

Creating a Thriving, Healthy Hybrid

By **Karen Asp, MA**

Develop a green thumb and your fitness career may blossom into something greater. Sound farfetched? Not if you follow the lead of skilled gardeners and try hybridization.

A hybridized group fitness class may sound like a glorified version of cross training, but it's not. Rather than simply offering multiple activities for the sake of being novel, a successful hybrid class blends two (or more) complementary activities into one. The result is a unique experience for participants that challenges the mind and body in new ways, corrects imbalances caused by repeatedly doing the same activity, and keeps exercise fresh and exciting.

But participants aren't the only ones who benefit from hybrid classes. Instructors also reap rewards. By creating a hybrid class, you can express your creativity and renew your enthusiasm for teaching.

So how do you design a winning hybrid? In the next few pages, you'll learn the secrets behind some successful, creative and cutting-edge hybrid classes.

Digging Into Hybrid Classes

Scan current fitness conference brochures and you're bound to see hybrid classes among the session offerings. Consider, for example, Yo-Nia™, which blends yoga and Nia; Cycle Reebok® Sports Conditioning, which combines indoor cycling with strength and power moves targeted to specific sports; and the New York City Ballet Workout®, which merges basic ballet moves with general fitness conditioning. Why are these classes so popular?

First and foremost, hybrid classes offer variety. "People get bored doing the same activities, so they seek something new and unusual to break the monotony," says Mary E. Sanders, MS, adjunct professor at the University of Nevada at Reno, education director of WaterFit/Wave Aerobics and creator of a well-received hybrid water class. Boredom is one of the main reasons people drop out of exercise programs, so the more engaged participants are physically and mentally, the more tempted they'll be to stay.

Second, many participants have time-crunched schedules, so they're trying to get as much as they can out of each workout. "Hybrid classes offer time-efficient workouts," says Lenita Anthony, MA, program coordinator for the University of California at San Diego Extension's Exercise Science and Fitness Certificate Program and a Cycle Reebok presenter. "Because hybrid workouts can be more complete and balanced [than traditional fitness classes], participants get more for the time invested."

Third, hybrid classes give instructors the opportunity to correct participants' muscle imbalances, thereby enhancing performance in class and decreasing injury risk, says Jennifer Fox, co-owner of Santa Cruz, California, based Yoga Nia Adventures, which offers Yo-Nia retreats. The New York City Ballet Workout, for instance, was conceived as a ballet routine for the general

population. But after the creators consulted physical therapists to identify the injuries most often suffered by professional dancers, the workout was modified to prevent these injuries while simultaneously correcting existing muscle imbalances.

Today, the New York City Ballet Workout is billed as a fitness workout that combines elements of ballet training and athletic conditioning. Participants perform muscle conditioning, flexibility training, balance exercises and movement patterns. "The workout gives participants body awareness like you might find in yoga, and the ballet moves bring in artistic expression, which is missing from many of our lives," says Rebecca Metzger-Hirsch, former manager and current consultant for the New York City Ballet Workout and now a teacher at the San Francisco Bay Club.

Hybrid classes offer advantages for you as an instructor, too. By merging two or more of your passions into one class, you'll gain an edge in the industry and bolster your identity as a fitness professional. Perhaps even more important, you'll derive energy from creating and teaching your own hybrid. "[Yo-Nia] keeps me excited about what I'm doing," says Paul Gould, co-owner of Yoga-Nia Adventures. "I can funnel that energy back to participants."

What Makes a Successful Hybrid?

To be successful, hybrid classes must be carefully, not randomly, thrown together. "You [need to think] about how you can give participants a more complete workout, like connecting the dots to create a whole," Gould says.

These classes work best when the parts complement each other. "You don't just put an antique chair with a modern chair," Fox says. "They have to say something together." At first, Fox and Gould taught yoga and Nia as sepa-

rate entities. But because the elements in each modality were complementary, they began flowing together into one class. The result was Yo-Nia, a class that combines traditional yoga poses with Nia's creative versions of martial-art steps, stances, kicks and blocks, which encourage freedom and self-expression.

Hybrids must also be well rehearsed. Gould and Fox spent years perfecting yoga and Nia as stand-alone activities before combining them into a unique hybrid.

Another attribute of hybrid classes is that they meet needs that have been previously ignored. In Gould's eyes, Yo-Nia fills a void for participants. "I think we're all searching to be more complete," Gould says. "We're looking for connections with each other, with ourselves and with nature. Yo-Nia provides those connections."

