

# PILATES PHYSICALMIND INSTITUTE

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## FORUM



for members of the PHYSICALMIND INSTITUTE®

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## Anatomy of An Open Studio

by John Gossett

Every Pilates story has a beginning. Mine begins in Chicago. It was 1980, and Maria Tallchief had just hired me for my first professional dance job with Chicago City Ballet. I started ballet very late—the first time I had even attempted a plie was at the age of 22. My body awareness had come from high school football and wrestling, so as you can imagine it was a struggle. The co-director of the company was Paul Mejia. Paul's mother would come to Chicago to visit, and to watch classes and rehearsals. One day she approached me about some exercises that she felt would help my technique. I didn't get a chance to take her up on her offer. It turns out that Paul's mother is Romana Kryzanowska. And that's how I heard about Pilates.

In 1983, I moved to Houston, Texas to take a position as artist in residence for City Ballet of Houston along with an apprenticeship in the Houston Ballet's Body Conditioning Studio. This was a formal Pilates Studio which was based reworking of the technique by Alan Herdman. The clientele consisted of ballet patrons, board members, and injured dancers. The studio emanated a snobby air. Unfortunately, I have found this to be the case in many Pilates studios. When I opened my own studio, Pilates Concepts of Houston, I decided to explore an approach that would encourage students to learn about Pilates in a more grounded, welcoming environment. I call this the "open studio" approach. Having a personal trainer is a great concept, but the average person

cannot afford to spend upwards of \$500 per month for their exercise. As we all know, Pilates is extremely effective when taught one-on-one, but this is not the only way for students to reap its many benefits. I think that when Joseph Pilates began using Contrology, he did so with an intention of helping all people. Yet, somehow over the years, the technique has developed an elite status. I think if it this way: it is just exercise! The bulk of our clients should be from the general population. In order to combat this exclusory tone, many studios have adapted by offering duets, reformer classes, and group mat classes. This in turn makes exercise much more affordable. In an open studio, no client receives exclusive one-to-one attention. Instead, all clients are given attention while being monitored by a variety of teachers who are "working the floor". The teacher does this by monitoring the clients' exercises, alignments, spring settings, and breathing. They also assign new exercises and modifications when

needed. An open studio teacher is a special breed: one must be aware of what every client is doing, where they are in their workout, all while ensuring that the apparatus will be available for clients when needed. In other words, a good teacher must have eyes in the back of her or his head (mirrors do help with this)!

With this model, the cost to the client is at the high end to start. However, as they gradually as they become more self-sufficient, the prices decrease. The focus is on teaching clients to become their own teachers. Our goal is to enable the clients to understand the work and make it their own. It is a wonderful feeling to see a room of 10 people that you have helped train performing their exercises with confidence.

I'd like to give you an in-depth explanation of how a new student might be introduced in the open studio model we use at Pilates Concepts of Houston.



Eastside Studio in Houston, Texas

Sybil arrives for her first Pilates class. There are already 10 clients in the studio working out, and two instructors are supervising the floor. One instructor will now get Sybil started on her workout. The dialogue between teacher and client might go something like this: "Hi, my name is John and I will take you through your first Pilates class today. Sarah is another instructor working with other clients, and she may also be helping you today."

I have Sybil complete a studio release, which we then go over to discuss any health contraindications she may have, as well as concerns about what she will be doing. After a brief tour of the studio facilities, we begin. At our studio we always begin in the standing position. This is not the Standing Pilates of **Initiation 201**; it is mainly a series of upper body movements to aid the client in awareness of posture alignment, shoulder and pelvic stability, and head placement. I have found in the general population that most people tend to have a slight swayback slouched posture. Even for people with correct posture, there is a tendency to sit into the hips. Again, I'll provide some dialogue that might occur at this point in the lesson:

