Focus on Mindful Movement:  
Problematizing Contemporary Dancers’ Training Practices through Pilates

JANITA FRANTSI  
University of Alberta

The purpose of this study was to explore how to design and instruct a Pilates workshop aimed to increase dancers’ body awareness and encourage their decision-making and critical consideration of their training. Using Foucault’s concepts, this paper discusses how space and time in the workshop setting can be used to create less disciplinary training practices. The workshop was instructed to a group of five dancers, and the empirical material included the researcher’s reflective journal and recorded group discussions with the dancers. The participants found this workshop beneficial as they learned to problematize unquestioned dance training practices and consider their effects on meaningful, less disciplinary training. With these findings, this study contributes to the sociocultural research in dance and fitness that offers alternative practices for dancers’ and exercisers’ well-being.

**Keywords:** body awareness, contemporary dance, Pilates

Technique training that focuses on developing physical skills is a central part of contemporary dance practice. The emphasis on the physical aspects, nevertheless, can lead to dancers becoming mindless, robotic bodies who unquestioningly follow the teacher or choreographer (e.g., Enghauser, 2007; Fortin, 2002; Foster, 2007; Shapiro, 1998). Pushing the body to its physical limits as a result of such training as well as to the requirement for the aesthetic ideals of dance have been established as serious problems in dance (Kearns, 2010; Markula, 2015; Rouhiainen, 2008). As one solution, it has been suggested that dancers should take care of both their bodies and minds. Mindfulness, as argued, can help dancers become more aware of how their bodies feel in the dance setting (Berardi, 1993-1994; Enghauser, 2007; Fortin, Vieira, & Tremblay, 2009; Kirk, 2014).

In my study, I wanted to address the lack of body awareness and some of the common injuries in dancers. Using a Foucauldian theoretical approach, I designed a Pilates workshop to explore how contemporary dancers could be involved in more
Mindful dance training. Thus, the purpose of my research was to use Foucauldian-inspired Pilates practice to create less disciplinary training practices for contemporary dancers. In this paper, I first review the impact of contemporary dance technique training on dancers and discuss current efforts to include somatics in dance training. Then, I introduce the Foucauldian theoretical perspective and how it can inform more mindful training practices for dancers. Thereafter, I provide an overview of my qualitative poststructuralist methodology before sharing the insights from my data. I finish with suggestions to further develop dancers’ training practices and well-being.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Technique classes are the primary form of dancers’ training (Fortin, Long, & Lord, 2002; Parrott, 1993). The purpose of technique training is to improve dancers’ skills and performance in their dance style (Adair, 1992; Brodie & Lobel, 2016; Foster 1997). This way, dancers’ technique training intends to prevent injuries and contribute to career longevity (Brodie & Lobel, 2016; Koutedakis, Owolabi, & Apostolos, 2008). My research interest is in contemporary dance that typically emphasizes diversity and freedom in technique and less strict bodily requirements than other Western concert dance forms (Markula, 2015; Swami & Harris, 2012). It is said to focus on dancers’ individual movement and interpretation more than a codified technique or a particular look of the body (Dryburgh & Fortin, 2010).

Nonetheless, previous literature has noted some problems in contemporary dancers’ training. The injury rate of modern and contemporary dancers during their careers can be as high as 90% (Thomas & Tarr, 2009). As a solution, several researchers have encouraged supplemental cardiovascular and strength training (Franklin, 2004; Koutedakis, Stavropoulos-Kalinoglou, & Metsios, 2005). These conditioning programs, however, often focus on controlling the body through mechanical, repetitive training and place lower value on sensory awareness that can result in disembodiment in dancers (Batson & Schwartz, 2007; Fortin, 2002). The lack of body awareness has also been noted as an issue in dance technique training (Kearns, 2010; Markula, 2015; Rouhiainen, 2008). Even though dancers are capable of observing their bodies, technique classes do not necessarily call attention to dancers’ sensations, internal processes, and experiences if they aim to construct a body that matches the external thin aesthetic ideals of dance (Enghauser, 2007; Foster, 1997; Kearns, 2010; Rouhiainen, 2008). Consequently, contemporary dancers can become “skilled but not aligned, skilled but not expressive, skilled but not mindful, skilled but not embodied” (Kearns, 2010, p. 35). Therefore, even though contemporary dance appears to be a freer and less disciplinary dance form
than, for example, ballet, the technique classes and added conditioning programs may not work towards dancers’ well-being. The increasing amount of somatic research in the field of dance indicates a need for more mindfulness in dancers’ training.

