

MOVEMENT EDUCATION

Yoga for College Students: An Empowering Form of Movement and Connection

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Abstract

Yoga is a historic method for exercising, as well as cultivating a mind–body connection. For busy college students, it may be an effective way to slow down. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of participating in a semiweekly yoga class at a university on college students' lives. Evidence of impact was measured through students' written responses to reflective questions about the semester-long yoga class, which was designed based on the traditional characteristics of yoga. Students enrolled in the class reported increased levels of relaxation, greater perspective of their lives, more focus, and feelings of empowerment. Given these important outcomes, the author advocates that more yoga classes at colleges and universities should be taught in the traditional way (i.e., with a foundation in yoga philosophy) to enable more students to discover these life-enriching benefits.

College students lead complex, busy lives. They no longer just enjoy their college days. Instead, many juggle full-time work and families along with their classes. As a professor of pedagogy and a certified yoga teacher, I designed and taught a yoga class based on

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the traditional aspects of yoga that resulted in students finding more peace of mind and presence in their lives. In this article, I explain how I designed and executed this class, as well as the impact it had on students' lives, as evidenced by their weekly journal reflections. I begin, however, with a brief description of the extant research on teaching yoga in schools and, in particular, higher education.

Literature Review

At the elementary school level, several studies have been conducted and programs have been described (e.g., Serwacki & Cook-Cottone, 2012; Williamson, 2012). These studies and descriptions have shown benefits of yoga for children, including fewer behavior problems, less test anxiety, and increased learning. Similarly, high school students reported positive psychological benefits from yoga sessions that were incorporated into their school PE program (Noggle, Steiner, Minami, & Khalsa, 2012). In another study, high school students showed better academic performance with yoga practice that included asana (poses), pranayama (breathing exercises), and meditation (Kauts & Sharma, 2009).

At the college level, Nowak and Hale (2012) reported that students had a strong interest in yoga; in fact, in one survey study, more than half of undergraduate students surveyed had tried yoga (Riley, Park, Marks, & Braun, 2012). These authors also reported that yoga participants tend to be female, Christian, and English speaking. Researchers who looked specifically at the effects of pranayama instruction found that perceived stress was reduced for undergraduate students (Sharma et al., 2013) and test anxiety was diminished for graduate students (Nemati, 2013). Helberg, Heyes, and Rohel (2009) described a cross-curricular course they created for upper level undergraduate philosophy students titled *Thinking Through the Body: Philosophy and Yoga*. This course met once weekly to discuss readings and once weekly to practice hatha yoga. They found that the components of the course were complementary; however, at the same time, they struggled with a disconnection between the two classes in that they occurred on separate days and in different spaces.

In related studies, researchers have investigated the effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs, of which yoga is a component. MBSR programs, as originally developed by Kabat-Zinn (1990), include the teaching of mindfulness through the practices of meditation, yoga, and body scanning. MBSR has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety for college students (New-

some, Waldo, & Gruszka, 2012; Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008), for generalized populations (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Shapiro, Brown, Thoresen, & Plante, 2011), for particular groups such as health professionals (Martin-Asuero & Garcia-Banda, 2010), and for people with social anxiety (Koszycki, Benger, Shlik, & Bradwejn, 2007). The effects of MBSR programs incorporated into academic courses on college students have been studied. Bergen-Cico, Possemato, and Cheon (2013) reported general psychological benefits from a 5-week session of MBSR that was integrated into an undergraduate elective health course. Cohen and Miller (2009) investigated the effects of a 6-week interpersonal mindfulness training program on psychology and counseling graduate students. They found that students felt an increased sense of well-being because of the program and that the program could be a beneficial topic of study for future clinicians. Newsome, Christopher, Dahlen, and Christopher (2006) described a semester-long class titled *Mind/Body Medicine and the Art of Self-Care* that was created to help counseling students avoid burnout in their work. Their findings indicated that students learned how to better manage stress and improve their counseling practice.

