

Group Reformer Classes; a Teacher's Perspective

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A couple of years ago I attended my first group reformer classes. Why? Because I believe that unless I experience something first-hand, I am not justified in having an informed opinion about it. Given that this relatively recent trend (that most of us who seek to remain true to Joseph Pilates' method are somewhat disgruntled about) is growing, and influencing the course of the Pilates industry, I wanted to learn more about it; off I went and participated in two classes within a two-week time frame.

One was at an established and well-known franchise that is multiplying steadily and the other at a smaller studio owned by a physiotherapist. I disliked both for many reasons including safety concerns, the quality of the teachers leading the classes and the loud dance music which I grew out of many moons ago. I never thought I would... (insert embarrassment here)... end up teaching these classes myself! Yes, I, a Diploma level instructor who is fanatical about safety, technique and the Pilates principles, crossed over to the *other side*: my betrayal lasted a little over two months.

All was not lost. I learnt, my students learnt and hopefully you too may gain something from the sharing of my experience.

Before I elaborate, I will explain how this all came about.

A brief background:

Every Tuesday, I teach a weekly group mat class in a gym to an extremely capable group of students, many of who I am inspired by and in awe of (Teaser at 70 years-young anyone?). This same gym was embarking upon the group reformer path and looking for instructors and I was asked to be one of them. I presumed – and have since learnt not to – the classes would have a maximum of 10 students, that I would have the freedom to structure the class as I pleased and that the choice of exercises and modifications would be left to me. Alas, only after I had agreed to take on the role and been time-tabled on the roster, did I learn that I would be

teaching a pre-recorded 45-minute reformer class with up to 20 participants.

Upon receiving this disturbing news, I became rather stressed. I was now in the position of having agreed to something without any forethought. Nor had I engaged in any due diligence regarding what I had agreed to. Clearly this was my error. This left me feeling rather stupid and annoyed with myself for not having made enquiries sooner (note to thyself: think and ask before saying “yes”). Not one to back out of an agreement, I decided to walk down the path I had set foot upon. After all, I could always choose to stop teaching these classes and, as it stands, I no longer do.

Having had a first-hand experience regarding these group reformer classes, I now seek to share with you what I gleaned about this current trend that most likely is here to stay for a while, at least until Virtual Reality takes over and we all end up in Haptic Bodysuits that control our personalised avatars – Heaven, help us!

The group reformer class format:

I will only speak of the classes I taught. The 45-min classes were as structured as follows:

- A light warm-up (standing roll down or a stretch)
- Footwork (including different foot positions and/or single leg variations)
- Plank-like, all fours, weight-bearing exercises (mostly closed-chained and facing the foot bar)
- Supine exercises (either hands in straps or feet in straps)
- A mix of three of the following series: long box, short box, kneeling, side-lying, standing, hands in straps, feet in straps and seated work)
- A stretch

N.B: Either a circle/ring or yoga block was used during at least one section of the class and a sticky mat was provided for additional foot or hand grip.

The Exercises:

Each exercise lasted approximately one minute. A count-down timer on the monitor indicated the seconds remaining and a gong signalled that the exercise would finish in 15 seconds. The on-screen demonstrator, a mixture of females and males, was mostly well-aligned and performed each exercise to an acceptable standard at a reasonable speed whilst music played in the background.

The verbal instructions, a voice-over at the beginning of each exercise, lasted approximately 15 seconds. They were short and left room for personal interpretation; it was my role to provide clarification by using additional verbal cues and tactile guidance. Breathing cues were included in the initial voice-over but may have been easily missed if not paid attention to; again, it was my role to fill in the gaps. Modifications were not mentioned. However, I was given a limited list of regressions and progressions in my notes about each ‘workout’. I called upon my own knowledge to modify exercises to suit individual needs when I deemed appropriate and prayed that the students were willing to take my suggestion on board.

The spring load was indicated in writing on the screen; the options were extra-light, light, medium, heavy or all springs. I called out spring colours that I believed reflected these categories at the beginning of each exercise and gave at least two options. I then proceeded to walk around and change the student’s spring load if I saw someone in a spot of bother. Some did not appreciate my meddling and were adamant that they knew best; I left them on their merry path rather than cause a scene.

The exercises ranged from beginner to advanced and were not always appropriate to the varying levels of ability, especially considering some students presented with pathologies including recent dislocations, tears and disc injuries to name a few. I did not have the authority to prevent anyone from joining the class yet I could advise them to seek advice from a medical or an allied health professional and inform them that they were exercising at their own risk. There were some who were not, in my opinion, fit to participate in many of the exercises yet I did my best to give these students personalised modifications – a task not always possible given the number of students in the class.

Levels of Ability:

Unfortunately, the classes were not divided into different levels of ability. The same workout was taught at various times for an

entire day and the following day a different workout would run. For those who had never been on a reformer, no introductory class was provided. To compensate, I was asked to use the 15-minutes prior to my class start time to explain the workings of the reformer to new students – obviously, this did not suffice, especially considering not everyone arrived early.

Additionally, I used some of this time to break down the more difficult exercises that I knew were included in the workout. Although I did my best and demonstrated the trickier ones, I do not believe that long or short spine are appropriate for these types of classes; 90 percent of participants are unable to perform them safely, especially given they needed to turn their heads to see the screen.

