

How to Create a “Balance” Workshop With Your Clients In Mind

An Interview With Lisa Walker, GCFP

IT: Lisa, what do you like most about your private practice?

LW: The cool thing for me is the variety, and the zest for life I see in each individual. When I first started practicing, I had friends in the marketing world who told me to focus on a particular segment or population. Pick my market, they said. Somehow that didn't feel right to me, so I didn't take that advice. It turned out to be the right path for me, because I now know with hindsight how my work with kids with severe neurological challenges informs my work with an 85-year-old with a new hip replacement, or an equestrian who wants fluidity and balance on her horse. Furthermore, my work with myself informs my work with the 40-year-old with fibromyalgia contemplating suicide, and the 45-year-old guy looking for meditation to save him from debilitating back pain. I love the challenge of orchestrating learning for such a mix, and I absolutely love witnessing the deep learning EVERYONE is capable of.

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IT: How would you describe your “typical clientele” that shows up for your workshops?

LW: My “typical clientele” is a very diverse range of ages and abilities and goals and hopes and dreams and realities. Depending on the time of year, about a third to half of my practice is working with babies and children. It’s not so diverse in that my practice mostly attracts humans who aren’t worried about putting food on their table or being attacked, as one might find in other regions of the world. I live in the countryside of Minnesota. Most people come from within a 90-minute drive. Some come from farther away, and they stay in hotels to see me for 2-5 days. Some of my clients come to the Mayo Clinic from around the world, and they see me when they are here. And, lately, I’ve been traveling more to teach workshops around the country.

IT: Describe your “typical” class, if there is such a thing!

LW: The age range in my classes right now is all the way from teenagers to 80’s. There are a few who can barely get up from the floor (yet!), and there are elite athletes. Many have challenging conditions like MS, Parkinson’s and various balance disorders. Most have some kind of musculoskeletal pain, some severe.

I’ve probably got an unusually large percentage of healthcare professionals, both medical and alternative, because I’ve done a lot of work with the Mayo Clinic over

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the years. I know this has influenced my teaching. I love the fact that we have top experts in class, and I can just ask them to speak up when a question arises they could best answer. I remember when I first started teaching I'd sometimes get nervous, hoping I would not say something stupid or incorrect. These are super smart people, some known internationally, and they know a LOT of stuff I do not know. But, it didn't take me long to realize I know a lot they don't know, and this work truly is valuable for them.

IT: What do you think about as you choose lessons for such a wide variety of abilities within the group?

LW: The first and most important thing I always think about, no matter who I'm working with, is "How can I best help this person in this moment? How can I most precisely meet them right where they are?" It may seem a given that we, as Feldenkrais® Practitioners, are asking that kind of question, but I also know it can be easy to fall back on my own habits of teaching. It can also be easy to get lost in some interesting tangent. That tangent may be cool, but it may not be as helpful as something else. So, I make it a very important rule to ask this question over and over. It's my way of keeping myself focused on the student, and not just following my pet idea of the moment.

The Process

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I also think about comfort and safety, not only so that people don't physically hurt themselves, but also how to create an overall environment where they feel safe enough to want to experiment, explore, and learn.

The last thing I think about is the mystifying, scary-to-talk-about depth we all know exists in our work. I think that is actually "the juice" that keeps people seeking more. We seem to have a hard time defining that in our profession, and

that may be because it means different things to different people. When I hear from people of all walks of life say this work has completely transformed their life, I know it's not just because their knee feels better when they go down the stairs. So, I think about empowering people to feel their own "juice." I'd love it if they could also enjoy that process. And, I'd SUPER LOVE it if they could all walk away feeling love...for themselves and others.

Here are some strategies I use to meet mixed groups "where they are at:"

1. Be present with the actual people in the room. Watch how they are moving and responding, and plan my next 'move' accordingly.
2. Talk directly with them about how cool it is that we can have such a diverse group. You can have someone on the floor who has been doing it for 20 years, next to someone in their very first class. Why is that? How could they both possibly be learning? The new person might actually have an easier time with a certain movement than the veteran. The veteran might be learning more, even if they've already done this lesson 100 times. Why? Because if I'm doing my job right, I'm guiding them to teach themselves.
3. Experiment with my language so that it will be heard differently, depending on the experience level of the student.

Many ways to approach

IT: You have taught workshops and lesson series in the past on the topic of better balance and falls prevention. You're teaching a series on that topic now. What can you share with other Practitioners who might want to teach on this topic in the future?

LW: I see the limitations of naming a class "Balance", and I also see the usefulness of it, not only from a marketing standpoint, but also from a learning standpoint. It's helpful to create a temporary "frame" much like it's helpful to impose a constraint. It's also important that WE, as Feldenkrais Practitioners, see the bigger picture. I feel like I'm being most useful to people when I'm guiding them to see a bigger picture as well.

In this most recent class I chose to keep the lessons on a similar theme. It's not how I always plan a progression of lessons, but it's a cool strategy. You can't possibly teach EVERYTHING there is to experience about balance. So, what is ONE of the themes that would be helpful for every single person to improve balance? Side-bending. Now, before anyone gets all up in arms, I didn't just teach "side-bending". But, in carrying that theme throughout, the newer students probably felt more assured they were learning something because they could return to something they "knew" and had already felt they improved. The more

experienced students were all jazzed up about diving deeply into something they thought they already knew well.