To my knowledge, however, none of the studies on yoga in higher education consisted of yoga alone, targeted to a general undergraduate population and taught within a semester-long course. The purpose of this study was to fill this gap in the literature through investigating how undergraduates respond to a yoga class that draws upon traditional yoga philosophy. Although the number of colleges and universities with requirements for students to take physical education (PE) classes has decreased to almost 40% (Cardinal, Sorensen, & Cardinal, 2012), students who attend institutions that offer yoga as a choice in fulfilling that requirement or offer it as an elective could benefit greatly, particularly if the yoga class is taught in a traditional way (i.e., incorporates yoga philosophy and meditative aspects). Yoga has been shown to increase the quality of life for people who practice it regularly; specific benefits include muscular strength and flexibility, reduced stress and anxiety, improved sleep patterns, and enhanced overall well-being (Woodyard, 2011).

Method

In this section, a description of the course, demographics of the students who participated in the study, and procedures for data collection and analysis are provided.

Description of the Course

When I was asked to teach a section of yoga at my university, I thought of it not simply as teaching physical exercise, but as designing a curriculum commensurate with the traditional aspects of yoga tailored to meet the needs of college students. As a professor of pedagogy, I strive to plan meaningful learning experiences for students, and as a certified yoga teacher, I understand the importance of integrating yoga philosophy with physical practice. My approach to course design was based on constructivist principles; therefore, I sought to create a learning environment based on Jonassen's (1994) eight characteristics of constructivism. The characteristics most important to me were (a) multiple representations to avoid oversimplification and to represent the complexity of the real world, (b) emphasis on knowledge construction instead of knowledge reproduction, and (c) encouragement for thoughtful reflection on experience. I will further describe the ways in which I implemented these ideas next. Each component of the course structure was essential for my goal of student reflection and deeper learning about yoga.

My training in yoga encompassed more than 10 years of study and teaching, including a 200-hr teacher training with instructors who had an Ashtanga yoga background (as originally developed and taught by Pattabhi Jois in Mysore, India). The 200-hour program included emphasis on yoga philosophy (including required reading and discussion of *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* [Satchidananda, 1978/2009], *The Bhagavad Gita* [Easwaran, 1985/2007]; *Light on Life* [Iyengar, 2005]), Sanskrit, pranayama, meditation, anatomy, and teaching with hands-on adjustments. Subsequent to that program, I attended multiday teacher trainings in restorative yoga with Judith Hanson Lasater, alignment and philosophy with Donna Farhi, yoga nidra with Richard Miller, and breathing with Leslie Kaminoff. I am certified through Yoga Alliance at the 200-hr level as a vinyasa yoga teacher and have taught primarily slow, meditative vinyasa classes that are focused on pairing breath with movement and calming the mind.

Upon considering what was important to teach in a yoga class, I thought first of the eight limbs of yoga, as delineated by Patanjali in *The Yoga Sutra* (Satchidananda, 1978/2009). The eight limbs make up classical or traditional yoga. I wanted students to know more than just asanas (the poses) because in my own experience with yoga, the poses did not bring me deeper psychological benefits (e.g., calmness of mind) until I learned more about the classical yoga philosophy.

Even now, my physical practice continues to deepen as I learn more and reflect more on the eight limbs. Thus, these eight limbs were the foundation of the topics for the weekly agenda: yama (external restraints), niyama (internal restraints), asana (poses), pranayama (breathing), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), darana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (enlightenment). I also included other topics, including the types of yoga (Ashtanga, kundalini, yin, etc.), the history of yoga, and partner yoga. I used other references in course design, particularly in explaining yoga philosophy, including *The Yoga Tradition* (Feuerstein, 2008), *The Heart of Yoga* (Desikachar, 1995), and *Bringing Yoga to Life* (Farhi, 2003).

The class met twice a week for 1 hr 15 min each session. I began the first class of each week with a brief introduction and discussion of the topic for that week (types of yoga, history of yoga, yamas, niyamas, etc.); this portion of the class usually lasted 10 to 15 min. For the discussion part, I usually read short articles from *Yoga Journal* and miscellaneous online resources, which contained detailed explanations of the topic of the week. Consistent with Jonassen's (1994) characteristic of a constructivist learning environment, I sought to provide multiple representations of concepts, including conflicting ideas, to represent complexity of the real world of yoga. For example, when I discussed the types of yoga, I included aspects such as diet, poses, and meditation used in each. I led group yoga practices during each class meeting for about 1 hr; these practices included vinyasa, hatha, kundalini, and yin yoga, and I often incorporated student requests for areas of focus (e.g., shoulders, hips, core, balance, inversions). Attendance and participation in the classes comprised 60% of students' grades.

