

Breathing and Balancing: Yoga in the Classroom

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Note: We have found that some students are reluctant to engage in yoga because they see it as participating in a religious activity outside of their own beliefs. Teachers might want to discuss this with students upfront, explaining that the postures can be done for health benefits without ascribing to a certain belief system. LB



At Project Hope, we decided we wanted to incorporate a physical activity—accessible to all students—into the classroom to help manage stress. I had participated in a training last year about how yoga has been used to work with people who have experienced trauma. I was impressed with the research done by Dave Emerson (2011) at the Trauma Center in Brookline, MA using very simple postures and breathing exercises. Given that many of our students have experienced trauma in their lives, learning some basic practices by trained yoga instructors seemed like a way to begin bringing the body connection into our class, a class designed specifically to engage connections among the mind, body, spirit, and emotion.

I had a number of conversations with both M and D, two recently certified yoga instructors trained at the South Boston Yoga studio, about our interest in bringing yoga to our students. They had both expressed excitement and interest in teaching. Given D's lengthy experience as an adult education teacher, I sensed she would bring her knowledge of adult learners into the yoga instruction.

The four facilitators of our Women of Strength classes—Sarah, Joan, Jeymi, and Grissell — were included in the initial two-hour meeting at Project Hope. We discussed our interests and what we thought might be supportive to our students in putting together a two-session curriculum. We agreed on two 75-minute classes on consecutive weeks. This offered us a week between classes. This way, we could get feedback from the first class and use it to plan the second one.

Moving and Breathing

We had a wonderful exchange about ways to demystify yoga and make it accessible, fun, and relevant to the students. We talked about the importance of introducing the combination of breath and movement, the core practice in yoga; we also discussed the ways some of our students might be put off by their impressions of yoga from the media, etc. We emphasized that we wanted to make sure the women could learn simple postures that could then be incorporated into their regular academic classes. For example, their math teacher might offer a breathing exercise and posture before students took a test or before students presented in front of class to help with the stress of these situations.

Getting Started

Before implementing the yoga project, we brainstormed and discussed yoga with the students. (We also asked the students to sign a liability waiver form created by M and D.) A number of students said they had done yoga at the gym or used a yoga DVD. In general, they expressed interest in participating. We reminded them with a flyer posted around the building to wear comfortable clothing.

Our classes took place for 1 hour and 15 minutes. D taught the first class and M assisted. The class facilitators participated. They explained the origins of yoga and discussed the impact yoga had on each of

them in their own journey of self-care and healing. D and M made sure at the beginning of class to ask if any student didn't want to be touched by them during class as they assisted with postures. We handed out illustrations of some basic chair yoga postures. An excellent resource for showing simple postures is Peggy Gardiner's book, *Yoga at the Kitchen Sink*. (See citation below). It is intended for the elderly but is valuable for all ages.

D introduced how to practice deep breathing and then connected it to each posture. She went through the sitting postures and then invited the students to try standing balancing postures. After the first yoga class, we asked the students for their feedback. Many said they were happy with the class, offering comments like: "The practice helped me to shut out the outside and free myself from the inside." And, "I liked the body movement from head to toes...I felt relaxed, flexible, and it helped me to know that I can still use my body as well as I want."

Some students offered suggestions for improving the yoga classes, such as using music and increasing the tempo of the poses. Others indicated that they used what they learned at home. One student said, "I repeated the breathing movement, closing my eyes, relaxing my feet and arms."

Tennis Balls and Self-Massage

M ended the second class with a breathing meditation exercise. A number of the students commented afterward how relaxing this was for them. At the very end of the class, M demonstrated how two tennis balls could be used for gentle self-massage for the shoulders and back. A number of the students were very interested in doing this at home once they purchased some tennis balls; some students asked where they could take a yoga class. The experience certainly sparked some interest! See the YouTube video links below for instructions on making a tennis ball massager.

Next Steps

Our plan is to continue incorporating a yoga practice into each of our Women of Strength classes. We've dedicated five to ten minutes at the beginning or end of class to practice two or three postures and breathing exercises. We will eventually ask students to volunteer to lead this activity. We have also created a reflection chart to document the yoga postures we do each week with a place for student and facilitator responses.

Last week one of our ABE math and computer instructors invited one of the students to lead a relaxation exercise in computer class. The student instructed the class in some deep breathing and a few of the stretches she had learned in our yoga classes. I have since shared with the instructor the finger, hand, and arm stretch we learned that can help the students as they prepare for typing. The hope is that this few minutes of relaxation and stretching will become more a part of all our classes.

References

Emerson, D., & E. Hopper. (2011). *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Gardiner, P. (2010). *Yoga at the Kitchen Sink: Standing & Chair Yoga Poses for Seniors & Their Friends*. Arlington: MA: [the author] www.yogaandseniors.com/sample.

Tennis Balls and sock Self Massagers

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coP-7rwkbuo>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Cvxx3fhcLI>