

Don't touch

Exploring fitness professionals' dual roles as educators and entertainers

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Part of the challenging role of group fitness instructors and personal trainers is our vast list of responsibilities. All of these form the two major categories of our job descriptions: We have to both *educate* and *entertain* clients. *Education* means that clients learn something about themselves during a session or class that they did not know previously. *Entertainment* means that clients come to live sessions and classes because they seek out buzzing energy not unlike that of a live production show. Today's leading instructors and trainers realize this dual nature of the job description and creatively educate and entertain clients and classes in unique ways. And this article poses some distinctive methods to enhance our approach as entertaining educators.

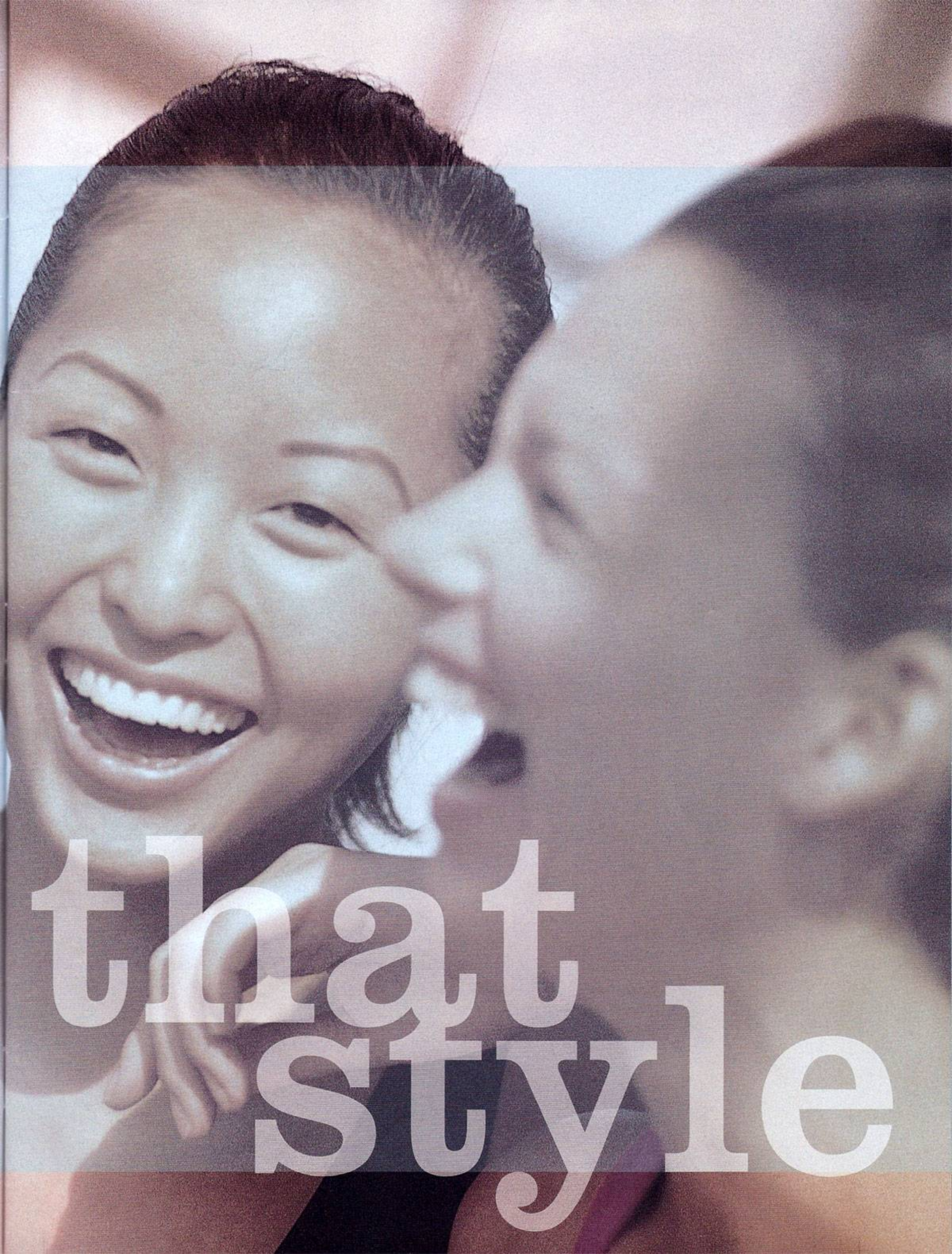
Elizabeth Larkam is a fitness fusion pioneer, Feldenkrais instructor and creator of Pilates Performance. She dedicates herself to the exploration of the intersection of dance and art with dance on Pilates equipment. Larkam is an outstanding example of educator-cum-entertainer. When she teaches, precise words flow out of her mouth as if she were giving a lecture on fitness, yet she colors the canvas of her dictionary in such a way that everyone understands what she says. Furthermore, and simultaneously, she entertains by integrating playful music and interjecting sophisticated hu-

