less on my injury, and more on the actual benefits of the pose; while using the bolster for stretches I feel much more comfortable with the support in my back, and consequently could stretch my lower back out easier; I really enjoyed the bolsters!

Student Response Forms

Linking and learning

The seeds of self-understanding that were planted in the early classes at UVic began to take root with the exploration facilitated by the use of props. Not only did the students deepen their understanding, but they found that this understanding would now be available to them in their own practice, even when the props were not there. The theme of linking and learning seemed to be a constant process with each new exploration documented by the students.

The poses that we worked on were mainly poses that we already knew but we incorporated ropes in with them. ... I gained a new understanding of the poses; able to understand the poses better than without the props; and then taking that learning into the pose with the memory of the experience; allowed me to gain greater understanding; after using the props (especially the ropes), to really understand how poses are to be done and feeling them I'll be able to take that learning into the classroom at UVic.

Student Response Forms

The classes in the studio at UVic provided the students with a firm foundation in the Level I Syllabus. Leslie followed the sequence of learning suggested by Geeta Iyengar in her book *Basic Guidelines for Teachers of Iyengar Yoga*. The logical sequence of learning ensured that students became quickly familiar with the important basic aspects of the standing poses, introductory inversions and seated postures. This foundation

prepared them well for the enriching experience of learning from other Iyengar teachers on their trips to the yoga center. They quickly recognized the thread that ties the teaching together.

Similarities in poses taught and language used; same tips for moving into the pose; the exact same pose; taught very similarly; teaching strategy and content was very similar; similarities [in] what was taught and how it was taught; similar teaching methods; many of the poses I have been learning through my course were also in the class.

Student Response Forms

The consistent threads of the teaching served to anchor students' experience of different teaching styles. Hearing different words and images from different teachers was another way to open their minds to new understanding of the poses, building on what they had already learned.

Building on experiences; able to feel the pose differently; changed my perception; understand the pose in a different way; interesting to hear different verbal cues; realize different aspects; beneficial to hear different explanations to fit a different learning style; different ideas and imagery helped me; the feel of the class was different; different kind of experience; slightly different teaching style; each teacher brings a new perspective to each pose; take what we have already learned to a higher level; helped give me confidence in my knowledge and abilities.

Student Response Forms

The Personal Journey: Applied Yoga

For many students the possibilities presented by learning Iyengar Yoga extended far beyond the classroom experience and the credit they would receive on their university transcript. Even by the end of the first month of classes students were starting to recognize the holistic nature of the yoga experience and its place in everyday life.

As my UVic yoga course is providing me with more hands on guidance and explanation, I feel more able and interested to pursue yoga out in the community; Yoga is a lifestyle for many people; I can definitely see myself incorporating yoga into my everyday life; I enjoyed knowing the benefits of each pose because then I can relate some of the yoga into my everyday life; I wish to incorporate yoga as a part of my lifestyle; I really started to understand how yoga can benefit me in my own life.

Student Response Forms

Students readily accepted the idea of incorporating yoga into their own life because they could easily see how the practice could be adapted to suit the unique circumstances of their own bodies and lifestyles.

Seeing the varying degree of flexibility, styles and use of props by the two different teachers made me realize it is simply a matter of practice to find out which props and positions work best for my body; this portrayed the flexibility and adaptability to personal style and preferences that people can make to yoga to have the poses and classes work for them; yoga is a personal thing, and it may mean something different to everyone (e.g. Spiritual, health related, personal).

Student Response Forms

Beyond academics: Learning through experience

The Iyengar yoga class was a welcome break from the pressures of the normative university experience, where students sit in a classroom or a lab and listen and write. Yoga extends learning far beyond the intellectual realm. Students welcomed the opportunity to take learning into a physical realm. The new learning style opened the door to new realizations about the interconnected relationship between the body, the mind and the soul.

A great change from my other UVic classes... no stress., no pressure...pure relaxation; It was nice to go to class and forget about other deadlines and stressful things that dominate my university experience; its more than a class; with each class I have found that I am beginning to grasp the bigger picture, with a focus on the actual harmony between body, mind and soul; I have an awareness of physical and emotional benefits; it's obvious why this type of yoga would be essential to a longer happier healthier existence.

