

Article

Opening More Than the Hip: Yoga in OCV and OCVI Classes

Mathew White

The intent of this paper is to explain the purpose of incorporating yoga into 3rd year Oral Communication V and Oral Communication VI Courses, describe how and when yoga is being incorporated, and report on some initial findings.

Background

I teach Oral Communication V in the first semester and Oral Communication VI in the second semester. These courses are required for third year students in the Career senko in the College of World Englishes. Each of the courses is fifteen weeks in duration, and they are currently held on Fridays, during third and fourth periods. There are usually between twelve to eighteen students in a class.

The classes are content-based, using a website (created and maintained by Sophie Muller) for students to access our co-created flipped learning materials. There are a lot of in-class discussions and activities, along with group (first semester) and individual (second semester) presentations.

The content for this class is refined each year to improve the educational experiences for my students. In 2017, I began incorporating short yoga breaks into my lessons. In this paper, I will: 1) explain my reasoning for incorporating yoga into the courses; 2) describe when and how yoga is included; 3) share the initial results of including yoga ; 4) suggest some limitations and areas of caution.

Reasoning

One of the main reasons for including yoga in my classes has been to help students better concentrate and optimize their learning.

When students walk into the classroom, there might be countless things on their minds, preventing them from being fully present, focused on the class content, and achieving their full potential. They may also be tired or sleepy, especially since it is the last two periods on

Friday afternoon.

One of the most fundamental practices in yoga is to focus one's attention on one's breathing, and in the process, silencing all the distractions in one's mind while awakening one's powers of observation. In addition, when I introduce breathing techniques or yoga sequences, the process of listening to my instructions and making their bodies move into the correct postures might help students bring their focus back to the present moment.

My second purpose for incorporating yoga into the classroom is the physiological relation between movement and the brain. Souza (2011) points out that when we sit for 20 minutes, there is a build up of blood from the brain to the feet, legs and butt, and that by just moving for one minute, we provide our brains with a 15% increase of blood and oxygen. In other words, through movement, we can optimize our minds' abilities to process information.

Students have already engaged in some physical activity in order to arrive in class, so while they may benefit from some initial meditation or focus on breathing in order to become focused, they are not necessarily in need of physical movement at this point. Though I vary the times at which I lead students into some light yoga or stretching, I usually wait a minimum of twenty minutes into the lesson.

A third factor compelling me to include yoga in the classroom is to improve the overall mood and reduce stress. Third year students often express their feelings of stress in relation to part-time jobs, job hunting, family relations and friendships. A study conducted on university students by Streeter et al. (2007) found that students who participated in yoga lessons were more successful in reducing their levels of the anxiety and stress hormone cortisol than students who completed walking activities. In addition to reducing cortisol, Streeter et al. (2007) found that the students who practiced yoga had higher levels of the chemical gamma-amino butyric acid, or GABA, when compared with the university students who were in the walking group. Higher levels of this chemical are associated with improved mood and decreased anxiety.

For me, unsolicited feedback from students in which they comment on how much fun they found the yoga stretches, and the requests for me to include yoga in future lessons reaffirm my belief that yoga facilitates a positive learning environment and instills a sense of fun in learning.

A fourth reason for introducing yoga into the classroom is novelty. Each time I try to introduce at least one new yoga asana, or "pose". Souza (2011) points out that when the brain picks up some new stimuli, a rush of adrenaline closes down all unnecessary activity and focuses the brain's attention, so that it can spring into action. A lack of novelty will have the

converse effect, encouraging the brain to turn inward in search of novel situations, which explains why classes with too much predictability in content and procedures are more likely to have a higher number of students who are unable to "pay attention".

In my classes, I try to ensure that my students always experience what TEDster Godin (2003) refers to as a "purple cow", which means something novel and worthy of remarking about.

How and When I introduce yoga in the classes

I must confess that Chukyo University has spoiled me when it comes to classroom settings. I teach in a large carpeted room that has two-person tables, which are on rollers and flip up easily to rearrange the class. Students tend to sit in the back of the class anyway, so at the beginning of each lesson, as students are completing their warm-up discussions and sharing their own research and what they learned from the flipped activities, I remove tables and chairs from the front of the room so that we have an ideal space in which we can stretch together.

I begin introducing yoga from Week 1 as part of my self-introduction. As Palmer (1997) points out we may be doing our students and ourselves a disservice if we attempt to distance ourselves from our teaching. I thus share a little bit of who I am outside of the classroom with my students, and I hope they will do the same. In Week 1, we invariably do some ice-breaking activities. Since I practice yoga daily myself, it seems only natural to include it in my self-introduction.

I make it clear that in yoga, each person is reminded that they know their own bodies and physical limitations better than their instructors, so they are encouraged to refrain from any poses or stretches that they feel uncomfortable doing, or are unable to do due to physical limitations, the clothing they are wearing, or for any other reasons.