"Sybil, I would like for you to face the mirror with your feet in a parallel position about hip width apart. As you stand I want you to think about three points in the bottom of your foot, two in the front, and one in the back. You are trying to create a tripod on the bottom of your foot, with your weight evenly distributed between the three points. Moving up the leg, the knees are soft, not locked. Now we're moving up to the pelvis. I think that your pelvis is a little forward. Remember you're standing on your tripod, knees soft, and now I am going to have you lift up your abdominals (contract in.) I am going to place my finger in the lumbar region of the spine, and I want you to pivot from this point and move your trunk a little more forward. Don't round forward, just pivot forward from my finger. Now we have your shoulders right over your hips. I want you to intentionally lift your chin and look up. Visualize a string on the top of your head, and I am going to pull on that imaginary string, and that will cause you to drop your chin and lengthen the back of your neck. Now we have the center of your head, which is just behind your ear, over the center of your shoulder, over the center of your hip dropping down straight in front of your ankle. This is your straight plumb line."

After giving her coaching on the basic concepts of standing mat fundamentals, I watch Sybil to make sure she has grasped them. I assign her some repeats, and then move across the room to monitor several other clients needing instructor assistance. As I am now coaching another client, Sarah, the other instructor supervising, gives Sybil her next position. This trade off between the instructors continues. By working in this shared teaching model, we are ensuring that the new client is given the attention she needs to start her Pilates practice correctly while providing feedback for our more advanced students—all at once!

This example illustrates how an open studio concept can provide an alternative to exclusive one-one sessions. Choosing this scenario does not come without the need for structure. Running your studio in this way will create a need for more (very patient) instructors, larger space, and additional equipment. However, the reward you receive of having access to a larger population of clientele makes it well worth the challenge. I feel that the open studio concept is a noble one, because it maintains the tradition of Joseph Pilates' original work. By making this important method accessible to all, we as lovers of Pilates, continue to honor his intentions.

#### **John's Suggested Open Studio Workout Series**

-The entire time that we go through the exercise series, the client needs to be aware of maintaining a neutral pelvis with abdominal support and scapula stability awareness.

-There are seven upper body exercises, then a Thera-Band stretch over the head, and a side bend with a small hand weight (very similar to the side tilt on the short box).

-The list of mat work, reformer work, and Cadillac work suggested follows:

#### **The "standing" posture is taught prone or supine on the mat:**

- prone hip extension
- flight or small swan
- side lying lifting both legs off of the mat
- single leg stretch
- double leg stretch
- straight leg scissors
- spine stretch
- saw
- adductors using the magic circle or ball
- hip roll
- hamstring stretch with the strap
- roll up

#### **Reformer (continue with standing posture onto reformer)**

- foot work
- heel lowers
- second position
- running
- one hundreds
- arm circles
- leg circles
- frog

#### **Cadillac**

- roll downs with arm pump
- forward push through
- scapula work using push through bar
- piriformis stretch
- psoas stretch

The entire class takes approximately one hour. As our clients become more self-sufficient, we change the order of their workout to reflect the traditional order of the work, and we utilize the Fundamentals as needed. Wall charts are placed around the studio for the clients to reference. Consistency is always a challenge. We try to use the concept as a teaching tool, so that the teacher is able to focus on the quality of the exercise. Obviously, we refrain from teaching the more acrobatic exercises (such as snake, star, and hanging upside down) because of the risk involved without hands-on supervision. Also, I feel that most of the more advanced exercises from the classic vocabulary, as mentioned above, are not always appropriate for the general population in the studio.

John Gossett is certified in Pilates by the PhysicalMind Institute and is the owner of Eastside Studio, our Certifying Studio in Houston Tx. He has danced with the City Ballet of Houston and the Chicago City Ballet and was a body conditioning studio instructor with the Houston Ballet Academy. He has completed workshops with Eve Gentry, Alan Herdman, Romana Kryzanowska, and Ron Fletcher.

#### **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

When I started Pilates (4 decades ago) Open Studio was the structure. When we began the Institute in 1991 our studio was modeled on this approach. Eastside Studio's fees reflect the student's commitment. Price Schedule:  
First 5 lessons (almost privates): \$250.00  
First 8 lessons after the initial five: \$200.00  
Second set of 8 lessons: \$190.00  
Third set of 8 lessons: \$180.00  
From then on, packages of 12 lessons are \$165.00