

# Contemplative Methods for Prison-University Writing Partnerships: Building Sangha Through “The Om Exchange”

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*Community writing partnerships between university and incarcerated students typically focus on developing critical reading and writing skills through shared assignments, peer review exchanges, and group discussion. This article examines a prison-university writing partnership between two semester-long yoga classes, one at a maximum-security women’s prison and one at a competitive university, that privileges building community over building academic skills. The yoga students shared reflective writing on yoga-related topics – from philosophy, to tips and modifications for poses, to personal experience – in a monthly newsletter called “The Om Exchange.” The sound of “om” in yoga symbolizes the universal “oneness” of all living beings. The purpose of the newsletter was two-fold: to support reflective writing for deeper engagement with class material and to connect with the larger yoga community beyond classroom walls.*

*While the yoga students only met in person once, the newsletter enabled them to build a sangha, or a local community with shared values that offers members motivation, guidance, support, and accountability in practicing those values. I suggest that the intersections between contemplative practice and feminist rhetorical listening facilitated these students, who may appear distinct, in finding “oneness” with each other; with*

*its focus on building community, this writing project affords visibility to the power of forming partnerships around explicit shared values through the lens of sangha, and offers transferable methods for more conventional community literacy projects. A contemplative approach fosters social and emotional learning, including civic and democratic values, that bridges institutions, cultures, and differences for a more equitable society. As one incarcerated yoga student reflected: "If what we do for the good inside these walls doesn't reach beyond these walls, then what's the point – [this partnership] is the point and a start."*

Read more at [https://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/19Sp\\_KINE\\_1410-1\\_Yoga/](https://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/19Sp_KINE_1410-1_Yoga/)

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The sound of “om” in yoga symbolizes a universal “oneness” with all living beings. The “om” should be made loud enough to create a physical vibration in the body, as if every cell is vibrating at the same frequency of the universe; the pitch or quality or harmony of the sound is irrelevant. Yoga is the practice of yoking the mind to the body, the self to the community. A yoga class often ends with a spoken namaste: I see and recognize myself in you. As one of my incarcerated yoga students, E.H., said: this closing “creates a feeling of unity across each person’s different dynamics. It is spiritually awakening.” Another incarcerated yoga student, J.E., wrote: “The best feeling comes at the end of class. The resounding positive energy touches the hearts of all.”

The unity across difference and the shared sense of positive energy are at the heart of this writing partnership between incarcerated and university yoga students, or “yogis,” highlighting the intersections between contemplative practice and rhetorical listening as the yogis created a yoga community, or sangha. The value of rhetorical listening in building and maintaining collaborative community writing relationships is well established. Rhetorical listening is defined by Krista Ratcliffe (2005) as “a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly a code of cross-cultural conduct,” which “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (17). A relationship built on rhetorical listening should exhibit the curiosity and cooperation recommended by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch (2012) as a community builds knowledge together, including a suspension of judgment “to resist coming to closure too soon” at the expense of “creativity, wonder, and inspiration” (85). Such an approach to community writing is widely embraced, but methodological

questions still abound for developing and enacting rhetorical listening in university partnerships with incarcerated people: how do we listen to each other? As research on this question increases (see Karen Rowan and Alexandra J. Cavallaro's 2018 article), I suggest looking to contemplative practice for academic collaborations involving carceral spaces, where concepts such as oneness and community are founded on non-judgement and inclusivity through contemplative "deep listening" that echoes and expands rhetorical listening by first "listening" to oneself.

This article demonstrates the potential of a contemplative approach for prison-university writing partnerships by examining the formation of a yoga community in fall 2018 through five editions of a monthly joint newsletter between yogis at WCC, a Virginia state maximum security "women's correctional center," and UVA, the University of Virginia—only 15 miles apart. The groups came together in this way to practice oneness by writing short reflective pieces on class material, including yoga philosophy, history, poses, and personal experience. The two groups consisted of 16 incarcerated yoga students at WCC in a 200-hour Registered Yoga Teacher Training (RYTT)—who were all women from a variety of places and backgrounds, with months to decades of yoga experience, aged 27 to 74—and 25 university yoga students in a semester-long 1-credit hour Introduction to Yoga course—who were mostly women, from Virginia, academically high-achieving, aged 18 to 22. Both groups were in "closed" classes, with fixed rosters and required attendance for the duration of each course; I was the instructor for both groups. Acknowledging the emphasis on oneness, the joint newsletter was called "The Om Exchange." All of the yogi voices in this article are excerpted from the newsletter.