According to the founder of somatics, Thomas Hanna (1970, in Weber, 2009), somatic practices emphasize mind-body connection and subjective awareness. In dance training, Green (1999) suggested that somatics can be used “as a vehicle for body awareness and release of habitual tension patterns” (p. 91). Somatics can also help break “the mindset that if [dancers] are not sweating or hurting... they are going to lose technique” (Roche & Huddy, 2015, p. 156, emphasis in original). Previous research has shown that somatic training has benefitted contemporary dancers: it increased awareness (Allen, 2009; Fortin & Girard, 2005; Fortin et al., 2009; Rouhiainen, 2008; Weber, 2009), enabled a more holistic view of oneself that considers both body and mind (Fortin & Girard, 2005), and encouraged improvements in technique through versatility and articulacy (Allen, 2009; Weber, 2009). Dancers have also gained confidence (Weber, 2009), greater authority, and respect for their bodies (Fortin et al., 2009) through somatic training.

Sometimes considered a somatic technique, sometimes a mindful fitness form, Pilates also emphasizes body awareness and is a common form of supplemental activity for dancers (Batson & Schwartz, 2007; Caldwell, Adams, Quin, Harrison, & Greeson, 2013; Fortin & Girard, 2005; Thomas & Tarr, 2009). Caldwell et al. (2013) argued that Pilates “offers a unique bridge for training dancers since it can be considered both a cross-training method and a somatic approach” (p. 150). The benefits of Pilates include a range of physical improvements, such as alignment, core strength, and spinal flexibility, along with mindfulness and acceptance of physical limitations (Adams, Caldwell, Atkins, & Quin, 2012; Caldwell et al., 2013; Kearns, 2010; Parrott, 1993). During Pilates training, dancers have been empowered to make their conscious choices based on their bodily feelings (Caldwell et al., 2013) which has helped to address some of dancers’ common injuries and the lack of body awareness. However, simply adding Pilates classes or other somatic techniques into dancers’ training may not bring the desired benefits. According to Green (2002-2003), Pilates training can turn into another practice that disciplines dancers through controlling how they understand themselves. For example, Enghauser (2007) noted that when encouraging dancers to focus on their breath as a means to tune into their bodies, somatics instructors may dictate a specific breathing pattern that dancers follow without question. Therefore, simply committing to more somatic practices without critical thought may not help dancers overcome their problems or increase mindfulness. I next locate the ‘making’ of dancers’ bodies within a Foucauldian poststructuralist framework to further understand how to implement mindfulness in dance training.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTRODUCING FOUCAULDIAN-INSPIRED MINDFUL MOVEMENT TO DANCERS

Although mindfulness appears as a potential option for more meaningful and less injury-prone training, it needs to be located within the socio-cultural context of contemporary dance to avoid it turning into yet another mindless practice incorporated into the existing mode of dance technique training. I use Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist work to understand how any type of dance training can turn into a disciplinary practice to then argue how it may be used to disrupt the disciplinarity of dance training. To do this, I discuss disciplinary techniques Foucault argued to produce ‘docile,’ unthinking (dancing) bodies.

