

# yoga

JOURNAL

## The Next Step

Learn how to take the leap from teaching classes to leading workshops.

By Sara Avant Stover



Are you the kind of teacher who always finds yourself ending class 10 minutes late? Do you know your teaching routine so well that you could almost do it in your sleep? Or do you keep a list of topics that you would like to develop and share but can't seem to fit into your regular drop-in classes?

It sounds like it could be time to take the leap from teaching classes to holding workshops, or longer, more in-depth classes. Some teachers might cringe at the prospect because they have stage fright, while others are turned off by the assessment that workshops, once a rarity, have now seemingly become a dime a dozen. But don't let fear stand in your way if something inside of you yearns for the opportunity to delve deeper with your students.

However, before you plan your first workshop, investigate your motives, clarify your content, bolster your confidence, and glean advice from seasoned workshop presenters so that you can take your teaching career to the next level.

## The Call for Change

Quinn Kearny, codirector of Chicago's Yogaview, started teaching in 1993. The calling to offer something more than regular classes came a couple of years later, both from an inner desire and from his students' requests.

"I made the transition from teaching classes to workshops by wanting to teach more than ongoing classes, and by having people who were interested in participating in these more specialized offerings," he says.

There are more reasons why one might want to begin teaching workshops. Kristin Cooper-Gulak, creator of Rhythmic Flow Yoga and director of Wilmington Yoga Center in Wilmington, North Carolina, admits that she is one of those teachers whose classes chronically run overtime. The desire for more time propelled her into workshops.

"I've always felt cursed with running 5 to 15 minutes over in my regular classes," she

says, "and workshops are a way to teach in a setting without such a short time structure."

Also thirsty for a creative outlet through which she could bridge her love for yoga and drumming, Cooper-Gulak saw workshops as opportunities to develop her ideas with willing students.

## **There Is a Difference**

Since most workshops do give you the luxury of two to three hours—that's twice as long as a regular yoga class—you have to do things differently to flesh out your subject matter.

"When I create a workshop, I am much more meticulous in my planning of it," explains Ana Forrest, who teaches workshops worldwide. "I first create a theme and decide on the apex [most challenging] poses."

Every pose Forrest teaches in a workshop must support her theme and lead into the apex, she says.

Cooper-Gulak, who is also no stranger to the workshop environment (she often serves as a teaching assistant to Shiva Rea and has been teaching workshops of her own since 2000), says she focuses as much on working with the group as on asanas.

"In my experience, there's a big difference between being a good teacher and being a good workshop presenter," she says. "Workshops are often more structured and creative and require an ability to lecture and work with group dynamics that are much more organic than a standard yoga class setting."

Workshops require lots of planning and sharing, she says. For the latter, she includes both sharing circles and question-and-answer sessions, as both help create a sense of community.

## **Learn from Example**

Assisting, apprenticing with, or observing experienced workshop presenters is a great way to learn the particular skills required.

Mitchel Bleier, a vinyasa teacher based at Saraswati's Yoga Joint in Norwalk, Connecticut, began teaching workshops while living in Detroit in his early twenties, and he continued them while he traveled around the country as an Anusara Yoga teacher, apprenticing with John Friend.

"My transition from teaching classes to workshops came rather organically," he says. "I was studying closely with John Friend, who solely traveled, teaching workshops. As one of his main apprentices, it was an easy transition for me since I could mostly parrot the example that I was constantly around."

If apprenticing full-time doesn't seem feasible, you can also contact a teacher in your

area whose teaching style you respect. Then offer to assist his or her next workshop.

## **Skill Building**

With practice, you will embody the very qualities that you admire in others. Intuition, efficiency in observation and assisting skills, and better articulation are a few of the many tools that teaching workshops will help you hone.

"I have gained the ability to listen to a larger group of people, to feel the energy of the room, and to give information at a time when it can best be understood," Cooper-Gulak says.

"I've also learned how to monitor my responses to questions more mindfully, taking deep breaths and honoring the diverse outlooks and opinions in the room," she continues. "At times it has been challenging. When you open the floor to questions, you put yourself in a vulnerable position—you never know what you'll get!"

Bleier agrees that there are many opportunities to be gained from teaching workshops.

In workshops with sometimes up to 100 students in attendance, he gained tremendous skill in observing and assisting students quickly and effectively.

"In addition, because I traveled and would see different students every weekend, I gained more knowledge of working with a wider range of bodies, capabilities, and injuries."

As you are growing your skills, consider marketing your first workshop to your current students. "There's no need to go out and try to solicit new students," Forrest points out. "Create a workshop for your student's needs and desires. You know what they're hungry for! It's a friendly way to start doing workshops."

## **A Heads-up on Challenges**

Teaching large numbers of students over long stretches of time affords you the opportunity to become a better teacher—but this is no easy task. As a seasoned workshop presenter, both nationally and internationally, Bleier knows that there are many potentially challenging variables: the host; the studio/community; and the promotion, traveling, and initial courtship of getting to know an audience of strangers.

"My greatest challenge is the first class, especially if it's a Friday night and the energy is low," reveals Bleier, who often teaches weekend workshops around the country. "I find that I am nervous, trying to read and assess the group. There's that initial awkwardness."

He also feels the pressure of needing to deliver something new or special, since a workshop costs so much more than a regular class.

"I feel the need to impress [the students] and make some major shift in their yoga or life in such a short period of time," he says.

## Final Words of Wisdom

Before you take the leap, gain more confidence and expertise from some sage advice:

- Learn from workshop presenters who inspire you.
- Make your workshops dynamic by using media, handouts, and books.
- Teach what you love.
- Believe in your abilities. Put everything into the process and then let go of the results.
- Breathe deeply as you teach.
- Give students tools that they can bring to their regular practice.

If yoga calls you to grow in this way, then let your path continue to be one of discovery. "Yoga is all about going deeper, and it really doesn't matter where you start digging," Bleier says. "It's all good and gets better the more you explore."

**Sara Avant Stover, who lives in Boulder, Colorado, is a yoga instructor and writer who teaches internationally. She also leads transformational journeys around the world. Visit her websites [www.fourmermaids.com](http://www.fourmermaids.com) and [www.expeditioninsight.com](http://www.expeditioninsight.com).**

Return to [http://www.yogajournal.com/for\\_teachers/2633](http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/2633)