



PROFESSIONAL EDGE

ONE SIZE HAS TO FIT ALL

Teaching Different Levels in Group Fitness

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Group fitness instructors face the issue of intensity on a daily basis. Questions ranging from “Will this class be too hard for me?” to “Are you going to make it hard *enough*?” illustrate the variety of intensity needs among participants. Instructors must continuously be ready to offer a selection of intensity options every day, regardless of specific class type. Seasoned instructors know that, even though a class may be labeled “Level 1,” there will often be at least one participant who attends based on the time of day, instructor, equipment or something else that is unrelated to the actual intensity level. Similarly, students



who would be more successful in a “Level 1” class often attend classes with higher intensities meant for seasoned exercisers. The result is they end up needing many intensity modifications. Truth be told, instructors today often end up teaching three different classes in one based on different intensities. The following techniques for manipulating intensity will assist instructors in developing their “intensity modifications toolbox.”

Progressions and Regressions

Teaching a multilevel class means offering varying degrees of intensity. The most common technique when teaching strength, flexibility or cardiovascular training is first to show the exercises at a moderate level of difficulty, which many consider to be a “Level 2.” To be sure, this level of moderate difficulty is subjective and requires the instructor’s sensitivity to the participants, club and expectations. (For example, not every “Level 2” class for senior fitness is the same across the globe.) When instructing at a moderate level of difficulty, setting up the exercise quickly is key so everyone can get into position and nobody wastes time. Immediately after beginning the exercise, offer ways to decrease the intensity, especially giving consideration to joints and other safety points as pertinent to the third of AFAA’s famous “five questions,” asking, “Does this exercise pose any potential safety concerns?” Call these decreases in intensity “regressions.”

After showing ways to decrease intensity, offer further challenges for those who can do harder, more complicated work. Call these increases in intensity “progressions.” While a

decrease in intensity considers joint and lower back issues, a progression usually considers:

- Adding multijoint actions
- Combining planes of movement for biplanar or triplanar work
- Adding or changing direction
- Converting short-lever movements into longer-lever movements
- Changing the rhythm
- Adding plyometric movements.

The table illustrates an example of teaching multilevel intensity with simple moves for cardiovascular, strength and flexibility training.

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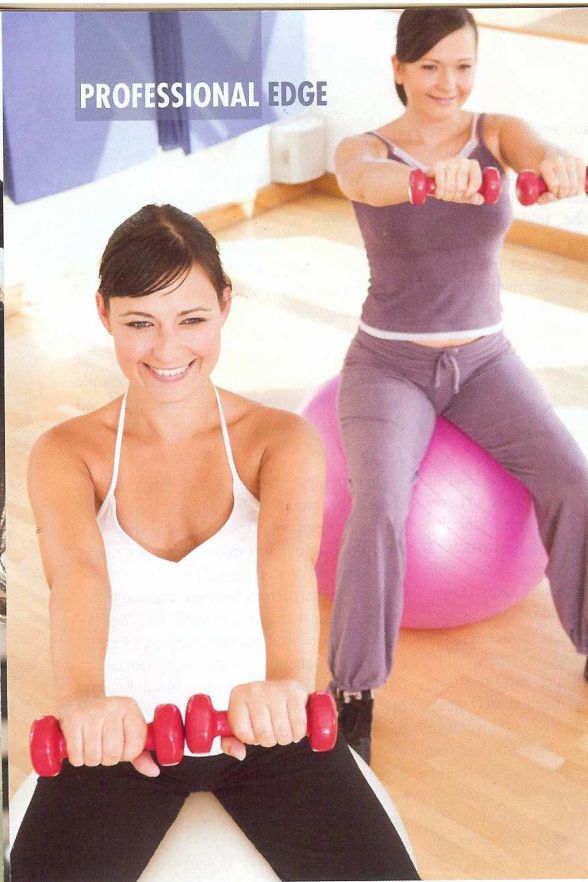
Instructors teaching multilevel classes should be aware of all participants in the class. A keen eye toward even the back row proves crucial to maintaining a sense of how well all of the participants are able to follow the instructor’s exercise prescriptions. Since the most important word after “safety” should be “success,” guaranteeing such success for *all* participants means that instructors often have to change preconceived notions of choreography, right on the spot. Called “abandoning the mission,” this technique refers to doing whatever is necessary midstream to depart from a planned flow of class in order to choose moves that are more appropriate for the majority of individuals in the interest of success.

Mothers and Athletes

Keeping in mind two symbols can aid all instructors in teaching multilevel classes. Thinking of both one’s mother and an elite

CARDIOVASCULAR STRENGTH TRAINING	STRENGTH TRAINING	FLEXIBILITY TRAINING
Start to teach middle difficulty: Jumping step-touches (leaps) with low-intensity high impact	Start to teach middle difficulty: Do a push-up on the knees with hips in extension	Start to teach middle difficulty: Do standing chest stretch with arms abducted to the sides, pressing arms toward the back
Regression: Show how to make the step-touches low impact	Regression: Show how to do push-up in quadruped position with hips over knees	Regression: Do one arm at a time with or without a wall
Progression: Add knee-lifts on the step-touches with high-intensity high impact	Progression: Add push-ups on the toes with alternating lifts on the up phase	Progression: Clasp hands behind the body and move up and down for dynamic active stretch

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An Issue of Weight

In classes that use equipment, instructors should explain carefully to the students how to make their selections. Oftentimes instructors for body sculpting classes tell their students to prepare “a heavy set and a light set of weights.” Deborah Puskarich, group fitness manager for Dr. Kenneth Cooper’s Craig Ranch facility, encourages instructors to define (as clearly as possible) the upcoming exercises for the specific body parts to be worked. “Instructors should tell the students what exercises they will be doing in that class, because the terms ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ are relative to specific muscle areas and types of training. What I would choose for ‘heavy’ to work the chest, for example, would be drastically different from what I would choose to work the shoulder rotators.” When instructors use specific descriptions for the work at hand, like saying, “Choose weights for three sets of 12 repetitions for the shoulders,” their students learn to make responsible choices in weight to achieve an appropriate individual intensity.

Conclusion

Above all, instructors should remind students at the outset of every class that, although the experience may be for a group, the intensity choice should always be based on each individual. With the evolving nature of the group exercise environment, instructors today have to be more versatile than ever before. One aspect of this versatility involves having to address many different participant levels within the same class. Having several techniques in one’s toolbox for teaching multilevel classes means being prepared to make positive, successful experiences for participants of all levels in all classes. AF

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athlete will help instructors create different exercise regressions and progressions. When imagining an instructor’s mother in class, an instructor will offer regressions of difficulty to make all exercises safe and accessible. An instructor teaching his or her mother would teach every move with love and care, and approach each exercise setup safely and carefully, avoiding any risky or contraindicated movements. An instructor will offer progressions of difficulty to those needing more challenging options—an athlete, for instance—so that these stronger individuals work up to their most challenged capacity as well.

When modeling different exercise progressions and regressions, remember to use students from the class for demonstrations. June Kahn, LifeTime® Fitness Studio Coordinator, oftentimes uses her students as role models. “I know the abilities of most of my students,” she states. “So I may point out and invite everyone to follow Mary who is demonstrating progressions, or follow Jeremy who is demonstrating regressions. This makes them feel important and gives me the freedom to move around the room to interact with everyone else.” Drawing on the “talent” in each class liberates instructors from thinking they have to depend exclusively on themselves to demonstrate every single progression and regression in multi-intensity classes. This technique also enables them to offer individual attention where needed because there are other “models” in the room for the rest of the students to follow.