Foucault (1995) located individuals within the relations of power where various disciplinary techniques such as the use of time and space, create docile bodies. According to Foucault (1995), how space is distributed through enclosure, partitioning, functionality, and rank can discipline individuals. This organization allows constant surveillance by, for example, dance instructors and the fellow dancers. Dance studios are often enclosed spaces where dancers face the instructor with more confident dancers in the front and less confident at the back. Green (1999) noted that mirrors, in particular, contribute to such surveillance by making dance studios competitive, objectifying, and regulating spaces. In this partitioned, functional, and ranked organization, dancers become easy to observe and control (Smith, 1998). Similarly, time can turn into a disciplinary technique through which individuals are disciplined to follow a strictly defined timetable, tempo, and timing of their activity. The exhaustive use of time aims to further maximize efficiency and ensure that no time is wasted. Contemporary dance classes, for example, are often segmented into defined sections of warm-up, skill building, choreographic combinations, and cooldown (Brodie & Lobel, 2016). When aiming to maximize the use of time, the focus is often on technical skills leaving less time for warm-up, conditioning, and cooldown (Parrott, 1993; Shah, Weiss, & Burchette, 2012). Similar to ballet (Clark & Markula, 2017), the choreographic phrases are typically detailed and timed to the rhythm of the music. Dancers perform them in exact timing with each other. These disciplinary techniques ensure that all movement is precise and coordinated.

The organization of spatial and temporal disciplinary techniques construct “an efficient machine” (Foucault, 1995, p. 164). Since everything is precisely coordinated, there is no confusion about how or when one should move. Even though this organization is efficient and productive and produces dancers as “material” for teachers and choreographers (Smith, 1998, p. 131), it can reproduce them as apathetic, robotic, and docile, as they only follow orders and are not required to ‘think’ (Fortin et al., 2002;
Fortin et al., 2009; Green, 1999; Green 2002-2003; Markula, 2011). Because one can be judged based on how one looks and functions, constant surveillance differentiates and hierarchizes individuals but also homogenizes and normalizes them (Foucault, 1995). Since individuals can be singled out based on their skills and progression, dancers function uniformly and unthinkingly toward what is considered ‘normal.’ When certain behaviours become normalized, they are accepted as the sociocultural norm in contemporary dance classes where both teachers and dancers carefully observe and aim for the ‘correct’ behavior.

Despite their efficiency, these processes are potentially harmful for dancers, as they can contribute to the lack of body awareness and critical thinking. To advance less disciplinary dance training (Fortin, Cyr, & Tremblay, 2005; Fortin et al., 2002; Fortin et al., 2009; Green, 1999; Smith, 1998), a more mindful environment in dance (and in Pilates) with a focus on listening to the body is needed to challenge the external control (e.g., Enghauser, 2007; Fortin & Girard, 2005; Fortin et al., 2002; Kirk, 2014; Markula, 2011; Rouhiainen, 2008). Both Fortin (1998) and Markula (2011) indicated that creativity and unpredictability that allow participants to determine the intensity of their movements can contribute to disrupting the detailed, mechanical training systems in contemporary dance and Pilates. Therefore, offering a chance to explore movements without detailed instructions can serve as a means to challenge the disciplinary techniques and allow participants to make their own decisions.

While previous research has suggested some alternative practices for dance and Pilates, the current dance literature lacks research that aims to disrupt discipline through actual movement practices. Therefore, the purpose of my research was to use Foucauldian-inspired Pilates practice to design and explore alternative, less disciplinary training practices for contemporary dancers. To do this, I utilized a qualitative poststructuralist research methodology.

RESEARCH METHODS

To frame my study, I employed a qualitative poststructuralist perspective to devise a Foucauldian-inspired Pilates workshop that I delivered to five contemporary dancers. As a contemporary dancer and certified Pilates instructor, I theorized that Pilates, as one possible way of combining physical practice with Foucauldian theory, can offer an alternative to disciplinary training. My workshop comprised four 2-hour sessions that took place over the course of eight days in two different studio spaces. My exercises emphasized body awareness while incorporating Foucauldian-inspired practices to change some of the typical contemporary dance and Pilates practices.
In my research, I engaged in two methods: 1) reflective journaling of my observations and 2) discussions with my participants in the workshop sessions. As the instructor of the workshop, I participated in the research situation and concurrently overtly observed it. During the workshop I engaged in descriptive, focused, and selected observations (Markula & Silk, 2011) that I recorded as observational and personal notes. I also had group discussions that centred on the participants’ experiences and reflections of the workshop sessions. These discussions, that took place amidst the exercises, were audiotaped and transcribed. Using Foucault’s concepts, I analyzed themes from the conversations.