At the end of every week, students were required to answer reflective journal questions on Blackboard (an online learning management system). The purpose of these questions was to help students consider at a deeper level the topics discussed in class, as well as the ways in which yoga has had an influence on their lives. My intention was to encourage thoughtful reflection on experience (Jonassen, 1994). I graded these journal entries as a completion grade; therefore, if students participated, they received the points. This component of the course was 20% of the overall grade. The 13 reflective journal questions are listed in Table 1; four of them were used as the data on which the results of the current study are based.

Table 1

List of Weekly Reflection Questions

1. Describe your thoughts about the first group practice. How was it different than you expected? How was it different than what you've done before?
 2. In class this week, we talked about some of the types of yoga, but there are many other types. Do a little brief research on other types of yoga and describe them. Which ones sound most interesting to you and why?
 3. In your own words, explain the history of yoga. (If needed, read a little more about it on the Internet, but write in your own words.) How does it differ from what you previously thought?
 4. What is your favorite aspect of yoga? How has it influenced your life so far?
 5. In your own words, describe yoga philosophy, as well as an area or idea about which you would like to learn more.
 6. How do the yamas and niyamas relate to the values that you already hold? Do you see yourself incorporating the yamas and niyamas into your approach to life? If so, in what ways? Give examples.
 7. Describe the outside yoga class that you took, including the name of the instructor and class. How was it different from our class?
 8. How has your breathing (in general) changed as a result of this yoga class? What is your favorite pranayama?
 9. Describe your feelings about partner yoga.
 10. How can you engage more pratyahara in your life?
 11. Up to this point, how have you shared the yoga you've learned? How else could you share it with others?
 12. How has yoga impacted your concentration?
 13. How has your yoga practice changed since the first day of class? How do you plan to continue your yoga practice after this semester?
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Note. Questions 1, 4, 8, and 12 analyzed for current study.

In the course structure, I also included two projects, each worth 10% of the class grade: (a) a 5-min presentation on any aspect of yoga and (b) a 30-min personal practice to be demonstrated during the last class meeting. Consistent with the tenets of a constructivist learning environment, I designed these projects with the goal of providing students a way to construct knowledge rather than reproduce it (Jonassen, 1994). My purpose for the first project was that I wanted students to do brief research on an aspect of yoga so they would see how much information is available about it, as well as for them to learn more than what I presented in class. Considering that the course was a PE class and not an academic class, I did not expect a lot of depth. However, I wanted students to find interesting information to add to their and other students' understanding about yoga. I allowed the students to choose their topic; some students chose

to research and present about information I had mentioned in class (e.g., a type of yoga), and others chose new topics (e.g., chakras). Although these projects did not have an effect on the data collected for this study, they added to the students' understanding of yoga and were an important part of the course structure.

For the second project, the development of a personal practice, I wanted students to have written information they could use to continue their yoga practice after the end of the semester. I did not require a specific format, although I did encourage students to indicate the amount of time they would practice each pose or series; some students wrote the poses in a list, and others cut out pictures of poses or drew them. I encouraged them to develop their personal practice based on what would be safe and helpful for their bodies and lives, as well as a routine they would actually perform; therefore, some included more yin yoga (a slower, meditative style of holding poses for 3 to 5 min), and others included more vinyasa or kundalini (more active styles of yoga).

During the three semesters of the study, I needed to be away from the university for at least one class meeting due to attendance at conferences. To replace this missed class, I asked students to complete an outside practice. I thought this would be good for them so (a) they would experience variety in approaches to teaching yoga and (b) they would find a place to do yoga outside of class on a regular basis if they chose (i.e., local gym or yoga studio, student recreational center, or online class such as on www.yogatoday.com or www.youtube.com). All students followed this requirement and wrote about their experience in their reflective journal entry for that week.

Participants

The participants for this study were students enrolled in the yoga PE class that was offered at a regional, public 4-year university in southeast Texas. Over 14,000 students were enrolled at the university, of which 68% were undergraduate students. One PE class was a requirement of the university to meet the core curriculum guidelines. Over 50% of the students who registered for PE classes at the university were freshmen or sophomores; the percentage was similar for the students who chose to take yoga to fulfill their requirement. In addition, many students took the class as an elective.

