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Synthesising Les Mills' Five Key Elements: How Readiness-to-Hand is Developed Among Group Fitness Coaches

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Abstract

This paper examines the process by which Les Mills group fitness instructors in the Philippines develop a seemingly effortless coaching style. They simultaneously perform exercises alongside their participants, correcting and motivating them, while maintaining awareness of the music playing. Using ethnographic data from a local Philippine gym, pseudonymously referred to as The Fit Stop, it is argued that the apparent naturalness of their teaching develops through numerous stages of practice and feedback. Throughout the process, instructors gain mastery over what Les Mills calls the Five Key Elements of instruction: choreography, technique, coaching, connection, and performance. As they become more adept, the Elements become more ready-to-hand (Heidegger, 1962), allowing instructors to apply them intuitively and without conscious deliberation. By highlighting this form of embodied expertise, the paper contributes to the limited literature on group fitness instruction. It proposes readiness-to-hand as a valuable lens for analysing the embodied development of coaching competence among group exercise professionals.

Introduction

It is past 10 am on a Saturday, and Jeremy's BODYPUMP class at The Fit Stop has just completed their warmup. Squats, the second segment of the workout, are about to begin. Jeremy takes his place in the middle of the stage, lifts his barbell onto his upper back, and addresses the class, telling them, "Squats, 2-2." Music with a strong bass starts to play, and he brings his hips down in a squatting motion following the beat of the music. It takes him two beats of the music to go down, and two beats to go up. He reminds participants about the range of motion, saying, "Butt to knee height, no higher, no lower". He coaches participants in this way throughout the entire song, signposting changes in the tempo and encouraging them to keep moving through the challenging parts of the song.

BODYPUMP is a programme in which participants perform weightlifting movements while following a prescribed choreography that is set to music. In coaching his attendees for the squats segment of the class, Jeremy began by demonstrating where the barbell should be placed as they moved and telling the class that they would be following a "2-2 tempo." Using his words and bodily movements, Jeremy coached his participants through the workout. He demonstrated the proper range of motion, and at times when the workout got challenging, he encouraged them to keep going. Throughout the workout, he continued to move, performing the

exercises alongside his participants. As a weightlifting class, BODYPUMP is designed to "shape and tone the entire body, increase core strength, and improve bone health" (Les Mills, 2022). By demonstrating the proper range of motion, signposting changes in movement, and motivating his attendees, Jeremy helped them attain the benefits of the workout.

The uninitiated may not detect that Jeremy's teaching exemplifies the standard coaching model for all Les Mills instructors. He implements what are known as the "Five Key Elements." These are aspects of a teaching style that instructors become increasingly proficient in using during the early stages of their careers in group fitness. On their first day of training, prospective Les Mills coaches are informed that when the Five Elements are implemented effectively, they enable a practical and enjoyable workout experience. These Key Elements are choreography, technique, coaching, connection, and performance.

The first, choreography, refers to knowledge of the movements that correspond to the music. Technique is the second of the Elements. It pertains to the proper demonstration of movements that class participants follow. Coaching, the third Element, refers to what instructors say, including cueing movements properly so that participants know how to move and when to do so. It also refers to communicating clearly so that attendees do not get distracted or lost. The fourth is connection, which entails tapping into the environment, both in terms of the music and the participants. Instructors are expected to use eye contact, facial expressions, and body language to engage their attendees and highlight the feelings they evoke from the music. Finally, performance refers to the ways instructors bring their individuality into their classes, which is manifested in different ways, including the use of humour, improvised movements, or adopting a particular attitude during a class or song. Performance is the most abstract of the Key Elements and is also the one that varies most across individuals.

Returning to the vignette depicting Jeremy's BODYPUMP class, we find that the Five Elements were displayed in his teaching in some degree or manner. First, his placement of the barbell and his movement in a squatting motion demonstrated technique. Second, telling his participants about the 2-2 squat rhythm and signposting tempo changes exemplified his knowledge of the choreography. Jeremy's instruction for participants to bring their "Butt to knee height, no higher, no lower" represents coaching, but also reflects technique, since it showed his awareness of the safe and effective range of a squat. Finally, both coaching and performance were exemplified in the way in which he motivated his class to continue moving through the complex parts of the track. His Les Mills training does not strictly prescribe the words he should use or when he should say them. As such, the timing of his coaching interventions was deliberate and exemplified how he connects with and performs for his attendees.

