

# WHAT ARE WE DOING TO THE YOGA CLASS?

## *A cry from the heart of Jeremy Jones*

*Be careful, very careful about organizations.  
Yoga cannot be organised.  
Organizations kill work.*

*Vanda Scaravelli.*

It is self evident that a yoga class needs a good teacher. What are the qualities of a good teacher? You could write a book on that question. Come to think of it, someone probably has already. However, high on the list, I believe, are two qualities. Without them, the teacher is doomed to mediocrity. They are a passion and commitment to the subject and a creative ability to make the subject personal and interesting to both student and teacher without personality cult and ego trip. In this article, I hope to show that the UK government and various national yoga organisations, often acting with the best of intentions, are actually succeeding in damaging the whole beautiful ethos of the yoga class and that, eventually, there is a real risk of it becoming extinct as part of the educational set-up. The class itself will not, of course, die. It will simply relocate to the fitness centre (in fact, it already has), where it will be financially beyond the reach of all but the better off - good news for those like myself who now teach mainly in these establishments, bad news for the British public.

Let me tell you a true story to illustrate part of my point. You may think that, in some ways, it reflects rather badly on me but I am totally unrepentant. You may also feel that it sounds horribly self-congratulatory and you might well be right but the story is too good to stop telling, as they say in journalism. In September 2003 I received an e-mail from a college. I shall withhold the name to protect the guilty. Would I like to take a class for the over 60's? My gut reaction was to say "no". I had a crowded timetable and I rather liked my fairly robust approach, which I was reluctant to dilute for a class with the inevitable physical limitations. Then I looked in the mirror and remembered my own age! In the past, I had been able to adapt my teaching to all sorts of challenges and "over 60" did not mean the same as "one foot in the grave". Indeed, my initial negative reaction was unpardonable. At my interview, I made a great impression with copies of old course/lesson plans, schedules of work, assessment forms, questionnaires etc. I said "yes" but there was an immediate problem not of my making. The college had left my appointment to the last minute. At my busiest time of the year, I had only two or three days notice. There was no time to plan a course or even the first lesson, as I had no idea who would turn up or what their physical abilities/disabilities would be. Apart from the usual yoga gear (mat, block and belts), the sum total of my equipment was a pen and folder with six sheets of scrap paper to make notes! The notepaper remained unused. Teaching by the seat of my pants, I felt totally inspired and liberated. I adapted with chairs and walls and improvised new practices and remembered old ones I had not used for years. Despite the college's administrative shambles, my students glowed with enthusiasm. They looked ten years younger as they left. One day I had to phone in sick. True to form, the college failed to cancel the class. My students were totally unfazed. They simply carried on with the practices I had already taught them. I am sure that some colleagues will be horrified at the safety implications of a group of elderly ladies practicing yoga unsupervised but I was delighted to hear the story on my return. Half way through the course, I had given them the knowledge and confidence to execute their own personal practice. Isn't that what yoga teaching is all about? Because I was teaching on automatic pilot, as it were, I had neither the time nor the inclination to make notes. Despite my normally poor memory, I would go home and make notes on the computer with almost complete recall.

The whole point of my telling the above story is not to blow my own trumpet. It is to illustrate a very important but often ignored fact, namely that *inspiration and red tape are mutually incompatible*. Excessive paperwork and assessment crushes the teacher's spirit, wrecks his creativity and blunts his memory and ability to process old mental files. I suspect that the unconscious motive of some organisations is to prevent the teacher and, by extension, the student from thinking for themselves. Most of the poor teaching jobs that I have done (if we're honest, we're all guilty occasionally) have been over planned, over detailed, inflexible and bureaucratically hidebound. I have spent too much contact time with my face in a folder of notes. My experience teaching these feisty old ladies was both moving and salutary. I learnt more than I have ever

done since completing my BWY diploma course. I now have an extensive inventory of adapted postures and other practices on disk for future reference.

Another true story - from someone else this time. A session of my foundation course is spent discussing the theme of "how I came to yoga". Nobody is obliged to contribute, but everyone does. You hear some intriguing, moving and, occasionally, astonishing stories. One student spoke about how she started yoga at school. One of her teachers was "a bit of a hippy" (her words!). School assembly was visualisations and similar exercises, and PE was – you've guessed it! My student had continued her interest in yoga right through to adult life. Today, that same teacher would probably be told to stick to the curriculum and toe the line. If she failed to do so, she would probably be dismissed. The truly inspirational schoolteacher is becoming an endangered species. The box-ticking assessment fetish of the government, Ofsted and local education authorities has crushed them out of existence. A well-meant attempt to raise standards by identifying poor teachers and methods has been an educational disaster. Standards have only marginally improved and schools have become work-stress pressure cookers for students and staff alike. One teenager known to me had to be kept off school for a week because extreme stress had left her mentally almost dysfunctional. I don't call that education, I call it legalised child abuse. Our children will soon start to leave school unable to function in everyday adult life without a set of guidelines and a flow chart.