Since I was so inspired by working with Anastasi Siotas in his workshop at the 2019 FGNA Conference in Boulder, I wanted to experiment more with using rollers to teach my current “balance class.”

Getting specific – an example

IT: So, what did you ultimately choose to teach for this group?

LW: Here’s my rough outline. Of course, the series could have gone in a number of different ways. If it’s helpful for other practitioners to know specifically what I taught, here’s what I did for this group, this time. The advice I would give to other Feldenkrais teachers is to experiment and expand your own understanding of whatever your workshop topic is, so that you can choose lessons that you enjoy teaching and that you think your students will enjoy learning.

Workshop introduction (first 15 minutes of the first class)

- I asked my group to brainstorm a list of useful strategies for balance and falling. I had a list in mind, but hearing from the students helped to get everyone “on the same page.” Some of the strategies we came up with were: lowering

center of gravity/fold/crouch, widening base of support, observing breathing, reversibility, counterbalance, dynamic stability, and being more “moovy”/differentiated vs. stabilizing by holding it all together. It’s all the same stuff we always talk about, just with the frame of balance more highlighted.

- In the introduction, I also asked the students to pick a few things they’d like to explore throughout the 5 weeks. They mentioned walking, walking a straight line, walking backwards, standing on one leg, etc. This information also helped me to design the series.

ATM 1: rolling from side to supine with bottom knee bent, top arm and leg long. Highlight the list of strategies for balance, especially breathing, reversibility, counterbalance and “moovy-ness” (my technical term) of their spine and ribs.

For the more experienced students, I like to add little moments to carry this learning into something they know well. For example, sliding feet to stand – I took a little moment to highlight how even that movement gets more fluid, balanced, and reversible when you integrate the spine, ribs, and head. End of lesson 1 – get up and do some of the things we did before we got on the floor. What if you tripped on something?

ATM 2: lie on side, swing leg forward/back. Nice way to feel counter balancing, and even more fun to feel how pelvis, spine and head have options, especially

when you get to the delicious subtleties. I added more, including things I improvised, based on what I saw happening on the floor. Then, when they rolled onto their backs, I invited them to continue our exploration from last week.

ATM 3: “Golden Ball.” Imagine golden ball in tanden/dan tien area. Mentioned to them that, in standing, this is where your center of gravity is. Fun to do familiar pelvic-clock-like movements with this different lens of a 3-D golden ball, deep inside your lower belly. How does the golden ball move when you slide feet to stand compared to the way people typically bring feet up? (talk about dynamic stability vs. holding muscles for stability) Repeat mini-versions of lessons 1 & 2, tracking golden ball. Talk about pelvis as a moving power center and also a part of you that actually weighs a lot (for balance and counterbalance.) I think I said something like, “Arms do help with balance, but the pelvis is the cake, and arms are more like just the icing on the cake.”

ATM 4...ON ROLLER. Start supine just on floor, feel breathing when in a safe, stable place. Bring attention to golden ball. Slide feet to stand...with all we’ve been learning. Get on roller and feel all the same stuff. Pelvic clock 12-6 with golden ball. And then the majority of this hour was spent exploring pelvic clock 3-9. Compare stabilizing by all moving to one side with stabilizing dynamically...head goes opposite/spine and ribs side bend. Compare legs with wide stance base of support vs. narrow stance. Compare 3-9 by tilting knees vs. pushing through foot.

In each of these comparisons, the less you use legs, the more differentiation and sophistication required in other places. End by playing with reversibly getting off/on roller. I kept it very simple, and didn't introduce anything new except that they were now on a roller. The experienced students enjoyed it so much, they all want to buy rollers now. We experimented with rollers of different diameters, as well as rolled-up beach towels.

ATM 5 ON ROLLER: Repeat ATM 4. Grow 3-9 to rolling onto side on roller. Fun memory from lesson 5 – I asked them what they could learn about balance while lying on their back (off the roller). It's a good question for me, too. Lately, I've not shied away from repeating lessons. I realize the learning is not linear. We are not learning a, then b. Then review a and b, and add c. However, I find that even the experienced students love having the time to go more slowly and in depth, focusing on the details, rather than simply doing more stuff. The "repeat" is never the same, and considering how busy everyone is in our culture these days, I think the repetition of lessons helps them to feel more grounded.

IT: What quote from Moshe Feldenkrais most inspires you?

LW: I've heard it two ways, and I'm not sure if he even said the first one exactly as I know it because I can't find the source. Even if he didn't, it guides me every day.

“If you can teach others to love themselves and stand on their own two feet (not only one foot), you would be wanted anywhere in the world.”

“What is important is that you get the person to love himself, not just like himself. If you achieve that you are worth your weight in diamonds. If you take a person who hates himself, has no confidence, and make him feel that he can love himself, he feels he can begin to rely on his own self, and begins to have self-confidence to stand on his feet. Well, who can do that? No politician can, no millionaire can. You can't buy that for money. Yet, you may be able to do it and that means that you are richer than any of those. And a very funny thing. Wherever you go in the world, you will find that you are needed, without exception. Which is a nice feeling.”

— Moshe Feldenkrais, San Francisco Training, June 20, 1977

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Walker offers private sessions, classes and retreats, and advanced continuing education for Feldenkrais Practitioners in Welch, MN, and New York City. Her study and experiences of Taiji, Quigong, meditation, martial arts, yoga, Embodied Life™, TTouch®, and fly fishing inform her practice of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education.

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