

(Peer-Reviewed Article)**Pedagogical Considerations between Teaching Fitness and in Higher Education**

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore synergy between the pedagogy of teaching group fitness classes and that of teaching in higher education (i.e., undergraduate and graduate courses). The authors are both faculty and group fitness instructors. Through a brief review of literature, personal experiences as group fitness instructors, and perspectives of other faculty who teach fitness, the essay sought to explore pedagogical considerations between teaching fitness and teaching in higher education. Instructional differences, similarities, and overlaps were considered. In addition, teaching training and pandemic pivoting were also explored. The authors concluded with a call for more scholarly discourse on teaching in group fitness and higher education.

Keywords: group fitness, pandemic, instruction, college teaching, higher education

Pedagogical Considerations between Teaching Fitness and in Higher Education

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore synergy between the pedagogy of teaching group fitness classes and that of teaching in higher education (i.e., undergraduate and graduate courses). Both authors are certified fitness instructors who teach weekly in both group fitness (up to seven classes on four days per week) and higher education classrooms, and sought to determine how the pedagogy of fitness influences teaching in higher education and vice versa. We teach different audiences in group fitness, including high school students, college students, and people of all ages in our communities. There is limited research about the pedagogy of group fitness instruction. In defining *pedagogy*, Tinning (2008) suggested the term is “amorphous” and thus open to interpretation (p. 412). He described pedagogy as “fundamentally concerned with the processes of knowledge (re)production” (Tinning 2008, p. 416). Educators can apply the art of teaching in different settings, and we aimed to discover how teaching group fitness strengthens teaching in higher education.

College faculty are trained in discipline-specific courses, with limited training on pedagogy, the art of teaching. Jensen (2011) explained, “The pedagogical training typically includes courses in child and adolescent development, multicultural and special needs education, cognitive psychology, behavioral theories, classroom management, the use of technology in the classroom, and curriculum design” whereas higher education instructors need at least a masters degree to teach at the college level, and a doctorate to teach at the graduate level (p. 31). However, she recognized that many higher education institutions require a teaching demonstration by its candidates for faculty positions. She also reviewed studies on these phenomena and discovered that years of experience and advanced education do not improve teaching quality without sufficient pedagogical training (Jensen, 2011).

In their review of the literature on the role of fitness professionals in public health, De Lyon et al. (2017) argued that there is a dearth of research “on the effectiveness of fitness professionals’ practice, education, training and development” in the context of content delivery (p. 315). They highlighted that fitness instructors have a high level of professional autonomy with their instruction, which is like how faculty members have academic freedom in teaching and research (De Lyon et al., 2017). Petrzela (2019), a dual faculty member and fitness instructor, commented, “Like most classroom educators, [fitness] instructors spend a great deal of time alone in studios with their students” (Today section, para. 5). She also noted how fitness instructors commute between different gyms and studios, like the adjunct faculty lifestyle (Petrzela, 2019).

In June 2021, Dr. Gina Garcia was interviewed for the *Student Success Podcast* by Al Solano about student success and equity. Garcia, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Pittsburgh, described the influence of fitness on herself and her teaching. First, she introduced how fitness influenced her life:

Fitness keeps me centered. I take a break every day at 12 o’clock and work out. It’s been able to keep me grounded and also healthy and emotionally, mentally, physically...It keeps me going, refreshes my mind. It’s good for me, obviously my body, but really is like the driver of everything else that I do. (Solano, 2021)

She described how being a group fitness instructor was part of her identity. Finally, she tied her expertise as a fitness instructor to teaching as a higher education faculty member when applying for faculty positions: “The very first teaching statement that...I ever wrote was actually wrapped around pedagogy of teaching fitness and how it really had informed my pedagogy” (Solano, 2021). Quinn and Maddox (2022) also made connections between their teaching practice as yoga instructors and faculty in higher education; thus, this connection may be of interest to other scholars too.