## **THE PARTNERSHIP**

The primary emphasis on "community" in this community literacy project affords visibility to the powerful integration of contemplative practice with community writing and rhetoric, while also presenting transferable methods for more conventional community literacy projects with explicit writing instruction or goals. In contemplative traditions, the community of practitioners is called a sangha and offers motivation, guidance, support, and accountability; the sangha is an opportunity to practice oneness with all living beings by starting with those nearby. Writing for the newsletter facilitated building a sangha across barriers

of distance and access, exploring the class material, and engaging in introspection or “study of self,” known as *svadhyaya* in contemplative practice. Reflective writing enabled all of the yoga students to deepen their connections with each other, the material, and their own selves; the newsletter was a place for the yogis to develop social and civic identities, as well as navigate their relational roles: the WCC yogis were finding their voices as new yoga teachers, while the UVA yogis were beginning to see themselves as serious yoga students. The monthly newsletter was the only communication the WCC and UVA yogis had with each other until December 2018, when the UVA yogis visited WCC for in-person introductions, newsletter discussion, and a joint yoga practice; this was the first university course partnership with a WCC program, the first class trip to WCC for a community-building purpose, and the first time “insiders” and “outsiders” practiced yoga together in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The strength of this sangha built primarily through a newsletter highlights the potential of contemplative methods when integrated with rhetorical listening and reflective writing. Reflective writing in incarcerated populations has been found to be an effective method for bridging past and future selves that is linked to reduced recidivism through identity negotiation and transformation (Stevens 2012, 15). Additionally, for inmates serving long sentences, letters and other communications from the public create “growing feelings of engagement with ‘the outside world’ and acceptance by ‘normal people’” (Hodgson & Horne 2015, 10). A sangha of incarcerated and non-incarcerated members reduces inmate social isolation and creates empowering social networks (Draine, McTighe, & Bourgois 2011; Kaskutas, Bond, & Humphreys 2002; Hick & Furlotte 2010). Much has been written elsewhere on the benefits for university students of reflective writing and participating in community literacy prison writing projects, including developing critical thinking skills, challenging stereotypes, reducing prejudice and punitive attitudes, and increasing community connection, empathy, and a drive for social change (Long & Barnes 2016; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Pollack 2016; Hilinski-Rosick & Blackmer 2014). Specifically, reflective writing on community partnerships provides university students a way to construct meaning of their experience as they recognize tensions and reconsider civic, political, and community identities (Mitchell 2014; Jones & Abes 2004; Jones & Hill 2003). The writing exchange facilitated identity negotiation for all yogis, as they developed their teacher and student

roles and as they reconceived connections and responsibilities to each other. The reciprocal and mutually beneficial nature of this community partnership was key to its ethical foundation as well as the trust and participation in the sangha.

Through reflective writing, in which yogis progressively embodied their respective identities of teachers and students, and careful reading, in which yogis practiced rhetorical listening through an openness to each other's experiences, a sangha characterized by the personal growth of *svadhyaya* emerged. UVA yogi S.J.S. decided to continue a personal yoga practice after the semester's end, reflective of the role of serious yoga student, because after "reading about the experiences of a WCC yogi who had gained the level of comfort to practice on her own, he was more able to see, and more motivated to pursue the benefits of practicing by himself." The relationship also gave WCC yogis an opportunity to rehearse their teacher identities, to write and speak with confidence. WCC yogi N.J. wrote in the final newsletter that "just recently she had realized her self-worth and potential through Yoga Teacher Training" and that the newsletter helped her with "building trust in herself" as she experienced how others trusted her by closely reading and "listening" to her words.

