



WORKING GROUP PAPER

Online Learning

APRIL 2019

#YAstandards

In 1999, in its role as a voluntary, member-based organization serving yoga schools and teachers, **Yoga Alliance (YA)** sought to ensure and preserve the quality of yoga education and practice by establishing and disseminating standards for the education of yoga teachers and by maintaining a registry of teachers who met these standards. In 2018, **YA** launched a review of its standards, calling it the **Standards Review Project (SRP)**.

One result of the **SRP** is this collection of eight collaborative, condensed, and edited working group papers to which key yoga stakeholders for **YA** and for the yoga community at large contributed. These papers represent the recommendations by each working group of the best practices for the standard, or key inquiry area, in question. There is one working paper for each; what follows is the working group paper on the notion of [Online Learning](#) in yoga.

ONLINE LEARNING UPFRONT

Society has entered an age when online learning is as ubiquitous and popular as yoga. This new reality requires Yoga Alliance (YA) to examine its existing training standards in online learning. If YA wishes to continue to define and preserve the quality and safety of yoga education and practice worldwide, it must set the standard for best practices for this discipline.

Over the last ten years, with continued growth in yoga studios worldwide, the number of yoga teacher training (YTT) programs and, concurrently, the number of completion certificates given by yoga schools (both Yoga Alliance Registered Yoga Schools (RYSs) and non-YA-affiliated schools) has increased exponentially. Market forces have made 200-hour YTTs an essential part of the business model for yoga retreats, yoga studios, and professional yoga teachers.

YA asked the Online Learning Working Group (OLWG) if the reward for embracing online learning for yoga is worth the risks. YA leadership, along with senior yoga teachers, has been cautious with respect to stepping into the online learning space. Fear for students' and others' safety, and concern over losing the essence of the teacher/student relationship, have been the drivers of this circumspection, overlapping with concerns pertaining to the quality and safety of the online learning experience overall.

The OLWG took on two main questions about the appropriate role of online education in yoga:

- ***What, if any, elements of an RYS's program should be taught online?***
- ***What controls must be in place to offer quality online education?***

The OLWG recommended a blended approach to Online Learning. It discussed some benefits that might come to RYSs, such as attracting students and making parts of the YTTs easier to manage. It also highlighted some concerns; in addition to those surrounding safety and the teacher/student relationship, the OLWG also expressed concern about drawing students away from traditional RYS programs, thus not serving YA members. The OLWG even reflected on the potential of a 100% online YTT program

This subject matter intersects with and influences the SRP Working Group Papers of [Teacher Qualifications](#), [Teacher Trainer Qualifications](#), and [Core Curriculum](#); please see them for further inquiry.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The OLWG reviewed the following questions and explored: 100% online training, including a video-submitted practicum; 100% online training with the exception of an in-person practicum; and 50% online training, allowing for 100% online for Speciality Trainer (ST) sections. The group also reflected on the ability for specialty credentials and/or continuing education (CE) hours to be able to be delivered 100% online. The group asked:

- Who should be allowed to teach online? Do these educators need skills different from regular teaching? What specific skills or safety issues are needed in teaching yoga online?
- Should YA provide online education or leave the education to the schools? Would there be a benefit from a mix of both?
- What systems are necessary to ensure the quality of the educational experience?
- How is yoga tested online? Can a yoga teacher be tested solely or partially or at all via an online format?

BACKGROUND AND REFLECTION

As with other Working Groups, the OLWG noted that some in the yoga community have expressed concern over the quality and safety of current-day YTT programs, including those affiliated with YA as RYSs, because they may be producing teachers who lack basic anatomy and physiology, yoga history, and yoga philosophy knowledge. It was through this lens that the OLWG worked to identify the types of yoga training most successfully able to be accomplished online.

The OLWG noted the importance of the yoga community as a self-regulating body, with YA as its best-standards guide, as it developed its opinions of best practices in learning to teach yoga online, which it agreed was different from merely learning about yoga online.

The OLWG bifurcated its discussion between strengths and weaknesses and then addressed other important issues regarding learning yoga online.

