



WORKING GROUP PAPER

Scope of Practice

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 a Scope of Practice in yoga.

SCOPE OF PRACTICE UPFRONT

From its inception, in an effort to clarify the role of yoga teachers in society, Yoga Alliance (YA) has invested in the complex inquiry of what the Scope of Practice (SoP) of yoga is for schools and teachers. The goal of this inquiry is to educate and protect the portion of the public who interacts with the practice of yoga.

YA's yoga community of schools and teachers is essentially empowered to self-govern; the act of becoming a yoga teacher does not require licensure as do fields like naturopathic medicine or massage therapy. The yoga community exposes itself to vulnerabilities in the dissemination of the quality and safety of yoga education when certain ethical commitments, such as an agreed-upon SoP and Code of Conduct, are not adopted.

Please see the SRP [Code of Conduct](#) Working Group Paper here for more information on this area of inquiry.

Yoga continues to grow globally, which creates reputational and real-life risks when those calling themselves yoga teachers practice and teach in areas in which they are unqualified. Yoga as a practice, and as an industry, furthermore faces challenges as it increasingly intersects with modern secular sciences, international law, and other global institutions.

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YA asked the SoP Working Group (SPWG) two wide-reaching questions:

- ***What are yoga teachers, and what defines their practice?***
- ***How do yoga teachers' practices differ, or do they differ, within the many environments in which they work?***

PROBLEM STATEMENT

To answer the first questions posed to them, the SPWG felt compelled to offer a definition of yoga. The **SPWG defined yoga as both a unitive state of consciousness and the techniques, philosophies, practices, and lifestyles that bring one towards this state of consciousness as well as to many associated mental and physical benefits.** The group also considered that through a published SoP, YA could set a precedent to provide a definition for yoga's cultural history, which originated from the Indian subcontinent, and protect it in doing so. (Please see the [Core Curriculum](#) and [Inclusion](#) Working Group Papers for more inquiry into yoga's definition.)

The **SPWG recommended components of a YA-approved SoP in yoga** and explored areas for further inquiry. The **group pressed for more conversation within the YA community in order to arrive at a fully accessible and inclusive YA-approved SoP standard.** The group addressed these issues for conversation:

- The lack of preparedness by some Registered Yoga Teachers (RYTs) to hold the mantle of any proposed SoP
- Whether RYT 200 (or “foundational”) teachers would have different scopes of practice than RYT 300 (or “professional”) or specialty teachers
- The additions of practices that would allow for varying levels of YA-registered teachers and what role YA has in educating the public on these practices
- The issues of adjustments, consent, touch, and other safety concerns
- The resolution and approval of the other seven key areas of SRP inquiry and how those standards would influence a YA-approved SoP

Beyond acknowledging that a YA-approved SoP is necessary, the SPWG was unable to arrive at solutions that all or most in the group could embrace and endorse.

BACKGROUND AND REFLECTION

The SPWG identified many issues inherent in defining a SoP in yoga. The most important of these was the group's perception that some RYTs are currently practicing in areas in which they are unqualified. The group felt that this is a major problem for the general public, for individual teachers, and for the yoga teaching profession as a whole.

The SPWG did generally agree on a definition of yoga (please see the Problem Statement above) and acknowledged that these practices, techniques, and philosophies were generally brought from the Indian subcontinent. The intersection of these practices, techniques, and

philosophies with contemporary times elicited a group discussion and debate of an evolved, accessible, and inclusive definition of yoga.¹

The SPWG identified potential problems with YA defining an SoP as applying to any RYT, regardless of level or designation:

- Many RYT 200 graduates may not be able to hold the mantle of a new proposed SoP
- An RYT 500 or Trainer² (Lead or Speciality) should potentially have a different SoP
- Emerging yoga specialties might mandate different SoPs

Recognizing the rapid changes in the yoga community and overall industry, the SPWG asked how YA would address emerging yoga specialties and the different potential scopes that would result.