There are similarities between group fitness and classroom instruction, and key skills group exercise instructors develop through teaching, including communication, leadership, and cueing for safety and form (Riebe, 2012). In her reflection of lessons learned through teaching fitness, Creveling (2018) described the importance of maintaining energy levels and being “on” throughout the class. Body language is important, and “the way an instructor carries themselves can completely change how students respond” (Creveling, 2018, para. 11). As much is expected of a faculty member who leads a class. Instructors must also watch each student during a class to see if they understand the material or what to do, as students are not always at the same level of knowledge or practice. She also highlighted the importance of teaching evaluations to understand how instructors are perceived and identify areas for improvement, and time spent planning for class (Creveling, 2018).

There is a structure to class design in both group fitness and higher education. The Athletics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA) (2019) defined five components of a group fitness class design: intro, movement prep, body of workout, transition, and outro. College courses are often structured through a syllabus, with specific course objectives to organize topics and materials, and assignments to assess students’ learning outcomes. Yoke and Armbruster (2020) highlighted the six ethical practice guidelines for group fitness instructors set by the IDEA Health and Fitness Association, which include

1. Always be guided by the best interests of the group while still acknowledging individuals.
2. Provide a safe exercise environment.
3. Obtain the education and training necessary to lead group exercise.
4. Use truth, fairness, and integrity to guide all professional decisions and relationships.
5. Maintain appropriate professional boundaries.
6. Uphold a professional image through conduct and appearance. (pp. 371-372)

While these guidelines are tied to the group fitness setting, they are also applicable to faculty instruction in a higher education classroom. IDEA (2021) strongly encourages fitness professionals to be aware of current research in the field, which is very comparable to faculty who both consume and conduct research in the areas of expertise they teach. Professors intend for students to learn what is stated in the syllabus, including the course description and objectives (Rubin, 2016). They provide a safe learning environment, must have the education and credentials to teach the subject at the college or graduate levels, and similarly could apply the last three ethical guidelines to their role as educators. Higher education course design is based on the concept of academic freedom, in which faculty can select teaching methods, content, and assessment of student learning with little oversight, with the exception of following institutional policies (e.g., grading) and maintaining decorum (Finn, 2020).

Through the lens of a fitness participant, Gonzalez (2015) discovered experiences through CrossFit that enhanced her teaching practices in the classroom. She focused on four areas that made her think differently about pedagogy. First, she felt it was important to have differentiated options for how to approach learning something new, or in the classroom setting, using tiered or scaffolding in assignments. Secondly, she suggested the importance of variety in terms of how content is taught and how assignments are designed. Third, in the spirit of gamification, Gonzalez (2015) recommended that students be able to track their progress, possibly earning rewards (e.g., badges, advancing levels like in a video game) as they meet learning milestones. Lastly, she encouraged friendly competition for students to have extrinsic motivation. She explained, "It's easy to draw parallels between fitness and education. Achieving either one is a complex task, especially if we're trying to help lots of people from different backgrounds get great results" (Gonzalez, 2015, para. 19). Parallels were especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Instructional Parallels

Since March 2020, the word "pivot" has dominated how people around the world had to adapt "the way things were done," which in instruction often meant to move from in-person to virtual modalities. This was the case both for teaching in higher education and fitness settings. Prior to the pandemic, most group fitness offerings were offered in-person (Guo & Fussell, 2022). Of course, virtual options have existed, but someone who is streaming a live workout or on-demand recording from home is not truly in a group setting.

Andersson and Andreasson (2021) explored how fitness instructors navigated their identities in this role and how they approached teaching during the pandemic. They led four focused group discussions with 14 Les Mills International certified instructors representing nine countries. While moving classes outdoors was a potential safe option during the pandemic, that was not always possible due to weather or other restrictions; thus, many instructors taught online as a "better than nothing" option (Andersson

& Andreasson, 2021, p. 7). These instructors also mentioned feeling drained because it was hard to get feedback from members of the class online. They struggled with feeling like they provided quality instruction while navigating COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., wearing a mask in-person in a reduced capacity class). Attending a group fitness class is often a social activity, but many instructors experienced low attendance during the pandemic. Because the physical space for a class was absent, instructors struggled to keep the beat and stream music through technology. Yet, participants in this study expressed that they gained new skills that would improve their teaching moving forward (Andreasson & Andreasson, 2021). Like the fitness instructors in this study, faculty adapted courses to various hybrid and virtual modalities, both synchronous and asynchronous (Miller et al., 2020). Skills learned through changing instructional modalities helped faculty also.