This study spanned 3 semesters (Fall 2010, Spring 2011, and Fall 2011). Enrollment in the course each semester was limited by

administration to 20 students. Of the 60 students who took the classes, all except five students were traditionally aged students, between 18 and 22 years; the other five students were between ages 24 and 30. All the students were female except for two males the first semester and one male the second semester.

I did not initially intend to study the students' responses to the course, but as the deep impact became apparent to me midway through the semester, I submitted a proposal to the institutional review board for the current study. Therefore, I did not inform the first group of students about the study until the end of the semester. At that time, I told them about my idea of writing about how the course had had an impact on their lives, and I distributed consent forms. They were given the option to have their information withheld; however, no student chose this option. The consent forms, as well as my oral explanation, made it clear that they could withdraw from the study at any time and with no consequences for the class and that their ideas and responses would be used anonymously. To keep the subsequent semesters similar in terms of methodology protocols, I did not discuss the study until the end of each semester. In addition, my intent was for students to answer the weekly reflective questions freely and not feel as though they were being studied.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data for describing students' reactions to the yoga class came from responses to four of the Blackboard journal questions that had insightful and/or particularly reflective comments. Students responded to 13 questions throughout the 15-week semester, one for each week of class; this number excluded the week of Thanksgiving (for fall semesters), Easter (for the spring semester), and the final week of class. I designed the questions to encourage the students to reflect deeper on their experiences with the yoga practice and on important ideas discussed in class. Students' responses to each question ranged from 100 words to 300 words. All journal questions are shown in Table 1 in the order posed, with the questions used in this study noted.

Responses included those of students who took the class in one of three subsequent semesters (Fall 2010, Spring 2011, and Fall 2011). I taught the class in the same way each time, and the weekly Blackboard questions were the same each semester. I saved students' responses from Blackboard and removed all names to ensure confidentiality in the data. I analyzed the data using NVivo qualitative

data analysis software (QSR NVivo version 9.2). I analyzed the responses qualitatively, as described by Merriam (1998), and used the constant comparative method of theme generation to generate codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Themes are listed in the Results section in order of highest number of data segments that were identified, so the most common response or idea is listed as the first theme (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I compiled and analyzed the data from the three semesters about 6 months after the third semester. I found no notable differences in student responses over the 3 semesters. Although some bias in analysis may exist, I sought to reduce it by (1) analyzing the data in an anonymous format, (2) using NVivo software, and (3) doing so months after the last course. Potential biases are discussed further in the limitations section of the Discussion section.

Results

The four reflection questions that were chosen for data analysis included the following:

1. Describe your thoughts about the first group practice. How was it different than you expected? How was it different than what you've done before? (Posed at the end of the 1st week)
2. What is your favorite aspect of yoga? How has it influenced your life so far? (Posed at the end of the 4th week)
3. How has your breathing (in general) changed as a result of this yoga class? What is your favorite pranayama? (Posed at the end of the 8th week)
4. How has yoga impacted your concentration? (Posed at the end of the 12th week)

I analyzed responses to each question as a group and then combined the data from the most common themes across the groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The themes that emerged from students' responses were (a) calming, (b) perspective, (c) focus, and (d) empowerment.

Calming

Feeling more relaxed and calm was the most frequent response to all of the analyzed reflection questions. Many students noticed this difference after the first class, indicating they felt calmer throughout the whole practice; for example, one student commented, "The entire experience was extremely calming and allowed for self-re-

flection.” Others particularly enjoyed the final savasana (relaxation pose): “The last five minutes where we just laid there and focused on breathing and letting everything else go was the most relaxing five minutes I have ever had.” One student noted particular movements that were beneficial: “I was surprised at how relaxing just a few simple moves could be, like deflating my tongue or breathing from my belly instead of just my lungs.” Other students noted the calming effect after class was over:

I believe yoga must be good for the mind and body because I felt really great after I left class. It’s a feeling I’d have to say I never felt before. I realized that I felt more relaxed, and definitely more flexible. The breathing aspect of yoga was interesting as well. I felt as though it relieved my stress.

