

Working Toward Mastery

By Zoey Trap, MS

Almost 15 years ago I had a first lesson with Colleen Glenn, while I knew she had a gift and had me doing things in ways I had never before experienced, I couldn't quite put a label on it. Over the years, as I grew in my understanding of Pilates, I could label it, 'mastery'. She was totally in the moment when teaching, acting and reacting seamlessly with her students to help them work above and beyond what they could accomplish on their own.

Most [Pilates Instructors](#) come to their careers because of passion- passion for health, movement, and, of course, Pilates. Passion for any activity is a great asset and helps provide the inspiration for perspiration- the hard work that is essential to achieving mastery. In order to work toward mastery, we must first understand what mastery is.

Mastery is the complete command of a skill or skill set. When we look at mastery, it is important to understand it is as part of a learning progression that begins with incompetence, moves to competence, and finally reaches mastery.[\[1\]](#) Pilates is also a journey; one that begins with learning the black and white elements of exercise form, movement basics, human anatomy, and finally teaching. That foundation must be solid before the teacher can truly grow into fluency, where they begin to understand the nuances of Pilates. Mastery, is when the work is truly understood and the teacher is able to help their client interpret the work, in the moment, in the best possible way for their body on any given day.

Michael Masterson reports, "It takes about 1,000 hours of practicing a skill to develop competency in it. It takes less than that- perhaps 600 or 700 hours- if you have the advantage of good teaching. Most people are happy with competence. Once

they are 'pretty good', they stop practicing. A few people are not satisfied with being 'just okay' and strive to improve their skills. But it takes even longer to go from being good at something (competence) to being really good (mastery). That second, more advanced journey usually takes about 5,000 hours, 4,000 more than were needed to achieve competence in the first place.

When we look at people who have reached mastery, we usually only see the results of their work, not the hours of their practice which are invisible. Mastery takes commitment, time, an open mind, and a good mentor. The good news is there are simple steps you can take to create a pathway to mastery.

Clarify What Mastery Means

You have to know what mastery looks like or else how will you work toward it, how will you will recognize it when you have achieved it? Make a list of the attributes of masterful teaching. To get you started here are some descriptions shared by experienced comprehensively trained Pilates instructors and Pilates 'masters' from a variety of schools:

"Intuition meeting knowledge equals mastery. "-Colleen Glenn-Wilson, Colorado

"Mastery is a continual and constant process of self-awareness, education, compassion, patience, technique and finesse. We must continue to grow and know ourselves, to be the best and most patient and compassionate versions of ourselves for our clients, (who are our gifts). We much constantly challenge and better educate ourselves, in order to master what we already know and expand beyond that. -Ana Caban, California

"Feeling confident in one's teaching ability and the actual process of learning, to go down uncharted paths with the work". – Katherine Howe, Kentucky

“The true master teacher has logged enough hours, worked in a variety of settings, continued their own movement training and practice, and is now able to meet the clients from their beginning point (not the instructors), and to grow the work from there. They are able to understand a bigger picture for each client and individualize the work.” –Anglela Skinner, Minnesota.

A master teacher must have complete understanding of the nuances of each exercise, the deeper connections, the synergistic muscles that need to co-contract, the REASON behind (or goal) for doing that particular exercise, proficiently using all kinds of cueing: direct, imagery rich, tactile, and corrective, with the intuition of what each student needs at any particular time. – Connie Borho, Florida

Locate a Mentor

The mentor should exemplify the skills you wish to embody as a teacher and be willing and be able to coach you to develop the skills you are lacking. A lot of factors need to go into this decision:

Fit– Does your mentor embody the teaching as you would like to come to know it? For example, if you are interested in working with special populations, you need to study with someone who has mastered that field and has the expertise to teach you and the clientele for you to observe. A good fit does not necessarily mean that they teach like you do. The point is to grow and expand; learning new skills and approach things in new ways.

Coaching Ability– Does your mentor have the skill to identify what your priority areas are? To work with you in developing action plans? Most importantly, are they able to impact your teaching and skills in a positive way?

Relationship–There is no getting around it, you will spend many hours with this person. Hours that can be pleasant or

unbearable. Choose someone who understands your learning style and is willing to help you from that standpoint and not just theirs.

Get to Work

Practice and put in the hours, work at your skills, remember that practice is an action verb. This is where the perspiration comes in. It is easier to stay in the stage of competency than to move ahead.

“A lot of people believe there are some inherent limits they were born with, but there is surprisingly little hard evidence that anyone could attain any kind of exceptional performance without spending a lot of time perfecting it. Anyone can learn to be good at pretty much anything so long as he has the time and tenacity to practice doing it. “ says performance expert, K. Anders Ericsson.

Don't be deceived into just putting in hours, as with Pilates, practice quality is more important than quantity. Deliberate practice involves more than endless repetition: you must set specific goals, get immediate feedback on your efforts and concentrate on technique . Your students are a great source of feedback as you can see if your cues, touches, and teaching methods are working. Their progress is a measure of your progress. Your mentor can also help you taking you to new levels of awareness; helping you hone your goals and action plans.

For Pilates the journey to mastery is three-fold. Practice must include theoretical learning, personal technique, and teaching practice. Theoretical learning can include reading, taking courses, and simply asking questions. Personal practice shapes your teaching. There is no substitute for doing the work— work alone, with other teachers and with your mentor to perfect and understand Pilates in your own body. Perform the building blocks and modifications that you ask your students

to perform so you can know how they feel. The most difficult area to master is teaching and it requires thoughtful planning and practice. Be the best you can be with every lesson by designing and reviewing lesson plans, and specifically practicing the teaching skills that you have identified as needing development. This is another area where a mentor can be invaluable as you cannot always see your performance accurately..

Trust the Process and Embrace the Natural Ups and Downs of the Journey

Most victories are not easily achieved. Stay on track by periodically sitting with your mentor and reviewing your progress and adjusting action plans. If what you are doing isn't working, it's time to try something else. Keep a journal, it will help you identify small successes and allow you to capture the steps of mastery along the way.

Claim Your Mastery when you Achieve It

This goes back to Step I. If you have not identified what mastery looks like you will not know it when you achieve it. Celebrate, but humbly look to the future and know that learning is a never- ending process. A great way to continue to grow is to share what you have learned by becoming a mentor to new teachers.

“Technical skill is mastery of complexity, while creativity is mastery of simplicity.” Erik Christopher Zeeman

The journey of learning is joyful, ideally it uplifts up and inspires us. When working with teachers, I like to share with them that, “I will teach you ‘a’ way, later you will find your ‘own’ way.” Your own way will be effective, natural, and simple because it comes from a place deep within that is founded in good theory and practice and reflects your desire to holistically help your students.

References and Resources

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