We then discuss breathing and posture, both fundamental elements of yoga. I explain how our breathing habits and posture affect our moods, our energy levels, as well as how we are perceived by others. After that, I introduce a few basic yoga warm-up stretches, such as neck rolls, shoulder shrugs and arm stretches, followed by the first few poses in the series known in yoga as the "Sun Salutation A." If, later in the lesson, I observe a lull in energy or attention levels, I introduce the next few poses in the series.

Throughout the semester, I continue to share breathing techniques and poses with the students. The activity can take anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes. Often, I ask students questions about the content of the course while we are in the various poses, increasing the number of times they are using their minds for retrieval of the information, and their fluency and accuracy in finding the appropriate English to articulate it.

Initial Results

Although this is my first year including yoga on a regular basis, the feedback from students has been extremely positive. Many students acknowledge that they find the yoga activities fun, and that they look forward to the stretches each week. A number of students commented on how the stretches help energize them or wake them from their sleepiness. In the rare event that we are unable to include an element of yoga in the class, a few students are sure to comment and ask that I include yoga in the next class.

As we experienced, discussed and reflected on how the inclusion of yoga in the class affected us physically and mentally, I believe students become more empowered regarding the steps they could take in order to enhance their learning experiences in other classes, at work and in other aspects of everyday life.

Not a single student has commented negatively about the inclusion of yoga stretches in the class. However, it is possible that some students could be turned off by the inclusion of yoga, so I hope to conduct an anonymous survey on yoga in the classroom as part of my future research.

Some students were restricted in movement due to health limitations or inappropriate attire. However, students who were limited due to the type of clothing they were wearing volunteered to wear more suitable clothing in future classes.

Personally, I believe that including yoga in my lessons has allowed me to connect with students on a different level. It has also allowed us to see each other from different perspectives. For some, it has led to greater confidence. For a few, it has even inspired them to start taking yoga classes or practice at home with family members.

Limitations and Areas of Caution

Many classrooms may not be ideally suited for the inclusion of yoga. Desks and sometimes chairs are fixed to the floor, leaving little if any options for rearranging the classroom. However, if we keep an open mind, I believe that even in such teaching environments, we can still incorporate yoga in some form in order to optimize learning. For instance, students can still be encouraged to engage in breathing techniques, shoulder shrugs, neck rolls and arm stretches even if the desks and chairs cannot be moved.

The clothing students wear to class can often be a limiting factor. Skirts, dresses and low-cut or loose tops may prevent some students from being able to participate fully. However, many of these limitations can be overcome by modifying stretches or poses. For instance, if a teacher is planning on including forward folds, in which we stand with our feet about a

hip's worth apart and fold our bodies forward from the waist, reaching our hands to (or towards) the floor, students wearing skirts can be instructed to position themselves at the back of the room, facing forward, so that they will not be put in possibly embarrassing situations.

The main areas of caution are regarding the poses and breathing techniques that students are taught. As with any physical exercises, students should be reminded to prioritize safety over their egos. Yoga is not a competition, and students should always be encouraged to only stretch as deeply as they can do without injuring themselves. The effects of breathing techniques should also be taught to students, and any students with physical ailments, such as back and neck problems, heart problems, low or high blood pressure, etc., should check with their doctors to know which, if any, types of exercises they should avoid.

Conclusion

This paper is only an initial exploration into one of the new elements of my teaching practice. I believe that novelty is as important for the teacher as it is for the students. I hope that we can all benefit from continued exploration of our connections between our breathing, our mindfulness and our health. Mohan (2010, p.114) attributes Tirumalai Krishnamacharya with saying: "Yoga is awareness, a type of knowing." I believe introducing small amounts of yoga into the classroom can increase students' awareness, levels of empowerment and agency in their learning. Yoga is more than just a method of stretching and opening of the hips. It is a practice that leads to heightened awareness of oneself and one's surroundings.

In the future, I would like to research how the inclusion of yoga into classes on a regular basis might correlate with higher motivation and reduced absenteeism due to illness, as yoga influences both the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems.

I hope that students will take what they learn from the inclusion of yoga in the classroom with them and apply it to other aspects of their lives. Japan, as should every country, relies on a happy and healthy workforce. If a little yoga interspersed within the curriculum can optimize the classroom learning environment, what might it accomplish at home and at the workplace?

Author: Mathew White (Associate Professor at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies and part-time instructor at Chukyo University)

References

- Godin, S. (2003, February). How to Get your Ideas to Spread. TED Talk. Retrieved from:
https://www.ted.com/talks/seth_godin_on_sliced_bread
- Mohan, A.G., Mohan, G. (2010). Krishnamacharya: His Life and Teachings. Boston and London: Shambala.
- Palmer, Parker (1997). The Courage to Teach. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher.
- Souza, D. A. (2011). How the Brain Learns. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Streeter, C. C., Jensen E. J., Perlmutter, R. M., Cabral, H. J., Tian, H., Terhune, D. B., Ciraulo, D. A. and Renshaw, P. F. (2007). Yoga Asana Sessions Increase Brain GABA Levels: A Pilot Study. The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 13 (4): 419-426.
<https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2007.6338>