

Six Pilates Tips From a Choreographer



Kim Gibilisco

photo by Tom Caravaglia **By Kim Gibilisco**

Often, people believe that the more directions you are drawn in, the weaker your focus and level of mastery. Like many Pilates instructors, my work takes me beyond the walls of the Pilates studio. I am also a choreographer. Over the years, I have found that the more I pursue developing my choreography for my own dance company, [Kim Gibilisco Dances](#), the stronger my understanding, teaching and self-practice of the Pilates method becomes. Likewise, the more I study and train in Pilates, the more my choreography evolves. One discipline greatly informs the other, as they have several commonalities.

For both disciplines you need to be a creative thinker; a problem you've seen many times might require a fresh approach now and then. Puzzles you solve in choreography are not unlike the body riddles you find when training a Pilates client. So if you are a Pilates trainer who pursues more than one passion in life, ask yourself how this passion can inform and transform your Pilates practice and teaching. Here are six techniques I use in my dance-making that have improved my teaching of Pilates:

1. Make Your Intention Clear

In dance, it's always important to set your intention for the dances you create. In doing this, you are more likely to illuminate the message you are trying to convey to your audience. Using this technique in teaching Pilates will help your clients get the most out of each exercise and reach their training goals. If you determine that a three-month objective for your client is to increase balance in single leg exercises on the multi-chair, every session leading to this point should have a specific, singular focus that somehow informs this objective. In Pilates, the selection and sequence of every exercise taught can have a specific reason that will enforce and enhance the mastery of a concept or Pilates principle (control, centering, concentration,

precision, flowing movement and breath).

2. The Eyes Lead the Body Through Space

Recently I was working on a lifting sequence with my company that failed over and over again though the dancers are very strong and mentally focused, I found that the problem was in the visual gaze and visual pathway of the dancer being lifted. Once she was able to visually focus in the line of her trajectory, the lift was much more sequential and fluid from the time of the transition into the lift. Having experienced this, I began to study more carefully in the Pilates studio where can visual gaze best guide a client through a challenging exercise. For example, I have found that using the visual gaze to "zip down" the front body on the ascent of a roll-up better facilitates spine articulation through each vertebra and assists people when working through those stubborn "sticky spots." There are plenty of ways that cuing the visual pathway can inform Pilates practice.

3. Inhale to Prepare and Exhale on Exertion

In crafting tricky lift sequences and aerial movements, I cue my dancers to inhale on the preparatory movement and exhale on exertion. This is a classic Pilates breath pattern, though I encountered it first as a dancer. By doing this, one can fully lace the abdominals towards the spine and upwards towards the heart creating powerful and dynamic stabilization of the spine. This is critical to organize the body quickly and maintain back health while working through extreme ranges of movement. Quick and deep inhalation during the preparatory phase will also oxygenate the blood and give the muscles more propulsion on the exhalation that follows. I always come back to this technique when teaching the most challenging of exercises like Teaser on the long box and Snake, where core organization, power and balance are needed to perform these exercises safely and effectively.

4. Sequential Articulation of the Lower Extremity

In dance, there are several ways to teach plié-relevé/jump articulation. Many people teach a simultaneous firing of the knee and ankle joints so that they both flex and extend at the same moment in time. While this will result in powerful propulsion, if you examine this in slow motion, you'll find that the knees are bent as the body is coming out of the relevé/jump. Over time, coming back into the floor with this technique takes a serious toll on the ankle, knee and hip joints since the forces of gravity and the weight of the body are absorbed all at once. I cue my dancers to fire the lower extremity in a sequential manner. First the quadriceps fire to straighten the knee, and then, just before reaching full extension of the knee, the calf muscles (gastrocnemius, plantaris) fire to plantarflex the foot as it moves off of the floor. Then, on the recovery/dismount, I cue them to roll through the foot as much as possible and then right before the heels strike, begin bending the knees to absorb the forces evenly and sequentially. Try this technique when teaching leg press exercises that involve plantar flexion of the ankle joint on the footbar and/or leg press and jumping on the jump board. Check your client's form when working on both legs and during single leg exercises. Are they able to maintain strong sequential firing sequence when on one leg? During a leg press with plantar flexion, I often sing, "Knee, ankle-ankle, knee," to my clients so that they know when to fire each joint in the sequence.

5. Stability Through the Feet: Pada Bandha

In dance the use of the intrinsic muscles of the foot to support the arches (the foot has several arches: transverse, medial longitudinal and lateral longitudinal) is an essential technique safeguarding the foot from injury and creating a powerful foundation from which to move. Using a yogic technique known as pada bandha, which literally means "foot lock" engages these intrinsic muscles, helps to lift the arch of the foot and press the blade of the foot (the lateral aspect of the foot) into the floor thus creating a powerful platform from which the body can move. In doing this, you stabilize the body from the bottom up and energize the muscles of the inner thigh as if pulling up on your bootstraps. To perform pada bandha, imagine that your feet are firmly rooted in the sand. Without moving your feet through space, draw the toes downward and towards the center of the foot as if pulling the sand into the arch of the foot with your toes. Be careful not to curl the toes, but to keep them elongated. As

you do this, the blade of the foot depresses into the sand and the arches of the foot rise out of the sand. Using this technique in your Pilates work on the mat when bridging, on the footbar during footwork series and on the jumpboard when working the articulation of the foot will help your clients align their lower extremity, prevent them from rolling in on the arches (pronating) and give them more power and precision.

6. Stability Through the Hands: Hasta Bandha

Do you have clients who have wrist pain when performing the Side Bend Series and Push-Up? Like the foot lock, in yoga, there is also a hand lock known as hasta bandha. The hand lock is performed by firmly pressing the fingertips into the floor, which lifts and energizes the intrinsic muscles of the hand, alleviating pressure in the wrist. I use this technique when choreographing arm balances and dismounts from lifts through the upper extremity. It helps to dissipate the forces of gravity more evenly through the upper extremity and energize the entire arm all they way up to the humerus, rather than hinging in the wrist. To cue hasta bandha, ask your client to press all ten fingerprints into the mat and shift the weight out of the heel of the hand near the wrist and towards the heads of the metacarpal bones so that weight is distributed evenly throughout the entire hand.

Kim Gibilisco is a Pilates Method Alliance Gold Certified Instructor, a part-time lecturer at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts, and artistic director of [Kim Gibilisco Dances](#).

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Thanks for sharing these wonderful cues - isn't it amazing what subtle shifts in body mechanics can do?! I'm incorporating hasta bandha in tonite's classes.

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