The SPWG pointed out that YA’s current SoP states that an RYT is not qualified to “conduct any individual sessions, classes, or groups that involve mental health, emotional, behavioral, relational, or trauma-related issues or that make use of psychological techniques or practices.”³ The group pointed out that “thousands” of yoga teachers, RYTs and non-RYTs alike, are currently pursuing trauma-informed yoga continuing education training and/or are marketing their offerings, such as classes and workshops, as “trauma-informed” or “trauma-conscious.”⁴ The SPWG believed that YA current RYS standards do not adequately allow for trauma-informed teaching to be part of an RYT’s scope.

The SPWG also pointed to areas of specific biomechanical issues or common injuries, such as yoga for back pain, yoga for texting-neck, yoga for depression, or yoga for cancer. Here, too, the SPWG claimed, many yoga teachers are leading classes, workshops, and private sessions with these points of differentiation. The SPWG pointed out that these RYTs state that they can address those pathophysiologies through their yoga offerings, but technically and legally, they cannot say that what they are offering is, for example, “treating” low back pain as a doctor or other medical professional would. The SPWG found reality of the market problematic from both an ethical and legal perspective.

The SPWG observed yoga’s emphasis as shifting from an original focus on spiritual salvation to more modern-day needs of health and wellbeing. The SPWG agreed that the definitions and goals of yoga practice have historically included

Gentle touch in yoga... could be a part of an RYT’s Scope of Practice while tissue manipulation should not be.

¹ The SPWG discussed the definition of yoga and how it has evolved throughout history; in addition, it questioned whether defining yoga was within YA’s scope as a member association. Though viewed as a departure from accepted norms of a definition of yoga, a unifying thread that did keep coming up among the SPWG members was that yoga is a form of body-mind-and-self inquiry, from the therapeutic to the transcendent. There was also conversation around a polythetic definition of yoga and a concern over any inadvertent erasure of the heritage and history of India in shaping yoga via the creation of a YA-approved SoP.

² The notion of Lead Trainer(s) and Other Trainer(s) come from YA’s section of its website on [Standards Guidelines \(all RYS\)](#).

³ Please see more info [here](#).

⁴ Quotes are SPWG members’.

health and wellbeing, and from this point of agreement, the group suggested that YA consider commissioning a polythetic definition of yoga to accompany the organization's definition of yoga (*please see footnote #2*).

The SPWG debated whether YA should require RYTs to pledge; while some viscerally reflected on whether such a pledge is even necessary, others found the pledge to be aspirational and poetic, while still others believed it is beyond the bounds of YA's reach.

Finally, the SPWG said that touch, and the safety of all students, were issues that an SoP, inclusive of all other standards, must squarely address.

YOGA AS AN UNREGULATED FIELD AND PURSUIT OF HUMANITIES

In addressing the "scope" of the SoP, the SPWG encouraged YA to consider linking the SoP to similar fields such as those in medicine while also considering how a SoP could be explicitly inclusive of the entire yoga community. The group said YA could potentially set a precedent in an attempt to protect yoga's cultural history, using the concept of "yoga humanities" to influence "how" a yoga teacher should relate to yoga philosophy, thereby avoiding "what" an RYT can and cannot do legally, which would be outside of a YA-approved SoP.⁵

The majority of the SPWG believed that yoga teaching as an unregulated field was irrelevant to its inquiry into best practice standards for yoga's SoP. However, the group did strongly comment with respect to the following two issues:

- The "Do's and Don'ts" in an SoP relegate RYT concerns exclusively to wellness/biomedical/psychological realms, which intersects with cultural appropriation. The SPWG believed that YA has an opportunity to address yoga's given definition to include an SoP that speaks to intellectual, cultural, accessibility, and inclusion competencies and limits.
- "Something" has to show the RYT that the skills of yoga teaching are important, subject to qualification, and dangerous to practice irresponsibly."⁶

SOLUTION

AUDIENCE FOR THE SCOPE OF PRACTICE

Some members of the SPWG recommended changing the name of the RYT at the 200-hour level, perhaps to an RYI (Registered Yoga Instructor), to limit their scope relative to other RYT designations. As in several other SRP Working Groups, the SPWG distinguished between RYS 200 as a "foundational" training and RYS 300 and above as "professional" trainings. The SPWG said the SoPs for these trainings would be foundational SoPs and professional SoPs, respectively.