Significance of the Course in the Lives of University Students: The Final Papers

At the end of the term students submitted their final learning log and portfolio. In this assignment, students wrote a one page overview of their understanding of yoga and its application to their future professional identity; and analyzed one pose from their learning logs. This analysis included their understanding of the challenges, and gains they faced throughout the term in the learning of this pose. For the purpose of this analysis I reviewed a selection of eight of the students' final papers. This section summarizes their final thoughts on the experience of taking this course.

Many of the students are in programs that will lead to them taking up positions as educators; others are setting their sights on professions in health care related fields. One intends to become a physiotherapist. Many of the students recognized the benefits of yoga for practitioners of these professions. Students expressed appreciation of the non-competitive nature of yoga. Aware of the frustration that many students face in classes focused on competition, future physical education teachers see yoga as a program of learning that offers students a healthy activity that can be performed by any body, athletic or not. As one student noted, it offers a non-competitive, health promoting activity that will engage future students in cognitive, social and psychomotor learning.

Students realized the complexity of yoga though, and expressed an understanding that continued practice would be required in order to bring one beyond simplistic understanding to a place of more complexity in mind and body. One future teacher expressed her desire to continue learning so that she will be able to teach.

One student who was reluctant to jump on the bandwagon of the current yoga craze told a touching story. She was concerned about the state of teaching in the market environment and the disrespectful way in which yoga is often marketed today. At the same time she struggled with her resistance because she also saw yoga as an answer to many of the health problems that westerners face. The class at UVic was her first step and it helped her to come to an understanding of the benefits of yoga, and the importance of following a path of integrity in the teachings.

Another student expressed appreciation for the transformation that yoga brought to his personal way of being, facilitating a sense of calm. He described how this calmness brought a sense of confidence, which also stemmed from a deeper recognition of self developed through the practice. Yoga, he said, reduced his experience of stress and consequently improved his ability to communicate with others. People close to this person also noticed the transformation he was experiencing and commented on it.

One student began the term with a new injury that restricted her capacity to do many of the things she was previously able to do. She was both frustrated and inspired by her experience. The restriction of the injury, experienced through yoga taught her a lot about herself. She said she found this learning to be a wonderful and magical exploration of body which took her beyond the logical, analytical, physical self.

Students gained strength and discovered new ways to be happy through their practice of yoga. They noted the tremendous need for yoga in western culture and saw it as a practice that could help unite the intellect, with physicality and spirituality. Several students wrote that the non-competitive nature of yoga is helpful for children. Others suggested that teaching yoga in the education system could help provide children with a way to become aware of their ‘whole selves,’ something that modern education often fails to provide.

Students reported benefits to their health, awareness and ability to concentrate on their other university studies. New awareness of my body alignment benefited some students in other activities and they had fewer discomforts. One student learned that it is healthy and beneficial to take time to produce a quiet state, through Savasana. Learning to “feel” the body rather than “look at” the body was an important new understanding for another student.

Conclusion

This teaching partnership between the University of Victoria and the Iyengar Yoga Center of Victoria provided a unique learning opportunity for future educators, health professionals and community leaders. Students learned through experience within an academic setting.

Students’ experiences in the yoga class served to increase their awareness of self and through this growing awareness they came to understand both their capacity and their

limitations. As their learning developed they came to trust their self knowledge and respect their own needs in the practice.

The variety of learning experiences presented them with the opportunity to see connections between poses and the way they are taught. They saw these connections as extending out into a diverse community of yoga learners from all ages and backgrounds. Students recognized that the Iyengar approach makes it possible to embrace diversity in the teaching setting, and that yoga is an appropriate and beneficial activity for everyone. They expressed the promise that this could hold for children within the school setting.

As future educators and practitioners they acknowledge that they will need to continue learning so that they can share these benefits with their future clients and students. Recognizing yoga as a life long activity, many of these students expressed a desire, or even a commitment to continue their involvement with yoga long after the marks for this class are posted on their university transcript. The world may be a better place for their involvement in this class.