

Hey everybody. It's Amber here. I want to talk to you in this slide presentation about making welcome, what we can do to help our students feel more safe, more welcome like they belong in the yoga spaces that we're creating. And I also want to talk a little bit about setting up your actual classroom, whether that's going to be online or in person, what are some things that you can do to set yourself up for success with any class that you host?

So, the first thing I want to do is kind of give us a little pep talk or a little orientation around this, that as the yoga teachers, we are the culture-makers, right? What I mean by that is that we have the opportunity to really set the expectations for our students. What is a yoga class? Like what is a yoga class all about, right? If you think about back to when maybe you first started practicing, or even now, like if I asked you, "What's a yoga class like? What can I expect when I go to yoga class?" You might have very different answers now than you did when you were new to yoga, right? Maybe yoga to you when you began was all about asana or physical postures and now it includes more adaptation and personalization of the postures. Maybe now it includes pranayama, breathwork, meditation, philosophy, right? There are so much more to yoga than just the postures, right?

But as our understanding deepens, we have the opportunity as teachers to reset expectations of our students, right? If they think that coming to yoga means that they're about to have an hour-long, hot, and sweaty workout, where we lay down for a few minutes at the end, right? That's one sort of set of expectations that they may be coming in with, that yoga is a fitness pursuit, right? And with those expectations comes a lot of other things, right? Like fitness needs to happen in a gym or a yoga studio or a place that's like special, right? It doesn't happen in your home for instance, where we know the yoga practice can take place anywhere, right? People may be expecting that they come in and they need to keep up with the class. They need to compete. They need to nail the pose, right? There are lots of expectations that people can bring in. But the opportunity that we have as teachers is really to define that.

Define what our classroom community is going to look like and define what this practice of yoga, this practice that we're sharing with our students and the experiences we create, what is that yoga all about? Right? Maybe it's not strictly a physical pursuit. And I hope it's not. Yoga is such a rich practice with many different modalities and tools and technologies that give us wonderful coping tools and skills and mechanisms with which to encounter our life as it is and to connect with the parts of us that are unchanging in a life and a world and a body that's constantly changing, and that we don't always have a lot of control over.

And so, while physical movement is of course important, and we don't want to just discard asana altogether, I think there are many other rich opportunities and I just want to start us off talking this way and just give you the permission and the agency and maybe even the motivation to think about like, what is the type of culture that you want to create within your classrooms? What do you want to be known for? It's one thing to be known for being able to give somebody a hot and sweaty workout and that's fun. Don't get me wrong. I love those kinds of classes too. But for the people who aren't well-served by the yoga community right now, for marginalized folks, for people in bigger bodies, people of color, queer and trans folks, older folks, people whose English is not their first language who are practicing in the West, right?

All of those students, we get to redefine for them an image of yoga that maybe they think is only for thin people or young people or white people or whatever, right? We can show them that yoga is for everyone. And it starts with the moment that they come in the door, whether that's the Zoom meeting or the in-person. So, I want to talk about making welcome. How do we make our students feel welcome like they belong, right? We need to know that students are often bringing with them a ton of implicit bias, a lot of misconceptions about yoga practice, oftentimes coming in with apologies ready to go, "I'm

sorry, I'm so out of shape," or overweight or whatever, right? Students come in and they already feel very intimidated if they even make it to this space.

So, when I talk about making welcome, this isn't just about greeting students and learning their names and that sort of thing. It's really an opportunity to help students unlearn the misconceptions they have about who this practice is for, about who it belongs to, about what type of people practice yoga, that kind of thing. So, the first place we have a chance to do that is really when we meet our students for the first time, whether that's online or in person. I think it's very important to have a welcoming attitude, to smile, to greet them appropriately.

So, if you're in person that may not be a hug or a handshake, depending on the COVID situation at the time, maybe it is appropriate to ask to, "Can I shake your hand? Do you want to fist bump? It's nice to meet you." And it's very important to learn names and how to pronounce them. And really take the time to do that. If you're somebody like me that has a hard time remembering names but is really at faces, maybe do name tags for your students at least the first couple of times they attend. And maybe you can wear one too, in case that's difficult for them to remember, but learning their names and how to pronounce them, I think is very important in honoring the wholeness of all our students, right? We want to really respect and honor their identities so they don't feel like they have to leave any parts of themselves outside the door in order to belong, right? Come as you are is a big theme.