The UVA visit to WCC affirmed and strengthened the sangha. Echoing the beneficial outcomes of university-prison writing partnerships outlined above, both groups of yogis overcame stereotypes and prejudices while building community and understanding in the spirit of yogic oneness. From submissions for the final newsletter, a UVA yogi reflected on the visit to WCC that "there are very few places where he could go to merely be in a group of people so different from himself, let alone be accepted as one of the group." Another UVA yogi wrote that "This experience continues to provide a deeper perspective on how similar we all are." The UVA yogis found acceptance, community, and similarities, and so did the WCC yogis; just as the UVA yogis had preconceived notions challenged, the WCC yogis came to see the UVA student experience in greater complexity. A WCC yogi reflected: "Quite revealing, came the understanding that whether one is incarcerated or not, we each suffer insecurities, we each have attachment issues, we each try to avoid dealing with something: the practice of yoga purifies these obstacles for everyone." Both groups of yogis were affected by the

realization that insecurities, attachment issues, and many more obstacles are universal. Using contemplative methods of *svadhyaya* and “deep listening,” informed by reflective writing and rhetorical listening, the sangha found oneness.

## THE METHOD

The WCC-UVA sangha was formed from established models of writing exchange programs between incarcerated and university students, such as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Prison Creative Arts Project, the Speak Out! Program, and Exchange for Change program (with the limitation that the yogis communicated solely through writing leading up to a single UVA class trip to WCC in mid-December). These collaborations create opportunity for promoting writing by incarcerated people to outside audiences, breaking down stereotypes about incarcerated people, and building connection and community around shared work. In theorizing the impact of the Exchange for Change program, Wendy Wolters Hinshaw (2018) builds on Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, contending that the Exchange for Change program creates a community where everyone is heard by asking the incarcerated and university students to consciously assume an open stance towards others for cross-cultural exchange to communicate across difference (56). For the yoga exchange, I integrated rhetorical listening with contemplative “deep listening” to develop a contemplative method for a university-prison writing partnership.

Deep listening in contemplative practice is similar to rhetorical listening, requiring the listener take an active role by being fully focused on listening without judgement, without attempting to control the conversation, and without planning a response; “we let go of our inner clamoring and our usual assumptions and listen with respect for precisely what is being said,” according to the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (“Deep Listening” 2015). Deep listening is a type of mindfulness, or “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 8). Contemplative practices such as deep listening and mindfulness are increasingly accepted in the university writing classroom: the approach helps students connect to their purpose and audience (Frey 2017-18); increases awareness of diverse lived experience, consciousness of bias, and feelings of belonging in the classroom (Wray 2018); and creates an embodied ethos of presence that

also promotes physical and emotional well-being (Wenger 2016). Gesa Kirsch (2009) has argued that contemplative practices “can enhance creativity, listening, and expression of meaning” that “enable rhetorical agency” in students and meet key goals of writing curriculum (W2).

Incarcerated populations receive the same benefits of awareness, community, well-being, and agency from contemplative practices as university students; as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness programs become more common and more researched in correctional settings, contemplative practices are also found to improve stress, aggression, attention, and impulse-control in inmates, all factors that support rehabilitation, addiction recovery, and reduced recidivism rates (Lyons & Cantrell 2015; Muirhead & Fortune 2016; Kerekes, Fielding, & Apelqvist 2017). Contemplative practices prime students for the deep rhetorical listening that community partnerships require. By December, the yogis had found unexpected similarities with each other and had also developed an appreciation for their differences. The yogis wrote about this in the newsletter, and it was also reflected in their physical practice of yoga. Yogi M.S. wrote that “at first, when in a pose, she would find herself looking around the room, getting a tinge of satisfaction if she was able to do the pose ‘better.’ This idea disappeared sometime along the way, replaced by a newfound appreciation for how different bodies are.” Another yogi, K.L., explained that “class is a judgement free zone where everyone understands that everyone’s body is different. It is not a place to look at others and judge. In this type of environment, it feels safe to learn new poses.” Yoga lessons on the mat transferred off of the mat, and vice versa. The yogis learned about avoiding comparison and judgement of self and others through explicit instruction in deep rhetorical listening and contemplative values, and with time it became part of their practice on the mat, a tension they navigated in their reflective writing and a value in the sangha.

