



Teaching Pilates Mat Work

Helping your students connect with the exercises is both a science and an art.

“It is the spirit that builds the body.” This quote from 18th century German poet Friedrich Schiller was displayed—in its original language—in Joseph Pilates’ New York studio for more than 50 years. Many first-generation teachers who trained with Joe Pilates refer to his studio as a school. They say, “You were there to study movement: to perfect your movement.” In his classroom, Joe was the professor and the subject was the road to happiness (his word for wellness). He taught that

mind, body and spirit were one, that all three were needed for happiness—and that when they united and worked together, the result could be euphoria.

A Pilates mat workout is practice for life movement. Yes, it builds strength and flexibility, but what makes it Pilates is how these movements connect with the mind and spirit. As a teacher of the method, your job is both a science and an art. You want to plan your class scientifically, with a warm-up, a workout and a

cool-down, but you also want to develop the art of engaging your students. If you can teach them to focus, to do more than just go through the motions, they will leave with a newfound connection. It might be as small as a new deep breath or a slight shift in posture, but that in itself will be profound.

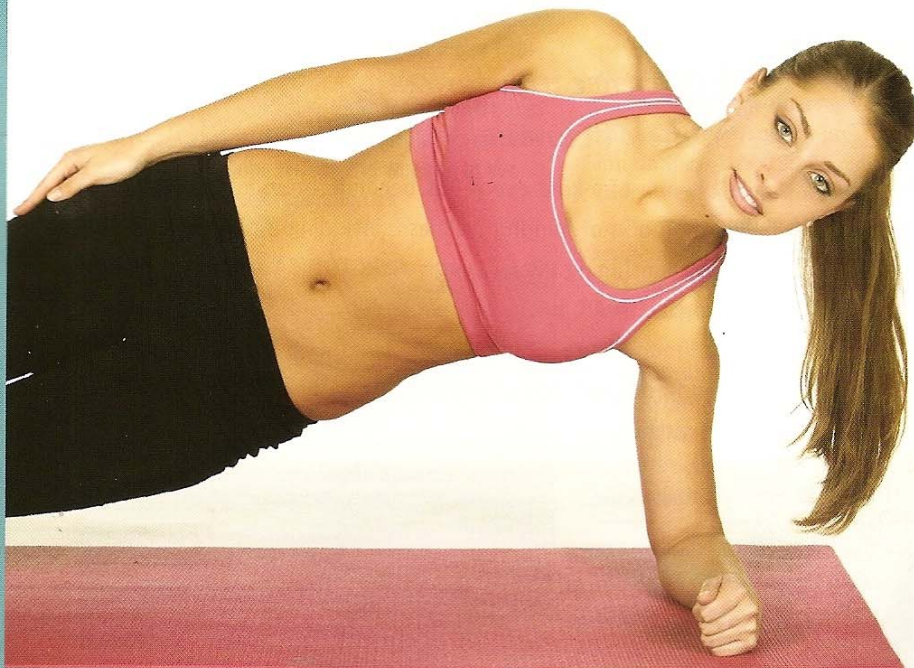
For the most part, this article addresses the science of instructing a mat class—the four steps to follow when teaching an exercise and the factors to consider when sequencing moves. It also hints at ways to help students make the mind-body-spirit connection. For new teachers, integrating this element is the most difficult task. It comes only with practice, persistence and mentorship. Like Joe, aim to engage your students as though you were in a classroom. For you—and for them—practice will make perfect, and as Joe said, perfect practice will make happiness.

Teaching a Pilates Move: The Four Steps

When teaching any Pilates mat move, it is logical to follow these four steps:

1. Lay the foundation.
2. Find the center.
3. Hold still and move.
4. Flow.

Lay the Foundation. Think of this as building the basement. Begin with alignment. I recommend employing verbal visual cues that stimulate the mind, rather than using your body. You want your



clients to take in the information and process it—not just to mimic you. Be specific, be precise and expect perfect practice. Proceed quickly into the movement so that your students' minds don't wander. Keep talking to hold their attention. Avoid counting; instead keep the pace with your voice and your cues.

Find the Center. Using the breath, bring attention to the powerhouse (the rectangular area of the torso). Discuss its position and the engagement of the abdominal area as well as the expansion of the rib cage with the breath. It is essential to involve the powerhouse in each exercise.

Hold Still and Move. Think of a few familiar Pilates mat exercises. In each of them, certain segments of the body move, while others hold still. At times the parts even alternate in their movement. This is the most important concept to focus on in a class of beginners. In life we learn to

When a student holds still and moves, he gains core stability and flexibility.

move whatever we need to complete the task at hand, but this is not always the most efficient use of the body. Pilates teaches us to learn the movement available at each joint and how to isolate that movement to just that joint. Joe Pilates described this as “moving without tenseness,” using only the muscle and joint needed for the task—nothing more. If you think of this as you build each exercise, you will have great success with new students and continue to challenge your long-term clients.

When a student holds still and moves, he gains core stability and flexibility. For example, in leg circle, the student holds his pelvis in neutral and circumducts his hip. He gains stability in the pelvic girdle and increases flexibility in the gluteals and

hamstrings. Think of the many other exercises that begin with this one basic task, “Hold still and move.” The list is endless: hundred, seated twist, spine stretch, rolling like a ball and so on.

