

Ep. #344 - Teaching Shapes vs. Teaching Change: The Hidden Limits of Choreography



Full Episode Transcript

With your host:

Susi Hatelly

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hatelly

Introduction (00:00.00)

You are listening to From Pain To Possibility with Susi Hatelly. You'll hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain, and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hatelly.

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Susi (00:23.16)

Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here because today, I am starting a three part series that's been inspired by my most recent therapeutic yoga intensive, and it's gotten me thinking a lot around what really is the shift from yoga teacher to yoga therapist. This three part series, we're gonna explore how we move from choreography to teaching movement, and finally into awareness and integration – these key components that are necessary to really grow mastery and skill of becoming a yoga therapist that gets great results.

And this is important because every teacher that I know of starts with choreography. It's one of the core tenets inside of teacher training programs. Think about it. Put your foot here, your arm there. Move this way as you inhale, move that way as you exhale. The beauty of it is that it organizes a class. It keeps people safe. It gives both the teacher and student something to hold onto. But choreography and movement are not the same thing. Choreography teaches position. Movement teaches pattern and relationship.

Susi (01:41.82)

So when you're helping people with pain or strain, that difference really does change everything. Someone can perform a shape beautifully and still reinforce the very pattern that's been keeping them uncomfortable. So with this first episode, I wanna unpack what choreography is in my mind, why it became the default way to teach, and why with my work, if you wanna be really good at helping people to reduce and eliminate physical pain, choreography is not the thing that creates real change.

You'll start to see, hopefully, that choreography in and of itself is not wrong, and I really, really wanna emphasize that. It is a starting point for sure. And if you wanna become really great as a yoga therapist, this doorway of choreography that you have to step through, you're likely gonna be closing the door on it at some point.

Susi (02:39.15)

So let's dig into what choreography really is. When I use the word choreography, I mean the outer pattern, the sequence, placement, timing, and the breath cues that form the visible part of a class. Most modern yoga and movement training is built upon this model, and it came from a need for efficiency. You could codify movement into repeatable patterns, you could train thousands upon thousands of teachers quickly and keep classes consistent. It's tidy,

reproducible, and predictable. And in the nineties and early two thousands, that consistency was really part of yoga's global rise. It helped studios promise that a level one vinyasa meant roughly the same thing everywhere, and it gave teachers and students somewhat of a predictable map.

For many new instructors, choreography really is a lifeline. You walk into a room, you glance at your notes, and you know what's coming next. In a sense, it gives your nervous system something to hold, a structure, a sequence, certainty. And for students, it gives belonging. They can follow along, move in rhythm, feel competent.

Everyone knows the arc: warm up, standing balance, and so it goes towards the cool down. And that rhythm matters. Choreography at its best provides enough order that safety and coordination in many ways can emerge. The trouble comes when we mistake that safety map for the territory itself. Choreography organizes movement, yes, it does not explain it.

It shows what to do, not how the doing happens. It can take someone into a pose without ever revealing how they got there, what joints contributed, what breath supported it, and what effort compensated. So while choreography is an excellent teaching scaffold, it's not the building.

Susi (04:52.29)

Yes, it's a stabilizing frame that lets a teacher stand in front of a room, but the building, the living body, we need to pay attention to it. Choreography doesn't really pay attention to it, and it's truly where my work lives. I don't teach choreography. Nothing about my yoga therapy training is choreography because I'm not training people to replicate.

I'm training them to perceive. Replication belongs to choreography. Perception and awareness, those belong to movement. So why does choreography persist? It's endured because it really does appear to solve three teacher problems: **confidence, control, completion**. It gives confidence because you know what's next, it gives control because you can manage 20, 30, 200 bodies at once. It gives completion. People leave sweaty or stretched and think, *oh yeah, great class*. It's efficient, repeatable, and marketable. And for many people, for many teachers, that's enough. Choreography, though, is an external organization. It's not internal education.

Susi (06:22.80)

It can refine form without improving function. I meet teachers who can cue flawlessly. Their language, timing, and demo are excellent. And then when I ask them, you know, *what do you feel in your own pelvis as you step your leg back? Or how about that leg bone moving in your pelvis?* There's total silence. Because choreography trains performance, **it does not train perception**.

The same is true for students. They may look perfectly aligned, but still ache. They've learned to match shapes, not sensations, and that's why you can have someone who's been practicing for 10 or 20 years and still have the same shoulder tension or back pain.

Sure, their choreography has improved. The movement pattern, though, hasn't changed. When teachers that I train stop teaching choreography, everything really begins to shift. They begin to see the compensations in the room. They see the timing, the interplay between effort and ease, and then their instruction becomes less about finding the perfect cue and becomes more about what's going on in the room. **And that's when real progress begins.** It's not because they're doing more, it's not because they've got these whizzbang techniques and tools, which they do truly, it's because they're finally seen what's going on in their room.