Sanders wanted to create a cardio-resistance workout that would incorporate cardiovascular sports conditioning and water resistance training. When she queried her participants about their goals, she discovered that many were recreational athletes who wanted to compete in various leagues but lacked sport-specific training. After observing muscle imbalances in her participants, she created a water workout that would condition them for specific recreational activities. The workout, which Sanders presents at conferences as the Fitness Paddle Program®, trains participants for power, directional changes, speed, agility, dynamic balance, strength and flexibility. The program strengthens weak muscles like the triceps and abductors while stretching tight muscles like the hamstrings and erector spinae. It is also designed to counteract the effects of daily living—for example, by correcting poor posture and preparing participants for quick changes in stance. "Life is starts and stops," Sanders says. "Because life is full of surprises, I teach the class with surprise. I teach skills,

engage participants cognitively and give them mastery over the skills.”

In other words, Sanders created a hybrid class with purpose. Anthony did the same with her hybrid cycling class. When polling her veteran cycling participants to find out what they wanted and needed, she realized that most required additional work in balance, coordination, and muscular strength and endurance because cycling by itself is an incomplete workout. So Anthony reformatted her existing hour-long class, shortening the cycling segment to 30 minutes of intense interval work. She filled the next 30 minutes with a sports conditioning circuit largely designed to open up the chest muscles, which get tight when the body is hunched forward during cycling. The circuit might include rope jumping, push-ups, medicine ball throws and single-leg squats. Anthony says the class, which is offered as a specialty class in eight- to 12-week sessions throughout the year, has been wildly successful. She gears each session to a specific sport, such as tennis, basketball or skiing, depending on the season.

Ashley Duggan, a fitness professional in Santa Barbara, California, followed a similar course when she created her hybrid class, “ABC: Abs, Balance, Core.” She recognized that while her college-age participants were strong, they lacked core strength and overall strength in their body as a unit. “Plus, I wanted them to look at their bodies differently than when they were doing step or high/low impact,” she says. To challenge her participants, Duggan combined Pilates, yoga and dance to create a class that focused on strengthening the core and correcting muscle imbalances. As the class has evolved, so have her participants, who continue to find new ways to become stronger and more flexible. Duggan also teaches a modified version of “ABC” to seniors.

GET READY TO BRANCH OUT

Here are some tips for introducing your hybrid class to participants:

Test the Waters. Talk with participants about your idea before you introduce the class to them. Tell them you’re trying to create something new that will challenge them, but you won’t be abandoning everything they love doing. “Emphasize that this will be something good for them and you,” Gould advises.

Believe in Yourself. Don’t be afraid to take a risk. “If something feels right to you, be willing to risk looking a bit like a fool for your dreams,” Fox says.

Be Honest When Describing the Class. If you’ve created a high-intensity class for advanced exercisers, Sanders says, don’t be afraid to describe it as such. In the New York City Ballet Workout’s description, for example, participants are warned that the movement format is not low impact.

Admit That Participants Might Feel Silly at First. “One of their greatest fears is that they’ll make a fool of themselves,” Fox says. “Over time, participants lose that childlike ability to try something without being afraid to fall on their faces.” Generally, most participants do the same activity repeatedly because they know it well and it feels comfortable to them. Remind them that it’s okay to feel goofy. You might even share your own anxieties with them.

Encourage Participants to Challenge Themselves. A “challenge” can run the gamut from performing a difficult physical task to just breaking free from long-held inhibitions. Metzger-Hirsch challenges her participants by treating them as if they’re in a dance company. “I want them to push their energy,” she says. “But most people make small movements because they’re intimidated or embarrassed.” To encourage class members to enlarge their moves,

Hirsch tells them she doesn’t care if they look terrible; their goal as dancers is to get people to notice them. “When they find this new energy, they become free,” she adds.

Ask Participants for Feedback. “Get them excited about being part of the process,” Sanders says. After class, ask them what they liked and didn’t like about the new workout. Be willing to listen to their feedback and evaluate it objectively without personalizing it.

Learn From Your Mistakes and Successes. If your class doesn’t go as well as you’d expected, ask yourself why. What could you do better to improve it? If someone walks out of your class, don’t take it personally. Instead, try to talk with that participant and find out what he or she didn’t like. If your hybrid receives high marks from participants, figure out what went right so you can continue duplicating and improving on it.

Don’t Expect People to Be Perfect ... This was a valuable lesson Metzger-Hirsch learned when she first began teaching the New York City Ballet Workout. “I couldn’t expect people who had never taken ballet to look like dancers,” she said. “Besides, I wasn’t trying to teach people how to be dancers; I was just giving them a new, fun way to work out.”