Side note: the class I previously attended at the large franchise studio obligated all new students to attend a 45-minute introductory class which mitigated some of the risks associated with working on a reformer. I attended this class and was pleasantly surprised at the detailed introduction to Pilates until we entered the workout phase and I was told to “keep going” for as many repetitions as possible for the remaining 30 seconds.

Several exercises included in the workout were pathology-free and, notwithstanding I explained this prior to the class commencing, human nature lends many to want to emulate what is in front of them (or, in this case, on the screen they are looking at) and oftentimes ego supersedes sound judgement. That said, I did encounter a few participants presenting with very sound technique, strength and flexibility who could execute the more challenging exercises with relative ease.

On a positive note, some students did listen to my advice which reassured me that not all those who attend these types of classes are looking for a short-cut towards Pilates proficiency but rather are there to learn and progress at a workable pace. There were students who attended my class on a weekly basis who worked very well; their skills improved as they worked diligently and wisely.

The music:

The songs played were covers of commercial pop music (royalty free, I presume, but do not hold me to that). Pleasingly, the volume was not loud although I think that was due to an issue with the pre-recorded sound levels. Did the music serve for much? No. I think it was there to give a gym-like ambience that many people enjoy when they are working out. I confess that I sometimes listen to music when I train myself so I shall not pass judgement on this point!

The reformers:

In truth, I cannot recall the brand without finding my training notes. Suffice to say they were rickety and not something I would ever purchase or choose to work with. They clunked, the cleats often came loose, the foot bar was challenging to manoeuvre and the reformer sat very low to the ground. There was a stopper which could be moved to a different setting; it was useful for those on the taller side who required a little extra legroom.

The teacher training:

A one-day in-house training course. The prerequisite was a mat Pilates certification (I am not sure what the standard of this needed to be). The lady who trained me was knowledgeable, has attained a well-recognised diploma in Pilates and works at a reputable Pilates studio. She imparted as much information as possible throughout the training.

Are there any benefits to these group reformer classes?

Yes and no. The answer depends on various factors including the ability of both the teacher and the student. If the teacher gives an array of modifications (as you could imagine, the students present with levels of ability as plentiful as there are stars in the sky) and if the student takes on the advice of the teacher, improvements are possible. Those who listened and applied my direction made significant steps forward and I was very proud of them. Those who attempted to follow the on-screen demonstrator AT ALL COSTS improved very little and, obviously, risked injury; one of the reasons I could not be party to continuing to teach these classes.

Some students who were accustomed to working out on gym equipment struggled to understand that neither kneeling arm series nor feet in straps require three red springs to be effective (yes, I am being truthful) and that more spring load does not equate to more difficulty. Others, also regular gym attendees, embraced my suggestions and overcame the barriers that were prohibiting them from beginning to understand the Pilates method and how it differs from standard gym/fitness workouts. I was happy to have reached out to these students and, hopefully, positively influenced their understanding of their bodies in some way – after all, that is

my job.

My verdict:

Evidently, teaching these group reformer classes is not for me. Although I always knew that would be the case, through my own error, I ended up participating in that which I am fundamentally opposed to.

Do I regret it? No. If I was successful in better informing even one person who may not have otherwise had the opportunity to learn about the Pilates method, then it was worth my while. Who knows, maybe I even prompted some students to seek out Pilates in the way you and I understand it to be.

These group reformer classes, although filled with Pilates exercises, are in a context and environment which does not permit the Pilates principles to be fully incorporated into the movements: it is the absence of these principles which detracts from these classes being Pilates per se, not the integrity of the exercises in and of themselves. The fundamental reason I ceased teaching these classes was not because of the content but rather due to my concern for the safety of the students and my inability to ensure their well-being because of the nature of the class.

I did, to no avail, write a letter to management voicing my safety concerns. As nothing came of it, I chose to resign before someone suffered an injury during one of my classes. I felt it was only a matter of time before this happened and my conscience did not want to front that possibility.

Final thoughts:

My experience reminded me that Pilates, as most of us would define it, can be an activity out of the reach of many. Those who are interested in it and can afford to attend reputable Pilates studios will probably do so and those who cannot may opt to frequent a gym or another place that offers some form (oftentimes bastardised) of the Pilates method at minimal cost.

As a small Pilates studio owner who seeks to remain true to the teachings of Joseph Pilates, I am unable to financially compete with larger businesses who offer a \$15 weekly membership or a \$60 six-class-pack. If I did so my businesses would fail financially. Therefore, I inevitably teach those folk who can afford my services and by default seldom reach those who, due to their socio-economic status, cannot afford my premium. This is a huge shame and I do not have a solution.

Perhaps, when we choose to judge these group reformer classes and their participants, we should also ask ourselves how we arrived at this point. Yes, big business is out to make a buck at any cost, these classes should not be called 'Pilates' but rather something else, the teachers should be adequately trained, the exercises should be catered to the level of the student, the class numbers should be capped and the reformers should be sturdy but perhaps we could remember to contemplate why these classes are so popular. Having spoken with several participants, many made it clear that they simply could not afford to attend a small Pilates studio and opted for what was within their budget; namely, a fitness workout on a marvellous piece of Pilates equipment that Joseph Pilates blessed us with.

A more concerning point relating to the trend of group reformer classes is the lack of regulation within the Pilates industry. If our industry were to become regulated, although classes of this nature may continue to exist, there would at least be a clear distinction between what is Pilates and what is not.

Daniela Di Fabio, PAA Committee Member.

 **group reformer classes**

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