In their study of 11 fitness instructors' and 14 clients' experiences with livestreamed group fitness, Guo and Fussell (2022) discovered that online group fitness instruction lessened the use of nonverbal communication, and instructors felt like they could not do as much to customize the class experience for clients based on injuries or other needs. Fitness instructors found moving around the physical space and observing clients' movements was significantly harder while using technology to stream a live class. Similar to faculty's not having equipment or technology at home needed to teach virtually, many fitness instructors did not have the appropriate physical space or props to teach (Guo & Fussell, 2022). Instructors struggled with maintaining energy in an online environment and building rapport with new clients. College and fitness instructors both found it difficult to teach when clients'/students' cameras were off in the virtual environment (Guo & Fussell, 2022). The research indicated how much feedback is valued by both class participants, and how much instructors wish to provide it.

In many countries worldwide, online instruction and appropriate technology was not ready for such a drastic change in instruction. Many faculty had to rapidly shift to online teaching (Al-Naabi et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2021). Al-Naabi et al. (2021) observed that many instructors were unprepared to teach online due to lack of technical experience or knowledge of online teaching pedagogies. Yet, despite these challenges, Al-Naabi et al. (2021) noted that they provided an important opportunity for educators to access professional development and create "innovative pedagogical strategies" (Introduction, para. 3). These included using external tools to learning management systems, team-teaching, and implementing formative assessments to adjust teaching to students' comprehension throughout a course (Fridley et al., 2023; Stokowski et al., 2022). Yet, these approaches do not always make sense for face-to-face instruction. Upon reflection, we suggest faculty in higher education consider expanding pedagogical knowledge through fitness instructor training.

Pedagogical Observations

Both authors teach different types of fitness (i.e., yoga, yoga sculpt, trampoline, barre, suspension training). Through our perspectives and varied training, we thoughtfully reflected on what is unique to the pedagogy of fitness and the pedagogy of teaching in higher education, plus where we see or have experienced overlap. Table 1 displays the pedagogical differences in these two fields in our exploration of this inquiry.

Table 1. Pedagogical Differences in Instruction for Group Fitness and Higher Education

Fitness	Higher Education
Formative Feedback	Summative Feedback
Honor the Body	Use of Technology
Mindfulness, Focus on Present	Focus on Future
Sense of Place: Mat	Sense of Place: Desk
Teaching Practice in Training	Discipline-Specific Training
Visual Cues	Presentation Slides
Verbal Cues	Lecturing, Silence as a Teaching Tool
Motivational Language to Inspire	Syllabus as a Guide
Clients Choose to Attend	Attendance Required
Ensure Physical Safety	Motivate Students to Learn vs. Earn Grades

In our consideration of different instructional styles and approaches, we also found significant overlap in the pedagogies of fitness and higher education. These concepts include openness (e.g., to new music, curriculum); constant learning and continuing education; timing of content in the classroom; preparation, class design, and progress of learning objectives; credentials and training required to teach; adapt to trends and current issues in the fields; teach to every type of person in the class (e.g., ages, fitness levels, injuries, knowledge level); challenge students and clients to grow and learn; focus on specific areas (e.g., of the body, content); classes are structured but can be improvised as needed and adjusted to the mood of the room; the importance of atmosphere which can be beyond instructor control; flexibility and autonomy to design classes/academic freedom; modifications (e.g., for learning disabilities, injuries, pain, abilities); no showing has a cost (e.g., monetarily, experience and knowledge is missed); expectations of instructor appearance and dress; confidence in leading the class and trusting one's teaching abilities; know names of people in the room and make them feel valued for showing up; be authentic; time-limited focus on outcomes (e.g., one fitness class or length of college course); and use of direct instruction and modeling.