The calming effects that students noticed persisted throughout the semester. In response to the question about their favorite aspects of yoga, one student wrote, “My favorite aspect of yoga is the relaxation. I like the feeling of being at peace with oneself. I feel I needed this type of serenity in my life, especially being so busy and stressed all the time.” Other students commented:

After yoga practices, I feel extremely calm and at peace with everything. Even for the rest of the day I find myself breathing deeper and feeling more calm, rather than stressed as usual, and that is the biggest way it has impacted my life.

My favorite aspect of yoga is the fact that it is calming. No matter how awful my day has been or my week, it is the one class I can come into feeling stressed and come out feeling completely relaxed. It seems to calm my nerves quite a bit and help make life a lot less stressful.

This theme was also the most often cited in response to how yoga had influenced their lives. Students commented, “Yoga helps me calm down when I am upset or disheveled. Even when I think about practicing yoga, it calms my mind” and “I’ve learned how to relax my mind at all times—it makes such a positive difference in how I live my day to day life.” Another poignant response about the influence of yoga on a student’s life was the following:

Prior to practicing yoga, I was very stressed out all the time with school and life in general and I had horrible sleep pat-

terns. Now, I'm still stressed with school and life, but I know how to keep calm by breathing and analyzing what's stressing me out and working toward de-stressing my life. Recently, I've had a very hard and rough two weeks and yoga has helped me by relaxing and taking my mind off things and to just let the things I don't need to worry about pass by like clouds. If I didn't know the things I do with yoga then I would've been a train wreck.

Similarly, another student wrote, "I am less stressed about a lot of things—I tend to let things just blow over instead of becoming upset about them."

The most often cited way in which students' breath changed was in terms of helping them be more relaxed and calm. For example, one student wrote, "I have learned that when I am worried, stressed, or angry that I can concentrate on my breathing and it helps to calm me." Another student wrote,

Something I didn't realize until I took yoga was how important the actual way you breath is. Sometimes for yourself you have to just stop and focus on nothing but your breathing. It's not only healthy, it's calming and gets you back on a more focused state of mind.

Other students commented, "If I'm having trouble sleeping or I'm really frustrated then I try the same breathing technique used in class to help me relax and gain a peaceful mind state," "I think it really helped me to control my breathing and ultimately helped me relieve my high anxiety life style especially working full time and going to school full time," and "Usually the breaths that I take are short and fast almost like I'm constantly panicking. Recently however they have been more from my diaphragm and I am more calm."

Several students commented about how they relaxed easier due to their improved concentration. One student described, "Yoga has impacted my concentration by helping me to take a step back, relax, and actually focus on whatever I am doing." Another student wrote,

It has helped me in concentration with my day-to-day activities, school, and at home with my family. An analogy that I can use to describe myself before yoga is a bee. Just always running from one thing to another, never taking the time to slow down and really think about what I was doing, or needing to do. I just zoomed through everything as fast as I could

so that I could get the next thing on my list accomplished. I no longer do that. If I catch myself falling back into this routine, I take a step back, take a deep breath, and slow down. I never thought that yoga would have such an impact on my life, in every area of my life.

Other students commented, “Yoga has improved my concentration not only in school but in daily life and that’s what I find most amazing about yoga” and “Really my yoga practice has impacted my life for the better; I am more calm and collected, and I concentrate more, and I am way less stressed.”

Perspective

During the semester, the second most common theme in the reflection question responses was about gaining a wider perspective of what is most important in life. For example, students commented,

Yoga has also influenced me to keep everything in perspective. I am usually very high strung and always worrying about things that I don’t really have control over, but yoga is helping me to let the less important things go.

Throughout the semester, the main thing I have taken from this yoga class is a more noticeable concentration on being in the present moment. When I get caught up in my daily schedule and things get hectic, yoga has taught me to stop and concentrate on where I’m at and what I’m doing.

Practicing Yoga has been a great addition in my life. During my practice, I get the chance to clear my mind and look at the things that are not changing. Having that quiet time to focus on what is important, and not just the everyday stressors, is very helpful to me. It is a good way to put things in perspective. I would definitely recommend practicing Yoga to anyone.