Jeremy is one of thousands of Les Mills instructors found in gyms worldwide. All of them have been initiated into the use of the Five Key Elements, which they combine during the teaching of their classes. This model of coaching is standard for all programs licensed by Les Mills, a New Zealand-based company that has been described as doing for group exercise what McDonald's did for hamburgers (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016). They offer eighteen programs, namely:

1. BODYATTACK	10. BODYCOMBAT
2. GRIT	11. PILATES
3. STRENGTH DEVELOPMENT	12. FUNCTIONAL STRENGTH
4. BODYJAM	13. BODYPUMP
5. BODYSTEP	14. TONE
6. RPM	15. DANCE
7. CEREMONY	16. THRIVE
8. BODYBALANCE	17. CORE
9. SHAPES	18. TRIP

(Les Mills, 2025)

Each one has a distinct exercise focus and a unique set of movements. BODYPUMP, which was described above, is a weightlifting class. By contrast, BODYJAM is a dance-based cardio program, and RPM is an indoor cycling workout.

Les Mills classes are characterised by standardisation, such that the music, movements, and some aspects of the instructors' coaching are the same, regardless of where the programs are taught. Parviainen (2011) discussed how instructors present predetermined songs and choreography to their participants, making the classes forms of "imitation-based fitness" (p. 536) activities. Such interpretations have contributed to the perception that Les Mills programmes leave little room for instructor agency or improvisation. This paper, however, offers a corrective to these arguments by foregrounding the lived experiences and embodied expertise of instructors themselves. Data obtained from coaches suggest that they are more than just automata transmitting choreography.

This paper argues that the Les Mills coaching model allows instructors to express themselves individually, despite having to deliver standardised music and movements. The data presented in the following sections indicate that Les Mills trainers can motivate and connect with their classes in distinctive ways. They master the skill of combining music, movements, and coaching during specific milestones, such as their auditions, Initial Module Training (IMT), and mentorship. The concept of "readiness-to-hand" (Heidegger, 1962) is adopted to explore how instructors undergo a phenomenological process of transformation in experiencing their *being-there* in the Fit Stop and become increasingly competent with the Five Key Elements. Ultimately, they reach a point where they can apply them without being consciously aware of what they are doing or saying. As their coaching tools become more readily available, they then gain more mental bandwidth to observe their participants' movements, the class's emotional state, or memorise new sets of choreography whenever Les Mills releases them.

Readiness-to-Hand in the Academic Literature on Sport and Fitness

Les Mills instructors are not immediately adept at applying the Five Key Elements upon receiving their instructor licenses. Instead, they undergo preparatory stages in their careers during which they are trained to implement specific Elements and evaluated on their ability to apply what they have learned. As they progress, they are expected to become increasingly proficient in using the Elements until they can seamlessly integrate all five when leading their classes.

This study, with its focus on how group fitness instructors develop their teaching expertise, is underpinned by the established literature on skill acquisition. Two influential frameworks in this field are the three-stage model proposed by Fitts and Posner (1967) and the five-stage model developed by the Dreyfus brothers (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Dreyfus, 2004). Fitts and Posner describe a progression that begins with the cognitive stage, where learners perform tasks deliberately and with effort. This is followed by the associative

stage, where practice leads to gradual improvement and a decrease in errors. Finally, in the autonomous stage, performance becomes smooth and requires little conscious attention. The Dreyfus model outlines a similar shift from novice to expert but emphasises a decreasing reliance on formal rules and an increasing capacity to respond intuitively to situations. At the expert level, individuals act fluidly within context and no longer need to deliberate over each decision consciously (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005).

