

In the Studio: A Yoga Coach Observation & Analysis Using CBAS

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Abstract

Research been conducted on the effectiveness of using a Coach Behavioral Assessment System (CBAS) to help coaches from different sports disciplines gain a better understanding of their own practice. A CBAS can be defined as a scientific approach to observing the work and the effects of coaching. The question is, will using a CBAS be effective in another type of instructor-led physical activity? The hypothesis of this paper is that yoga instructors may also benefit from the same type of systematic observation and analysis. The following is an observation and analysis case study using a CBAS on the in-class behaviors of a 500-hour yoga instructor. The study contains details on the merits of a scientific approach to analyzing coaching behaviors and the methods used to apply a CBAS to yoga instruction. Results of the data collection and a discussion of the findings are included.

Introduction

Coaches can have a profound impact on the experiences of their players. Smoll and Smith note that, "Coaches influence the effects [of sports participation] through the interpersonal behaviors they engage in, the values and attitudes they

transmit both verbally and through example, and the goal priorities they establish...” (Smoll & Smith, 2002, p. 211). Because coaches and athletes traditionally operate in an organic, changing, and face-paced environment, it is often assumed that situations in sports drive the different behaviors coaches display. In other words, coaches are reacting to what they see in practice and on the field and responding with the correct behavioral adjustments. Since the situations are often fluid and changing, coaches may also assume that it is difficult to know which behaviors will be necessary and effective. Smith, Smoll, and Hunt (1977), however, proposed that coaching behaviors can be studied and modified using scientific methods. They proposed a behavioral assessment system for coding and analyzing the behaviors of athletic coaches in naturalistic settings, using 12 behavioral categories derived from content analyses of coaching behaviors during practices and games.

Since then, the CBAS proposed by Smith, Smoll, and Hunt has been used in a number of sports settings at a range of athletic levels. Sports coaching is not the only setting, however, in which instruction in physical activities takes place. I believe a yoga instructor stands in a different cultural space than a sports coach. Even if students are only interested in fitness yoga, most recognize that for others, yoga can involve not only the body, but also the mind and perhaps spirit as well. Yoga is a “Body-Mind-Spirit” practice and yoga teachers are trained in many different ways and have many different outlooks and commitments, that it is often difficult to assume anything about their behavior practices. I am a 500-hour certified yoga instructor and have gained a number of insights into the

nature of yoga practice and instruction. I hypothesize, however, that a scientific approach (like CBAS) to analyzing yoga instruction could be beneficial to both instructors and students but my belief would need to be tested. That hypothesis forms the basis of this paper.

Methods

Participants

My analysis focused on a 90 minute Karma/Vinyasa class I taught in my yoga studio located Old Town Lansing in Michigan. I had 14 students in my class. They were mostly level 1-3 out of 5 and between roughly the ages of 18-55.

Procedures

Before my class started, I asked all of my students for permission to video record the class. When every student gave permission, I started to record our 90-minute class. I positioned the camera so that I could see and hear myself as I gave instructions at the head of the class. The students were gathered in rows in the studio, two or three students to a row. They had brought yoga mats with them that they laid out on the wooden floor of the studio. The mats keep their feet from slipping when they perform the postures of the class. The studio has a particular smell, like sweat and incense, with a little hint of rubber from the mats.

I am both active and focused when I am in the studio. I sometimes walked around the perimeter of the students in a circle and I occasionally walked over to students who needed adjustment. I most often stayed at the front of the studio,

with the students and I facing each other so I can see how they are doing and if they need any help or adjustment.

After class, I stopped the recording and watched the session one time. I wanted to watch the recording once before I tried to code my coaching behaviors. Using CBAS requires marking down all the instances of 12 coaching behaviors (see Table 1). I printed out a table with all the coaching behaviors and then watched my video a second time. I marked down all the instances I could see of any of the 12 coaching behaviors in the CBAS. I then waited another 3 days and then watched the video a third time. I printed out a new form with a table of the 12 coaching behaviors and again marked the instances of the behaviors. I then tallied up the all the different instances of the behaviors under different categories of behaviors. The following are the results of both my qualitative and quantitative observations and analyses.

Results

Qualitative observations

Students and practitioners of yoga follow a path into deep psychological and emotional territory. Even if someone starts yoga simply because they want to exercise, it is very common to find that they start to have much more intense emotional, psychological, and perhaps spiritual experiences. Yoga coaching is about instructing people in the essentials of human movement, educating them on how to use their bodies correctly and creating a feeling state for students in the studio. I should explain there are two different instructional approaches to

teaching yoga. The first one is hands-on instruct and is align the body verbally and the second is through hands-on adjustments. The ways a yoga teachers communicates speech and reactive/responsive behaviors such as hands-on adjustments in a yoga class, aside from the actual sequencing, are among the most important aspects of yoga instruction. Most people come into the yoga studio after a long day at work, after being stuck in traffic. They may be tired, angry and stressed. It is the teacher's job to clear the energy in the space and set a tone for the class.

Watching the recording of my class, I focused primarily on my verbal interactions. I choose this specifically because I consider myself to be thorough and specific in my verbal instructions. I began the instruction of the class by walking around the studio and verbalizing how to start our yoga practice. During the opening sequence, I combined anatomical terms with Pranayama-breathing terms to better explain the nature and required actions of the poses. My tone was softer during the beginning sequence to create an even plane of energy in the room, and help the students get on the same level. Breath cues helped with this as well and I continued reminding the students about the importance of breathing until the beginning sequence came to an end.

I then transitioned into sun salutations. This segment of the class is initiated with the introduction of music and signifies the beginning of the flow. It also further helps students drop into the energy of the space and movement. During this segment my tone was quickens to keep pace with the flow of the

movements and the verbal cues were more about general body position and direction than about specifics.