**Participants**

Five female contemporary dancers were selected purposefully through criterion, snowball, and convenience sampling (Patton, 2002). I recruited adult female contemporary dancers with at least two years of experience in contemporary dance from the local community and my local dance group. My participants’ information is presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Dance Experience (years)</th>
<th>Current Involvement</th>
<th>Dance Training (hrs/wk)</th>
<th>Dance Styles</th>
<th>Pilates Experience</th>
<th>Group Fitness Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Contemporary, Ballet, Jazz</td>
<td>3-4 years (on/off)</td>
<td>Yoga, Garuda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Contemporary</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yoga Zumba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathrin</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Social Dances</td>
<td>A few classes</td>
<td>Yoga, Zumba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loie</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>1.5-4.5</td>
<td>Ballet, Modern, Jazz, Lyrical</td>
<td>Within dance and sport training</td>
<td>Kick boxing, Kung Fu, Yoga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>Contemporary, Ballet, Jazz</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Tabata, Yoga</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The key to organizing my workshop was to use Foucault’s insights into disciplinary power to create alternative training practices to enhance body awareness and conditioning required for dancers’ well-being. I now focus on the use of space and time in the workshop, to explore if they enhanced dancers’ mindfulness and body awareness.

The Use of Space in the Workshop Sessions

I instructed my workshop sessions in traditional group fitness and dance spaces: a multipurpose room and a dance studio. Through these practices, I attempted to challenge some of the potentially disciplinary effects of space (Foucault, 1995).

“Where’s the Front?” Reflections on Spacing

Instead of the typical spatial organization of dancers facing the teacher in rows (Green, 1999, 2002-2003; Markula & Pringle, 2006), I encouraged the participants to choose and move around in the spaces. I also aimed to change where I instructed during the sessions occasionally using a circle formation where no one was in front of anyone. These practices attempted to challenge the partitioned, functional, and ranked organization of space (Foucault, 1995). My participants, nevertheless, were inclined to face me in rows. In the first session, Kathrin asked where “the front” was, so that she could position herself the ‘right’ way following the typical organization of dance and group fitness classes (Green, 1999; Markula & Pringle, 2006). In addition, I observed that the participants tended to habitually keep the same spots in the spaces. It was also difficult for me to change my instructing spot: while I walked around when giving individual feedback, I always returned to my spot to instruct the next exercise. I felt “reluctant to walk around too much” (journal notes) because I wanted to avoid positioning myself behind the participants as if to covertly observe them. Especially in the first sessions, I was also so focused on following my lesson plans that I may not have paid attention to my own use of space.

To avoid the traditional spatial organization of dance and group fitness classes, I designed exercises that included walking around in the studio. As the workshop proceeded, the participants started to explore the space by moving around more. They mentioned that it felt “good” (Martha) and “different” (Kathrin). I also moved more in space and found it “very refreshing” (journal notes). Nonetheless, I observed that my participants often walked near the walls leaving empty space in the middle of the studio. Isabel reflected on this observation:
I noticed how I immediately went to walking the same shape as the room. But then, I’m like ‘Hey, I’m not limited to this box’ and then you start curving your pathway little bit, like diagonally or in an X.

Isabel’s reflection indicates how a space can regulate one’s movements, especially when not consciously paying attention to it. Although moving around in space is unusual in a Pilates class, Loie commented that “[i]t reminded [her] of dance class.” I also reflected in my journal: “I realized that while moving in space may be different in regular Pilates classes, it is quite common especially in contemporary dance technique classes.” Therefore, although moving around may challenge the typical functional and partitioned use of space in Pilates classes, it does not necessarily challenge that in contemporary dance classes.