While both models emphasise a shift from rule-based behaviour to intuitive action, Heidegger's concept of readiness-to-hand provides a more phenomenologically grounded account of this transformation. Whereas the Dreyfus' model describes observable stages of expertise, Heidegger is concerned with the deeper nature of how tools and actions become integrated into our way of being. Rather than depicting expertise as a technical process of efficiency or automaticity, it focuses on how tools and actions recede from conscious awareness and become integrated into a person's embodied engagement with the world. Dreyfus (1991, 2008) interprets this as a transition from deliberate skill execution to skilled coping, in which individuals respond directly and fluidly to their environment without reflective thought. In Heideggerian terms, a tool is ready-to-hand when it is used fluently within a meaningful activity and does not stand out as an object of reflection. The performer is not merely unconsciously competent but is absorbed through action in a pre-reflective and embodied way (Wisniewski, 2012).

This distinction is especially relevant for understanding group fitness instruction. Although the Five Key Elements are not literal tools, they function as operational components in the instructor's practice. As trainers become more skilled, they cease to consciously consider the Elements and instead use them fluidly while simultaneously cueing movement, monitoring form, motivating participants, and managing new choreography. This form of embodied absorption reflects not only a high level of competence but also the readiness-to-hand of a practice deeply integrated into the instructor's body and professional identity.

While the concept of readiness-to-hand is rarely discussed in sport or fitness research, some notable exceptions exist. Martínková and Parry (2016, 2018) have examined how Heideggerian philosophy informs the understanding of athletic experiences, while Breivik (2007, 2008, 2010) has applied it to specific domains of movement, such as skiing, skilful coping, and skydiving. These works suggest that athletic expertise is often characterised by a kind of non-reflective engagement that is central to Heidegger's phenomenology. This paper builds on those contributions, extending the application of Heideggerian concepts to the domain of group fitness instruction.

In addition to technical skill and embodied fluency, group exercise instructors, like other professionals in the fitness industry, perform a considerable amount of affective and aesthetic labour. Harvey, Vachhani, and Williams (2013) highlighted how fitness professionals trade on physical capital and emotional engagement to present themselves as both aspirational and approachable. Similarly, Maguire (2001) examined how personal trainers manage emotions as part of service work, blending motivation, coaching, and consumer engagement. Ryu and Kim (2016) and

Sacha (2015) illustrated how emotional labour plays a significant role in instructional settings, often accompanied by emotional exhaustion or identity negotiation.

More recent studies have added further nuance to these discussions. Harvey and Griffin (2021), for instance, explored how instructors working with older adults draw on "age capital" to empathise with ageing bodies and balance affective energy with inclusive pedagogical strategies. Adamson et al. (2023) demonstrated the additional emotional and communicative demands faced by instructors teaching exercisers with disabilities, while Andersson (2024) examined how group fitness coaches negotiate tensions between fun and discipline in relation to health norms and gendered expectations. Gui et al. (2022) showed that in online fitness environments, instructors must manage expanded social dynamics and heightened emotional responsibilities, particularly when engaging participants remotely. Finally, Rowe and Slater (2021) found that instructors' identity leadership and their ability to foster in-group affect were significant predictors of continued class participation. These insights underscore that developing expertise in fitness work involves not only technical and embodied capacities but also the ability to manage affect, relationships, and self-presentation in highly performative environments.

By examining the development of coaching competence among Les Mills instructors, this paper integrates theoretical and empirical perspectives from the literature on skill acquisition, phenomenology, and the fitness industry. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews, it shows how technical competence, embodied fluency, and emotional performance are developed in tandem. In doing so, it offers a situated account of expertise that foregrounds not only what fitness instructors do, but also how they come to be the kind of professionals their roles require.

Methodology

The approach employed in this study is ethnographic, in the sense that it entailed examining the *in situ* "events, language, rituals, institutions, behaviours, artefacts, and interactions" (Cunliffe, 2010: p. 227) of Les Mills trainers at The Fit Stop. After obtaining permission from both the gym and its employees to gather data, I observed group fitness classes and conducted interviews with the coaches. By the end of the data-gathering process, I had observed or conducted interviews with most of The Fit Stop's Les Mills trainers. They represented a range of teaching experience, with one participant having just begun their instructor journey, while others had been coaching for over a decade. Participants also taught a variety of Les Mills programs and shared their experiences teaching each one.