Professional development for fitness instructors might broadly enhance faculty teaching practices. In "Top Tier Teaching: Simple Ways to Elevate Your Classes," O'Dell (2022) emphasized four focus points: 1) create the right environment where people want to be, 2) options, 3) cueing, and 4) flipping the focus. To set an environment, instructors should welcome students/clients and make them feel comfortable in the room. She described how energy is contagious and must be set by the instructor, who "flips [the] instructor switch" on and controls the environment, regardless of what has happened before class time (O'Dell, 2022, slide 6). This involves being prepared and on time for class, playing music before and after class, avoiding a monotone voice, using the body as a teaching tool (e.g., moving around the room, nonverbal communication), being available and accessible before and after class, and having fun.

Options are ways for students/clients to effectively engage in movement within the fitness context (e.g., levels of challenge for an exercise), or learning in the higher education context (e.g., offering different types of assignments for credit). They make the class more enjoyable and more personalized (O'Dell, 2022). In fitness, cueing is critical while teaching, but often takes significant practice to master. It is not always taught in basic fitness trainings. This is like pacing in a college course, guiding students through materials during a class period. O'Dell (2022) suggested that cueing requires being direct and clear with language, advertising what is coming next, and being bossy to control the room.

In college teaching, instructors teach students information, are clear with assignment directions, and make sure students know what is expected through the course. To clarify confusion, O'Dell (2022) emphasized saying content and directions in different ways to reach various people and using imagery. She also highlighted the importance of building rapport with students by learning their names and engaging with them by name throughout class, plus staying upbeat while not using 'don't' or other type of negative language (O'Dell, 2022, slide 22). If an instructor is positive and engaging, they can better motivate students/clients in the class.

The final top tier teaching tip is flipping the focus. O'Dell (2022) emphasized that instructors must be student-centered, and that the class should be about "getting people to do what they think they can't do" rather than be about the instructor's showing off what they do or know (slide 27). Instructors need to be visible, active, and use eye contact. For a successful fitness class, Yoke and Armbruster (2020) argued the need for instructors to balance being teacher-centered and student-centered. They explained, "The teacher-centered instructor focuses on developing relationships with students that are anchored in intellectual explorations of material" whereas "the student-centered instructor...strives to establish an atmosphere of independence, encouragement, attainable goals, and social connectedness" (p. 13). A talented instructor demonstrates knowledge to everyone in the class while still providing individualized instruction for those who are struggling, something relatable to the group fitness and college/university environments (Yoke & Armbruster, 2020). In addition, Quinn and Maddox (2022) called for the concept of embodiment in the higher education classroom, connecting their expertise in yoga with college teaching. In yoga and other fitness classes, instructors provide space for participants to connect mind and body, and the college classroom could also be a place where students connect learning with their physicality, which embraces a holistic developmental approach through instruction (Quinn & Maddox, 2022).

Having and applying these skills in both fitness and higher education may require different amounts of time or more practice to master. For example, having confidence teaching in one classroom did not necessarily translate to our confidence in the other setting without practice. There are certainly many other possible synergies between these two fields, but our initial reflection and observations demonstrate that the pedagogies of fitness and higher education have much in common.

Higher education is an interdisciplinary field and draws from various fields for theories and pedagogical practices (Lund et al., 2020). Finding similarities between group fitness instruction and teaching in college and graduate school classrooms can enhance how faculty consider teaching approaches, styles, and strategies. There are also distinct differences, and faculty who teach in higher education may find group fitness instructor training beneficial to improving teaching practice. For example, fitness instructors learn how to teach and practice teaching skills in training, whereas faculty

may only learn discipline-specific content in a doctoral program but not how to teach in their fields. Classes on college teaching may be offered at institutions, but are not necessarily required in terminal degrees' curricula. Scholarly discourse about how fitness instruction and teaching practices in higher education influence each other are important, as these fields both have congruent foundations.



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