Flow. Last but not least, flow. Connect to the foundation, to the center, to the movement and go, go, go . . . This is the fun part, but it takes the first three steps to get there. If we start with flow, we often lose the connection with the mind and the precision that our original “professor” looked for. A good grade requires this perfect practice, and we should encourage it in our classroom.

For an example of how these principles would apply in practice, see the sidebar “The Four Steps: Rolling Like a Ball.”

The Four Steps: Rolling Like a Ball

This example shows you how the four teaching steps can apply to the Pilates mat exercise “rolling like a ball.” The steps are written as verbal cues:

Step 1: Lay the Foundation

“Sit toward the front of your mat with your heels in line with your sitting bones and your knees bent and in line with your second toes. Begin by sitting up tall on your sitting bones and opening your chest. Raise your elbows to assist in dropping your shoulders. Maintain your tall posture and open chest while you draw your sitting bones toward your heels and your navel to your spine. Imagine zipping up a zipper on the front of your pants. You will now have a scooped area at your bellybutton. Keep your neck long and your shoulders down. Gently lift one leg at a time into the table top position, and balance behind your sitting bones.”

Step 2: Find the Center

“Inhale deeply into your rib cage. Imagine the ribs expanding to the sides. As you exhale, draw your navel to your spine and reach your sitting bones more toward the backs of your knees. Visualize yourself like the leg of a rocking chair: stable from your middle and ready to rock.”

Step 3: Hold Still and Move

“Maintain this stable position, thinking of the distance between your knees and shoulders and your heels and your buttocks. Keep that distance consistent and avoid swinging your legs. Inhale as you roll back, but do not let your head touch the floor. Exhale as you roll back up to balance behind the sitting bones. Be sure to keep the scoop in your lower belly and the open chest. Avoid allowing the pelvis to move when you again reach the balance position at the top.”

Step 4: Flow

“Pause for a second at the top of the movement while you complete your full exhalation. As you inhale, roll back. Begin to form a rhythm between your breath and your roll. Your speed should be equal as you roll back and then roll up. Inhale and roll back; exhale and roll up. Open the ribs and roll back, draw the navel to the spine and pause at the top. Feel your spine roll as you go back. Maintain your position as you roll up. Okay, last one. Draw the air in as you roll back; exhale and roll up. Hold this last position, drawing the shoulders down and opening the chest.”

Sequencing Guidelines

You probably know that there was a recommended order for the original Pilates mat exercises. Passed down from teacher to teacher, this order has set the stage for many of today's workouts. Usually, hundred comes first. However, if you watch old movies of Joe Pilates teaching mat classes, you will see that he actually started his clients with calisthenics in a standing position. The warm-up produced an overall rise in temperature, and hundred came after that. Maybe this order that was passed down was just a good way to make sure that all the mat exercises were remembered. Maybe, in that case it would be okay to stray from this order. However, with modern ideas about exercise, we should keep a few rules in place, whether we choose to follow the traditional order or not:

- 1. Warm Up the Low Back Very Early in the Workout.** The perfect low-back warm-up in a mat class is articulating bridge. Incorporate it early to avoid straining this area. In the general population, the back is often the weakest link.
- 2. Avoid Maintaining One Body Position for an Extended Period of Time.** The body can get very uncomfortable if left in one position too long. Keep the body positions flowing. You can always revisit supine later in the workout.
- 3. Interrupt Supine Spinal Flexion With Spine Extension.** Spinal flexion, as in

the stomach series, can be stressful—especially for beginners. Interrupt the curled position with a quick, articulating bridge and then go right back into flexion. This will allow stress relief but keep the abdomen working.

Cues to Help Your Students Connect

To encourage students to engage fully with their mat workout, try the following:

Have an Objective in Mind and Reinforce It Throughout the Class. Give your class a theme and revisit it throughout the exercises. Maybe one day the theme is drawing down the shoulders and another day it is drawing up the kneecaps. Whatever you choose, make it the lesson of the day.

Cue in Relation to Body Position, Not Angles or Degrees. Keep the workout personal. It would be better to say, “Raise your legs to a position where you can hold a neutral pelvis” than to say, “Raise your legs to 90 degrees.” Each person is different, and we need to be sure that our cues match everyone.

Use Visual Cues. Be descriptive with your cuing. Use common items such as food or everyday activities. For example, in side-lying I use the visual that students are toast in the toaster and need to avoid being burned.

Avoid Demonstrating Exercises. Use demonstration only as a last resort. Challenge yourself to elicit the responses you want with verbal cuing. This will get your students’ minds involved.

Avoid Counting; Keep the Pace With Your Voice. Focus on quality, not quantity. We don’t want participants to know how many repetitions of an exercise they did; we want them to know how well they did it!

Read Your Students; They Will Feed You Your Cues. Do not fuss over cues. Just watch the class and cue their positions. You will be surprised how students tell you just what to say!

4. End the Class With Prone Extension.

There is a lot of spinal flexion in Pilates mat work. Although good for strength and flexibility, it often places pressure on the disks in the spine. A spine extension exercise is a great way to relieve this stress.

For suggestions on cues that might help students integrate the body-mind-spirit connection, see the sidebar “Cues to Help Your Students Connect.” ■

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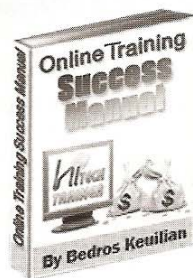
Resources and Suggested Reading

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