

Evolution of a Teaching Style

by Banna Dunn

When I first became a Pilates instructor, I taught Mat classes in commercial health clubs. The client demographic in these gyms was under fifty and injury free. I could pace the classes accordingly without making lots of modifications. I grew comfortable with my Mat class format and kept to the same set of exercises with a few variations. Then two years ago I started teaching in a small private Pilates studio. While some of the clients at the studio came to supplement their fitness regimen the majority used Pilates as their primary form of exercise. Furthermore these clients had been referred to the studio by physical therapists, osteopaths, massage therapist or chiropractors. Basically they were told, “Try Pilates and see if it will help you.” I quickly learned I needed to make significant adjustments in my teaching style to be of service to my new client base.

Watch and Learn

As is the protocol in most studios, I would take a fitness and health history from a new client and then make assessments while watching them move. Sometimes by the end of thirty minutes I had a greater sense of which exercises would be contraindicated than which ones would be appropriate. I began to form a mental list of what to look for: forward neck position, flatness in the thoracic curve, knock knees, supinated feet, etc. By watching the ways people moved, I quickly formulated suitable teaching parameters. I found myself continuously revisiting the biomechanical principals outlined in the Fundamentals.

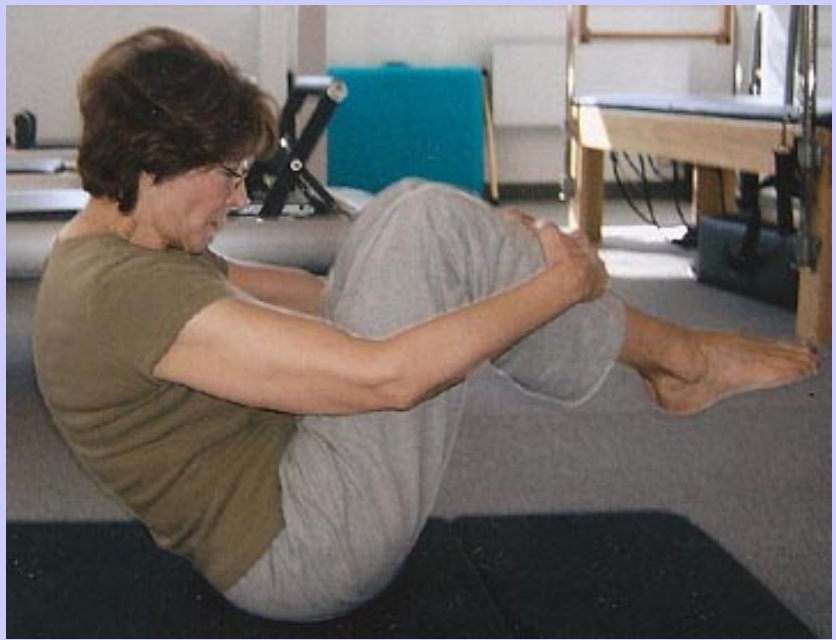
Slow and Steady

I began to teach in much smaller ranges of motion using very small progressions. Gone were the days of Open Leg Rocker and Corkscrew; just one good *Rolling Like a Ball* would be progress. What I learned is that a well executed *Rolling Like a Ball* might be months away. So we would begin with *Pelvic Bowl*, *Imprinting* and *Leg Slides* or *Knee Stirs*. After several sessions I would introduce a coccyx curl and a small lift of the pelvis, making sure the client was pain free before asking them to perform a full Bridge. This new pacing, which at first seemed tedious, became rewarding as clients progressed and mastered exercises without aggravating existing injuries.

Client Profile

One client, a former modern dancer and avid water skier, came to the studio presenting chronic pain and tightness in her posterior thoracic region. She struck me as a very physically fit person with some acute discomfort. Upon taking a brief history she described an event of, “throwing out her back” the result being a chronic knotted sensation in her mid to lower back. When asked to perform a standing roll down it was immediately apparent she had a considerable flatness in the curvature of her thoracic spine between T-7 and T-10. This flatness impeded her ability to perform a *Rollup* without momentum and also impeded her

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ability to sustain many of the flexion positions for exercises like *Rolling Like A Ball* or the *Knee Stretch* series on the Reformer. My strategy focused on smaller ranges of motion and blending lots fundamentals into her sessions. For months I included *Imprinting*, *Knee Sways*, *Cat* and a modified *Rolling Like a Ball* to enhance her flexion. As her spinal mobility increased, we focused on deepening her breathing patterns and added *Flight* to strengthen her extensor muscles. Gradually her body absorbed the new information and began to establish healthy movement patterns. Her sessions evolved to make use of the Cadillac roll back and push through bar. After a year of consistent work she no longer mentions pain in her back, her *Roll Up* has become synchronized and she can maintain the curved position that *Rolling Like A Ball* requires. She added a home routine of stretching which includes *Knee Sways* and *Cat*. Since the Pilates Method is so versatile, it allowed me to keep this athletic client moving and injury free while her spine learned to articulate properly.

A New Way of Teaching

Seven years into teaching Pilates I'm still learning nuances of the technique and strategies for its application. My new client base gave me the opportunity to make adjustments in my teaching style and improve it. I continue to be fascinated by The Method and look forward to many more years teaching and learning something new from the next client who walks through the door.