Many students also wrote about focusing on the most important aspects of their lives. For example, students commented, “Yoga to me pulls your mind to concentrate on the more important areas of life” and “Yoga eases my mind and helps me to focus on more important things than just the day-to-day hustle and tasks.” Another student noted,

Yoga has also influenced me to keep everything in perspective. I am usually very high strung and always worrying about things that I don't really have control over, but yoga is helping me to let the less important things go.

Another common area of increased perspective was learning how to be present in the moment. Students stated,

Since I've been in this class, if at any point during my day I feel overwhelmed, rushed, aggravated, etc., I stop and take a couple deep breaths, concentrating on where I am and my breathing, and it always helps me bring the situation into focus. This tactic always brings me back to the present and allows me to focus on what is happening in that moment.

Like what is said in class, "let your thoughts go by like clouds," I try to use this and simply focus on what is important to me in that moment and not all the other things that I don't need to worry about right then and there.

Some students wrote about how focusing on their breath helped them keep the events in their lives in perspective. For example, one student noted, "Especially when I am feeling stressed out, I breathe more deeply and just try to focus on that instead of whatever I am stressing about, which definitely helps with controlling my stress." Other students wrote,

When I find myself in a very hectic complication and am constantly worrying, I tend to catch myself before I break down and just breathe. As I am breathing, it makes me think about how lucky I am to be alive and just really give thanks.

Throughout the semester, the main thing I have taken from this yoga class is a more noticeable concentration on being in the present moment. When I get caught up in my daily schedule and things get hectic, yoga has taught me to stop and concentrate on where I'm at and what I'm doing. I am able to focus on my breathing and remind myself that if I'm not mentally present, I'll miss out on opportunities. I always get caught up in thinking about the past or planning for the future that sometimes I forget to enjoy the present.

Focus

Many students enjoyed the increased level of focus during and after the practice. One student stated, “I wasn’t thinking much about anything other than my own movements and control of my breathing. I completely forgot about anything and everything outside of the confines of the room.” Another student wrote, “I really liked the feeling of calmness and the level of concentration that it brought on whenever practice was over.”

Students also noted that their increased focus that started during the yoga practices was having an effect on other aspects of their lives. For example, students made the following noteworthy comments:

My favorite aspect of them all is FOCUS. My spirit is always focused on the present during practice. My mind is in one place. Normally, my mind is bogging with due dates, homework, personal issues and work. My schedule is always booked. Although my hectic schedule has not changed, I have learned how to stop and focus on one thing at a time. As soon as I catch myself spinning around the room, I pause. I breathe in deep and release and prioritize my thoughts. I do exactly what you described in class: The Cloud Analogy. I acknowledge all my thoughts as they float by and get back to them when I can. Focus is really important in life.

I would have to say my favorite aspect of yoga is the focusing aspect in yoga. I only focus on yoga when I am practicing. I just forget about everything outside of yoga, but when I practice yoga I focus on all of the details of yoga during my practice. I focus on every little detail, like that I am making sure that I am breathing right, or that I make sure my fingers are spread apart and that I am rooting down with my hands when I am in downward facing dog, or that my back is straight. When I focus really hard during my yoga practice, I feel like I am getting the most of the practice and it makes me feel like I did the best practice I could do that day. Being so focused when I practice yoga has helped me be more focused when I do everything else.

Other students wrote, “To stay in those positions and keep the mind clear of thoughts was hard, but this helps me in my tennis,

school, and life by improving my concentration and be able to live in the ‘Here and Now,’” and “I have found that yoga has really been helping me focus more in my other classes as well as in everyday life.”

In particular, many students noted the effect of the yoga practice on their ability to focus on their schoolwork:

Before regularly practicing yoga, I also had a hard time paying attention in class. I would allow my mind to wander when I needed to be studying, doing work, or just paying attention, but somehow from practicing yoga regularly I have been able to find a way to become more attentive during class lectures and in my everyday studying and work.

Being so focused when I practice yoga has helped me be more focused when I do everything else. I used to have a really bad procrastination problem, and now I’ve been getting most of my work done earlier. Also I noticed I have been doing a better job on whatever I am doing. If I am studying for a test I can study the same amount of time I would have before I started practicing yoga, but I retain more information now than I would have before I started practicing yoga. I also had a problem with remembering people’s names, but now I can remember most people’s names when I first meet. And because I am more focused now I get my stuff done sooner, so I am less stressed.