Learn your students' pronouns as well. I like to make it a habit just when I introduce myself for the first time, I'll often say my pronouns, especially if I'm in the seat of the teacher. I do that, not only to let people know what my pronouns are, but to also normalize the fact that you can say your pronouns when you introduce yourself. It kind of takes the burden off the person who uses... Maybe they use they/them pronouns, but people perceive them as a she/her, right? It takes the burden off of trans folks, of people that use different pronouns from always being like the one that says, "Okay, but mine are different than you expect." Right? When someone who... I've never had anyone default try to go to he/him pronouns for me, for instance. People assume I'm a woman. I look like what people imagine a cisgender woman to be. They assume she/her pronouns.

And even though that's correct, I often come out and say them even before someone has needed to use them, just to normalize the fact that people have different pronouns, you can't always tell someone's gender by looking at them. And so, it's important to ask. So, oftentimes if I don't get that back from the student, I'll ask, "What pronouns do you use?" Just want to make sure and really keep that in mind when you're speaking to and about your students.

I think a great technique also is to introduce new students to the regular, right? So, if you have a new student who's coming in, whether that's into a physical space where I think this can work a little bit better, and you want them to know where everything is, right? How to get to the bathroom, where the props are, what props you need, where do you prefer for them to set up? What's the orientation of the room, right? All that stuff that you need to know to be successful when you come into a class. Let one of your regular students show them around. I love that because it creates a connection. It really helps your regular students to feel like they have buy-in and ownership in this community that you're building together. And it also helps the new person feel like at least they have one person other than the teacher whose name they know who they can ask a question to.

And of course, as a teacher, it's important that you make sure it's okay with your regular student. Chat with them ahead of time and just say, "Hey, when new people come in, I really like to hook them up with a regular who knows what's going on. Are you okay with that? Can you be one of those people for me to answer questions and show folks around?" And I find that, especially for your extroverted folks that love to do that kind of thing, I've never had someone turn me down. People are really excited to welcome new people into the community and to share a practice that's been beneficial to them. So,

online, it can be a bit trickier to do, but you always could hook up your students through DMs, right? And just say that, like a new person comes in and you can say, "Oh, I have a designated regular student who's going to tell you how we use the space and that kind of stuff." That's certainly an option.

Oftentimes I will just, instead of that in Zoom, if I have specific instructions for people to set up, I'll put up a slide, like I'll share my screen and put up a slide or a word document or something like that that says get two blocks and a blanket or whatever the instructions may be. So, whatever you decide to do, I think it's important that you be thoughtful about how you're onboarding your students. And that's what I've been talking about with the where's the bathroom? How do we use the Zoom space? All of that kind of different stuff. What do they need to know to succeed? If you were showing up for the first time, what are the questions that you think you might have? What are the questions you get over and over again? That's the kind of stuff that you need to cover in this onboarding.

So, we have this powerful opportunity as yoga teachers to set the expectations about what is a yoga class? What is this practice all about? And to reset expectations for some of our students who maybe have had experiences with yoga that skewed toward the fitness-oriented, or maybe that you have a student in a larger body coming in who was ignored or maybe injured or something in a class that centers smaller bodies, right? There's some reputation management, not only for the class that you're hosting, but for the practice itself, right? And so we have this powerful opportunity as teachers to say, "What is a yoga class?" Is it 55 minutes of extreme asana, followed by five minutes of shavasana, and then we run out of there? Or are we going to have a mix of all the different modalities and techniques and practices that are offered in this yoga tradition, right?