As a Les Mills instructor myself, I had some knowledge of the world in which my participants operated. Dedicated positivists may argue that the "objectivity" of this study was compromised due to my insider knowledge. On the contrary, though, I have found my background information beneficial in helping me understand instructor experiences. Like any cultural group, Les Mills instructors have shared meanings, practices, ways of speaking, and significant objects that are not readily understood by non-instructors. I was aware of the equipment they used, how Les Mills programs are structured, and the training methods used for instructors. Furthermore, I could easily understand the terms that participants used when they employed group fitness jargon during our interviews.

My positionality as an insider enhanced access to participants, as many were more willing to speak with someone they already knew or recognised from the Les Mills community. This existing rapport helped make recruitment smoother and interviews more open. At the same time, participants often assumed that they could reference shared experiences or use abbreviated terms in interviews with them without needing to elaborate further. While we shared many mutual reference points, I remained aware that my role as a researcher was to unpack the meaning behind them. Consequently, I frequently asked follow-up questions to prompt participants to provide details and clarify their experiences. This process was crucial to avoid collapsing individual variation into a generalised insider perspective.

During the process of collecting and analysing data, this study adhered to the standards for ethical social science research. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Leicester. Although the research being conducted did not pose risks of psychological or reputational harm to participants, their names have been pseudonymised to maintain their anonymity. The Fit Stop is not the name of the gym where participants work. It was changed as an additional layer of identity protection.

Ultimately, the goal of the ethnographic approach was to combine the observational and interview data to present an account of participants' experiences that reflected their perspectives (c.f. Dewan, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Marcus, 2007). This entailed asking instructors about their careers, including how they started and what skills they had developed. When this topic was explored during interviews, participants consistently emphasised how they became increasingly adept at using Les Mills' Five Key Elements. Excerpts from some of their accounts are presented in the succeeding section.

Figure 1. Developmental Trajectory of Les Mills Instructors

Findings

Evidence from interviews indicates that the Five Key Elements' readiness-to-hand develops gradually, and increased competence is expected as instructors go through: (1) auditions; (2) Initial Module Training (IMT); (3) mentorship; and (4) Quarterly Workshops. A visual timeline of the different stages is depicted in the Figure 1.

During the audition stage, aspiring instructors are evaluated on their technical skills. Once they begin their official training, they are required to memorise choreography and learn how to coach segments of a class. When they move to their mentorship, trainee instructors practise using all Five Elements in front of actual participants. Throughout the process, individual Elements become more ready-to-hand, allowing instructors to focus on new aspects of their teaching. Once they are capable of handling full classes and all five are easily applied, instructors enter a continuous cycle of studying newly

released choreography every three months during mandatory Quarterly Workshops. These may be likened to fast-tracked versions of their original training, where they must learn to apply the Key Elements to new sets of movements. However, they can do this because they no longer have to be overly conscious about how to use the Elements and can instead focus on just memorising the new choreography. Each of these milestones is discussed in the succeeding subsections.

Standardised Technique and Instructor Auditions

At the Fit Stop, aspiring instructors must undergo an audition process before participating in their IMT. The gym can enforce this because anyone signing up to train for a Les Mills program needs the endorsement of a licensed company for their registration to be valid. Auditions are an added ritualised layer of gatekeeping that allows The Fit Stop to assess prospective instructors' fitness levels and evaluate how closely their technique aligns with Les Mills standards. In doing so, the company enhances the chances that the trainees they endorse will achieve a passing mark in the IMT.

The format for auditions is similar to a regular Les Mills class, with one of The Fit Stop's instructors on stage, leading the group of auditionees through a class. Unlike a typical exercise session, however, auditions last for over an hour, and aspiring trainees' movements are scrutinised by veteran instructors who evaluate whether their technique meets the standards set by Les Mills. The focus on movements alone is explained by the fact that prospective instructors are usually unaware of the Five Key Elements when they audition for a position. They are not expected to know choreography, coaching, connection, or performance since they are not given any training on these in advance. As such, the basis of passing the audition is solely technique.

Two of the participants interviewed in this research project have served as assessors during their program's auditions. Noah, an RPM instructor, explained that they focus primarily on a prospective instructor's technique. In terms of RPM specifically, he remarked, "It means do they show the right 'P-R-P: position, resistance, and pace." The program is a cycling class in which participants ride stationary bikes equipped with a dial that adjusts the amount of resistance they need to push against the pedals. During the audition, assessors primarily check that aspiring instructors are "on the beat". That is, they are pedalling with the rhythm of the music. They also check that auditionees are "not bouncy," referring to the inability to keep one's hips stable on the bike seat. This occurs when a rider has too little resistance.