mor. It is no coincidence, therefore, that she coined the expressions "edutainment" and "edutainers," fusing the words "education" and "entertainment."

As trainers and teachers strive toward professional improvement, we can gain a deeper insight into the intricacies of the gym floor and classroom by considering these reflective questions:

- "Where is my strength between *education* and *entertainment*?"
- "Is my strength in delivering a true experience in *education* so that participants leave my sessions and classes having learned something that they did not know prior to being with me?"
- "Is my strength in *entertaining* so that my participants never notice the time fly as they laugh, interact and forget themselves just for a while as if they were spectators in my show?"

From my book *Cream Rises: Excellence in Private and Group Instruction*, the following checklists will help determine your strengths between education and entertainment. By no means exhaustive, the purpose of the two checklists is to get trainers and teachers started on a two-part mission. The first aim is to notice your strengths. The second aim is to seek out and implement techniques into your sessions from your weaker side, be that educating or entertaining.



that
style

Read through the following lists and check off any phrase that specifically applies to your teaching style on a regular basis.

Educators:

- I use precise anatomical terms when I teach, and teach my clients and students what these terms mean (examples: femur, patella, ribcage, ASIS, coccyx)
- I use precise terms of kinesiology (examples: *superior, abduction, concentric, isometric, sagittal*)
- I explain the *purpose* of every exercise pattern or movement series
- I offer ways for everyone to achieve success by incorporating *progressions* and *regressions* as modifications
- I explain how to avoid injury during movement patterns
- I let the class “in on the secret” of why I choose certain movement patterns and what makes them functional
- I explain the transcendence of a particular exercise series for any given day, which means teaching how any particular movement transfers to activities of daily life
- I quote recent research or conventional information to justify doing something a certain way
- I pause to be sure that the client(s) has/have learned an independent change in behavior (example: “if I stop moving, the client or class could continue to demonstrate the required behavior without me”)
- I may cue specifically like a fitness textbook: “shoulders back and down” as you “retract your scapulae with the rhomboids and middle fibers of trapezius; this is called ‘scapular retraction.’”
- I make sure that, each time, everyone leaves with at least one new insight or mastery of something and I bring that to their attention at the end of class
- I ultimately teach people something about themselves
- I explain major muscles being worked using Latin terms
- I draw attention to where to feel a certain movement pattern, sometimes using the words “concentrate on,” “focus on,” and “feel”
- I may ask thought-provoking, open-ended questions to help participants get in touch with their bodies (example: “How does this movement make you feel in this area of your body during the concentric phase?”)

Please total number of checked boxes here before moving on:

Total: _____

Entertainers:

