

## How to Teach a Multi-Level Class

Teaching a multi-level class is challenging and requires tremendous focus and care. Fortunately there are skills you can learn to give all students--young and old, practiced and new, injured or healthy--a good experience.

By Marget Braun

It's something many yoga teachers face when standing at the front of a room to begin a class. Before you is a classroom of yogis representing a range of levels, ability, ages, and expectations. How can you lead a practice that's appropriate for each person? Teaching a multi-level class with grace is the hallmark of an experienced teacher, but there are strategies you can use even if you're just beginning to teach yoga.



First, boost your confidence by acknowledging that teaching a multi-level class is a skill that can be learned. Second, recognize that keen observation is crucial to this task, and begin to develop your ability to really see your students. Third, once you've trained yourself in careful observation, offer appropriate modifications of poses, as well as interaction and humor, to make sure students at all levels are learning and progressing. And finally, realize that, in a sense, the idea of "levels" is simply a construct that true teaching quickly transcends.

### The Importance of Observation

Refining your power of observation isn't just a way to keep your students engaged—it's also a way to evaluate your students' abilities and protect them from injury during a class that may be challenging. Ashtanga teacher and author David Swenson believes that every class is a mixed-level class. "There is no such thing as a class where all levels of experience are the same," Swenson says. "And further, students find that their 'level' may change, even from day to day."

Swenson will scan a new group of students as they go through Sun Salutations. "Teachers are like forest rangers watching for signs of smoke," Swenson says. "The signal I look for is danger of injury."

Neal Wright, the former owner of Mission Yoga, a Bikram studio in San Francisco, also makes safety a priority because Bikram classes always mix beginners and more advanced students for its 90-minute timed sequence.

"It's fine to have mixed levels as long as the teacher's goal is to make each person feel they've received attention," Wright says. "Everybody wants some attention from the teacher. Most

people want corrections, too. They want to understand the practice and feel they are progressing."

According to Cyndi Lee, Vinyasa teacher and director of Om Yoga in New York City, you can give this individual attention best once you really observe your students. Train your eye to see what's going on with them, she explains: "Develop the eye to see." Lee may ask new students to sit with legs crossed. "You find out right away about hips, back, their strengths, their habits. In Child's Pose you can see an even, or non-even, curve of spine. In Downward Dog you see everything: lower back, hamstrings, shoulders, the strength they have or may not have in limbs." Becoming aware of their individual bodies is the first step toward offering modifications and variations.

### **Engaging Students with Modifications**

So just how can you engage *all* of your students in every class? Wright highlights the importance of this question: "Everything is fine and dandy if everyone is the same, but differences can make a class jagged." He notes, "The experience of a teacher is demonstrated by how he handles a roomful of new and more experienced students."

Swenson echoes the sentiment. "A teacher's experience is demonstrated by how well he is able to inspire each person in the room." In a class of many levels, Swenson gives alternatives that resemble the full posture as closely as possible, such as Marichyasana B with leg on the floor instead of half-lotus, so students have a multiple choice list of possibilities. "Variations are possible even in a flowing class," he says.

Cyndi Lee is also a strong proponent of adaptation and variations. No props? No problem. "If the only prop is a wall, use the wall," says Lee. "If students have a yoga mat, roll it up and use it as a cushion. There are a gazillion things you can do."

Most importantly, Lee says, know the foundational building blocks of each pose in order to offer variations. "I don't mean to rant," says Lee, "But I'm not sure you can call yourself a teacher until you can deconstruct poses."

For example, Vrksasana (Tree Pose) has elements of Tadasana (Mountain Pose) and Baddhakonasana (Bound Angle Pose.) And Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) is Tadasana split by a 90' angle. "Lie on your back," says Lee. "Put your legs up the wall with your arms extended alongside your ears. That's a Downward Dog. Or, place your hands on wall and walk back. Find a 90' angle. That's a Downward Dog."

"Every pose can be broken down," Lee says. "Know the action of the pose. Is it a twist? A side pose? A forward bend? A backbend? What are arms and legs doing in relation to space? What are legs doing in relation to the pelvis? What are arms doing in relation to the shoulder girdle?" Once you can identify the foundation of each pose, you can break it down for all levels of students.

"When you teach variations in the context of these building blocks, everybody can accrue the energetic action and benefits of the pose. Then students learn more about yoga than where to put their hands and feet," says Lee. This kind of learning can be exciting. People can see where a pose comes from and where it's going. "With this level of understanding," Lee says, "You are teaching yoga, not just giving instructions."

## **Redefining Levels**

But how do you know whom to teach an easier variation to, and whom to challenge with the full expression of a pose? Sharon Conroy, director of The Iyengar Yoga Center in New Orleans, equates level with the attention a student can demonstrate to the practice. "Level is not necessarily how perfectly anyone does the pose, or how flexible or strong he or she is, it's more the focus they embody," Conroy says.

"Right off the bat I can see how intelligent a person is in a pose when I instruct him to perform multiple actions," she says. "Beginners are apt to do one thing at a time. More experienced students can hold more than one action in their body, maybe as many as six or seven actions. A beginner may lose a second or third instruction after the first instruction."

Conroy gives instructions for Tadasana as an example. "Press your feet down and pull the front of the thighs up. Lift up through the sides of the ribs and stretch your arms. Now, take the top of your thighs back, hold the tail bone down."

"A beginner can't hold that many actions," Conroy observes. "But more experienced students don't lose the first action when you give them the third or fourth."

Conroy offers a popular "Ageless Class," in which all poses are supported with props and ropes. Most of the students tend to be between 50 and 70 or are working with an injury. Using props, students can focus on refinements and many improve their balance enough to move to a more advanced class.

In general, Conroy increases students' competency using Iyengar's system for progressing through the poses. Students first learn the standing poses, then progress to inversions, forward bends, backbends, then balances. This way she can make sure each student is practicing safely and enjoying the full benefit of the system. "In general we try to get people fully extended before we bend them forward or backward," she explains.

Conroy also distinguishes level by whether or not a student has a home practice and, in particular, how she uses yoga in her life.

"The people who use yoga most effectively are not necessarily the people doing the most advanced poses," she says. One student offsets his depression by finding a room at work where he can do a full arm balance. "That's using yoga to change your life in a positive way," Conroy says.

Looking at level from this perspective, level is mainly about the integration of yoga into your life, not any external standards of competency.

As people progress in yoga, Conroy observes, they understand that yoga is more than physical. "It's about stilling the mind, says Conroy, "We are using our body as a way to train the mind."

Although levels do exist at every stage of yoga, let's not get stuck rating ourselves, or our students only in relation to flexibility or ability. At its core, yoga is not about levels but about joining with one's own effort and being.

Swenson adds a bright note, "The deepest levels of yoga are experienced on the subtle plane within the breath and mind. When we encourage the student to maintain focus on these areas, we transcend the very idea of levels because we are all equal." Just as importantly, we should "encourage joy in practice. If a teacher can bring joy and a bit of laughter into the experience, the mood may spread!"

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