Aiming to problematize the ranked, habitual organization of dancers in rows, I introduced a circle formation in the second workshop session. My participants enjoyed it. Martha, for example, commented that she could see and hear the instructions better. Loie mentioned that the circle brought us closer together. Similarly, Isabel explained that it felt “less structured but more like we’re all here to explore this together.” She reiterated, “even though you’re leading us – obviously – it feels less structured.” Even though Isabel highlighted my role as an instructor, the circle seemed to contribute to disrupting rank and hierarchy both between the participants and between the participants and myself. I reflected on similar feelings in my journal notes: “I liked the moment we had in the circle on the floor performing the ‘playing piano with toes’ exercise. It felt like we were all in it together, struggling, laughing, and exploring.” We continued to use the circle in all of the remaining sessions. However, the circle formation did not solve all the issues of the row formation, as I noticed us being in the same order in every session. Unintendedly, the circle also allowed me to see the participants and for them to see each other at all times, which can reinforce surveillance and comparison.

While letting the participants choose their spots gave them more freedom, it also enabled them to routinely position themselves the way they were accustomed to, which did not challenge partitioning or functionality the way I had hoped. Additionally, as an instructor, I was also accustomed to a certain way of using space. Nonetheless, the exercises that included moving in space encouraged both my participants and myself to step off our mats, which contributed to disrupting partitioning, functionality, and rank in our sessions (Foucault, 1995; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

“**This Is a Very Ugly Position of My Shoulder:**” Reflections on Mirrors

Because mirrors can contribute to constant surveillance, comparison, and normalization as they can prioritize appearance over body awareness (Barr & Oliver, 2016; Fortin et al., 2002; Green, 1999; Smith, 1998), I wanted to limit the use of them
in my workshop. For example, to avoid forcing my participants to face the mirrors, I did not position myself in front of them. In addition, I aimed to minimize my observation and supervision of the participants (Foucault, 1995), and not using the mirrors toward that aimed to disrupt the disciplinary use of the spaces.

However, my participants, especially in the first sessions, sought to view their bodies from the mirrors. At the beginning of the first session, Isabel, Kathrin, and Martha automatically positioned their mats toward the mirror. Following Green (1999), dancers were accustomed to viewing themselves and their peers in the mirrors to ensure the desired aesthetics of the body. I sensed a surprise when the participants realized that the session was not going to be centered around the mirrors. While I aimed to limit the use of mirrors, I did not reject them entirely in my workshop. I was aware that some of my participants might have no prior Pilates experience and, therefore, utilized mirrors in some of the exercises in the first sessions. This was to help the participants with alignment and to illustrate a possible difference in how moving feels with and without visual feedback. I reflected in my journal: “I felt that we used mirrors purposefully in this workshop: we did not utilize them excessively but used them a couple of times to our advantage.” As Markula and Pringle (2006) discussed, a practice itself is not necessarily ‘bad’ or disciplinary; what matters is how we use it.

Primarily, my participants found the mirrors helpful. Loie expressed that they helped with “checking the alignment and seeing that your body is the right way.” Having no previous Pilates experience, Isabel added that the visual feedback was helpful especially in the beginning. She explained, “You can think that your ribs are in, but until you see it, that’s like ‘Oh, no, they are not.’” Kathrin agreed with Isabel: “It’s a lot easier for me to see it and then be like ‘Okay, so that’s how it feels.’” Seeing the positioning in the mirror helped the participants feel the movements in the body, which paralleled my aim of limiting but not rejecting the use of mirrors. Some participants also noticed that they used mirrors more in the first two sessions. As the exercises became familiar, Isabel noted, “you just get it more, so you don’t need the visual reminders.”

The mirrors can overemphasize appearance and cause feelings of stress and insecurity. For example, Kathrin seemed worried that her shoulder was in “a very ugly position” in a spinal twist exercise. Additionally, facing the mirror in a standing exercise made Isabel feel uncomfortable because it reminded her of her “lack of turnout” or turnout that she considered insufficient. “That’s just my own insecurity about me as a dancer,” she explained. She referred to the dancing body ideal of a 180-degree turnout stemming from ballet and often extended to other Western concert dance forms (e.g., Fortin, 1998; Foster, 1997; Mazo, 1974). Isabel’s and Kathrin’s comments indicated that it was easy for them to observe their bodies and make judgements based on how they looked. This type of self-surveillance is common in dancers who often compare their
bodies to the idealized, external bodily aesthetics (Dryburgh & Fortin, 2010; Green, 1999).