When asked to elaborate on why technique is so important, Noah explained, "If your students see that (wrong form) in class, they won't find you a credible instructor". His remark establishes a connection between an instructor's credibility and their ability to demonstrate technique correctly. Such statements emphasise the high level of standardisation associated with that Key Element.

Valerie, who served as an assessor during several BODYCOMBAT auditions, echoed Noah's statements about what is sought among prospective instructors. She said, "During auditions, we basically check to see if…technique is correct. If the instructor in front says 'hook', does their punch look like a hook? If it's a roundhouse kick, does it look like a roundhouse kick?" BODYCOMBAT, a martial arts-based

program, utilises movements from disciplines such as boxing, Taekwondo, Karate, and Muay Thai. For Valerie, the assessors' job is to check that the auditionees' technique resembles the martial arts movements used in the Les Mills program.

The nature of Fit Stop's audition system suggests a preference for candidates whose bodies already exhibit a form of readiness-to-hand. That is, these individuals can perform the correct movements fluidly and instinctively. Prospective instructors whose cadence and martial arts form are already aligned with Les Mills standards can execute techniques without needing much deliberate thought. From a Heideggerian perspective, such movements are not merely superficially correct. They are intuitive and readily available for use. These candidates do not require further guidance on how to move their bodies and can instead concentrate on learning choreography or coaching once training begins.

Initial Module Training: Assessing Choreography and Technique

All participants in this study will, at some point, have undertaken the mandatory IMT to teach their programs. During their initial modules, they are guided by a trainer through a standardised course that is provided to all trainees of Les Mills programs worldwide. During the IMT, prospective instructors are introduced to the Five Key Elements, guided through technical instruction for specific movements, and given a foundational model for coaching. Before completing the module, trainees would have taught a short segment of a class and been evaluated on choreography, technique, and basic coaching cues.

Jason, who teaches BODYBALANCE and RPM, recalled an especially intense part of his IMT called the "Race of Truth," where trainees cycled for over ninety minutes while alternating between heavy climbs and fast sprints. This exceeded the duration of a typical RPM class and required sustained technical precision despite fatigue. Jason remarked that the experience helped him "get a feel for what RPM was," suggesting that the physical challenge allowed him to grasp the essence of the program through direct bodily experience.

There are two ways to unpack what he meant by this. First, the Race of Truth allowed him to experience how challenging RPM could be as a workout when done beyond its prescribed time limit. Second, the physical challenge gave him an appreciation for the physical training effect that riding with proper technique could have. Combining both interpretations, the Race of Truth serves as a way for aspiring RPM instructors to familiarise their bodies with the workout they will be teaching and as a means to reinforce proper technique that is already second nature to them, having passed the audition process.

Jason's experience appears to reflect more than physical exertion. It exemplifies how embodied familiarity is cultivated. Through repeated physical drills, he moved beyond cognitive awareness of proper form and entered a space where technique became second nature. He did not just know how to ride correctly; he also knew how to ride correctly. He could do so automatically. His technique had become second nature, allowing him to pedal correctly despite his fatigue. This is a hallmark of expert embodiment, where bodily movement no longer requires conscious direction but is instead carried out through absorbed practical engagement.

Anthony, a BODYATTACK instructor, shared a similar experience.

His IMT included propulsive drills such as jumping jacks, plyometric lunges, and tuck jumps. He emphasised that choreography must be executed precisely, and that mistakes in movement could lead participants in the class to follow suit. Like Jason, he argued that an instructor's body serves as the model, and their movements must be both correct and consistent. For BODYATTACK, which includes many high-impact exercises, incorrect form could result in injury, making technical precision even more essential.

The constant repetition of complex movements during the training can be viewed as a method for deepening readiness-to-hand. Trainees may have already started the IMT with their technique as second nature. However, the activities they performed during the module pushed them to maintain those standardised movements even at the point of physical exhaustion. In doing so, it reinforced their ability to perform reliably under physical stress. If they could demonstrate proper technique at their limits, they would be more than capable of doing so during regular instruction.

