

Refining instruction-giving and use of language in teaching yoga

by Andrea Newman

Human Communication

We each have a unique life story full of communicative interaction with many people in different situations. As we grow up we become experienced in the type of communication needed within the contexts that we find ourselves in, such as within a large group of siblings, a group of friends, dealing with bullies or difficult neighbours, purchasing something in a shop, collaborating with work mates, making decisions in the Board room, visiting the doctor, being a teacher in a school classroom, being part of a sports team, a house share, conversing with others in a non-native language, etc.

We each come to yoga teaching with our own particular experience of communication. A yoga teaching and learning environment is somewhat different from other contexts, so we need to find which parts of our experience we can use, and which areas we need to develop.

If you think back to when you first started teaching yoga, you will remember what it felt like as you began to develop appropriate vocabulary, and started to realise that others don't always think like you do and don't follow instructions in the way you expect! If you have previous teaching experience, you may have found that there are some transferable skills, but that yoga teaching requires the addition of other ways of communicating.

One thing I have noticed in observing yoga teachers in teacher training assessments over many years is that teachers are often unaware of what they are saying and how they are saying it. They are relying on their usual ways of communicating. In the first few years of teaching yoga, you learn by observing your students and seeing how they respond to what you say. You find ways of giving instruction that students respond well to and are doing what you intended them to do. You develop habitual patterns of language use that

work. But like any habitual patternings, it's worth our while stopping to pay attention and examining the way that we speak, and is a skill that we can continually be refining.

You may like to try recording yourself teaching, and then listening back to it at home. Consider your tone, diction, pacing, choice of wording, how you relate to the students. Consider whether you are authentically conveying the teachings of yoga in the way you think you are, and the kind of relationship dynamic that you are setting up with your students. In your role as teacher, the boundaries within your yoga class and the nature of the relationship with your students, are set by you and maintained by the language you use.

Body language

Communication between humans is complex, and involves body language and gesture as well as words and voice inflexion.



Here is a video of some students giving a presentation about the use of body language when speaking to a group. Teaching yoga is usually different from a lecture situation, but there are many useful transferable tips here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFLjudWTuGQ>

When teaching yoga, it's vitally important that we watch our students continually throughout a class. However, sometimes we can be so focused on the students that we forget ourselves. It pays to take some time to be aware

of our own body language while teaching. Are we embodying yoga? Are we sitting and standing in an upright, poised and balanced way? (Even while students are lying down with their eyes closed – they sometimes have a peep at the teacher!) What are our hand gestures and facial expressions conveying to the group? When we demonstrate a pose, are we practising mindfully with strength and ease? (Often this is easier if we stop talking as we demonstrate.)

Giving instruction in different ways

There are many ways of giving the same instruction. Often we can express more than we realise by our choice of words and sentence construction. You are not only giving meaning and information and a request to do something, you are also implying something about the nature of the interaction and perhaps some ulterior motive. For example, imagine how you might feel in response to someone saying each of the following to you, within the same scenario:

‘would you like to eat that last slice of cake?’

‘I’d like you to take that last slice of cake’

‘I burnt the cake slightly and put a bit too much sugar in it, but do please have the last piece’

‘this is a cake recipe I’m working on, I’d really like you to taste it and let me know what you think’

‘if you don’t want that last slice of cake, I’ll wrap it up for you to take home’

‘there’s only one slice of cake left, you don’t want it do you?’

‘I’ll give that last piece of cake to the homeless woman at the end of the street, unless you want it?’

I could go on...!

These statements will also change their meaning depending on the tone of voice used and the body language accompanying them. Human communication is very complex and nuanced.

So when we are giving instruction to students in a yoga class, it is helpful to be clear in your mind what your intention is in that moment, as this will likely come across unconsciously in your choice of words, tone and body language, and will have bearing on the response of the student.

Consider: What is the theme of your class? What approach is relevant to the level of the students in the class? What aspects of practice have you assessed as needing work or refinement? What are your own areas of expertise that you wish to include? How do you see your role as yoga teacher in relation to your students? Are you keeping clear boundaries? Are you stressed or experiencing an emotion? Are you giving students autonomy and choices, or giving direct instructions?

At the workshop we will explore different ways of giving an instruction or teaching point to a yoga class, how that might be received by different people, and how it might alter how a pose is experienced.

Negotiating relationships

The way we use language is a good indication of our own thought processes. We express a lot more than we may realise through our choice of words and how they are delivered.

We apply yogic philosophical concepts (eg. yama and niyama, klesha) to contemplation of our behaviours in our practice of svadhyaya, or self-study. It's also worth looking at our language use in this light, as if we can convey these attitudes in our own use of language, then we are teaching our students so much more.

In this TED talk, Stephen Pinker talks about some of the intricacies of language and how our use of language tells us a lot about ourselves as humans: https://www.ted.com/talks/stephen_pinker_on_language_and_thought?referrer=playlist-words_words_words#t-1033441 (Start at 10:15 if you want to skip the language analysis part.)

Stephen Pinker talks about 'indirect speech acts' ie. not just the facts or information that you are sharing, but also what is implied. He talks about how

threats, polite requests, solicitations, bribes are often veiled, but the speaker and listener both know and understand the meaning of interaction. For example 'if you could pass the guacamole, that would be awesome' is a polite way to tell someone to stop hogging the guacamole! 'Would you like to come up and see my etchings?' 'Nice store you've got there, it would be a shame if something happened to it.' Taken at face value these are simple statements, but we can see the underlying messages they contain.

In the same way, there is much more taking place in an interaction between yoga teacher and student than happens when you simply follow instructions for a practice from a youtube video. As teachers we are setting and establishing a particular relationship and the boundaries within it. We are conveying a yogic approach to a practice and not simply a description.

Language is a way of negotiating the relationship you have with your students. Do you want the teacher-student interactions to feel like a family relationship, or a professional relationship, or a friendship? Traditionally the yoga-teacher student relationship has a very particular nature, and when you get it right, much learning takes place and it can be a very fruitful interaction for both student and teacher. Sometimes such a relationship can be called a 'spiritual friendship'.

Suitable language use can engender trust in yoga students, which allows them to relax into the practice. It also immediately gives the teacher power over the student. As teachers we have a duty of care not to abuse that power and not to blur the boundaries of the relationship.



Students can also project on to the role of yoga teacher and put the teacher up on a pedestal. Or they can also put you into a position of authority in their mind, and then act out their personal issues with authority figures!

It's the job of the teacher to use language which gives the students respect and autonomy, while at the same time authoritatively guiding them through a safe and balanced practice. Ordering people to do things frequently, creates a situation of dominance. Taking away autonomy by making choices for students frequently, takes away their autonomy, making them dependent on you as the teacher. Consider the relationship you are setting up in your classes.

Developing healthier thought patterns through language

Words make us think and stimulate brain activity. Thinking repeatedly in certain ways creates mindsets and develops thought patterns. These thought patterns create actions and behaviours. So your words as a yoga teacher can have a big impact on your students.

If we speak our truth, authentically, this will come across in the nuances of our language and gesture. Where we are at on our yoga journey comes through in our communication. Any unresolved emotional or ego issues of our own will also be there in our language, so it is good to be aware of those.

We can use words to help people become more autonomous with their own self-care and health management. We can let them know that it's safe to be self-reliant, that they are being trained to do that by a caring and knowledgeable person, and that they are supported on that journey.



We can communicate attitudes of self-enquiry and self-respect through our language. We can enable students to trust themselves and their bodies. We can inspire people to use their imaginations and to be pragmatic at the same time. We can help people to learn and grow.