

Teaching Strategies For Adult Learners

by Tania Huddart

Fundamentals and the adult learner

Beginner Pilates instructors often struggle with the evaluating the amount of information to give to a new client, especially when teaching the fundamentals. It is often tempting to give a client as much information as possible but this may lead to confusion. When training clients it is important to remember that adults learn differently from children. Based on current research, adults learn best when they can see the practical value. This means that they will need a reason for doing the movements you are asking them to do.

The fundamental exercise *prone hip extension* is more likely to be understood if the instructor can encourage a client to think of the benefit it will have for walking, running and climbing stairs; not to mention the fact that it is the first step toward not having a 'droopy' bottom. Follow this fundamental exercise with PhysicalMind's Standing Pilates advanced fundamental exercise - *single leg abduction* to make a vertical application to the movement and bring it closer to everyday functional exercise patterns. These two fundamentals are especially important for people with lower back discomfort or pain, as strength in the gluteal and hamstring muscles help to stabilise the lower spine together with Transverse Abdominus and Multifidus.

Adult learners have accumulated a foundation of knowledge and life experience that guides them when learning a skill. They relate new information against previously learned skills and will often learn more slowly. Providing motivation and well structured feedback for the adult learner is extremely important as they value feelings of achievement and self esteem very highly.

Motivation

Motivation in particular is linked to goal achievement. When a client perceives they are making progress towards their goals their motivation levels are increased. The intrinsic motivators of knowing, doing and accomplishing a specific task cultivates belief in the value of participating in an exercise regimen. Pilates exercises in particular are useful for developing an awareness of the body's movements and exploring ways to use sensory information to increase perception. This reflective knowledge is useful in everyday life, and promotes understanding of the self as well as others.

In contrast, extrinsic motivators flow from any aid used by instructors to guide students towards learning. Making Pilates classes personally relevant will draw the client in, for example when instructors incorporate clients' personal experiences into lessons. This can be done by discussing the reasons for activities with the client by jointly figuring out how specific tasks fit into the wider context of their everyday life.

Telling clients what to do tends to make them passive and may dampen motivation and curiosity. Encouraging them to become active participants in their sessions will stimulate creative thinking and increase learning. Experimentation is another useful tool which

engages clients' curiosity. Try incorporating balance control exercises and invite clients to stand on one leg on different textured surfaces. Ask them to describe in their own words how it feels in their bodies and minds. Then get them to repeat this exercise with their eyes closed. Compare and contrast the two experiences.

Clients also need to take responsibility for their own learning and giving them the space to explore their perception of their bodies in space may help to build confidence and enable them to tackle increasingly difficult learning challenges. As an instructor you can initially set moderately challenging goals that are achievable and encourage success. Progress this by increasing the 'stretch' or complexity as their confidence grows.



Models: Tania Huddart, Wendy Shutt.

Photos by: Andrew Ivory

Giving feedback

Feedback is the main form of communication experienced by the client. There are two major types of feedback — intrinsic and extrinsic. **Intrinsic feedback** is the sensory information that normally occurs when an individual produces a movement. This information is derived from sources outside the body, such as visual or auditory information, or from inside the body - proprioception. It gives the body indications such as the positions of the joints or orientation within space.

Intrinsic feedback is always present and can assist students to determine when they are doing something incorrectly. It can also help a client to recognize improvements when executing movements. However, intrinsic signals will not always clarify the precise reason why a movement was successful or unsuccessful or how to improve the movement execution in the future. The instructor plays a vital role by providing **extrinsic feedback** to achieve this distinction.

About Tania Huddart



Tania came to Pilates training through a career in dance teaching. She started Pilates work with Lesley Ackland at London's BodyMaintenance studio in the mid-1990s and is a Certifying Studio for PhysicalMind Institute. Tania returned to Wellington to form Hearts and Bones Pilates® Centre in 2002. From 2003 to 2006 Tania provided Pilates services for students at the New Zealand School of Dance. Tania also writes and delivers workshops for a variety of dance institutions as well as writing a variety of articles about Pilates and dance for magazines including NZ Dancer Magazine (September 2007), DANZ (April 2008). Tania's other qualifications include a Diploma in Ballet specializing in teaching from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and a Bachelor of Philosophy (Hons) from the University of Durham, United Kingdom.

Unfortunately, a heavy focus on error correction may cause the client to 'switch off' their intrinsic signals and rely solely on extrinsic feedback. Instructors can encourage and reward clients for their efforts and use questioning techniques to encourage self-evaluation and discovery before giving their feedback. Regardless of the type of feedback used, one of the most important functions is to provide motivation.

Positive feedback will reinforce a client's motivation and confidence and make it more likely that they will repeat actions successfully again. Praise should also specify which action is being complimented in order for it to promote learning. Both positive and negative comments influence motivation, but research consistently indicates that students are more affected by positive feedback as it helps them to be successful. Praise also builds clients' self-confidence, competence and self-esteem.

However, if a client's performance is weak, they will benefit from knowing that the instructor expects them to improve over time. When giving negative feedback it is important relate it to the task and not to turn it into personal criticism. Viewing feedback as a two-way process, in which the client assists in the communication, can enhance their skill acquisition in a positive and constructive way. It is important to give clients feedback and a chance to reflect as quickly as possible, along with some discussion of how well they have done. Clients will learn to develop greater patience, and to work at their individual pace, while learning to appreciate your contribution to their learning. By figuring out how to work through challenges, clients are likely to experience a greater sense of achievement and to build confidence that will increase their motivation to learn.