

Hey everybody. It's Amber here. In this presentation, we're going to talk about teaching personalized practice, how to actually teach students, how to use variations or modifications. The way we make space for all bodies in yoga is, to me, three things. Number one, it's establishing a culture of consent and agency to empower our students. We're going to talk about that at length. It's adjusting our language and our cueing to focus less on a hierarchical view of things where you have beginners and then you have advanced people, or you have a modified pose, and then you have the real pose.

It's less of that and more of an invitation to experience the practice, to choose a variation that works for you, to find a place to work that feels appropriate to your energy levels and where your body is today. And then giving folks the tools to work with asana in the bodies they have today. Not just grab a block if you need one, but really teaching students how to use props, and tools, and variations, and their own bodies to find a personalized way of practicing that's really customized to them. And that really allows flexibility for wherever they might be in their practice or in their energy level that day.

So, the first of these three points that we talked about was establishing a culture of consent and agency to empower students. So I want to talk about agency for a moment here. That creating a safe container of agency, and the way I define agency is it is a feeling that you understand what's going on in your body and your life, and that you have some choice over that. You have a say about what happens to you and your body. And for the context of this discussion, you have a say about what you do with your body in my yoga class.

So it looks like students taking ownership of their practice and their bodies. We're going to talk specifically about creating a culture of consent in another part of this. And that goes for physical touch, but it also goes for knowing as the student that you can opt in or out of an exercise of a practice, of a posture if it's not working for you. That you have the permission to take your practice into your own hands and really be responsible for what goes on on your yoga mat.

That students understand and learn what is going on inside their own bodies. These are those self sensing skills that I've talked about. Interoception, the sense of what's going on in your body. The stuff we look for in a body scan, heartbeat, sensation, that kind of thing. Proprioception, sense of where your body is in space learning to move well. Nociception, that's the noxious input. The little itchy tag on the back of your neck or the cramp that you start to get if you stand away. Being able to notice that and respond appropriately.

And not just being able to detect all of these things, but the discernment to know what does that information mean that my body is trying to tell me? What might be there for me in that information? Or should I just remain open and curious about it? Teaching those self sensing skills really goes far toward agency. Because if you can understand the information that's coming to you, that your body is saying, that much more feel like you have some choice in what you do with that information, how you respond to it. Or just being able to understand that this is a sensation, is a normal sensation that many people experience, and it's not going to stay forever.

Creating a safe container for agency means that our students' identities are honored and that they don't feel like they have to leave parts of themselves outside the door in order to belong. I know there's plenty of places that I went that I didn't feel like I could talk about what it was like to be existing in my fat body in a room full of thinner people. Where maybe it's easy for them to be in a certain yoga posture that is not comfortable at all for me, but I didn't feel like I could be fat in that space.

You know what I mean? In the same way of like, if I had been with a bunch of my friends in bigger bodies, we could look at each other and be like, "Oh, this pose," and roll our eyes and then make the adjustments and all of that. We really want to have all our students feel respected, feel seen, feel understood.

In a culture of agency, they have permission to give themselves permission. To have the practice that they need to have that day, to be where they are today to have an experience in their body without striving or attaining or feeling like they need to be good at something to take rest that they need it, but also to push themselves if a challenge would benefit them. It's normalizing the idea that your practice is going to look different from day to day and throughout the seasons of your life. And that you have the permission to do what you need to do to take care of yourself.

That they can choose where they want to focus or work rather than competing or trying to keep up with the person next to them. And this has to do a lot with the way that we cue, with the language that we use. And we'll dive more deeply into those topics and other sections of this course. And then they have the tools to personalize their practice for their own bodies. And that's hopefully the tools that we're giving you with all the different asana videos and the ways to put together this type of adaptive teaching for your students.

So let's talk about this word, modifications. Modifications, in and of itself when we're talking about yoga poses. That we have the real yoga pose, and then we have modifications. We can really start to address this implied hierarchy in our teaching language. I think it's one of the biggest ways that we can start to normalize the idea of personalized practice is to remove hierarchy from our teaching language.

