

BECOMING AN INSTRUCTOR

A DETAILED GUIDE FOR TEACHING PILATES

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BECOMING AN INSTRUCTOR OF PILATES

What Makes a Pilate Instructor?

Instructing Pilates is an opportunity to pass on your skills, your knowledge and your inspiration to the next generation. Whether you think of yourself as a teacher or not, one of the key features of being human is your ability to teach those around you what they need to know to be part of the human community. Pilates is one kind of teaching that may be new to you, but all your skills as a communicator, performer, parent, sibling or adviser can come into play as you develop your unique instruction style.

In observing the development of many Pilates instructors over the last several years, I have noted distinct stages students pass through on their way to becoming truly skilled professionals. All of the stages represent the process of acquiring skills that are necessary for progressing to the next level.

LEVEL 1: THE EXERCISE LEADER

The exercise leader is a teacher who can successfully get their students to perform the exercise. If an exercise leader is teaching a group class, they can successfully demonstrate the exercises in an appropriate sequence and the students can follow along without too much confusion. If the exercise leader is teaching a private or semi-private session, they can set up the equipment, make appropriate adjustments and get the students to perform the exercises successfully and efficiently.

The exercise leader understands the exercises they are teaching in order to successfully communicate:

- ▶ **Correct equipment set up (if required):** # of springs, position of footbar
- ▶ **Proper body position:** supine with feet on footbar
- ▶ **Movement sequence:** press the carriage back and return
- ▶ Number of repetitions
- ▶ Transition to next exercise
- ▶ Basic safety instructions for clients without physical limitations
- ▶ Program sequencing and flow to fulfill the objectives of the class

This is the basic level of skill required to teach and it takes practice to achieve all of these things. The goal of the personal sessions and student teaching hours are to develop this level of ability. Until you can successfully teach an exercise safely and efficiently to a student or client you have not reached the basic level required of a Pilates teacher.

LEVEL 2: THE PILATES INSTRUCTOR

The Pilates instructor can take a student or a class and teach them not just how to perform the exercise but how to perform it better. The Pilates instructors' goal is to help his or her students achieve optimum function and performance in whatever they do. Whether the student is a mother, a computer programmer, a casual runner or a professional athlete, the Pilates instructor works with the individual student's goals to design a program to address postural, functional and performance goals.

The Pilates instructor can take a student without substantial physical limitations and design a specific program to help them to:

- ▶ Improve overall strength and flexibility
- ▶ Correct common muscular imbalances
- ▶ Improve posture
- ▶ Improve physical function in daily activities
- ▶ Achieve their fitness goals
- ▶ Improve their performance in the athletic activities of their choice

Verbal, Visual, Manual or Kinesthetic Teaching Styles

People take in information in a variety of ways. One way to categorize this is through what senses we are using to receive and process the information. In your teaching, the more categories you can combine in your instructions, the more effective you will be in your teaching.

VERBAL

Verbal instruction is the words that you say and the order you say them in as well as the qualities of the voice and the body language that accompanies them. Being able to articulate what you want your class or client to do is an essential first step in teaching. Verbal communication includes many aspects of the voice beyond just the words that are being spoken. Aspects of this non-verbal communication that are important to consider include:

Quality of the voice

- ▶ Is your voice pleasant or irritating to listen to?
- ▶ Does your voice convey the quality of the movement it is asking for?
- ▶ Do you speak at an appropriate volume for your client?

Rhythm of the voice

- ▶ Do you vary the rhythm of your voice when you are speaking?
- ▶ Do you speak in a monotone?
- ▶ Do you use your voice to convey the rhythm of the exercise?

Emotional content of the voice

- ▶ Is your voice expressive or dull?
- ▶ How does your voice make people feel?
- ▶ Can you give corrections and take control of a class without getting angry or causing pain or embarrassment to your students?
- ▶ Does your voice create a calm, energetic, manic or boring atmosphere?

VISUAL

Visual cues can be the physical movements that a person sees, or they can be hinting cues that create a mental picture that the client can use.