Overall, the participants appreciated that there was no excessive focus on the mirrors. For Isabel, this workshop was “much more about feeling into your body rather than looking at it from the outside,” which she appreciated. Bella and Loie also felt that there were no comparisons between the dancers in the workshop sessions. Since normalization of a certain looks is common in dance training (Green, 1999; Fortin et al., 2009), both Bella and Loie acknowledged that this workshop felt different than their typical dance practices. Altogether, my participants’ reflections illustrated that a mirror can be a good learning tool, but it can also contribute to the appearance-focused, comparative atmosphere of dance. Utilizing mirrors but not revolving the sessions around them increased my participants’ awareness of how mirrors can affect them and reduced normalization and surveillance (Foucault, 1995) in the workshop sessions.

The Pace of the Sessions: Time in the Workshop Sessions

Because my goal was to encourage my participants to feel their movements, I wanted to embrace a calm and unhurried pace in my workshop sessions. While I still had detailed lesson plans to help me instruct the workshop sessions, I aimed to limit the number of exercises and included discussion breaks. I also encouraged the participants to use their breathing to provide them with a tempo for completing the movements. These practices aimed to challenge some of the disciplinary techniques related to the temporal organization of the sessions (Foucault, 1995).

“A Pleasant Surprise:” Reflections on the Number of Exercises

As my workshop was designed to encourage awareness and mindfulness, I did not want to fill the two-hour sessions with continuous exercising. By aiming to include fewer exercises in the lesson plans, performing fewer repetitions, and encouraging individual and collective breaks, I wanted to reduce the effective use of time characterizing disciplinary techniques (Foucault, 1995). Individual breaks within the exercises and encouraging the participants to move in their own timing also attempted to challenge the tempo and timing of the exercises (Foucault, 1995).

I was unsure how the participants would respond to the slower-paced, awareness-centred Pilates workshop. At the end of the first session, Kathrin admitted that she would have wanted “more of a workout” and “more depth of strengthening,” and learning the new exercises and approach took time away from that. Previous research has indicated that dancers tend to have a desire to push their bodies for the improvement of the body (Fortin et al., 2005; Murgia, 2013). Markula (2011) also noted how her Pilates participants wanted to prioritize “feeling the ‘burn’” (p. 70) and shaping the body. The
majority of my participants still enjoyed the calmer and less intensive exercise. Loie was apprehensive that this workshop was going to be as intense as her previous Pilates experiences and found the focus on mindfulness and awareness “a pleasant surprise.” Isabel also enjoyed the different focus of the workshop:

I actually really enjoyed how it wasn’t so much about the workout, but it was more about knowing where the movement’s starting. I feel like there are a bunch of different opportunities to engage in a workout, but there are not really a lot of opportunities to focus on mindful movement.

Martha reflected on similar observations: she called dance classes “very jam-packed” and felt that in this workshop, “everything we were doing was really high quality, really focused.” Instead of mindlessly going through the motions to exhaust the body like in many dance and group fitness classes (e.g., Kearns, 2010; Markula, 2011), these reflections indicate that the calm pace of the sessions increased the awareness of how the participants performed the exercises.

The common mindset of maximizing physical effort in dance and Pilates classes (e.g., Plastino, 1990; Markula & Pringle, 2006) seemed to also be embedded in my instructing practice, as I tended to include too many exercises in my lesson plans. Even though lesson plans can act as disciplinary timetables regulating the use of time in the sessions (Foucault, 1995), they helped me plan exercises that targeted contemporary dancers’ commonly injured body parts and include time for discussions in the sessions. To further contribute to the slower pace of the workshop, to encourage awareness and reflection, and to learn about my participants’ experiences, I encouraged discussions and questions during the sessions. Since discussions are not a common practice in dance and Pilates classes, my participants were not really talkative at first, which can reflect the teacher’s authority and the participants’ internalized discipline (Fortin et al., 2009; Green, 1999; Smith, 1998). As an instructor, I also noticed having “an urge to move on in the lesson plan if the participants were not really saying anything” (journal notes). Toward the end of the workshop, the participants shared more. Kathrin mentioned that the small group environment was “reassuring” for her, as it was easier to ask questions. Isabel found that “two hours gave us time for meaningful discussion as well as movement exploration.” Notably, her description of the sessions did not include strenuous exercising or ‘hard work.’