You may ask, "What has all this got to do with the adult yoga class?" Rather a lot, actually. The control freak, micromanagement virus has now thoroughly infected the adult and further education establishments. One student who lectures full time at a higher education establishment told me of her own struggle to cope and how colleagues were going down like flies with stress induced illness. She spoke movingly of disaffected young students (often school excludees) disrupting lectures. Yoga teachers (and other tutors) are leaving the colleges in droves. Enrolment figures are declining as adult students vote with their feet and reject the new assessment culture. Whatever happened to the idea of learning without fear of failure? What has happened to the idea of learning for pleasure, as well as enlightenment? Experience has shown over and over that we learn more and retain more in a relaxed atmosphere. The box ticking culture goes completely against the grain of human nature. Learners learn better in a cooperative, non-competitive environment. I recall my old work as a service engineer. I sometimes had to go on technical courses to upgrade my knowledge. During the formal charts and diagrams part of the training I often noticed colleagues nodding off. When it came to the practical side, working in small groups, everyone was eager and communicative. Standing at the hotel bar afterwards (they were often weekend residentials) I usually learnt more from colleagues chatting informally than I did on the course I had paid for!

Now, it is bad enough that this bureaucratic pestilence has visited our educational establishments, which most of us use, directly or indirectly. Worse still, from a yogic viewpoint, is the way it has now infected the workings of national organisations. I am not an expert on the history of the organisation I used to be an enthusiastic if minor official for but I seem to remember being told that its founder had a strong distaste for what he called the 3 Rs – rules, regulations and red tape. I sincerely wish that this were still the case. When I took the job on, I was shocked at the amount of control and wearisome, frustrating and time-consuming paperwork just to get a simple training day off the ground. Then there was yet more admin. work afterwards to satisfy the organisation that objectives etc. have been met. Such is the demand for these days that I wanted to organise more of them but I was deterred by the administrative burden. Indeed, I wanted to tutor one myself on teaching the over 60's, using the plentiful material I have acquired during the course I have just described and others – but I was once again deterred. In a moment of despair, I said to a friend and colleague "I know how the fly feels, when it's caught in the spider's web". Why couldn't we just be given the information and a few suggestions and be allowed to get on with the job?

In fairness, the question of assessment is at the core of much (though not all) of today's paper chase. We are now talking about the assessment of both teacher and student. As a teacher, I have no objection at all to being assessed. (The euphemism is "teaching observation"). In fact, I welcome it – provided the assessor knows what they are doing. That isn't the same as enjoying it! Teaching is a bit like driving a car – you can get into bad habits without realising. I have nothing to hide and I'm always happy to listen to suggestions. Assessing students is another matter altogether. Yoga is highly subjective and internalised. "Experiential" is the buzzword. How do I know how a student is *feeling*? Over and over I have had students whose posture work was severely impaired by health and mobility problems, yet these very same students are the most likely to volunteer the comment about how much better they feel. Their postures may make a purist weep but they are still getting benefit from the work. Who am I to say "I can't tick that box because she's not doing it right"? I have occasionally had students with mental health problems. For such people, simply turning up to a lesson on time is a major achievement. What am I supposed to put on my learning

outcomes chart – “turned up on time”? At a recent college staff meeting I found I had a rather unlikely ally. A swimming instructor pointed out that she often teaches water phobics. Simply standing on the edge of the pool is a major breakthrough. “Do I write ‘stood on the edge of the pool’? “, she asked in a withering tone. Does anyone actually look at these charts? Somehow, I doubt it. Course success is now measured by a mathematical formula based on boxes ticked expressed as a percentage. What a way to measure achievement! I once attended a training day on assessment. I attended eager to dispel the mystery and came away having learnt absolutely nothing that is relevant to the yoga class. To date, I don’t feel that anyone has come up with a practical and objective way of assessing yoga practice “on site” that would not be hugely time consuming and self-defeating. We need to remember, when we get bogged down with such activities, that it is *the student’s paid for time* that we are wasting.

One of the pleasures of being a representative of a national organisation, foundation course tutor and occasional teaching practice observer (I have now relinquished all three roles) is the lovely people you meet and learn from. I have been in contact with a number of student teachers and I’m hearing things that worry me a lot. It is at this level that the control freak tendency hits hardest. The demands being placed on some teaching diploma course students are becoming impossible. There is a very real danger of burnout before they even qualify. When I was doing my training we were told to keep attending our regular classes and keep up our personal practice and any extras were up to us. Now, diploma students have to get a signature for each term that they attend an outside class and details of the teacher and his/her qualification. I don’t mind signing at all but I’m certainly not going to waste time checking the attendance “claim” against my register. I take my student’s word for it.