ONLINE LEARNING: STRENGTHS

- **Academic Aspects:** information management, methodology delivery, group discussions, at-home practice/teaching, individual or team projects, and practicum. The group said some YTT students have difficulty retaining content via “live,” in-person environments, and an online environment could give these students more opportunities to revisit the syllabus material and digest key learnings.
- **Increased Exposure to Senior and/or Speciality Teachers:** the OLWG noted that all students would benefit from the increased access to senior teachers that Online Learning might provide via mediums such as live streaming.

If YA wishes to continue to define and preserve the quality and safety of yoga education and practice worldwide, it must set the standard for best practices for (online learning).

- **Resource-Rich and Adaptable Content:** more resources and course material could be made available with the opportunity to increase intersectional learning via online books, videos, audio, online handouts, and other types of materials. The online format could be adapted to suit more types of learners.
- **Levelling of the Playing Field:** the OLWG felt that online group discussions level the social “playing field.” Whereas in-person discussions have a tendency to be dominated by extroverts who need less time to reflect on their ideas before expressing them, online discussions give others a greater chance to also contribute. This could increase opportunities for diversity and cultural exchanges.
- **Increase in Accountability:** Online Learning could lead to greater accountability for students via more rigorous standards. Both RYS and RYT accountability increase via the sharing and evaluation process in practicum through recorded assignments.
- **Standardized Body of Yoga Teaching:** including all of the above benefits, Online Learning can aid in building and storing a standardized body of yoga teaching methodology that is very accessible and that fills current gaps in teaching methodology (such as teaching yoga to older beginners or to vulnerable populations).

ONLINE LEARNING: WEAKNESSES

Lack of Hands-On Elements: including physical movement, or the overall practical components of in-person learning. All of the physical aspects of a YTT program taught online could create exceptional demands on both Lead Trainers (LTs) and trainees with regard to time, resources, and videography/digital skills. For example, while the principles of assisting and adjusting students in yoga asana could be taught and demonstrated to great effect online, it could be difficult for trainees to demonstrate their learned understanding to faculty members.

Technical Abilities and Challenges: the OLWG observed that a heavily online YTT program could be a non-inclusive environment for many yogis if they lack technical abilities and/or access to resources.

Teaching Assessment/Practicum Issues: via an online YTT program, trainees would not be able to lead a practice class and have their teaching assessed. Examples underlying this concern included: how to use props or other special equipment like massage balls and foam rollers, the ethics of touch (including consent), and appropriate touch techniques.

Security/Piracy Issues: the OLWG noted that Online Learning introduces a new aspect surrounding the business of yoga. Like all online activity, Online Learning might not be entirely secure. In keeping with standard online privacy issues, the chances of infringement on copyrights of syllabi, curriculum, and reading materials are potentially higher than in an offline situation.

The Online Learning Working Group recommended a blended approach to online learning that would give RYSs many benefits, such as attracting students and making parts of the YTTs easier to manage.

Student Connectedness/Motivation: the OLWG discussed a wide range of issues around YTT student morale, motivation, and engagement. Large classes or cohorts, for example, across many time zones, while possible, and potentially advantageous, could be challenging in a variety of ways with respect to relating to student/student relationships, teacher/student relationships, and school (e.g., lineage)/student relationships.

APPROPRIATE ONLINE LEARNING CATEGORIES

The OLWG focused on the suitability of YA's Core Curriculum Educational Categories to the online environment, and the group agreed, as did the Core Curriculum Working Group (CCWG) in its inquiry, that most categories could be successfully taught online. The OLWG said specifically that courses such as yoga anatomy and yoga teaching methodology would enable a wider dissemination of innovative teaching methods, including teacher demonstration and peer and teacher discussions. (Please review the [Core Curriculum Working Group Paper](#) for more discussion.)

The only Educational Category the group found problematic was Practicum in YTTs. While the OLWG agreed that Practicum hours could be implemented through video-submitted practice teaching, the group (as well as the CCWG) said that Practicum should likely best remain as an in-person category. Were this to be the scenario, the OLWG offered a creative, community-based idea of neighboring RYS studios swapping YTT students and allowing free or discounted teaching for an intensive period of Practicum at their studio for the partner studio's YTTs.

APPROPRIATE CONTROLS FOR EDUCATIONAL CATEGORIES

The OLWG believed that teaching online requires more experience than teaching in person. Online teachers, they said, need to have physically seen a lot of people in person in order to teach YTT students "sight unseen" effectively and safely.