... But Don’t Underestimate Your Participants, Either. Metzger-Hirsch is still amazed by what her participants *can* do. “If I give them something a little bit more than I think they can do, they rise to the occasion,” she says. “I tell them a certain move might be difficult today, but in a week, it might be easier. What a great feeling they have when they finally get it!”

Developing a Healthy Hybrid Class

Creating your own hybrid may seem daunting at first. After all, there's no guarantee the class you create will succeed. But if you follow these tips from our hybrid experts, your creation will stand a greater chance of thriving.

Talk With Your Participants About Their Needs and Goals. Are they training for recreational sports events? Are they struggling with recurring injuries, which may point to muscle imbalances that need correcting? What are the fitness goals of your participants? What's missing in their current fitness program? "You can personalize classes by identifying your participants' needs and then meeting them in a way the participants have never experienced," Anthony says. By doing this, you'll create a stronger bond with your class members.

Analyze Your Participants' Strengths and Imbalances. If, for example, your class spends 45 minutes hunkered down on a bike, after the cycling segment do as Anthony did and add exercises that let participants unwind and release the tightness in their spine and upper body. Determine where the training falls short and then strive to provide a more complete, balanced workout. Consider, too, how people spend their days. Are they sitting at a desk most of the time? Are they on their feet?

Evaluate Your Own Teaching Strengths. Consider activities in which you excel. "To create the 'ABC' class, I looked at my strengths as an instructor and blended those with participants' needs," Duggan says.

Decide If the Activities You Want to Combine Complement Each Other. "The hybrid has to have an underlying foundation," Sanders says. "The activities can't be disjointed or else the class won't work."

Ensure That Your Class Makes Sense and Has a Purpose Grounded in Health.

"Don't let entertainment or creativity overshadow your purpose," Sanders says. Although hybrids should be fun, they should also be *safe*. Sanders once observed a cycling class in which weight machines were set up between the bikes. Participants were asked to transfer quickly from the bikes to the machines to combine cardio and strength training. Obvious safety concerns were overlooked, and several participants were injured.

Experiment With Your Music Selections. Because hybrids are specialty classes, they don't have to incorporate music traditionally found in group fitness classes. Duggan, for example, uses world music blends and songs with strong drumbeats to elicit a different mood than participants might find in traditional strength or yoga classes.

Love the Activities You're Merging. If you have a passion for what you're doing, you'll be able to express it to participants and convince them your class is worth trying. Without that passion, your presentation may flop.

Understand and Practice the Activities You're Combining. In gardening, you can try to mix different varieties of flowers, but you'll have more success if you get to know the characteristics of each flower separately and then group them accordingly. Hybrid classes are no different. "If you don't understand what you're teaching," Fox says, "you won't be able to embrace the energy of the activity and your class will suffer."

No Matter How Serious the Activities Are, Make the Class Fun and Interesting. Of course, safety is a primary concern, but without fun, people won't come back. Fun is one main reason participants have flocked to the New York City Ballet Workout. Many people took ballet lessons as children or always loved watching ballet but never had the nerve to try it until taking this class. "They love feeling like a dancer,"

Metzger-Hirsch says. "They enjoy the sense of movement and the freedom they feel while moving."

Introducing Your Hybrid

Once you've created your hybrid class, you'll need to present it to participants and win their approval. This can be just

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as challenging as designing the hybrid! Fox and Gould found that out when they first introduced Yo-Nia more than a decade ago. Some of their participants were initially upset about the new spin on yoga since it was a departure from what they were used to. Of course, not all participants reacted this way. Many were eager to try the new activity. If you get a similar reaction to your new class, remember that mixing things up is good for participants, suggests Gould. "Change is guaranteed in life," he says. "By introducing a hybrid, you're giving participants an opportunity to confront and deal with change."

As the initiator of change, however, you'll need to summon your courage and listen to your own voice. After all, participants may not respond as you'd planned, and in the worst-case scenario, your hybrid may fail. But that's part of being an inventor. "Realize that creating something new requires a process," Fox says. "Just because something doesn't work when you first present it doesn't mean the whole idea won't work. It simply means you've learned one way *not* to do it, and perhaps this will open up new possibilities."

The important guiding principle, Gould says, is: "Teach from your heart, and you can't go wrong." Hybrid classes

are only in their infancy, and the possibilities for future permutations are almost endless. As Fox says, "This is the age of creativity and choice, and there's no better time than now to create something that's uniquely you."

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