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Creating a Theme-Centered Class

Discover how using themes can turn your yoga classes from mundane to memorable.

By Sara Avant Stover

We all have yoga classes that stand out in our minds. Perhaps we found ourselves in a puddle of cathartic tears during [Savasana](#) (Corpse Pose) or euphoric after rising into an unassisted [Sirsasana](#) (Headstand) for the first time. Something that the teacher said, or simply her way of being, can stick with us for years. As yoga teachers, we all want to deliver such classes. We want to touch our students' hearts, even long after they leave their yoga mats.

So, then, what is it that sets an exemplary yoga class apart from a forgettable one? Is there a method behind the magic?

The Power of Themes

Jeanie Manchester, a certified Anusara teacher based in Boulder, Colorado, believes that the answer resides in creating a theme-centered class.

"A theme has the potential to take students to the very heart of the yoga practice: To remember and to recognize our basic connection to the universe and to each other," she says.

John Schumacher, director of Unity Woods in Bethesda, MD, agrees. "People generally absorb experiences and information much more readily when it is presented in an organized, thematic manner," he says.

Selecting a Theme

In choosing a theme, consider using a philosophical concept (like the three *gunas*), a category of asana (such as twisting), an event in nature (say, the full moon), or a pair of opposing heart qualities (try willpower and playfulness).

Schumacher, a senior Iyengar teacher, also advises to "first and foremost, pick a theme that is interesting to you and about which you have some real knowledge and understanding."

If you do not feel comfortable with or passionate about your subject matter, your students will sense it quickly.

One way to assure that your students resonate with the theme-at-hand is to choose a topic that specifically addresses one of their questions or expressed interests.

"Students often ask a question about yoga, like 'How does the coccyx help you find the back body?'" Manchester says. "This can lead me into an entire week's worth of themes relating physical anatomy to 'The Universal Presence.' I love when students ask a question because then I really know I'm serving a need."

Putting It into Action

To introduce a theme, begin the class by briefly reading a passage or telling a personal anecdote that effectively sets the stage. The ideas brought up can then be fleshed out and developed through your sequencing and choice of language.

Don't spend too much time talking, though. Your theme will have more impact once the students get moving and can sense it in their bodies through direct experience.

"Sequencing and themes go hand-in-hand," says Manchester. One category of themes that she uses is nature's pulsations, or *spanda*, such as the autumnal equinox, the juncture between summer and winter.

"Summer lends itself to backbending. Winter lends itself to forward folding, hip opening, going inside," she says. For sequencing, then, she suggests a backbend focus, and midway through the class shift to more "quieting, cooling, meditative poses," such as forward bends, hip openers, twists, and inversions.

One can also structure a class around a particular action in the body or category of asana. Schumacher suggests teaching a class around the theme of external arm rotation, for example. Such a sequence might include Urdhva Hastasana (Upward Salute); most of the standing poses, including [Utthita Trikonasana](#) (Extended Triangle Pose), [Utthita Parsvakonasana](#) (Extended Side Angle Pose), and [Virabhadrasana I, II, and III](#) (Warrior Poses I, II, and III); [Urdhva](#) and [Adho Mukha Svanasana](#) (Upward- and Downward-Facing Dog Poses); inversions; and backbends.

Be careful that you don't introduce a theme at the beginning of class and then fail to fully develop it. To continually apply the theme of external arm rotation, for example, Schumacher would "show how different poses are related to each other and how the theme is varied and adapted from pose to pose."

When Not to Theme?

While themes deepen the connection between your students and the subject matter, they can just as easily estrange them.

This is a point with which Mark Whitwell, author of *Yoga of Heart*, agrees.

"The problem of setting themes in yoga class is that each person is unique. A theme that applies to one person may not be relevant to another."

He finds this to be true especially in the case of using popular Hindu images and deities as themes. This can be confusing and conflicting for some students, he says.

When your theme applies to your audience and teaching environment, it has a better chance of making a positive impact. Therefore, to ensure that your theme has relevancy, Manchester encourages us to first ask ourselves, "Where do you want to take your students in any given day? What do they need? What will best serve them?"

Another downside of using themes is their potential to make a teacher feel restrained and unable to flow with the immediate needs of the class. Schumacher offers an antidote to this. "Much as a jazz musician follows a chord progression while improvising on the theme," he reveals, "the yoga teacher can find numerous creative and expressive ways to bring a theme to life in a truly original way without feeling hampered by it."

With practice, you can learn to operate within a predetermined structure while still enjoying improvisation and creativity.

Tips for Success

Before you teach your next class, first sit down with a pencil and paper. Brainstorm possible themes until you come up with one that feels rich and topical. Next, jot down supporting words, phrases, imagery, appropriate asana, pranayama, and meditation. Research yogic philosophy or poetry you may excerpt, if applicable, and link all of the components together in a sequence.

Rehearse the whole thing in your mind, from start to finish. Pay special attention to how you will open and close the class—at these points, you can have the most impact on your students. Be sure, however, that you find ways to develop the theme throughout the entire class. Don't start out strong only to let the theme fade away 15 minutes later. Stay with it.

Lastly, make refinements. Experiment with vocabulary, pacing and the volume and inflection of your voice. Then test it out! Most likely, you will delight in the results. "Themes have only brought more focus to my classes, creating a more profound experience for my students," shares Manchester. "They are a wonderful way to allow them to reflect inside and see themselves more fully."

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