The group suggested that the minimum experience for an RYT to register to teach an online course for continuing education credits could include the E-RYT 500 designation plus at least 10 years' teaching experience and a minimum of 500 teaching hours per year as well as a certification or degree completion in the specific subject areas. YA could consider providing online education as a potential addition to the YA continuing education portfolio, the OLWG said.

The OLWG uniformly agreed that the quality of an online YTT module should be at least as high as that offered in person.

SAFETY ISSUES

The OLWG said that teaching online holds different challenges than those offered in person, still acknowledging that the YTT students' responsibility to keep themselves safe remained the same online or in person. LTs and Teacher Trainers in both environments must have the knowledge, skills, and experience not to misdirect a student.

The OLWG discussed a main safety concern of students learning to teach asana/pranayama via online only, commenting that for this category, some percentage of in-person hours should be required.

The Online Learning Working Group noted the importance of the yoga community as a self-regulating body, with Yoga Alliance as its best-standards guide, as it developed its opinions of best practices in learning to teach yoga online.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (LMSS)

The OLWG found LMSs necessary to ensure a high-quality online educational experience. LMSs: enable the monitoring of student engagement with content and active usage for accountability; create a platform for dynamic cohort learning and interactivity; and support video conferencing capabilities, forums for discussion, and quizzes to potentially integrate with course assignments. They support efficiencies of course material and the timed release of syllabi and create a focal center for learning.

Members of the group acknowledged that many students frequently have difficulty and/or anxiety navigating technology, and this would need to be an important consideration when designing the dashboard and interface of the virtual classroom. Designated tech support provided by the RYS would be a necessary addition to assist students who feel challenged by the online environment.

DIDACTIC VERSUS LIVE ONLINE

The OLWG discussed how a didactic approach online (i.e., the teaching of the process of learning online) would serve two benefits. First, it would help students settle into the online learning environment, and, second, it would underpin the delivery of the online teaching methodology itself.

Members of the group considered a mix of didactic and actual live learning to be ideal. Demonstrating asana, showing anatomy, and even communicating between teacher(s) and students could be accomplished didactically. Live online interaction, the OLWG asserted, could support efforts like Q&A sessions, philosophy discussions, and even regular class times where a teacher would normally be talking to students. Studios could choose pre-recorded materials only, a mix of pre-recorded and live class time, or fully live interactions just like they normally would for in-person training.

TESTING AND COMPETENCY

The OLWG was clear about testing and competency: the real test of a yoga teacher is not how they answer test questions, but how they teach. The group said that a single way to gauge this across all yoga would be impossible, and that each RYS must be solely responsible for testing and competency. (Please review the [Core Curriculum](#) Working Group Paper for more conversation around assessment.)

The group agreed that it is necessary for YA to uphold the standards for YTTs and that a base level of testing should be required to maintain quality and consistency. The OLWG discussed that testing should focus on “core fundamentals” or “specific basic learning” in each Educational Category to ensure quality of understanding versus simply fulfilling a set number of hours per topic.¹

The OLWG group believed that testing and assessing competency could be achieved by setting assignments in person. The group suggested students’ assignments could be captured on video or through reflective journals shared with a tutoring team and/or put up for peer review. Testing could be restricted by YA, potentially, to subjects like anatomy and physiology.

Most categories could be successfully taught online... (though the) practicum would likely best remain as an in-person category.

¹ Quotes are OLWG members’.

SOLUTION

ONLINE LEARNING: MAXIMIZING STRENGTHS, MINIMIZING WEAKNESSES

Overall, the OLWG recommended that YA develop standards for Online Learning. The group said YA can establish and enforce standards in an effort to ensure the quality and safety of teaching of yoga to the end practitioner.

Online learning is an established and integral part of learning in mainstream educational systems, and this “anytime, anywhere” learning is advantageous to creating opportunities for inclusion and accessibility in yoga. Online YTTs create opportunities for people to participate in the training(s) of their choice because they can remove barriers such as time constraints, location, and cost.

The OLWG did acknowledge that Online Learning is less suited to matters involving physical movement, although the group agreed that much could be taught online (please see the [Core Curriculum Working Group Paper](#) for an in-depth inquiry into yoga curricula).