One of the most foundational methods that contemplative practice offers for listening to others seems counterintuitive: starting with attention on, or “listening to,” one’s self. In the WCC-UVA sangha, reflective writing was an avenue for listening to the self for *svadhyaya*. Yogis discussed their ideas and reflections in small groups in their own classes with a chance to revise before submitting to the monthly newsletter, as another chance to deepen and articulate their thoughts before sharing their reflective

writing more widely. In addition to reflective writing, students practiced listening to the self through loving-kindness or metta meditation, which begins with directing loving-kindness towards oneself before moving outward to a loved one, a friend, a neutral person, a disliked person, and eventually all living beings. Renowned U.S. meditation expert Sharon Salzberg (1995) explains that offering love to oneself “is the essential foundation for being able to offer genuine love to others” because when people recognize their own desire for happiness, they “see that all beings want to be happy, and that this impulse unites them” as they identify the shared desire (44). Practicing metta cultivates openness, awareness, and love by acknowledging shared humanity, but it must start with the self. The words for the meditation are simple, usually similar to “May I be happy. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease.” These phrases are repeated and altered as the recipient of the intention changes, switching the pronoun or substituting a proper name.

Starting with the self also gives an opportunity for grounding, to realize and remember one’s own positionality and situated-ness in the world before reaching out to others: an individual’s requirements to achieve happiness, wellness, safety, peace, and ease are unique, intrinsically linked with particular identities and life conditions. I agree with Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg’s (2018) vision of deep rhetorical listening in a community partnership as feminist praxis that “arises from the recognition that no one is ever outside of their communities” and therefore people must be “heedful of dynamics of identity that feminists teach must always be part of their considerations in their every day lives, social interaction, and cultural commitments” (3). People must know where they are standing before taking a step towards or into a new partnership; people must be aware of their own identity dynamics to assume an opening stance of listening to others.

The yogis found the self to be an effective starting point in building community, particularly for showing compassion. Yogi C.M. succinctly summarizes that “Good interactions with others and with the world around her originate from good interactions with herself. Using yoga as a time for self-care allowed her to have more compassion towards herself and others.” Compassion proved to be a powerful lens for navigating personal identity and building a diverse sangha, through the combination of reflective writing and deep rhetorical listening in the



newsletter. Yogi L.A. found compassion, identification, and connection through contemplative practice and philosophy “through which one feels compassion for others and self, as well as feeling connected – compassion creates an ability to identify with others.”

Contemplative traditions begin with cultivating an awareness of self, and then from this ability to “listen” to the self, a person can learn to “listen” to others—to develop compassion for the self, then for others, as the yogis explained above. Larry Yang (2002), a psychotherapist and meditation teacher who specializes in diversity practices, emphasizes that pain and oppression “separate people from each other—in ways that harm the quality of life of all beings” (225). To build community across difference is the practice of diversity, an “incremental and cumulative process” (Yang 2002, 225). Yang ends his metta meditation with a dedication, which includes “May the awareness of the needs of diverse communities continue to be recognized and to grow in all Sanghas” (Yang 2002, 281). The yoga classes aspired to build community in an incremental way, starting with showing compassion to the self, then expanding out, similar to the metta meditation: beginning with the self, then local classmates, eventually to form a sangha of WCC and UVA yogis.

## **THE CHALLENGES**

The bonds forged with local classmates were a strength of the sangha (within each institution, yogis met regularly) but the limitations to everyone coming together weekly were a challenge. WCC yogis embraced their local sangha, growing in diversity practices and deep rhetorical listening skills over time. The WCC local sangha has continued to grow and expand, carving out an “insulated” space from dominant prison culture and power dynamics (Werts 2013); in their sangha, the WCC yogis are building a unique social identity that counters mainstream prison culture in its members’ display of respect, compassion, and integrity, which is an act of power in itself (Laclau 1990, 33; Hall 2000, 18). The WCC sangha and prison administration are now exploring the possibility of a sangha residential wing at WCC, where 65 sangha members could live together, instead of dispersed throughout the dormitories, and set some norms and responsibilities for themselves.