Consider for yourself, for your audience, for the people that you're trying to serve, what is the appropriate mix of asana, of meditation, of self-study, right? Maybe writing, reflection, discussing yoga philosophy, breathwork, community, social time. Oftentimes we don't really intentionally build this in, especially online, in person it's like, there's the water cooler chat and people are talking while they're getting their props. But if you're teaching online, how are you building in community time? And we'll talk a little more about that in a moment. A question I always like to ask is are you teaching poses or are you teaching movement, right? Are we teaching a shape that we're hoping everybody will kind of be able to approximate or are we teaching folks like where their shoulder blades are and how to squeeze them together and what that sensation feels like and what muscles it's engaging in and that sort of thing, right? There are two different things.

I think that a very important thing when we're considering what type of class we want to create and what type of environment is building capacity in our students for interoceptive exploration. And by that, I mean, interoception is the felt sense of what is going on inside your own body, right? It's the stuff we look for in a body scan. Can you feel sensations of hot, cold tension? Can you feel your own heartbeat? Can you notice where movement is as you breathe? All those self-sensing skills. Do a couple of things. Number one, they'll help us to have more information as yoga students of where do we feel the stretch? Are we engaging the muscle that's being required of us, all of those types of things. But also, those interoceptive skills really go so far toward self-regulation, the skill of self-regulation. Because if we can learn to listen to our body and sort of have an idea about what that information might mean, right? Then we have that sense of agency that we've talked about in this course, and that we'll be talking about more.

That sense of, "I understand what's going on in my body and by extension my life and I have some choice in that." Right? An agency is number one in creating a feeling of safety and belonging, which we really need for our students to be able to participate in this, for some very scary notion of now you're going to sit alone with your thoughts, that sort of thing. Or now we're going to ask you to be fully present in your body. A body that might not feel like a safe place to be fully present in, right? And so,

when we teach these self-sensing skills, when we really take the time to teach our students how to learn to listen to their bodies, we do so much more than just teach them to do a body scan. It really does extend off the map.

Building and community time, I think is so important. So, here's a couple of tips for doing that. The simple check-in, "How was your week? What's going on? Any requests for things that you might want to work on?" Maybe you're going to ask a powerful question or have a Dharma talk with a discussion about some concept from yoga philosophy. Could spend weeks and weeks just talking about different aspects of a himsa, non-harming, for instance. Like, what does a himsa look like when we consider it in our thoughts? Having thoughts that are non-harming. What does it look like when we're talking about the things that we say, whether that's to ourselves or to other people? What about our deeds? What are different ways that we can practice a himsa proactively, right? You could go into depth or do a survey of different types of concepts from the yoga sutras or yoga philosophy.

I think giving our students time to let their voices be heard and not just being the sort of drill sergeant at the front of the room that yells out poses is a really important part of building a sense of community. And that actually will keep your students coming back and turn the new students into regulars is like, they get to see their friends, they get to practice, they leave feeling better and they get that really important thing that all human beings need of being seen and feeling listened to.

Another thing I really like to do to build a sense of community in classes is to work on a group project for social good or for community connection. This is something that you can take time building consensus on, or you could select the project yourself. I think volunteering as a team, if you're local and in-person together could be great, going out for like workday on a local farm or something like that, working at a food pantry, a kitchen, something like that. Or you could do some kind of fundraiser and raise money for a cause, right? Uniting together on something like that, where we have like-minded folks coming together to do good in the community, I think is a really great way to build community and strengthen the class bonds that you already have.

And then a couple of other things just that I think are worth exploring. When you're thinking about setting up your yoga class, you could workshop a pose or a sequence, right? Oftentimes we get sort of stuck in a rut of like a yoga class has to be this sort of choreographed asana dance and we don't stop talking until the end when they're all in shavasana, right? But maybe instead, we're going to talk a little bit, we're going to gather around, maybe I'll demonstrate something, and then I'm going to send you all back to your mats to try something.

And so, I'll give instructions, but everyone is having their own exploration, their own journey, then maybe we stop and we pause for questions. Someone has a great question. Let's gather around that person and let's look at some different aspects of this pose or the sequence, right? Really taking the time to break things down and answer questions, I think can go so far in helping your students feel like they're successful in your classes, help them understand... If you're getting a lot of questions like, "Am I doing this right?" To me, that tells me, "Oh, I could actually teach a little bit more about this posture." Like, what's the point of the posture? What muscles are we engaging? Where are those? What is this supposed to feel like, right?