The OLWG recommended YA create an RYS online credential to give meaning to these programs and to encourage RYSs to aspire to uphold standards.

The OLWG suggested that YA could support Online Learning through forums for ongoing discussions such as Facebook Groups, an LMS platform, and other interactive sessions (i.e., Zoom calls).

The OLWG suggested that YA or the Yoga Alliance Foundation explore the possibility of an “internet accessibility initiative” through a partnership with an organization like CREDO Mobile to facilitate access to online education in underserved communities and/or inner-city schools.²

The OLWG also suggested that YA develop a series of clauses within its [Code of Conduct](#) relating specifically to Online Learning, ensuring that RYSs provide all sessions/content as advertised. YA could also develop and provide tutorials for RYSs on how to use various course platforms and other communication tools to enhance the online student experience, including understanding, knowledge base, and learning.

Given that online yoga programs already exist, the OLWG expressed concern over the potential for “pirated programs,” as this practice is already seen via offline YTT programs.

For continuing education courses, the OLWG recommended that YA establish a compensated network of peer review experts to evaluate such courses, ensuring quality, safety assurance, and compliance.

TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

The OLWG acknowledged that the student/teacher relationship would change via an online environment and considered guidelines for student/teacher interaction in Online Learning. **The group said it would rather see this aspect left to the RYSs.**

Acknowledging the bond between students and their teachers as one that has endured throughout yoga’s 5,000-year history, the group said that while the in-person experience could not be replaced, a blended learning environment could provide students the best of both worlds.

The OLWG also considered the specific skill sets and understanding of the fundamental roles and responsibilities to the online student experience and learning outcomes essential for courses online.

² Visit credomobile.com for information on this organization. This is an endorsement or suggestion by the OLWG, not by YA.

The group acknowledged that the numerous channels of communication (video conferencing, i.e.) can be used with appropriate frequency to solidify the student/teacher relationship. However, the OLWG acknowledged an important element of this evolution of learning: greater commitment on the part of both teacher and student is needed to foster a meaningful teacher/student relationship online. The group agreed the online model can leverage platforms like Facebook Groups for ongoing discussion and learning between trainings. As a central place for questions, additional resources, and relationship building, these platforms currently have no parallel.

The OLWG saw the main issues of maintaining and improving the teacher/student relationship online as:

- The changing dynamic of the teacher/student relationship
- The amount of contact time between teacher and student
- The qualifications and skills of teachers to educate online
- The important tutorial support for RYSs

APPROPRIATE EDUCATIONAL CATEGORIES

The OLWG agreed that all categories could be taught online and that YA's role could be to ensure that RYSs remain in compliance with the standards, but it did not reach a conclusion on how this would happen. The group briefly touched on the need for Lead Trainers (LTs) to be trained on how to teach online, perhaps leading to an accreditation by YA.³ For more information on LT requirements, please review the Teacher Trainer Qualifications Working Group Paper.

ROLE FOR YA GOING FORWARD

The OLWG wanted YA to consider:

- Providing training and other support to RYSs and their program directors to facilitate bringing components of their YTTs online
- Offering a mandatory ethical commitment course online that would cover [Scope of Practice](#) and [Code of Conduct](#) while reviewing YA's grievance procedure and anti-harassment policies prior to RYT acceptance, which could be completed annually at the time of registration renewal
- Requiring proof of liability insurance at the time of registration renewal (though the group noted this was outside of their scope to determine how)

The OLWG said that YA should primarily be focused on the assessment of schools' standards, including the ongoing monitoring that standards are being met.

³ Footnote LTs per Ovissi

ADVISORY GROUP

Our heartfelt thanks go to the following Advisors who spent much time and energy meeting, discussing, debating, and resolving issues on Online Learning to the benefit of YA's membership. The Advisors were:



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YOGA ALLIANCE & THE YOGA ALLIANCE FOUNDATION

Founded in 1999, Yoga Alliance is a member-based, non-profit organization that serves yoga schools and teachers across the globe, providing a world-recognized, best-in-class credential and unifying its members around a shared ethical commitment. In addition, YA delivers a strong value proposition to its members through community-building initiatives, educational resources, advocacy efforts, and social impact programs. Its sister organization, the Yoga Alliance Foundation, supports leveraged impact and direct service programs that expand the reach of and participation in yoga.