I used to study only in my room where there are distractions and it used to take me hours to study for my classes. Now that I’m doing yoga I find myself actually going to the library and focus better on my work. Doing this helps me get done with my studying earlier. When I read over material for classes, I’m so focused that I am able to read it fast and at the same time comprehend it the first time. So now I spend like two hours and a half for all classes I’m in together.

Many students also commented on an increased ability to focus on one task at a time:

Since I’ve started practicing yoga, I can see a difference in my concentration. I would normally find it hard to only focus on one thing. I can be very scattered in my thoughts, es-

pecially when it comes to school work. But now I can handle my assignments with no distraction from myself.

When I first signed up for yoga, my attention span was next to none. It was hard for me to focus on just one thing at a time. I have always been scatterbrained; my mind is always racing full speed ahead, never really settling on one thought. I guess that changed due to the fact that yoga requires for me to focus on one thing at a time. I guess with me actually focusing on the practice every class, my attention span has gotten stronger; I don't daydream as much anymore. I can actually sit and concentrate on just one thought and not get anxious. It is easier for me to know what I have to do during the day and after classes because my mind is not roaming as much as it used to.

Also at work I often get very busy and have a million things to do at once, and since I have been practicing yoga, whenever we start to get busy, I stop and take a few deep breaths and really try to concentrate on every single thing that I am doing individually, and I have found that I end up making way less mistakes when I do this.

Empowerment

Students realized that they could gain more control over their thoughts and lives through an intentional yoga practice and quieter mind. For example, one student wrote, "This course has taught me how I can be aware of things and thoughts around me but not let them affect my thought process." Another student described,

I've become more aware of everything around me, and when there are distractions around me, I block them out while I work on what needs to be done right away. And because I concentrate hard on my objectives, I have more free time to do what I like. I also do not procrastinate as much anymore. I get my work and projects done for my class right away. Also, I have become a better driver. I pay way more attention when I drive now. My friends used to not like to ride with me when I drove my car because they were scared of the way I drive.

Now they have seen I concentrate more when I drive and they are less scared to ride with me.

Many students realized that by learning how to better access their breathing capacities and increase their levels of concentration, they could have more control over certain aspects of their lives. For example, with respect to the beneficial effects of intentional breathing, students wrote,

I think that the breathing exercises are very liberating in the sense that you have the ability to control the aspect you need to live. I always just assumed that you just breathed to live, but by altering the pattern, you are able to feel so many different emotions.

Since yoga, I have focused more on my breathing and feel like I'm more in control of my breath. All before, I was never really aware of my breathing, but now I'm more attentive and focused on each breath that I take. Breathing better has helped to obtain more energy and relieve stress.

Another student stated, "My breathing has been much better due to yoga. I have learned how to breath for certain results. Like if I want to be more relaxed, I know to breathe out more than I breathe in."

Students also commented on their new abilities to concentrate better:

Another way yoga has impacted my concentration is when we sit at the beginning of class and focus on what we're about to do. It makes tasks much easier to accomplish when I take a few moments at the start and set intentions and really focus on doing my best.

I do get stressed out and I have the feeling of wanting to quit sometimes when I should be doing homework or studying. Now I have the drive to concentrate on what I need to get done and relax afterwards instead of resting every other minute while I'm trying to get my studies done.

A related idea is the health benefits that students could activate themselves. For example, students noted, "My favorite aspect of

yoga is its healing benefits. How it has the power to heal a person mentally and physically without medication just amazes me,” and “Yoga by far has been the one exercise that actually makes me feel better about myself every time I do it.” Another student wrote,

Since learning the pranayama, my asthma hasn't been bad. I do still have a shortness of breath, but it lasts for two minutes maximum. Knowing the different breathing techniques has helped me out a lot in the few weeks of learning them. I now have a choice of which pranayama to use and if my first choice doesn't help me then I can try out the other ones. Walking to the...parking lot I no longer have shortness of breath.

One student commented about increased self-knowledge, also supporting the idea of increased empowerment:

I came into this class thinking that yoga was no more than an easy PE credit that would be highly appreciated. But these past couple of weeks, it has been more than that. I have found out more about myself than I have the whole twenty-one years that I have been living.