It doesn’t matter how fortunate you are, time, energy and money are finite. I fear that, before long, yoga teachers will all come from a very narrow social base, to the detriment of society as a whole. They will all be older women who I call “comfortably married”. In other words, they will enjoy the financial and emotional support of husbands in well-paid jobs while they work part-time or stay at home. Their children will be grown up or nearly so. Now this is not some kind of sneering put down. Nor is it a rant from an embittered radical. Some of the nicest people I know are “comfortably married women” but you do not have to be a radical sociologist to appreciate that teachers (in any subject) should be drawn from a wider social base. Why do I think that this will happen? Think about it. Diploma courses run by national organisations are becoming more and more difficult and time consuming to tutor. Therefore, they are becoming more expensive. This is not a reflection on the heroic work of the tutors; it is a reflection of the increased difficulty and complexity of overblown syllabuses and their attendant administration. Incidental time and costs are also going up sharply. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, diploma students are often obliged to attend a large number of outside classes and seminars. Before they start the course, they have almost certainly attended some kind of foundation course. All these cost money and take time and energy. Who are the people who have this energy, money and above all time? Certainly not men or women working full time, who are working longer hours and commuting further out of necessity, not choice. They also often have young families and partners to consider. Another point – I may be passionate about yoga but there are other things in life. Work-yoga-sleep is simply not a healthy, balanced life-style. If I were a diploma student, I think I would be saying, “Please can I have my life back”. I fear that student/teachers are having their vitality and creativity crushed between the hammer of “admin. frustration” and the anvil of workload. Some time ago I started to become aware of this change in my own mindset. I undertook a “no sacred cows” review of my own workload.

It is important to understand the psychology and evolution of organisations. It seems to have a common pattern regardless of the function of the organisation, be it college, trade union, charity or professional body. They start off with good, even noble intentions. They are informal and highly democratic. Their officials are usually unpaid spare timers. They may be occasionally fractious and decisions are slow because of the democratic, part time administration. The organisation is often rather like a favourite aunt, loveable, benign but occasionally irritating. Indeed, I often used to call my organisation “Auntie”! Then the organisation starts to grow and becomes a vested interest. A complex, self-protecting bureaucracy creeps in almost imperceptibly, like a slowly growing tumour. The organisation ceases to be organic and becomes a citadel with impregnable walls. It is difficult to get in or out or alter the shape of the walls. Later, as the bureaucracy becomes entrenched, an unpleasantly authoritarian “control freak” culture becomes the norm, rather like a secondary tumour. Now in my medical metaphor, the patient would undoubtedly die. This, however, usually does not happen with organisations outside the commercial sector. The survival instinct is too strong and they retain a residual goodwill from the membership and the outside public. They become ossified, part of “the establishment”, desperate to hold on to respectability. A cardinal crime, punishable sometimes by expulsion, is to “bring the organisation into disrepute”. This is often a code phrase for dissent. Any attempts at reform tend to be dominated by PR and “spin”. The outer varnish is polished and made presentable but

the inner core remains the same. This is particularly the case with colleges, struggling to grab at any funding source they can identify. In short, I have looked into my crystal ball and seen the future – and it doesn't work.

So, what can be done to put things right? It isn't easy. The IYN can only lead by example, something I believe we are doing well. However, we any organisation can start by delegating decisions downwards to the lowest possible level. Officials and teachers need the maximum possible autonomy. There must be an assumption of integrity and competence unless there is strong evidence to the contrary e.g. complaints from members or the general public. After all, if the members of the IYN are dissatisfied with the way any of us in the organisation do their job, they have telephone numbers, addresses and e-mail addresses. The same applies to my students, who also have recourse to my employers, in most cases. Criticism should be welcome, provided it is fair and constructive. So-called "Continued Professional Development" is a heaven sent control mechanism for commissariat – style professional organisations. The hapless member spends a fortune (and a lot of valuable time and energy) attending training days that are tutored by indifferent organisational bureaucrats, rather than inspiring teachers. Training days should be about what the members want and what the organiser finds practical, not what some faceless yoga commissar decrees appropriate. Should teachers attend CPD days? Certainly they should – but they should not be compelled to do so. Many teachers (I am one) do a lot of research and self-training at home. It's not easy to quantify learning but I suspect I have learnt more from my own efforts than I have from training days. Organisations must also resist government inspired paper chases. If money comes with unnecessary bureaucratic strings attached, it should be declined. To paraphrase a famous revolutionary, it is better to die on our feet from insolvency (highly unlikely, anyway) than live on our knees as an arm of the state. Individual teachers and other members also need to resist the paper chase, even if it occasionally causes a confrontation. A local fitness centre recently asked me to cover for a teacher on holiday. When I accepted, they presented me with a shopping list of nine different documents that I had to produce before they could put me on the payroll – *for one hours work!* My angry refusal left the coordinator totally bewildered. "We thought you guys were laid back", he said, with a tone of injured innocence. Well, yes, but – even a saint has his limits! Am I being unfair? I hope not. My mood is one of sorrow, rather than anger. If you have strong views either way, let me know by e-mail.

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