During the main flow and standing sequences, my verbal cues included much more specific instructions. I gave constant instruction and guidance on each of the poses, including body position, muscular action, direction, pace, and breathe. I also suggest options and variations and used pauses when necessary to bring everyone back to common resting positions. Watching the video as a relatively new yoga teacher, I was very impressed with how perfectly everything was timed, movement-by-movement.

I slowed the pace again for the seated/floor back bend sequence. The cuing was similar to that in the prior sequence but the pace has slowed, my tone was quieter, and there are more pauses. This was to remind students that even in the more restful stretching poses, the actions of the muscles and the body position are still just as important. I reminded students of actions using cues of poses they have already done and actions they have already experienced. I suggested even more options and variations during the finishing sequence, and my pace and tone was even slower and quieter. There were more periods of silence when the students were holding their poses, as opposed to constant physical action cues. I still suggested actions, though not as many physical cues or instructions as before. I set the pace to be more at the students' leisure. Finally, I began our svasana (resting) with relaxation cues that quietly faded to silence. After about 5 minutes, I slowly reintroduced deep breath and body awareness and finished the experience with an OM or brief, deep spiritual chant.

Quantitative observations

The following table presents the qualitative results of my coaching behaviors observation and analysis:

TABLE 1: COACHING BEHAVIOR FREQUENCIES

Coaching Behaviors	Instances (n)
Class I - Reactive behaviors	7
Responses to desirable performances	2
Reinforcement	2
Non-reinforcement	0
Responses to mistakes	5
Mistake-contingent encouragement	2
Mistake-contingent technical instruction	3
Punishment	0
Punitive technical instruction	0
Ignoring mistakes	0
Response to misbehavior	0
Keeping control	0
Class II - Spontaneous Behaviors	13
Session related	11
General technical instruction	6
General encouragement	2
Organization	3
Session irrelevant	2
General communication	2

For this analysis, I should note that yoga instruction is highly structured. The instructor is required to give almost constant verbal instruction to the students before, during, and in the transitions between poses. I did not code any behaviors that were part of my normal class instructional practices. Instead, I focused primarily on reactions and responses to actions and behaviors that I didn't script as part of the lesson. I noticed that my spontaneous behaviors

occurred more often than my reactive behaviors, especially my general technical instructions. I also responded frequently to mistakes in class, and used a combination of both verbal and hands-on adjustments. I was not surprised to see that I did not use punishment or punitive technical instructional behaviors. Given the ages of the students and the type of class I was teaching, I was also not surprised that I did not have any behaviors related to keeping control.

Discussion

In my opinion this was a useful and beneficial exercise. I found it insightful to watch my video with an eye towards observing my instructional habits with the use of a CBAS. In the process, mapped out my coaching behaviors more precisely than I had ever done before. It was a great experience.

I know my practice fairly well because I only recently completed my training. The critiques from my instructor and my classmates are still fresh in my memory and I try hard to remember how I was taught to teach a yoga class. I did notice, however, that I am sometimes not as quick as I should be to correct some of my students' postures and transitions. Part of this comes from the fact that yoga is a private sort of practice, so I was taught to keep hands-on adjustments to a minimum. I also thought I helped maintain a good motivational climate in the studio – people commented to me after the session that they enjoyed the sequence I taught them and looked forward to more sessions with me.

Limitations

I should note that a limitation of this study was the camera position I chose for the video recording. I was unable to capture all of the instruction, particularly some of the moments of hands-on adjustments. I also only observed this one class. I teach other types of yoga classes at different levels, so this observation and analysis only provides a small picture of my overall coaching behaviors. Finally, the character of a yoga class can change dramatically with the character of the students. I feel this study may reflect favorably on my coaching behaviors in part because the students were generally experienced practitioners and emotionally mature. A different set of students may have produced a different set of coaching behaviors.

Implications

There are significant implications for using a scientific approach to analyzing yoga coaching behaviors. Yoga has a very long history and a rich tradition but it is still relatively new to Western societies and often misunderstood and misapplied. The communal and personal practice of yoga for the past 5-7000 years is highly structured and in many ways is the result of a kind of scientific observation of coaching. Yoga is definitely a systematic knowledge of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation. This is what distinguishes yoga from being a mere religion, a dogma, a belief system, because over thousands of years, yogis observed animals, themselves, and the

natural world in order to gain knowledge about the body, the senses, the breath, the way certain movements effected their health and wellbeing.

One of the things that struck me when I first started practicing yoga and meditation was how systematic it was. In my 500 hours yoga teacher training, we focused on creative vinyasa, slow flow, ashtanga, pranayama, meditation, chanting and yoga philosophy. I have come to believe it is important to study the link between what yogis have been saying for thousands of years and what scientists are only starting to discover and explore now. We will also explore dynamic dancing meditation, creative vinyasa flowing sequences designed to place emphasis on the chakras and the elements of nature. I see Yoga as 'practical psychology' – providing us the tools to cope with daily life and its challenges. Yoga's direct positive effect on the body and the mind transforms our relationship with ourselves and the world we live in. Yoga leads to self-acceptance and self-love, which leads to realizing our true passions and gifts in life and the courage to follow our dreams to live a fulfilled life.

When I started yoga in several years ago, no one told me to simply "believe this or that". Instead I was presented with a body of very rational, systematic forms of knowledge. In addition, I was told: try this out in this and that way, and if you do, you will experience this and that. I did just that and joined a way of life that millions of others have studied and experienced. In this way, I believe yoga is very systematic and very scientific. Despite its spiritual overtones, yoga is not really a religious practice. Yoga practice and yoga coaching are the result of thousands of years of observation, analysis, and age old wisdom.

References

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