So even just the word modifications, even though to me, feels like a neutral word, does imply certain things. And implies that there's a true or real way to do a pose. And then there's a modified way to do a pose, which I think, our human brains sort into better and worse in that order. That if we're working with our students to try to build some efficacy and capacity in them to be able to make good choices for themselves and supportive choices for their bodies rather than, "Oh, I just need to pick the most advanced version that the teacher is offering because I should always be striving to be better."

Instead, we might want them to pick a more basic version or a more simple version that really allows them to focus on the purpose of the posture and not just about nailing the most physically difficult challenge. And so I think if we have students that are still working on that, getting that misconception corrected in their own minds, then we can do a lot with our language to take hierarchy out of it.

So I've really stopped using the word modifications. I like the word variations. I like talking about different places to work. I like talking about options. I like talking about ways that we're going to expand the practice. There's lots of different language you could use here. I'm not saying you shouldn't use modifications, but I'm just saying, think about who you're teaching, what your mission is in teaching them, and what you're trying to do with your language, and you'll find the answer.

So when we're removing hierarchy from language, what this looks like is making it clear that variations on postures are neutral. There's not a variation that's more advanced and one that's more beginner. There's not level one, level two, level three, or any of that hierarchical language. It's that, "Okay. We're all going to come in together and practice Cobra pose."

So maybe we start in one place, maybe we add on, but we don't say that there's the full expression of the pose and then there's a modification of the pose. We are going to build from a more simple shape to a more complex shape. And when Dianne does her talk about progressive teaching and the bus stop method, you'll get a lot more information about this. But I'll just give one example. So for opposed like downward facing dog, we're not going to start everybody off in down dog and then say, "If you can't do down dog, come down to hands and knees. And if you can't do hands and knees, just go home because you're a loser and can't do yoga."

That's what our brains here. Instead of cueing from the most complex to the most simple, we're going to start simple. We're going to start on all fours. We'll start in hands and knees. We're going to teach our students how to press down into the hands, how to spread the map between the hands to engage all

the way up to the arms, how to make the belly strong. How to do all of that before we even do anything that remotely looks like downward facing dog.

Then everybody has something that they can practice. Maybe you're going to stay right there and practice what we've talked about. Maybe you're going to tuck your toes and lift your hips with deeply bent knees and start to pedal through a down dog. Then maybe you're going to progress to other things.

So building from simple shape to more complex shapes. And then the safety and foundations first. Let's look at the basics first, before we get into the fancy stuff. And this goes back toward building from a simple shape to a complex shape. So where are your anchors in this pose? Where are your feet or your sitting bones or whatever parts of you are supposed to be touching the ground? Where's your pelvis? Where's your rib cage? Where's your head?

Let's make sure your spine is where it's supposed to be. Do you feel grounded in this pose? Are your foundations firmly plugged into the earth or the props beneath you? What is your inner body alignment feeling like? Do you have a long spine if that's what's indicated? Talking about the energetic actions of the pose, where are we supposed to feel muscle engagement? Where is the breath? What is that doing in the pose? And then once those basic things are established, once you have the basic shape and those basic actions, then you can introduce fancy stuff like taking your foot up higher, lifting your arms, or finding a deeper sensation, or something like that.

We want to normalize the concept of personalized practice and changing bodies. And I think Diane is always saying verbalize to normalize is the most important thing we can do is to say it out loud, and make it clear that the students know really what feels best in their bodies. So we want to give them space to practice those self sensing skills, and to trust their instincts, and saying things like bodies changed from day to day and throughout the seasons of our life. And so what's appropriate for you today may not be appropriate for you next week, or next year, or last week.

And so it's really important that we tune in to what we're feeling. How is your energy? What's the quality of your thoughts like? How is this feeling in your body? Is it more appropriate to take one of the other options that I've given during this time?

Find the language that works for you as a teacher and brings choice back to the student. So maybe you're not going to say modifications. Here's some other ideas, variations, enhancements to the practice. We're going to have a personalized practice. You're going to have different places to work. So you can work at the wall with tree pose and you won't have to balance as much, or you can stay on your mat and work more with your balance.