The IMT also introduces trainees to choreography memorisation, though participants mentioned this less frequently during their interviews. Nevertheless, the module requires them to deliver choreography flawlessly during their final assessment, and they receive feedback after multiple presentations. Trainees are reminded that choreography is the foundation on which all other Key Elements rest. Without accurate sequences, even excellent coaching and technique cannot compensate for the lack of precision. To paraphrase my own IMT trainer, an instructor with excellent technique and coaching is useless if their choreography is wrong. The participants in this study likely heard similar articulations during their training modules.

The IMT, thus, plays a dual role. It serves as a site of evaluation and a tool for standardisation. Trainees learn to embody choreography and technique as forms of patterned familiarity. Repetition and fatigue-based drills are not incidental. They are core to the process of building somatic fluency. In the language of Heidegger, the body becomes attuned to these movements not as isolated tasks, but as a mode of practical being. Instructors become able to move through routines without deliberate reflection because the knowledge is ingrained in their physical comportment.

Coaching, connection, and performance are relatively de-emphasised during the IMT, as trainers focus on the two highly structured Key Elements that will be scrutinised during the module assessment. This is not to infer that instructors are left entirely on their own to experiment with how to coach, connect, and perform after their training. Instead, newly trained instructors are guided on how to implement the three less structured Elements during their mentorships, which are the topic of the succeeding section.

Mentorship: Practising the Five Key Elements and Developing Responsibility

Following the IMT, instructors can be employed by gyms that are accredited to offer Les Mills classes. However, prior to handling a class in The Fit Stop, the participants of this study underwent a mandatory mentorship process. Each was partnered with a veteran instructor from their program, who guided them in applying all five of the Key Elements during actual classes. Valerie, who described her experience as an assessor in a previous section, has also served as

a mentor to newly trained BODYCOMBAT instructors. In describing her view of the mentorship process, she says,

> "It will develop you so will get to a stage where you can handle your own class. In the beginning, you just shadow with the mentor to get a feel for what it is like to be on stage. After two or three sessions, you'll be asked to teach, starting with one track [or segment], then two, then half the class. After a few weeks, you'll be teaching the whole class… Every time, you're being given feedback about how to fix your technique or coaching."

Valerie's description frames mentorship in terms often associated with apprenticeship. Prospective instructors learn from more experienced peers by gradually taking on greater responsibility. The process begins with shadowing, which means being on stage without speaking. Shadows demonstrate movements alongside the mentor but do not coach. After a few sessions, they are invited to lead one track, then two, eventually building up to half and then a whole class. Through this gradual process, aspiring instructors gain experience in both demonstrating movements and coaching participants.

Natalie, a BODYPUMP trainer, recalled her experience being mentored by a veteran instructor as follows:

> "Mentorship is totally different from your IMT because it's actual…IMT is like you're playing, because you're still learning, and you only present in front of your Trainer or fellow instructors, but in [the] mentorship, you are teaching to actual students. They will do what you do. If you say the wrong thing, they will do the wrong thing…I got feedback from Steven (her mentor) that I was too monotone, and…I seemed really boring. I was always thinking what I planned to say what's next so I would blab and blab, and nobody would actually be listening. His feedback helped me to focus on getting people to react, because that's how you know they're with you…So it's like you practice more and more, and you start to be more natural."

Natalie described the mentorship experience as "actual", as opposed to IMT, which she described as like "playing". It is during this stage that newly trained instructors first interact with class participants, which we may consider a factor in perceiving the actuality of this occasion. As such, she emphasised the sense of accountability that came with it, remarking that, "If you say the wrong thing, they will do the wrong thing". She thus became accountable for other people's workouts, and it became vital that her technique and coaching were consistent.

Her account also illustrates how mentorship transformed her stage presence. She described herself as "boring", failing to engage her participants. Over time, however, her mentor's feedback prompted a shift. Rather than simply delivering rehearsed lines, she learned to draw reactions from participants and to be more natural in her delivery. Though she did not use the terms directly, she was describing the development of two Key Elements: connection and performance.

