

Universal Truths I Learned On the Mat:

What Being a Yoga Instructor Taught Me About Teaching

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In my experience, nobody ever really feels that they are prepared to teach, even if they have been pursuing a discipline for years. In my case, I had a decade-long yoga practice behind me, with years of working collaboratively with my fellow yoga students and I was still taken aback when my teacher asked if I would substitute for her when she went on vacation.

“Me?” I asked, “Don’t you think you want to ask someone with training?”

“What have you been doing for the last ten years, if not training?” she replied.

Don’t be silly. I thought. I mean teacher training. I am qualified to practice, but how does that make me qualified to teach? But my teacher’s faith that this was something I could do was encouraging, and within a few months I had my own class to teach—and to learn from. What follows are a few universal lessons I learned from those years in the studio and how they can be adapted to the library and the classroom.

1. Authority and humor are not mutually exclusive traits: Standing in front of a studio full of people for the first time, I felt that I must be serious in order to be taken seriously. The class responded to my solemn demeanor earnestly and politely, but not very enthusiastically. The first time I cracked a small joke, my students’ faces lit up and the entire classroom became much more engaged. They stopped being there for their health or fitness or flexibility and were there because they were having fun. Used gently and appropriately, I found that my relationship with my students also developed much more quickly when I was able to use humor as a teaching tool. As a result, when I said, “Trust me,” they did.

Everyone remembers the class clown who disrupted their peers by making jokes at the teacher’s expense. Perhaps you still have one or two in your life. Dread of introducing “distractions” can keep many teachers in a formal mode; however, this can be a mistake. Laughter has been proven to actually enhance a lesson’s effectiveness. This occurs in two ways: psychologically though increased self-esteem and motivation and decreased stress, and physically through

relaxation and improved respiration and circulation.¹ Humor can also improve memory, even in the dullest of settings: I still remember some key points from bar review lessons because the instructors were funny.

2. Challenge is the key to success: One of my goals for each class was to ensure that everyone came away from a class having done something that they found difficult. They didn’t have to do it well, but barring a physical inability or injury, they had to try. More often than not, my students astonished themselves with what they were capable of, and that led them to be more willing to try something new at the next opportunity.

In a law school context, there are always those light-bulb moments to be found. You know that 1L can master The Rule Against Perpetuities and that ALR student is capable of navigating the *Federal Register*. When they do master those necessary but nerve-wracking skills and concepts, those students are only going to be more capable of taking on challenges.

3. Boundaries are sometimes necessary: In a highly personal discipline such as yoga, it is easy for the teacher to be too available to her students. This is draining for the teacher and can lead to some unhealthy behaviors on the part of a student. Learning to draw gentle boundaries was one of the hardest things I had to do as a teacher, but maybe one of the most necessary.

A professor has office hours, but many librarians are perceived to be available all the time they are in the building. Consider instituting office hours of your own, or perhaps schedule regular, closed-door thinking and research sessions to make sure you can accomplish some of your own goals.

4. Act like you have already earned the teacher’s seat: I have already outlined the mental process I went through when being

¹R.L. Garner, *Humor in Pedagogy: How Ha-Ha Can Lead to Aha!* 54 *College Teaching* 177 (2006).

called upon to teach. It can be daunting to re-define yourself as a teacher: you have to step out from the shelter of being a student and be prepared to lead. But this is often one of those situations where the world has stepped ahead of personal expectations. While the student is busy learning, she is also often preparing to teach whether she knows it or not.

You know those thoughts: They're going to find me out. I'm not a real teacher—I'm a fraud! False. You have been selected to teach these students either in the classroom or in the library because you have mastered a specific discipline and you know it. Your students don't expect to find an imposter—they expect to find a teacher. And that teacher is you. Tell the negative self-talk to take a hike and own that teacher's seat.

5. Prepare, but be open to possibility: Preparation for the studio was a twofold process for me as a yoga teacher: I showed up at least a half-hour early to warm up with a lesson plan in my bag. The warmup was far more necessary than the lesson plan, since my worst classes were always the ones where I adhered too rigidly to the plan and missed cues from my students about what they needed. When I allowed myself to thoughtfully step off the prepared path, we all benefitted. In fact, my students' favorite class was always the last one of the session, where I had them bring in their best loved and most challenging poses and I built the class on the fly using the poses they identified as the central core of the lesson. In those classes, the students sometimes even found that they ended up liking a formerly hated pose because of how they ended up seeing it through the eyes of a classmate.

Are your students following you? The only way you know is to open up discussion, but I have seen many teachers avoid this out of a fear of getting sidetracked. A small digression should not be something to be feared: if you have the teacher's seat (and you do: see above), you can bring them back on track, and the small diversion from the plan may be more useful than anyone could anticipate.

6. Continue to cultivate beginner's mind: Yoga's concept of the "beginner's mind" is used to keep a pose or practice from becoming stale. A practitioner not in touch with beginner's mind thinks they know what they are doing inside and out, and ends up going through the motions without thought or

considered effort. When you cultivate the beginner's mind, you come to the practice as if you were doing it for the first time, which increases awareness of the effects of the pose, improves alignment, and decreases potential for injury.

Any law librarian worth their salt probably has at least one aspect of beginner's mind down pat: after all, the law is in a constant state of change and there is always new information to be discovered. But there are other aspects to beginner's mind that may be less obvious. A student with a background in sociology may bring an interesting and fruitful angle to a research project. A former journalist may have a talent for framing an argument that brings a fresh perspective. Beginner's mind shows us that teachers are to be found everywhere—especially in our own students.

7. Balance and breathe: Anyone who has taken yoga knows that there is a constant focus on two things: balance and breath. But you don't need to be standing on your head to understand the importance of balance, and breathing is not just about expanding and contracting your lungs.

Have you ever heard a nervous public speaker who spoke in short, strangled bursts? Chances are that person was breathing too shallowly and it's almost equally as likely that they were quite literally off balance. Standing evenly on your feet with your spine erect and breathing deeply relaxes you and allows your speaking voice to carry in the classroom. When working with library patrons, good posture and deep, even breathing make you appear accessible and confident.

Most of all, what I learned from being a yoga teacher is the portability of all experience: my early history as an actress allowed me to appear calm and balanced even when I was not as sure of myself as I would like to have been. My years as a law student made me continue to inquire more deeply into my own experience and the experiences of my students. My personality generally and sense of humor specifically did not have to be parked at the studio door while I adopted a generic "yoga teacher" persona. And in the future, I will integrate my past as a yoga teacher into my career at the same time as I continue to learn new tools and skills from colleagues who bring their own unique and diverse experiences to work. **LLL**