Having variations on postures, I think, brings more power to the student. They're not a punishment for not being able to do a fancy posture because you're not strong enough or something like that. Having choice, having variations, and options gives the students agency to take ownership of their practice, which I think is really important.

Props are power tools. I think Diane came up with that. And I really believe that. I think it's important to set everyone up with the same props. That way there's no stigma about needing to get one and use it. Everybody is just expected that we're all going to have a blanket on our mat and that we may pull it out and use it at different times or whatever the prop may be.

Teach what props are for and how to use them. It's not just like, "We're coming into triangle pose, so grab a block if you need it." How do they know they need it? You need to give that information. So that might sound something like if you rotate your chest open, and reach your arm down, and you're feeling your thigh, or knee, or shin and not your foot, you need a block under your hand. Or maybe everybody takes a block in the right hand, reaches out long and then reaches down and puts the block on the floor. So you can incorporate the props in that way.

And then teach what props are not. Sometimes we need to rehabilitate the image of props. I've had a lot of people tell me things like, "Oh, I don't want to cheat." Or, "Oh, I don't really want to use the prop, I want to be able to do it without." Or, "I don't want to use a crutch." Even enable a statement like that there's nothing wrong with a crutch. A crutch is going to help you if you're injured or if you're disabled and you need to get somewhere.

And props are not any of those things. Props are there to enhance your practice to help you find better inner body alignment, more sustainable alignment with your physical body. They're there to help us find space in our breath. They're there to educate and clarify things for our body that are hard to conceptualize until you feel it. Props are for so many wonderful purposes.

And I think as teachers, we can start to talk about the advantages of props and how we use those as educational tools and really just teach them as part of the pose. Not as an afterthought, not as something that people need if they can't do the real pose. But we're coming into a forward bend, so everybody grabbed two blocks and come to the front of your mat. If you can't touch the floor or grab blocks, or if you need to grab a block, we're just going to give that instruction and see what students get out of it, invite them to practice with us.

So when we're thinking about adapting practice, when we're trying to figure out what variations do I offer on any given posture, we're going to give you a lot of different ideas in the videos that we have in each module of this course. There's a lot of asana videos with lots of different variations and modifications, whatever that you can offer your students. But I think there's a way to do this on the fly. And it's really good technique to be able to think creatively about postures, to be able to dialogue with your students and figure out what's going to work for them.

And so the real question that I always ask is, what is the point of this pose, this posture, this breathing practice, this sun salutation series? Whatever it is. What are the benefits? What are the challenges? Could I find the spirit of the pose in a different variation? So these are some things that I think about. What are the physical properties of this posture or practice? Is it a backward bend? Is it a side bend? Is it an inversion? Is it a warmup? What's the category there?

What are we trying to do with the body? What are the nervous system properties? Is it generally a down-regulating posture or is it activating for more people? What about the energetic actions? Is it a powerful pose? Is it a calming pose? Are we embodying a story, a mythology, a class theme, an animal? Is it Tadasana and we're embodying the mountain? There are other things that poses or practices are about other than just the nuts and bolts mechanics of it. When we think about something like Tadasana, yes, you want to have that strong firm stable base, but also like a mountain.

The mountain has a strong firm stable base and then rises up high into the sky with equanimity. And you can bring those qualities into that posture, even though it might look different than the next person. So as an example, let's just take sun salutations. Sun salutations are something that a lot of people have trouble with in the yoga practice. Not only folks in larger bodies, but older folks, beginners, anybody that might have different limb proportions that don't allow that step forward and step back to happen.

Sun salutations are, I think, a varsity level move. So if we want to be able to offer those, what is the point of the posture? So physical, well, it's a warmup. We're going to open the front body, open the back body. It provides a little bit of ritual. It's a sequence that's part of the yoga tradition. And so there's something to that. We can invoke images of the sun. And again, that would go to warm up for me. The sun is coming up, it's making us warm.