Actual visual cues include:

- ▶ Performing the movements exactly as the client will be doing them as in demonstrating for a Mat class
- ▶ Indicating the motion desired with a smaller body motion as in rotating the torso to indicate rotation to a client or using the arms to indicate movement of the legs.

Visual imagery cues can include:

- ▶ Reach your arms out to the sides as if you are making the shape of a 'T'.
- ▶ Imagine your spine is like the trunk of a young tree, bending gently in the wind.

MANUAL

Manual cueing uses the sense of touch to instruct the student and is used in addition to auditory instructions to facilitate movement, muscle engagement or muscle tone.

Examples of manual cueing include:

- ▶ **Facilitating movement:** When teaching a student how to rotate the torso, manual cueing can help the student to feel the movement clearly and to understand what the instructor is looking for.
- ▶ **Encouraging muscle engagement:** Placing a hand on the muscle to be used can help the student to identify what they are trying to use.
- ▶ **Moderating muscle tone:** A hand on an area can help bring the students awareness to that area and to decrease or increase the amount of muscle tone.

REFINING YOUR VERBAL CUEING

Since verbal cueing is most of what you will be doing in your teaching, it is worth exploring how you use language and how you can expand your cueing repertoire. The key things that need to be communicated about an exercise include:

- ▶ What is the starting position?
 - **Equipment set up:** 2 springs, footbar
 - **Body position:** prone, supine, sitting
- ▶ What is the movement sequence?
- ▶ What is the breathing pattern?
- ▶ How many repetitions?

Use positive cues rather than negative cues

When giving a cue, know that it is much easier for a client to do something you want them to do than to stop doing something you don't want them to do. For example, if someone's shoulders always rise. Try active cues such as "Slide the shoulder blades down your back", "Lower your shoulders" or "Melt your shoulders down" rather than "Don't raise your shoulders".

Get creative

Once you have covered the basics and the student understands essentially what they are doing, cueing moves to the next level and can include a tremendous amount of creativity. Once the mechanics of the exercise are understood, a variety of images and explanations can improve the student's understanding and refine their experience of the exercise. Imagery categories include:

- ▶ **Anatomical cueing and explanations:** Engage your abdominals to bring your ribs toward your pelvis.
- ▶ Tighten the quadriceps to pull the patella up.
- ▶ **Kinesthetic cueing:** Feel your ribs slide down the front of your torso .
- ▶ Imagine someone is lifting your upper body up as the abdominals engage.
- ▶ **Visual cueing:** Picture your ribs melting toward your pelvis as the torso rises off the mat.
- ▶ Imagine a pebble sinking from your navel to your spine as the abdominals engage.
- ▶ To feel the transversus working, imagine you have plastic wrap across your hip bones and it pulls tighter as you engage the muscles.
- ▶ **Movement oriented cueing:** Imagine energy is shooting out the top of your head as you stand.
- ▶ Reach the arms toward the ceiling as if you are reaching for something you want more than anything
- ▶ And lots more...

As a teacher you get to experiment with and develop your individual style and you will attract students who need your particular skills. If you are working in a studio with other instructors, keep your ears open for new ways of saying things and borrow what you feel drawn to. Find cues that feel true to you and that you can vividly imagine as you are using them. Your student's response is directly proportional to your connection to the image. If you are very clear about what you are asking, they will follow along. If you are fuzzy, they will be too.

As an instructor it is extremely important to be patient and to remember how long it takes to learn a new physical skill. If you are an accomplished athlete or dancer it may be difficult to remember how many years it took you to learn the skills you currently possess. For many of your clients without much of an athletic background it can take quite a while for the basic principles of Pilates to start to take root. Be patient. The mind is fast, the body is slow. Allow your client time to get used to all the new ideas you are throwing at them and to begin to digest the new vocabulary and experiences you are leading them through.

Take your time; enjoy the process of becoming a teacher.

If you enjoy people and movement and the miracles the body contains you will have a very rewarding and successful career in Pilates.