The SPWG suggested that the new specialty practices emerging in yoga warrant

⁵ Quotes are SPWG members'.

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the inquiry into a new credential, perhaps called RYS, or Registered Yoga Specialists⁷. The word “Specialist” could imply, or prove via other certification or credential, that someone has a license in a complementary field or additional training in a specified field. The fact that most yoga teachers end up “niching” as their career matures, the SPWG said, in effect requires that YA attempts to define and designate specific competencies and skills of an RYS.

HISTORY, INCLUSIVITY, FORM, AND PRESENTATION

The SPWG suggested mirroring the format of the [International Association of Yoga Therapists Scope of Practice, Health Sciences section](#).

ACCOUNTABILITY

The SPWG debated whether YA should create a clear grievance policy in relation to SoP violations and use its Accountability Office to investigate grievances filed against RYT's relating to the SoP, including: whether or not any standard was enforceable and, if so, by whom; issues of RYT's and RYS's; and other concerns as they arise. The SPWG suggested:

- That YA consider whether it should investigate SoP grievances. If not, YA would use the Scope as an educational tool for insurance companies and courts of law companies for handling liability cases. Note: the SPWG did not suggest that this would mean YA could not investigate Code of Conduct grievances, including sexual misconduct complaints.
- That YA set up a community system that certifies and/or trains local respected senior yoga teachers in conflict resolution and on YA's policies in order to handle Code of Conduct or SoP grievances in their communities.

ADJUSTMENTS, TOUCH, AND OTHER SAFETY ISSUES

Most of the SPWG agreed that consent, and specifically informed consent, is an important safety issue to be part of the SoP, Code of Conduct, and Core Curriculum Educational Standards. Some in the SPWG questioned whether yoga teachers should touch students at all. (Please see the [Code of Conduct](#) and [Core Curriculum](#) Working Group Papers for more conversation on the notion of consent.)

The SPWG acknowledged that implied consent, including physical tissue manipulation, can over time become used as a technique by unethical teachers to touch their students inappropriately. The group also described gentle touch in yoga, namely that for alignment, support, balance, proprioception, awareness of breath, and relaxation, as something that could be a part of an RYT's Scope of Practice while tissue manipulation should not be.

⁷ This RYS is not to be confused with the already existing RYS for Registered Yoga Schools. This is the SPWG's suggestion, not that of YA.

Finally, the SPWG questioned the need for CPR and AED training for RYT's; the need for emergency response plans for RYS's; and the inclusion of general safety competencies such as first aid. The group considered these questions on which they did not reach resolution:

- Should teachers be trained in CPR and AED?
- Should studios have emergency response plans?
- Does/should the SoP include minimal safety competencies such as basic first aid knowledge?
- Should yoga teachers and studios do an intake for every student and keep student health records?

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: CODE OF CONDUCT

The SPWG discussed several issues that they believed did not have a place in the SoP discussion, such as:

- Commentary on “blended” practices, e.g., culturally hyped practices such as acro yoga, pub yoga, goat yoga, nude yoga, beer yoga, etc., and how the RYT “brand” might get muddled with this
- Consideration of the cultural differences between yoga in popular culture and yoga in an academic setting. In an academic setting, it is taboo not to cite sources, expertise in a given field typically requires years of intense study and research, and people do not teach their own interpretations of particular ideas without clearly calling out that it is a hypothesis based on personal experience, whereas in popular culture, yoga teachers, with little more than 200 or 500 hours of training, very often assume a mantle of authority when teaching yoga philosophy, playing the role of the guru when their training clearly doesn't provide that competency
- The responsibility of offering modifications or guidance to a student who voluntarily shares information about a health condition; from a legal liability standpoint, an RYT must offer this, so what does that mean for YA's SoP, Code of Conduct, and/or Core Curriculum? (Please see the [Code of Conduct](#) and [Core Curriculum](#) Working Group Papers for more discussion on this.)

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Our heartfelt thanks go to the following Advisors who spent much time and energy meeting, discussing, debating, and resolving issues on the Scope of Practice to the benefit of Yoga Alliance’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.

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