Susi (08:12.00)

So what happens when you move beyond choreography? When we leave the sequence as the default and start paying attention and listening to the movement itself. The first thing that shows up is information, something that I often call data, right? We begin to see what's actually going on in front of us, how the arm bone is moving in the socket, what's going on with the rib cage, what's really happening in that twist.

And as a student, we can guide them to notice for themselves where their effort travels, where attention gathers, and where breath stops. And the awareness can sometimes be startling, sometimes delightful, like, *ooh, I had no idea that was going on in my room. I did not see that with my student.* And for the students who are sometimes my trainees as well, it's, *wow, I did not realize that my ribs can move like that.* Or confronting like, *ooh, I had no idea that I was bracing in that way.*

But that's where the real work and the real fun, the real progress begins because choreography hides compensation. In fact, many of the great cues that are utilized within choreography adds layers of compensation. And this is why flow can keep bodies moving forward, but actually masks how they're getting there. It's why pain can persist and persist and persist. **By removing choreography, by removing the default of sequencing, the body reveals its truth.** I see it all the time in my trainings. Someone lifts an arm and suddenly they notice their jaw tighten or their toes grip.

They've done the movement thousands of times, but it's the first time they've actually noticed what's going on. And once they notice what's going on, which I have to say is different than feeling it because we can feel all sorts of things and not notice how we're moving. When we actually notice how we're moving, change begins almost immediately because we can change what we're aware of. The nervous system finally has feedback. Without the awareness, our bodies repeat the same grip, the same brace, the same push. **With awareness, we have the opportunity to reorganize.**

Susi (10:52.16)

When people gain accurate sensory input, they gain new options. And for the teacher, when you let go of choreography, yep, you do step into a little bit of uncertainty, that's for sure. You can no longer predict what's gonna happen next because you don't have the next pose in front of you to do. You do have to look, listen, and respond in real time, and it can feel raw, vulnerable, and

unnerving. *Totally* unnerving at first. And this is what happens for a lot of teachers inside of the early phases of the intensive and certification.

The first time they throw away the plan, they walk into class. And they see what's actually in front of them, and they follow that instead. And for the first two minutes, it's absolutely terrifying for most, and then **utterly freeing** for a few reasons, because they're now no longer performing being a teacher. They're present. They're collaborating with the room. They can see what's going on and cue to what's going on, and that's when students make change and the pain they've had for 10 or 20 years, the same shoulder tension, can start to shift.

Susi (12:24.71)

When we leave choreography, we trade certainty for clarity and connection instead of, *here is what I want you to do*. The energy changes. The pace slows. People tune in. And even for people who like to move fast, those Ferraris in your class, maybe you teach a fast-paced vinyasa, you can bring that speed back up, but then it's this effortless flow. Like watching Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire dance and how they float because of what and how a person is paying attention to how their body moves and this beautiful thing called vinyasa. It's quieter, but so much deeper, connected to all the layers of their koshas.

Less is more. Doing all that you need to do and nothing more. That's when true strength really, really arises. When you're no longer following choreography, you're following feedback, and feedback becomes the new map, not some external set of cues, not reaching for another cue to try and find the best one because you're watching, you're seeing, you're listening.

You're teaching your students how to translate the language of their own body instead of copying yours, and that's how compensation truly unravels. Not by forcing change, but by revealing what's actually happening and giving the space to self-correct. And not only is it the heart of therapeutic movement, it's the fuel source for sustainable real strength changes, changes in propulsion, and power. And it's why letting go of choreography is not a loss, it's a liberation.

Susi (14:22.44)

In the next episode, I'm going to explore how to teach from that place, how to guide movement so that proprioception and interoception naturally build. We'll look at how bomb mechanics can become a sensory practice. How awareness becomes the foundation for lasting change.

I wanna invite you to step beyond choreography and consider how your role as a teacher could shift when you move from teaching steps and really start teaching movement.

So this week between these episodes, I invite you to notice your own teaching and to listen to your cues and to notice how your cues are landing in your room, with your people. How often are you telling people where to go and what to do, and are they actually following your cues, and what's the outcome from those cues?

And just gather the info, the data. You don't need to change anything yet. Awareness begins by seeing what's there. Choreography got us started. And awareness is what keeps us growing.

I'll see you next time when we dig into teaching movement from this place of awareness and where biomechanics and awareness can come together to really create some amazing movement practices that facilitate a reduction of pain, an increase of ease, effortlessness, strength, propulsion, and power. We'll see you next time.

Susi (16:22.43)

Hey, you know what? If this is interesting to you and you're ready to go on to the next steps, we have opened up the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive registration for 2026 in April. And you can check it out over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**. I'd love to see you there. Take care.