- I may use humor to put everyone at ease
- I may use personal names of client(s) so that the majority of those in attendance hear their names at least once per class experience
- I may cue with metaphoric, descriptive language such as “shoulders back and down” as “think of tucking your shoulder blades into the back pockets of your jeans” or “you’re in the shower with ice cold water behind you so your shoulder blades react to that”
- I captivate by incorporating some, or all of the five senses into an experience (examples: I may incorporate taste, aromatherapy, masterfully integrate the music into the experience, and manipulate the lighting at least twice during the class)
- I may train the client’s breath, brain and body to some degree in each experience, perhaps by mentioning each at least once
- I may choreograph each experience with time, movement and music to make magic
- I put attention into “dressing the part” so that every outfit complements the mood and style of the class and discipline
- I try to color-coordinate as many aspects of the occasion as possible and feasible (lighting, outfit, equipment, layout, makeup if appropriate)
- I change the layout of the class from time to time (examples: manipulating the orientation of where the “front” of the room is, changing the orientation of equipment laid out in class like steps or yoga mats, or varying the configuration of students, e.g., having them divide into groups, face the back or form a circle)
- I change the layout of my direction in regard to the students (sometimes I mirror image, sometimes I face them and sometimes I stand next to them)
- I break down the traditional barriers between teacher and participants with humor or stories or physical orientation, including using group dynamics so they sometimes can interact with each other
- I tell a story having nothing to do with the exercise at hand
- I tell a story including (a) particular participant(s) in the class
- I change up the way I teach verbally, visually and kinesthetically so that the “show” is never the same experience
- I may change the pitch of my voice, speak louder or softer, and/or sing cues during class.

Please total number of checked boxes here before moving on:

Total: _____

As you contemplate the aforementioned questions, you may wish to give the above two lists to a regular client or student of yours and invite his or her impressions of you in order to get someone else's opinion of the same criteria.

Creating the Experience

Trainers and teachers must hold the attention of all participants, and this involves creating an experience that both teaches and delights. Ankie Feenstra, Pilates instructor and owner of The Bodywork Gym in Mykonos, Greece, agrees, claiming "after we capture that trust and attention, I believe it is our goal to educate them."

Feenstra entertains first, and then educates. "When people come into the Pilates studio," she says, "they always find soft lighting, aromatherapy and relaxing music. I want them to be comfortable from the very start. During abdominal rotation to the first side, for example, I begin cueing with a friendly, humorous style, saying 'we are going to do some twisting exercises to improve our ability to twist and do a double-take at someone sexy who just walked by on the beach.'" This is the instructor as entertainer.

When she has the class rotate to the other side, Feenstra touches her own obliques, incorporating the terms "external obliques," "rectus abdominus," and "spinal rotation" in the process of cueing movements. This is the instructor as educator.

Jay Blahnik, consultant, speaker and author, based in Laguna Beach, Calif., says he uses the edutainment factor by always providing "teachable moments" that produce almost invisible education. He outlines, "I incorporate a 'focus of the day theme' in each class, so I can be sure that at least one important educational element will sink in. For example, in my running class, the focus of the day may be 'efficiency.' I invite them to spend time during the workout thinking about ways to be more efficient in posture, foot strike, arm swing and breathing." Setting the stage with a theme provides me permission to educate throughout the workout without seeming overwhelming."

To be sure, the "show" aspect is just as important as the educational aspect. Petra Robinson, Senior Vice President of Fitness Industry Relations for Zumba® based in San Diego, Calif., says "the Zumba Fitness program emphasizes that instructors are not only educators but performers, entertainers and party hosts to help everyone get lost in the music in creating a simple, fun experience."

Effective instructors as educators remember how they learned difficult terminology, and share their own process of simplification. When veteran aquatics instructor Bernadette O'Brien of New Jersey first learned the concept of "spinal neutral," she found it difficult. "I would cue to them 'keep imagining a long line running down the 7 cervical, 12 thoracic and 5 lumbar vertebrae,' but had a hard time always getting it right. To get my students to be able to

remember that, I shared with them how I memorized the number of vertebrae, by associating that I have breakfast at 7, lunch at 12, and dinner at 5." Letting the students "in on the secret" of education signals a cream instructor as educator.

Our roles as "edutainers" come with practice. Indeed, being an "edutainer" means neither being a comedian nor a boring professor. It means motivating and keeping everyone's attention on you instead of on the clock. Ultimately, it means doing *whatever* it legally takes to make each experience, to quote Carol Espel, National Director of Group Fitness Programming for Equinox Fitness Clubs, "a *compelling* experience that no participant can afford to miss." AF

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