For most people, these are activating for the nervous system. They're very stimulating. They get the body woken up in all the major joints. So could we accomplish all of those things with another variation or with a different thing altogether? Yes. The answer is always yes. And so how are we going to be

creative about that? If folks are having trouble getting up and down off the floor, could we practice from a chair? Could we practice at the wall? Could we develop a different scenario or series that sequence of postures that might have the same feeling of sun salutation of that breath with movement of the whole body warmup?

We can accomplish that in lots of ways. So I just say this to encourage you to not get too precious about what the posture looks like, but actually ask, "What is the point? What is the spirit of the pose? What is it that we're trying to accomplish with the body?" And then letting that inform the choices that you make about variations and options you offer your students.

Some other broad strategies for adapting almost any asana. Number one, break the pose into parts. So if you think about something very complicated, like Eagle pose, for instance, whereas asymmetrical, it's balancing, the upper and lower body are doing different things. When we're teaching that oftentimes it's helpful to pick one or the other. To maybe have hands on heart center and work on the skill of the legs, or maybe just work the arms while we're in Tadasana or in a seated pose, or even in a warrior pose. And then later you can put them together once you've built in those skills.

Make it dynamic. So moving in and out of a posture gently, oftentimes will help prepare the body to be there for a longer hold, but also is just a gentler way to come in to the pose. And oftentimes it will let the approach be a little bit more relaxed rather than tensing up. So by this, I mean, making it dynamic, moving in and out of the posture. So let's think about Warrior II, the standing posture. Maybe we start by coming into Warrior II, bending the knees, extending the arms out at shoulder height on the inhale, straighten your legs, straighten your arms and reach up.

And then on the exhale, bend the knees, reach the arms back out Warrior II. So you could do several breaths that way, maybe five breaths, and then hold the Warrior II posture for several breaths. Change the orientation or the relationship to gravity. So by this, I mean, if you're noticing that students are not able to access a pose in one position, how can you switch it up? So child's pose is one that I think is a great example. A lot of folks aren't comfortable on hands and knees or putting pressure on the knees really doesn't work for them.

And so one way that we could still practice the shape of child's pose and get those benefits is just a flip it over, change the orientation. So if you flip child's pose and do it on your back, that's knees to chest. Maybe wide knees to chest posture. And you'll still be able to get that little spine reset. You can still have the feeling of turning inward and bunching everything up into the space, that meditative space where you'll face down. But bring that intention into a different orientation.

Changing the relationship to gravity would be things like, if we're working on something like a plank pose, it's a very demanding to do just on the mat. But if we went to a bench, or a countertop, or the wall, we could find the shape of a plank, we could still engage all the same muscles. We can learn to use the breath, to engage the core, all of that stuff in a lower stakes way. And then we can build back up from, maybe we start at the wall, finding that shape of plank.

Then we move after some practice to a countertop. Then maybe we move to a bench. Then maybe the blocks. Then maybe the floor. So thinking about progressing in that way. Slow it down. This is pretty self-explanatory, but nobody's coming by to inspect your class and make sure everybody's doing inhale, lift the arms, exhale, fold, one breath, one movement. Maybe a sun salutation doesn't need breath cues sometimes. Maybe the cue is just let your breath do what it needs to do, let your breath run this movement. Don't lift your arms until the exhale is finished and it's time for the next inhale.

Slow it down. Allow the breath to move naturally. Allow yourself time to get into postures. Allow your students time for transitions for moving up and down off the floor. Just let it slow down. Nobody's

coming by to check your pace or make sure you're working toward a metronome or something like that. Let students get there in their own time.

Using a chair is a really powerful way to adapt asana, especially for standing postures. There's lots of great resources about how to use chairs. And we have a lot of videos that talk about variations in chairs. It's probably my favorite yoga prop. And I think goes a long way. You can see in this picture here, these are some of my students in a variation on Malasana. They're doing a little teaching practice circle here.