We can start to workshop a pose or a sequence and really give our students a deeper understanding. And then just make sure you build in a little time for social time. This can be as simple as turning on the Zoom call 10 minutes early, even though you're not there, just having it on in case people want to come on and chit-chat, or just allowing that extra five minutes in your class to let folks chat with each other, or maybe the social time is going to be built in in one of these other ways of building community. And that's totally fine too.

I think it's just important to remember, especially in environments like when we're teaching online, that can feel really one-directional, that one of the reasons our students come to yoga is not just because we're a fantastic teacher, but also to see their friends. So, especially with the past few years and the pandemic and everything, I think social time is more important now than ever. So make sure you build in some time for that.

What type of class are students signing up for? They may have an expectation that they're going to come in and they need to have certain abilities, they need to have a certain type of body. They need to be able to keep up with the class. They're worried about breathing too heavy, right? Students bring in all this baggage with them. A lot of it from the way that fitness has sort of laid itself on top of yoga and those expectations have become intertwined, but I think it's important to establish a judgment-free zone, right? And that is for you and that is also for your students. And so, not only are your students bringing in their own biases about yoga class and what the teacher's going to be like and all of those things, but we, as teachers are also carrying our own biases, right?

And so, I think it's important to remain in inquiry with this as a teacher, right? Are you making assumptions about a student's abilities or personality by looking at them? I think addressing bias and unlearning the societal conditioning that we have around what those people with those types of bodies do or look like and you can substitute any marginalized group in there, right? The social conditioning, for instance, around folks in larger bodies is often that they're not going to be able to do as much as your smaller students. They're not going to be as flexible. They're not going to be fit or capable. And oftentimes, other things like maybe they're not going to have good hygiene. They're not going to be as intelligent, right? There are a lot of stereotypes and stigmas around being at higher weights. And most of those things, or all the things I said are really untrue. They're not representative of every single person in the population.

And I think it's really important to examine when that conditioning comes up. When someone comes in and we assume like this is their first yoga class because we glance at their body and we assume something about that, notice that, right? Notice that and lean into those feelings and judgment, right? Maybe you're going to feel justified in the thing that comes up. Maybe you're going to feel guilty about that, right? Just notice, notice what's coming up for you. And I think it's important to explore how this type of implicit bias and the emotions that go along with it comes up in your teaching.

And I would love to encourage you to process this type of thing with your fellow yoga for all teachers and with me and Diane, but not with your students. It's not appropriate to go up to a student and say something like has been said to me before, which was like, "When I saw you come in, I really didn't think you were going to be able to do that thing that I asked you to do, but then you did and like good for you. That's so amazing." This kind of weird cheerleading is really the flip side of... It's a backhanded sort of compliment, right? Like it says, I had all these assumptions about your body and that can really make a student feel a little bit insecure and singled out. And we really don't need to share those thoughts with them.

We do need to examine those biases and question like, "Who told me this? Who taught me this about this kind of person? Does that ring true with my experience? Do I really know about that type of person's lived experience and what it's like to exist in that type of body or that type of identity?" Really being in inquiry with that and remaining in a space of curiosity rather than judgment, I think is really productive here. And there are a lot of fantastic trainings out there about implicit bias and about working with the way that society has conditioned us to view folks that are "different." And so, I encourage you to seek out your own training, your own information about working with bias and addressing that in your own teaching and your own life.



And so, I think it's important to communicate to our students that we're not judging them, that this is a judgment-free zone and ask that they do the same. Oftentimes, I will say, "I have two rules. The first one is no suffering." And we talk about that. We talk about learning to listen to our bodies and what type of sensations are good to move toward and what type we want to avoid. And then I say, "The second rule is no judgment," right? That you may look around this class and you may see somebody who's lifting their leg higher, who's less out of breath than you are and you might think that means something about their practice or your practice, but it's actually none of your business what's going on anywhere other than your own mat.

And so it's important to stay out of judgment, but rather to stay in curiosity. When you notice yourself judging, can you instead stay with the breath? Can you come back to sensation? Can you listen to my voice and do whatever I'm asking you to do in the cue rather than get caught up in this story about your body and how good or not good it is.