Overall, the participants found the time spent in the workshop beneficial. Reducing the exhaustion of time through the limited number of exercises, breaks, and discussions (Foucault, 1995) created a calm pace that allowed them to focus on the movements and perform them in their own timing. Isabel also enjoyed “the opportunity
to just devote a certain amount of time to [awareness and self-discovery] rather than trying to incorporate that into something else.” Therefore, supplementary classes focused on mindful movement practice can work well as part of dancers’ training.

“I Never Thought about When I Breathe;” Reflections on Individual Breathing Rhythm

To offer opportunities to decide one’s own movement tempo, I encouraged my participants to use their breathing. Many Pilates exercises include a specific technique of inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth in specific parts of the exercises while expanding the ribcage laterally and engaging the abdominal musculature (e.g., Isacowitz & Clippinger, 2011). This can, however, turn into another temporal disciplinary system (Enghauser, 2007), and therefore, I wanted to avoid pressuring my participants by also designing exercises without specific breathing patterns. For the same purpose, I planned not to use any music in the sessions. These practices aimed to challenge the timetable and tempo because they avoided imposing an external, obligatory rhythm to determine the duration of the exercise (Foucault, 1995).

Attention to breath was new and challenging to my participants. Paying attention to how one breathes is not common in dance, as Martha explained: “We’re not often consciously thinking about breathing.” Many also agreed when Loie commented: “I never thought about when I breathe.” The participants asked multiple questions about the breathing mechanics—how much one should laterally expand the ribcage (Martha, Loie) and if the stomach rises with the inhale (Isabel, Loie). Both Kathrin and Martha mentioned that it was easy to forget the breathing patterns and “just go and do the movement” (Martha). The emphasis on the body from the external perspective in dance training (Barr & Oliver, 2016; Enghauser, 2007; Fortin et al., 2009; Green, 2001) can explain why focusing on an internal aspect, such as breathing, felt new and challenging for my participants.

The majority of the participants strove for the exact breathing patterns. Loie acknowledged that even with the option to follow her own breath, she was still “trying to go with the breath that [the instructor] had said.” Similarly, Bella reflected: “I prefer [the exercises] with the cue when to breath. ... If you don’t have that cue, you don’t know what to do.” While following specific instructions can help when learning something new, the desire for the precise breathing patterns can also reflect dancers’ perfectionism (Hamilton, 2003) and following instructions instead of deciding their own rhythm. Even though detailed breathing patterns can become a temporal disciplinary technique (Enghauser, 2007), I felt I could hear my participants’ breathing even less in the exercises without set breaths. I wondered if outlining the detailed breaths actually helped the participants think about their breathing instead of only focusing on movement. Nonetheless, the breathing technique got easier and the focus on breath more enjoyable,
as the workshop proceeded. Isabel expressed that breathing made it easier for her to tune in, and in fact, she “liked having the freedom” of deciding her own breathing rhythm, as “you feel more autonomous with your own breathing.” Isabel’s reflection indicated that she was able to listen to which breathing pattern and rhythm felt good for her. The focus on breathing also contributed to a calm atmosphere that made Isabel and Martha feel relaxed in the sessions.

My initial idea was not to use music in my workshop to further encourage participants to use their breath and choose their own movement tempos. However, in the second session, Isabel expressed interest in having music in the background. To avoid imposing an external movement rhythm on the participants (Foucault, 1995), I ensured that the music I used was instrumental with no strong beat and in low volume in the background during parts of the sessions. In dance training, timing choreographic sequences to the rhythm of the music is extremely common, so my participants might have been used to it. They enjoyed having music in the background, and it actually motivated Martha to choose her own movement patterns. Music can help exercisers to calm down and focus on their moving bodies.