And so they have that shape of Malasana. The deep bend, deep reflection of the hips, deep bend in the knees, hands to heart center, they're able to really be with it. But it is a variation that requires a lot less effort as far as balancing, as far as the way that the legs are being demanded to hold the body up. So I love this for teaching it in a more low stakes way of like, "Let's be in the shape. Let's get some of those benefits." But let's not make it all about like, "Oh my goodness, I have to hold my body weight up or balance."

Oh, and then there it is my last bullet point. How could I teach this in a lower stakes way? What is a way that I can show my students what this posture is all about, but maybe make back the effort off a little bit, make it a little bit easier. Let's talk about some strategies for adapting to the chair. If you're going to build a sequence in the chair, consider the adaptive version of each asana. What would you do if I couldn't stand or I couldn't get up and down off the floor?

I encourage people to always have a strategy. That if you're going to write out a sequence of postures, really think about each posture. And what if you had somebody come in your class that can't get up and down off the floor? What if I came in there and I just had knee surgery and it's not appropriate for me to be on hands and knees, what are you going to do for me? Having that backup strategy and a plan is going to help you so much as a teacher to build your confidence that you can really serve all your students.

Think about it ahead of time, go online and search, come in the Facebook group and ask a question. We can help you troubleshoot this stuff, it's why we're here. Build the asana from the foundation up. So when you're thinking about taking a posture and moving it into a chair, how are they grounding in the classical asana? Is it standing or are they on their feet? Is it sitting? So the sitting bones of the foundation. Is it hands and knees? And how are you going to adapt that to the chair? So, let's get those foundations first.

Then what about the pelvis and the spine? What are the hips doing? Are they in an open or closed position? By which, I mean, think about something like Warrior II, where you have one hip that's in external rotation and one hip that's in internal rotation. Think about that when you're reconstructing the pose in the chair. What's the spine doing? Is it a neutral spine, long spine? Is it back bend, forward bend?

Once you have all of that set up, then add the fancy stuff. Where you're putting the arms? Taking the gaze? What's happening with the breath? Are we moving in and out through a vinyasa? Maybe you could add something in that's being missing from being seated. So like balanced or abdominal pressure. When we think about things like Cobra pose, you'd be laying on the belly on the ground. How can we bring some of that stuff back into the pose?

So maybe for balance instead of actually balancing on one foot, instead we're going to balance a block on her head because that brings in that element of balance in that challenge without having to be standing. And then what is that the essence of this asana? What are those energetic things we talked about? Can they embody the mountain? Can they embody a theme that you have in the class? Do we want to talk about the nervous system effects that it's having and encourage folks into a down-regulated state? Let that stuff inform the cues that you give while you're having them in this asana.

And then just a few tips for working with chairs, I think are important to know, especially if you haven't had any formal training here. Number one is just safety first, secure the chair. I like to make sure that all four feet of the chair on the mat, especially if we're going to be sitting in it or putting weight into it in any way, we don't want the chair to go sliding across the slippery floor. And so say that out loud to your student. I often also like if I can to put the short edge of the mat against the wall and then the chair against the wall. So you even have more stability there if you're going to be using it as a prop.

I like using the corner of the chair for open hip postures to allow more room for the legs. So just as an example, Warrior II, the person that's sitting in the chair here is not demonstrating this. But what you could do is rather than facing forward, turn 45 degrees. So you're facing the corner of the chair. Then that way you have room for, let's say you turn toward the right corner of the chair, your right leg can go out toward the right, your left leg can go out toward the left, and you're not going to be running as much into the sides of the chair. You can put a leg behind you and do more things than you could if you're just sitting straight on.

I love the chair as a replacement for blocks. It's less fussy. It's at a better height for most people. You can do a really great sun salutation variation, where you use the seat of the chair just as you would the floor. It changes the relationship to gravity. It really helps students to access the skills that we're looking for in the traditional sun salutations, but in a lower stakes way, that's really accessible. So just think about the chair, the seat of the chair as a replacement for blocks.

Hip extension while seated is difficult. So try one side at a time. That would look like rather than seating facing forward to the chair, turning 90 degrees. So one of your hips is against the back of the chair and the other leg can be free to go forward, or go back, or whatever.