So, ask them to stay in this place of non-judgment. And I just want to offer this final thing, which is, I often say to my students that my yoga mat is my ceasefire zone, right? It's where I have a ceasefire with my body, meaning that oftentimes it's easy to have negative thoughts about your body, judgments, all that kind of stuff, but for the next hour or however long your class is, we're going to have a ceasefire. We're not going to be having a love affair with our bodies. We're also not going to be talking bad about our bodies and hating on them. We're going to focus on our breath. We're going to stay with sensation. We're going to stay out of the story and the identity that we have. And we're just going to have an hour of peace. Now we're in Switzerland, neutral. And the borders of your yoga mat are where the ceasefire zone happens.

And I don't know if that image works for you. There may be other language that's better, but I just invite you to consider that that's something that I often talk about with my students and reaching this place of neutrality with the body. You may have a different story, but I think finding a way to communicate that judgment is something we want to leave behind and really stay present with the experience that we're having.

A couple of things on your voice as a teacher. I think it's really important to be yourself, to not try to become some other version of a teacher. And I think that these tips really go toward that. So how will you ground your energy before class? You may be nervous. You may be feeling tired, you may be feeling depressed. You might have a lot going on outside of class. I know I do right now. How are you going to make sure that you ground your own energy and that you're able to be present for your students while you're leading them through this experience? For me, I know the things that ground me. I think my breath is a very powerful tool. Oftentimes like stomping my feet into the ground and then really feeling the power of a really powerful *tadasana* throughout the whole body, growing it from the ground up. I have a lot of little sort of techniques like that, that I can do to really gather in all the threads of my energy that may be in various places.

Taking a little bit of time before class to maybe get some practice in yourself, or even just take three deep breaths with your hand on your heart and your eyes closed just to draw your attention inward and prepare you for the class, figure out what works for you. And you might have to experiment with this a little bit, but I think it's really important and your students will notice the difference. You'll probably notice the difference.

It's important when you're teaching to connect with your breath and take your time. I think this is one I definitely struggle with. I'll get to talking and then the next thing I know, I'm like taking a big breath at the end of all the sentences. And so, oftentimes I have to myself to slow down. Slow down what I'm saying, give students a chance to move into the postures. If I'm asking students to take 3D breaths, stop and take 3D breaths myself, so I know how long I need to give them, right? Take your time. Find your

unique voice as a teacher, not someone else's. And what I mean by that is we've all kind of heard the stereotypical yoga teacher voice that sounds very ethereal and mysterious. And it's supposed to sound like some kind of uber-feminine, I don't know what, right? Or it's soft and there's tinkling bells in the background. I don't know.

I don't sound like that. I tell jokes. I mess up. I say cuss words every now and then. I laugh a lot. I'm loud. That's just who I am. And so, if I try to be someone else, if I try to be that yoga teacher with the soft voice and gauzy scarves, right? It's not going to feel authentic. It's going to feel weird. The students are going to get a weird vibe, it's just not going to fit. And so, I think it's important to really be yourself. It doesn't mean that we overshare and we don't hold boundaries with our students and all of that. But I do think that it means that you can be authentic, that you can really use your own voice and not worry about trying to sound like someone else. Even if that means like for a while you repeat the cues that your teacher taught you in your own voice and at your own volume, whatever that may be, until you start to learn how you want to phrase it, what language works best for you, what feels most you about that? And that will change over the years as you teach.

Speak clearly and say what you mean, try to keep your cue simple. Try to give only a few options for each posture. I wouldn't give 12. I might give three, right? If the cues aren't landing with your students, if you say something and everyone else does something that you did not expect, good, that's an opportunity for you to get a little bit more precise in the instructions that you're giving or to give a little bit more education to your students. So, try something else. Vary your cues, speak clearly, take your time. And finally, be transparent with your students, right? I think it's okay to share where you're at emotionally, especially if you're having a challenging time. If you've just had a crisis or a death in the family or a really tough day or whatever the case may be, or you're really excited, you can share that with your students. They're going to pick up on your energy anyway.