Discussion

Students' responses indicate yoga may be a powerful force for helping students deal with their complex, busy lives. Students noted the myriad of ways in which the yoga practice brought deep benefits to their lives; echoing many of those reported benefits, one student commented:

I never realized that taking one class at [University] could impact my life so much. Participating and learning about yoga, I feel, has had a significant impact in my life outside of the classroom. I find that nowadays I have an overall more meditative sense of life while operating through daily routines. I can channel my breath while lying down to sleep at night. I can think about the calming sense behind the practice to help me get through my homework at the end of a stressful day. In most cases, I can reflect back to my focus in a practice to calm me down or help me make the best of a bad situation.

The primary themes from the reflective journals were (a) calming, (b) perspective, (c) focus, and (d) empowerment. None of these themes were particularly surprising, but each is important to the benefits of a regular yoga practice for college students. The first three themes are qualities that may help undergraduate students better cope with their lives, and the fourth theme, empowerment, is a way for students to gain more control over their lives.

Because college students are typically busy, finding time and a way to relax is essential. Yoga is a commonsense outlet, given that it is viewed as a relaxing activity (Lasater, 1999). The outcome of this study that students found yoga to be calming is consistent with previous studies in which stress reduction benefits were found for participants (Newsome et al., 2012; Oman et al., 2008; Shapiro et al., 2008; Sharma et al., 2013).

Through the process of understanding yoga, students reported they were able to develop more perspective on their lives and not get caught up in each situation or problem. Indeed, Strom (2010) asserted that through practicing yoga, people are able to connect with their inner selves and unite their mind, body, and soul, so an increased perspective is a common outcome (Lasater, 1999). This resulting theme of perspective was not found in the published studies on yoga or MBSR; perhaps this was because in most of those studies, benefits were measured based on psychological scales, such as perceived stress or mood states, whereas in the current study, students reported their perceived benefits through open-ended questions.

Practiced correctly, with intention as well as attention to the breath, yoga requires a fair amount of focus. The focus used on the mat can also become apparent off the mat in daily life (Strom, 2010). Obviously, an increased focus in daily life may be a valuable asset to students, particularly with respect to their classes and studying. This outcome is comparable to studies in which students noted increased academic performance (e.g., Kauts & Sharma, 2009).

The fourth theme, empowerment, is a result of the impact the other three themes had on students' lives. Students found that the knowledge and ability to enact ways of breathing and moving to have a desired effect on thinking was empowering. In fact, finding this power over one's life is important to maturing and moving into the role of an adult (Maslow, 1999). Yoga practitioners have written about and experienced empowerment through yoga for hundreds of years; however, for individuals who experience increased empowerment, it may be life altering (Wood, 2004). Yoga is an effective way

for people to obtain this control and insight into their lives (Cope, 1999). For college students, in particular, these benefits may have a profound influence on their lives. Similar to the outcome of perspective, this theme of empowerment was not reported in the extant literature; once again, perhaps that is due to the difference in data sources, as open-ended questions were used in this study.

Although students reported numerous benefits from this yoga class, there are several limitations to this study. Above all, it was a small-scale study of only one design taught by the same instructor, and yoga styles and types of instruction were not compared. Therefore, the type of yoga taught and the way in which it was taught could have been a bias. In addition, the same person designed and studied the course, so the results could be biased. I encouraged students to be honest in what they wrote in response to the weekly reflection questions, and I made it clear that I would be grading based on completion, not based on what they wrote and whether they agreed with my perspectives or teaching style. Also, because I wanted students to discover and reflect for themselves, I was careful throughout the class not to expound on the benefits I had personally gained from yoga practice. The results could also have been biased based on the majority of females in the classes and that a female instructor taught the course. Finally, although I took measures to prevent it (anonymous data, used NVivo, etc.), the analysis could have been biased because I was a solo researcher and not part of a team.

Despite the limitations and potential biases of the study, the results may be used to inform the design of yoga courses within PE departments. Indeed, if college students can experience some of the benefits reported in this study, they may find a calmer way of approaching their lives, with more perspective on the important aspects and more focus on their academic work. As a result, similar to the students in this study, they may become more empowered and thus feel a greater sense of control in their lives. Therefore, I advocate that comparably designed yoga course should be offered at colleges and universities to students, whether or not it is part of a PE requirement.

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