

The Process of Conducting Interdisciplinary Yoga Research



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Introduction

An Interdisciplinary Yoga Research Pilot Project established a multidisciplinary, collaborative, yoga research group at a small, mainly undergraduate Canadian university. The fundamental goal of this pilot project was to research and promote health, wellness and productivity on campus. For the purposes of this review article, we outline the process of conducting this research. The project researchers involved faculty from Business, Sport and Physical Activity Leadership, Nursing and Ethnomusicology who draw upon their collective knowledge and research capacities, including psychology, health and wellness, sound and movement studies, and a variety of community-engaged and applied methods. The project was made possible by the Centre for Sound Communities, a new digital arts and humanities research laboratory at Cape Breton University, funded by Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and the Nova Scotia Research and Innovation Trust (NSRIT). This state-of-the-art facility provided a studio facility, as well as dedicated research workspace, where data collection was carried out with the support of dedicated tools and technologies.

The pilot project examined the effects of yoga practice on student, faculty and staff's perceptions of the recent labour tensions on the campus; a secondary focus was perceived resilience in the face of situational and environmental stresses related with the pre-exam period. Project objectives included:

- Establishment of multi-disciplinary research partnerships between academics to explore social and environmental challenges.
- Fostering intergenerational exchange on social and environmental issues.
- Supporting continued interaction between staff, faculty and students.
- Initiating dialogue in the community pertaining to social and environmental challenges through yoga

participation.

- Fostering an understanding of personal wellbeing and stress management techniques to develop resilience and overcome environmental challenges.

- Informing public policy related to social and environmental health and well-being.

This pilot project involved on-campus delivery of yoga classes by one of the core research team members. The project took a mixed-methods approach involving the use of participant-observation (throughout); surveys and in-depth interviews (preliminary, intermediate and post); as well as measuring resting heart rate and blood pressure. This project was vital and timely in a campus community that was processing a recent strike possibility, and operating in an environment where faculty were working without a contract. The project built on prior studies into workplace stress and the students' perception of the ability to handle stress [1-5]. After the project's proposal underwent a rigorous ethics review, participants were recruited through the offer of free yoga classes (with the knowledge that they would be engaged in a research project). Posters were created by Digital Interns working at the Centre for Sound Communities and posted around campus; design aspects underwent several reviews and revisions in order to be inclusive of difference (gender, body type), and to appeal to diverse audiences. By way of invitation to participate, digital versions of the poster were also shared via institutional email and circulated via social media. Interested students, staff, faculty were directed to contact the team's Research Assistant (also a Digital Intern working at the Centre for Sound Communities) and/or the project's Primary Investigator. Ahead of their participation in the project, each participant met with a research team member to discuss the study and verbally review the consent form. Each participant then engaged in a brief interview pre-yoga classes to ask about their perceptions of current stressors and their understanding and prior practice in yoga. Forty-seven participants joined the

research project (16 students, 14 faculty, 3 management and 14 staff members).

Subsequently, participants engaged in an introductory level course of yoga, that also accommodated practitioners who came with different degrees of yoga experience. The course was delivered in a format of 6 classes over three weeks; participants joined a Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday class schedule. They were instructed in the fundamentals of Ashtanga yoga, a long-standing traditional practice. The instructor is a certified and insured instructor (of yoga, and yoga therapy), and is a principal research team member; the other researchers of the team are also skilled, licensed and trained in physical health and in the applied study of psychology. During the first class, ethics protocols were reviewed with participants to ensure their safety as well as ensure that the research team can safeguard the privacy of participants. Before and after each class, participants' heart rates and blood pressures were monitored, and participants completed a brief questionnaire. Throughout the program, participants were offered a package of information that followed their progress through the program, for purposes of their edification. After the completion of the classes, 9 participants (three students, three faculty, and three staff members) engaged in exit interviews, asking them about their engagement in the classes, their perceived stresses and how the classes were potentially able to alleviate or diminish the stresses. The yoga instructor was also interviewed to ask about her approach in working with the participants. The research team is currently reviewing all project data, beginning to compile summaries of results, and generating preliminary reports. Preliminary content analysis of the open-ended survey question identified initially participants' motivation for attending the yoga classes fell within five categories (listed in order of frequency: stress release, health and fitness, timing and price, pressure from significant other and offering support

to peer group). Most of these motivators remained consistent throughout but there were some interesting additional aspects noted in the final survey surrounding positive group formation, a desire to learn more about yoga and motivation to continue to exercise because of the improved fitness achieved.

Statistical analysis was restricted because of the small sample size (i.e., Pre n=19; Mid n=13; Post n=15); however, a few noteworthy points emerged. Views about conditions at the university being pleasant decreased over the span of the study period, which we attribute to the stresses associated with the approaching exam period. Additionally, when comparing pre and post survey results, in the post survey participants appeared to find the threat of a possible strike affected their workload less, reported a better work-life balance and they were more likely to take pre-emptive action before stress took hold. In process are co-authored scholarly articles, and preliminary project reports, including the current review article. Research team members are also collaborating on a funding application for a longer-term project.

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