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An Appreciable Affinity: Exploring Yoga Programming in Public, School, and Academic Library Settings

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Introduction: Why Libraries for Yoga?

Media images associated with mindfulness and self-care often stress the need for quiet, space and time for contemplation, and a liminal setting apart from the daily routines of work and homelife. These place-based attributes associated with settings promoting mindfulness parallel many characteristics of spaces in libraries, particularly those in school, public, and university settings. After a brief foray into building more collaborative and constructivist spaces, in the past two years, libraries of all varieties have harkened back to earlier models to dedicate space – both physical and intellectual -- for students and faculty who found new challenges to working from home. Over the past two years, libraries have found that quiet floors, reserves carrels, and allocated study rooms a practicality for enforcing social distancing, became an unanticipated luxury for library-goers negotiating a pandemic-era collision of home and study. These suggest more opportunities for sharing impactful self-care practices like yoga through library instruction and programming.

Yoga for Populations Across the Lifespan

Libraries provide an ideal setting for lifelong learners who might be intimidated by any classes in more commercial fitness settings. Barack [1] writes, “library yoga rarely resembles the strenuous activity held in gyms and yoga centers. The small, often drop-in classes are light yoga at best; for kids, they are often organized around an activity or story hour” (p. 28). Yoga in libraries often begins with the simplest and most accessible types of practice, stressing breathwork and mindful movement and extended savasana. Evaluating the incorporation of yoga into programming at the University of Utah, Casucci T [2] wrote “instructors start by teaching basic hatha and/or vinyasa yoga. As they develop more

confidence, some instructors will teach ashtanga, modified bikram, yin, and iyengar yoga, or they will ask the participants for their preferences (yoga style, body area focus, etc.) before a session begins” (p. 85). Not all yoga programming needs to be extended or even scheduled. In academic libraries, pop-up yoga sessions can provide a needed and welcome study break in the midst of study or exam weeks [3,4].

Yoga in Pre-School and School Library Settings

Most school libraries are the largest classroom in the building, offering ample space for a range of kinesthetic opportunities, and they also lack the potentially negative association of the gymnasium proper. Trends in school library furnishing stress modular, mobile furnishings of the variety that can be easily cleared away for yoga practice. Educators are also prepared for a general population in that supporting some new yogis means being prepared with appropriate adaptations and any modifications for the poses being attempted.

Library Director Jenn Carson at the L.P. Fisher Public Library in Woodstock, New Brunswick, Canada asserts that yoga practice can be critical for preschoolers as well, framing physical literacy -- “being aware of our bodies and how they move in time and space” -- as a part of school preparation, finding “many children are not physically ready for kindergarten: they can’t hold a pencil properly or stay seated in a chair. If you can’t hold a pencil or sit still you are going to have a really hard time learning to form your letters and begin writing. This affects later literacy as more and more children fall behind” [5]. It is easy to incorporate aspects of yoga using tried and tested strategies like those captured on the Yogibrarian blog by children’s librarian and certified yoga instructor Andrea Cleland.



Cleland offers a range of examples of how physical movement can be easily and rather seamlessly added to scheduled programs to extend the literacy experience: "Adding yoga to a library storytime increases children's opportunities for imaginative play and may help them control their emotions" [6]. In preschool and storytime settings, the library might not require any formal permissions or legal release forms "since participating parents do the poses alongside their children" [1].

School libraries in particular have much to gain by explicitly teaching students the self-regulation and focus that comes with yoga. In school settings, younger students are often restless after transitions and breathwork and communal flows can serve to center them before a lesson or read-aloud. Wong [7] sees yoga as helping schoolchildren with listening skills, compassion, and resilience through promotion of awareness and self-control (p. 34). Most importantly, she sees yoga as an equalizer, writing "Introducing yoga in the school library programming helps reach a population that otherwise would not have had access to it. The library and yoga offer a reflective, peaceful space where students can escape the confusion and chaos of home lives. Surprisingly, the school library and yoga offer one of the few places where children can find a sense of quiet and reflect on their innermost needs, dreams, and desires" (p. 34).

Getting Started in Your Library

Depending on the locality, yoga might come with associations of Eastern religious practice and may even be limited by law. My own state, Alabama, legally prohibited the practice of yoga in schools until this past legislative session, though canny educators were able to get around this by instead leading what they termed stretches or visualizations. Persuading library administrators to incorporate yoga might not be the challenge you anticipate. As Lenstra [8] notes, "Yoga programming in public libraries has emerged partly because of the library's historical role as a trusted source of information on health-related matters." (p. 759). In terms of logistics around those programs, Lenstra's expansive survey of libraries offering yoga for patrons found that responsibility for planning yoga programming most often fell to adult services 42% percent of the time, was the purview of youth services some 39% of the time, and sometimes was positioned as an aspect of programming, outreach, or lifelong learning (16%) (p. 766)

Unless your library is fortunate enough to have certified yoga instructors on staff, you might wonder where to find yogis or yoginis to work with your patron populations. One possibility is recruiting aficionados completing teaching requirements to lead your sessions, since trainee yoga instructors complete volunteer

hours as part of the process of earning full certification, Casucci and Baluchi [2] found that a "training program would benefit from partnering with the library because it would provide another location for accruing volunteer hours" (p. 81). Other local yoga instructors have been happy to work with libraries by providing accessible instruction for a nominal fee on a public service or outreach basis.

Conclusion

Library goers are fortunate in that there is increasing access to yoga and other mindfulness programming accessible to them, as Lenstra [8] described "scattered evidence on the rise of yoga programs for diverse audiences in diverse libraries" (p. 760). Most of all, these events tend to be both well-attended and well-regarded, with "80% of responding librarians said participation in yoga programs had met or exceeded their expectations" [8]. As libraries seek to influence community well-being, yoga is part of a complementary and integrative health option, an effective way to encourage low-impact physical fitness in and beyond physical libraries. As the general population continues to look for ways to reduce stress and improve quality of life, gentle yoga and yoga for beginners stressing mobility will continue to be a popular and economical tool with the potential to attract new patrons and extend the reach and relevance of the library within school, local, and university communities.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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