

Yoga Tools for Pilates Teachers

Learn seven key differences and takeaways between Pilates and yoga that you can use to enhance your teaching and your students' practice.

In one of my first Jivamukti yoga classes many years ago, I asked my teacher if she taught Pilates. She said no and asked "why?" I shared with her that her cueing for alignment was very similar to how I taught. This wise teacher laughed and said: "Good alignment is good alignment!"

So true. Some students and teachers say "I do yoga" or "I do Pilates" as if they are mutually exclusive or cannot co-exist. Rather than think of yoga OR Pilates, learn to think about yoga and Pilates as complementary and enrich your teaching and your life with both practices.

To the uninitiated, yoga and Pilates are often confused for one another, yet they are distinctly different. Yoga is an ancient practice dating back thousands of years, and its primary goal is reaching spiritual enlightenment. Meanwhile, Pilates is a modern mind/body discipline with a goal of developing the powerhouse and improving posture and movement.

Just as there are different schools of Pilates, there are different schools of yoga. Vinyasa (flow) yoga – where asanas (postures) flow on the breath – is the most similar in structure to Pilates. But they are still very distinct and

different practices; and it is because they are different that they can be very complementary practices!

You do not need to become a certified yoga teacher to incorporate some of the basic yoga asanas into your teaching. There are many online resources like yogajournal.com that give step-by-step instructions for asanas, but it is important to take yoga classes and gain basic, personal experience with the asanas personally to ensure authenticity and safety. Or take a Continuing Education Course to learn more on the subject.

Let's look at some of the differences between yoga and Pilates and discuss how to bring some new yoga tools into your Pilates toolkit. For each item discussed use the "take away tool" to spice up your lesson with your yoga and non-yoga students!

Difference #1: Pilates works and aligns the body from the center out while in yoga alignment is built from the ground up. Both have advantages and both are effective for their perspective practices.

The Take Away: Building from the ground up makes great sense when you are performing standing movements. In fact, it's a great way to set up Pilates Stance as well as other standing exercises such as the standing splits series, jumps and twists, butterfly, push down with squats...

Difference #2: Pilates workouts start with the body working with gravity, while vinyasa yoga normally begins working against gravity. Yoga activates the muscles of the posterior chain more fully and provides benefit to the multifidus when properly performed. The problem is that so many students have weak deep abdominals that the performance of the Sun Salutations is compromised for many yoga students.

The Take Away: Take the time with your yoga students to go over Sun Salutation in Part C. Teach your students the Sun Salutation to help improve overall strength and flexibility paying special attention to how to activate the powerhouse in

all asanas (poses).

Difference #3: Vinyasa yoga includes more standing work than does Pilates, it offers different opportunities for opening the hips and aligning the body against gravity.

The Take Away: Learn a few basic asana sequences that incorporate 3–4 standing asanas. A good example of a standing sequence is Warrior II (Virabhadrasana II), Triangle (Trikonasana), Extended Angle B (Utthita Parsvakonasana), Wide Angle Forward Fold (Prasarita A.

Difference #4: Pilates does not provide much opportunity for static stretches. When performed correctly, static stretching (holding stretches for 30 seconds and up) often lessens the sensitivity of tension receptors that allows the muscles to relax and stretch to a greater length. Tightness contributes to improper stabilization, movement initiation and execution through reciprocal inhibition.

The Take Away: Incorporate some static stretching with your tighter clients. This can be done without sacrificing flow. For example, on the last rep of the roll up, have students reach forward toward their toes and hold for five breaths, then roll down. Give static stretching as daily homework. It is best if static stretches are performed when the body is “warmed up,” so this is a great post-workout activity!

Difference #5: Balance training is incorporated into almost every yoga class. Decreased balance often occurs with age-related decline in multiple physiological systems that contributes to decreased muscle flexibility and strength, reduced central processing of sensory information, and slowed motor responses (American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeon Panel on Falls Prevention, 2001). In Pilates, we are training the powerhouse and that contributes a great degree to improving stability but is not specific to fall prevention which includes a focus on strengthening quadriceps, ankle

dorsiflexors, and plantarflexors.

The Take Away: Add some balance challenges to your Part C and session endings. For Part C, progress balance on the chair with Standing Pumping from a flat base foot to a relevé. For Part D, include exercises such as heel-toe walking and standing on one leg. Aim for holding balances for 10 seconds. Keep balance challenges appropriate for the student's ability level.

Difference #6: In Pilates, we use the key concepts of length and opposition, while in yoga, students work to expand lines of energy. These are similar concepts, but the cueing can bring different results.

The Take Away: Lines of energy by nature involves directing energy through the body. My first yoga teacher described this concept by comparing the human body to a 6-pointed star. One point is the crown of the head, one is the tail, two are the fingertips, and two are the soles of the feet. What a nice concept to teach students – that they are all “stars”! Try adding cues about star points and lines of energy to your arsenal, and see length and opposition grow in leaps and bounds.

Difference #7: Yoga incorporates relaxation (shavasana always ends the asana practice) and meditation. Pilates incorporates six principles and is re-invigorating and uplifting. The truth is both can be taught as lifestyles.

The Take Away: Know each of your students' goals. There have times when I have had students struggling with big life issues, and I have turned the lights down, moved them a bit more slowly, and yes, left time for relaxation. That said, there are students who, when times are tough, benefit more from a hard workout and getting their mind off of everything. Know your student!

When we teach holistically, serving all aspects of our

students we bring to them not just our skill but our compassion. Pilates is not the less spiritual cousin to yoga, unless it is taught as such. Both practices are deep, rich, rewarding and beautiful! As an instructor, the more that you know, the more you can share!

This article was contributed by Zoey Trap, MS is a Peak Pilates Master Trainer who also has over 500 hours of yoga instructor training. Zoey is also a Jivamukti Yoga Certified Instructor.