And so, what I suggest is you can share where you are, but maybe don't get too much in the story, right? I may come in and if I've been not getting good sleep recently, and I know I've been stumbling over my words and my thoughts aren't coming very clearly, I might just say, "Hey, you all, I've had some difficulty sleeping recently. I might be a little scatterbrained or stumble upon my words. I just want to give you a heads up. If you're getting a weird vibe, it's not you, it's me." Something like that, I think would be fine. Getting more into the story of why you're not getting sleep and how your medical issues and your bills and your parents, then that becomes more of an overshare and now we've all pulled everybody into our story instead of the opportunity to be present in our bodies there at the class. So, share your emotions, share where you're at, be transparent, but maybe don't overshare.

And then just a few tips. If teaching is feeling too one-directional. Maybe you're trying to encourage dialogue, you're asking questions, but you're not getting people speaking up, it's just you talking the whole time, this is a real opportunity to listen to your students. Maybe just to dialogue with them about their needs and their preferences. What's working? What's not working? What's feeling really easy? What's feeling really hard, right? That'll give you a lot of information, especially if you're teaching online, it can really feel this way. And I think just getting a little bit of information, I had a friend who was teaching Zoom classes and she would get everybody in the class, but they wouldn't turn their cameras on. And so, she was really frustrated by this and I told her, "Just ask, why are they not turning their cameras on? Just have a little discussion and say like, 'Hey, I don't want to pressure anyone, but I want to find out what's working for you about this and what's not working, what can we improve?'"

And it turns out that people were just concerned about where the recording would be used and would they be on a video that was going to be posted somewhere? And once she got really clear about what it meant when you have your video on, which is basically just she would be able to watch you and be able to offer helpful suggestions and that the recording was only for someone who missed the class and it

wouldn't be distributed, that helped. And students were fine to share their video because they got to see one another and all of that and mitigated the concerns that they were having. So, oftentimes it's just a simple dialogue that needs to take place.

Really make sure you build in that social time and community. Often, if students feel like they're able to chit-chat with each other, to work on something together, to have their voice heard, they're more likely to be able to do that in the maybe higher stakes situations where they have to ask a question that they might be insecure about, or they have to draw attention to themselves during the asana portion by asking for help with something. But it's easier to speak up if you're speaking up in these other low stakes situations.

Make sure that you're onboarding your new students and be thoughtful about what they might be missing. This is a good opportunity for listening to what's not landing, what do you not know how to do here? Do you know where everything is? Whether that's online or in person and use this technique that I like to use. A lot of skillful facilitators use this where we'll have a question or a topic or a prompt, and we spend time doing three things. Number one, the first one is self-reflection, right? I may offer a question or a prompt, and then they go right for three minutes, five minutes, 10 minutes, whatever you have. Then we take that question to a small group. We break everybody up into small groups, either through breakout rooms in Zoom, or just going to the corners of the room in person and let them discuss the prompt. Everybody can share what they talked about and they can have a little discussion. And then we come back to the big group.

We all come back to the class and I ask people for feedback or for highlights. What did you learn? What was your aha moment? What did your group discuss? Right? So that way, folks have time to think about their answers. They really have time to hear what other people have to say. They have time to get insights and then they feel more comfortable sharing in that big group scenario.

And then finally, if your classes feel like they're not landing with your students, something that I think is important is to ask like what would serve my students best at this time and really ask for their feedback on this too, right? It's not like we need our students to decide like, what are we teaching in class today? But I think it's good to be an inquiry about what really would serve my students best at this time? During a pandemic when most of them are working from home and practicing yoga on Zoom from home, is it a 90 minute hot and sweaty workout that they need? Or maybe do they need some quiet, some space, some breath, some self-regulation tools? A space to talk about what's going on with them, right? Maybe it's something like that rather than just something focused on movement.

So, I had a lot of ideas here about ways to make students feel welcome and some ways that you can work with that in your class. So, this is a reflection moment, optional, but I think it's great to extend your learning just to take this question with you and maybe sit down for five minutes and write out, what are three simple ways that you can make welcome or build community in your classes, whether that's online or in person? Thanks for being here. I'll see you in the next presentation.