Overall, the use of breath helped to create a calm pace in the sessions and contributed to my participants’ awareness of their bodies. The exercises that were not tied to specific breaths offered the participants an opportunity to explore their movement tempos more freely. These exercises, especially, contributed to my aim of disrupting the timetable, tempo, and timing of the exercises (Foucault, 1995). Even though music can contribute to disciplining participants to move in a certain rhythm, using instrumental music in the background can reduce its disciplinary techniques of tempo and timetable (Foucault, 1995). Using music in the sessions increased my awareness of what kind of music and how I was using it. The practices of breathing patterns and music, particularly, reminded me that these practices are not ‘bad’ or disciplinary as long as I am aware of how and why I use them (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

CONCLUSION

In this study, the purpose was to offer less disciplinary training for contemporary dancers through a Foucauldian-inspired Pilates workshop delivered to five contemporary dancers. My practices aimed to challenge the sociocultural ideals of how contemporary dancers should look and behave through an alternative use of space and time to typical dance and Pilates classes. Furthermore, the workshop was designed to increase contemporary dancers’ body awareness and to focus on commonly injured body parts to respond to some of the dancers’ training needs (Fortin et al., 2005; Fortin et al., 2009;
Many of my practices resulted in small, gradual changes used in common dance and Pilates practices. While using typical dance and group fitness spaces, I encouraged the participants to choose and change their spacing and move around more freely with less pressure from viewing themselves in the mirror. I also emphasized breath and individual movement tempo rather than moving mechanically in unison. Instead of standardized and normalized behaviour common in contemporary dance technique classes (Green, 2002-2003), my workshop included more freedom for the participants to make decisions, to lower the intensity, and to reflect on their individual training needs. Based on my observations and the participants’ reflections, my workshop was successful in encouraging body awareness and decision-making often undervalued in dancers’ training (Enghauser, 2007; Green, 1999; Fortin et al., 2009). Specifically, the participants enjoyed the possibility to move freely in the space at a lower intensity with a focus on concentration and the opportunity to ask questions. When the participants were actively exploring different spacing and timing, I, as the instructor, could also reduce my direct surveillance of the ‘correct’ movement technique.

I further learned that engaging in Foucauldian-inspired Pilates practice required time, conscious and critical thought, and self-reflexivity. In accordance with previous research (Fortin, 1998; Fortin et al., 2009; Green, 2002-2003), I needed to be flexible and willing to apply the practices creatively. I was also reminded that creating less disciplinary training does not necessarily mean rejecting all control entirely. While increasingly enjoying freedom, my participants also liked and needed guidance and enjoyed some of the more common dance and Pilates practices, such as mirrors, breathing cues, and music. As Markula and Pringle (2006) emphasized, the practices themselves are not ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ liberating or oppressive, but we need to problematize their effect on the individuals. My workshop increased my awareness of how and why I used certain practices and how they affected my participants. My study demonstrated how considering the impact of movement practices is an important consideration when aiming to reduce disciplinary training.

Previous literature supports the use of sociocultural knowledge in dance and fitness to challenge the dominant practices and ideals (Fortin et al., 2009; Green, 1999; Markula, 2004; Markula, 2011). As Markula (2011) noted, to create change in the dominant discourses, one needs to create change in the actual movement practices. Lyle (2018) also encouraged application-based research to explore how theoretical concepts can be applied in practice. I created a Pilates workshop because of its possibility to strengthen the dancing body in a mindful manner, but other movement practices in
different class and workshop formats could also be combined with social theory to design alternative training. While my research focused on contemporary dance and the female dancing body, other dance forms and dancing bodies would also offer an interesting premise for application-based research. Regardless of the specific dance form, movement practice or workshop format, employing social theory is important as dancers’ experiences derive from the sociocultural norms and expectations that surround them. Research that combines social theory and movement practice is extremely valuable to consider dancers not only as physical bodies but also fully living being alive in the sociocultural context of their practices.

REFERENCES