Use drishti to bring in the element of balance, even if both feet are on the ground. Bringing in that gaze or that focus can help replace some of that challenge that we're looking for with the balance. And then just be aware that some folks, the chair is not going to be appropriate prop for them. Maybe some folks in larger bodies might need a different prop. I think benches work pretty well for everyone, but just say that to make you aware that like, even though we think, oh, chairs are like one size fits all, oftentimes they're not.

And so having a backup plan for that, or just dialoguing with your students to find out what might be more comfortable for them can be really helpful. So let's talk about the skill of actually teaching these mixed-level classes. Where you might have some people practicing in the seat of a chair, and some people standing, or on the mat, or whatever. Always offering that chair option, I think is important to have that as a backup strategy.

And so sometimes you might need to actually cue two different setups at the same time where some people are practicing with their butt in the chair. And some people are standing on the mat. Or some people are seated in the chair and others are on their belly on the floor. But you're guiding them through the same type of posture. So the focus needs to be on unifying the group or the group experience. This is not two separate poses or someone, "Oh, we're all going to practice Cobra pose and if you can't do that, you can just rest in child's pose. We're not going to teach that way anymore."

We are going to have all of our students be part of the group and invite them to practice. So we'll cue an example of this after I run through this list, I just want to tell you how I do it first. First of all, arrange students so they're all oriented in the same direction and everybody's part of the group. I feel like I shouldn't have to say this, but I have been in places where it was like we had one student in a wheelchair and they were pointed weirdly into a corner and everyone else was facing a different direction.

And so I just say it out loud, maybe you're practicing in a circle and everybody's a spoke on a wheel. Maybe you're in rows, but everybody needs to be in the same direction. And then you're going to instruct students to come into the preparatory position separately based on who can hold the preposition longest. So let me explain what I mean, we'll take Cobra pose for instance.

So some of the students are going to be laying on their bellies on the mat, practicing a more traditional version of Cobra. Some of the students are going to be seated in a chair, and maybe we're going to have them put the hands on the thighs or my favorite, bring a bolster onto the lap and rest the forearms on top of the bolster. The fingers can curl around the little lip, the edge of the bolster, and that's going to be your new floor. So it's like you have your forearms on the floor.

So, there's two positions. We're going to cue those separately. So first I would like to cue the people who could probably hold the preposition the longest. In Cobra pose, I don't know that there's one that's more challenging or not. So I may just start with the people in the chair and just say like, "Okay, if you're going to be practicing from the seat of the chair, everybody grab a bolster and put it on your lap, let your forearms rest on the bolster, and your fingertips to the edge, and then just wait for us there."

If you're practicing on the mat, lie on your belly, bring your hands underneath your shoulders, elbows in towards your rib cage, and then we're all going to lower down. Forehead down towards the mat, towards your bolster. Good. Then we're going to come into the pose together and find language that works at different levels. So for this pose, we all have our heads down. We all have our arms ready to go. We're going to press down with the hands, inhale and lift the chest, lift the gaze, lift the head, and curl the shoulders back.

So squeeze the shoulder blades together, whether you're in the chair or on the mat, press the arms down into the mat, pull back. So it's like, you're digging your claws in, and then you're going to drag your chest forward through your hands. You give all those cues that can work at multiple levels, breathe together in that posture, and then come out together. So now we're going to release an everybody lower back down, chest forehead toward the mat. And then inhale, go ahead and sit back up.

So cueing the prep separately, cueing everybody in together, giving some cues that work at multiple levels and then coming out of the post together. And for me, it's always more important to create an equitable experience for students than to really get through a ton of poses or to have some peak physical experience. There's lots of classes out there like that, less classes where you can really come in and have an accessible practice and know that your body is going to be honored no matter what you've got going on that day.

So that brings us to the end of this presentation about personalized practice. I like to invite you to explore the other videos in this module, especially the ones, the asana videos, and think about how you might apply some of these lessons to those videos. Thanks. I'll see you in the next time.