The stability and longevity of the WCC local sangha facilitated the formation of a WCC-UVA sangha: the successful creation of a cross-cultural, cross-institutional sangha writing partnership in the 15 weeks of the UVA semester can be attributed to this foundation, coupled with the contemplative approach. The UVA yogis, in contrast to WCC, came together as a class for just the semester; this limited the relationship-building among the UVA students and between UVA and WCC yogis. Our success in creating a cross-cultural, cross-institutional sangha writing partnership in 15 weeks can be attributed to contemplative methods and to the stability of the WCC sangha. As teachers-in-training, the WCC yogis were prepared to expand metta beyond self and demonstrate oneness to the UVA yogis, though this also involved emotional labor from the WCC yogis in terms of hospitality and relationship-building with UVA yogis who were entering into the community for only a semester. While the UVA yogis were invested and dedicated during that time, the WCC yogis were creating a sangha meant to last decades.

The WCC yogis also faced challenges to access and inclusion that the UVA yogis did not: the WCC yogis were nervous that their newsletter submissions were handwritten instead of typed, which meant no auto-correct or spellcheck and more difficulty in revising. It was important to the WCC yogis that their submissions were read and “heard,” but space, cost, and WCC printing constraints meant that not every submission could be included in each printed edition and the digital appendix of all entries was nearly inaccessible to the WCC yogis. While I was careful to balance the number of entries from WCC and UVA in each print edition, and to include everyone in print across the five editions, at one point a WCC yogi expressed concern to me that she was not “good enough” because she was not featured within the first two print editions.

In spring 2019, the WCC-UVA community writing partnership continued to evolve and grow, and I addressed some of these challenges with increased institutional support and grant funding. This semester, the WCC and UVA yogis wrote their “Yoga Stories”—to reflect on and share why they practice yoga—which research assistants edited, spell-checked, coded for keywords, and compiled on a website and in an indexed booklet organized by keywords. The website and booklet serve to lighten the emotional load of the WCC yogis by offering written self-

introductions that can be read by future UVA students, and to represent our findings in print and online, improving accessibility.

## **THE TAKEAWAYS**

The newsletter and resulting sangha formed a deeply transformative experience for the yogis: the contemplative approach to building the sangha, working from self outwards as in the metta meditation, grounded the yogis and prepared everyone for deep rhetorical listening. UVA yogis were inspired by the WCC yoga teachers-in-training, who offered wise advice and modeled yogic behavior; WCC yogis found their teacher voices and confidence, encouraged by the trust of the UVA yogis. The unique circumstances of this partnership afford visibility to contemplative methods in community projects, given its focus on oneness; these methods could be integrated into a more standard university class, prison writing project, or community literacy effort with the same benefits, following a broader trend in higher education of uniting mindfulness and learning.

The parallels between rhetorical and contemplative methods for community building are rich, from rhetorical listening and deep listening, to reflective writing and *svadhyaya*. Beyond these parallels, a contemplative approach adds another layer to community writing partnerships; emphasizing the community aspect changes the nature of the relationship in a fundamental way. The concept of sangha in particular motivates community formation across institutions and differences to create a more equitable society. Sangha members learn and cultivate pro-social behaviors that contribute to the educational, civic, and democratic values that so many university community literacy projects desire to foster. A community project may teach social and emotional learning (SEL) by emphasizing sangha to develop both cognitive skills, such as literacy, as well as non-cognitive skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Over the past 20 years, these non-cognitive skills have been increasingly tied to social, academic, and economic success, as well as overall well-being (Elias et al. 2015; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). SEL, pro-social behavior, and sangha are intricately linked and mutually reinforcing. The WCC-UVA sangha is a starting point for exploring contemplative methods for university community partnerships and theorizing the impact of sangha.

The Om Exchange newsletter was also a starting point for a continually evolving relationship between WCC and UVA yogis. Contemplative methods may require additional time and reflection for relationship-building, but the outcomes are rewarding. The process-oriented approach facilitates the instructor's ability to listen to the community in order to adapt the project, situate the participants, and address concerns. My work setting up a cross-cultural, cross-institutional sangha between WCC and UVA yogis continues, as I reflect on these takeaways and adjust the projects to be more accessible, inclusive, and equitable. Both groups want to the work to continue. A WCC yogi commented that both groups of yogis "were profoundly affected by the words of each other. The project expanded both groups' sense of 'oneness' with the larger community." After the UVA visit, WCC yogi L.E.S. reflected: "If what we do for the good inside these walls doesn't reach beyond these walls, then what's the point – tonight was the point and a start." Deep rhetorical listening across difference to build community through sangha and svadhyaya reflective writing—that is the point, and we have only just begun.

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