Natalie's ability to connect with participants was evidenced in one BODYPUMP class observed for this study. It was a weekday evening, and Natalie was leading her participants through a barbell track focused on doing

bicep curls. The song playing was upbeat and popular, with lyrics that many participants appeared to recognise. As the tempo increased, she faced the class while curling her barbell to the rhythm of the beat. Rather than remaining silent or withdrawn, she scanned the room as she moved, making deliberate eye contact with participants along the front and sides. She called out names of attendees mid-track, saying phrases like "Come on" or "Let's go." At a particularly energetic moment in the song, she altered the lyrics, changing the line "Do you love me" to "Do you love lifts," prompting stifled laughter from several participants. As the repetitions built intensity, her voice rose over the music. "How's everyone doing?" she shouted. The class responded with scattered yells and audible grunts of effort, to which she replied with loud encouragement, saying, "Yes, stay with it." The track ended with a dramatic bass drop, and instead of simply lowering her barbell, Natalie struck a playful pose, which drew cheers and laughter from the room despite the group's visible fatigue.

In that moment, connection and performance became tangible. Her eye contact, vocal expression, and humour reflected a deep attunement to the class. These gestures no longer seemed rehearsed or deliberate. They emerged fluidly, shaped by the energy of the room. Natalie did not add these Elements on top of her instruction. They arose from a body and voice already immersed in the practice. Her lyrical changes and theatrical gestures were not novelties, but natural expressions of a presence shaped through repetition and feedback.

This version of Natalie contrasted sharply with the trainee who once failed to hold attention. Through mentorship, she developed not only technical consistency and choreographic fluency but also the capacity to read the room and respond in real-time. She had moved from self-conscious delivery to a style grounded in responsiveness and ease. Her attention was no longer divided between memorised lines and bodily execution. Those Elements had become ingrained in her demeanour. Her focus now extended outward, toward motivating and energising the class.

Natalie's story, alongside Valerie's description of mentoring, reveals how mentorship serves as a bridge between mechanical repetition and embodied fluency. Trainees begin with a narrow focus, often restricted to choreography and technique. As shadows, they mirror movement without speech. Through repeated exposure to live environments, constructive feedback, and guided practice, they begin to internalise the Five Key Elements. Over time, their delivery becomes fluid and responsive, drawing energy from the music, the room, and the participants themselves.

In Natalie's case, this shift was evident in how she used her voice, read the room, and incorporated moments of humour. These gestures did not exist apart from the workout. They arose within it, having developed comfort with her movements, cues, and presence. Mentorship, then, is not just a period of observation or supervision. It is the phase in which instruction begins to feel lived. The Five Key Elements are not something that can be simply learned. They become integrated into the instructor's way of being, shaping how they move, speak, and connect on stage.

Workshops: The Continuous Cycle of Applying the Five Key Elements

Although instructors are no longer formally assessed after their mentorships, they continuously renew the readiness-to-hand of the Five Key Elements through their engagement with new "releases" in class. Four times a

year, Les Mills produces new combinations of music and choreography for all its programmes. These are called releases and are distributed globally through a structured chain of transmission. The company uploads materials online for its licensed instructors worldwide (Parviainen, 2011). Instructors receive music tracks, training videos, and detailed choreography notes. They are then responsible for memorising, rehearsing, and eventually presenting the new content to their participants.

While instructors can study these materials independently, The Fit Stop requires all instructors to attend Quarterly Workshops, which are held in Manila. During these events, Les Mills brings in designated trainers known as Presenters to lead masterclasses. These classes mirror a typical group fitness session in format, but they are led by instructors who already embody the Five Key Elements in their practice. The purpose of attendance is not to receive a workout, but to experience the new release in preparation for teaching it to their participants in the following weeks.

Jasmine, a BODYCOMBAT and DANCE coach, reflected on this process, saying, "During Workshops, I don't really pay attention to how easy or hard the release is. I'm checking to see how hard the release is to memorise and listen to how the Presenters coach." Her statement reveals that her cognitive attention is not focused on performing the movements but on assimilating their structure and delivery. By evaluating how difficult a release is to memorise, she assesses how it will integrate into her bodily routine. By observing the Presenters' coaching, she is exploring how language and gesture can be adapted to her teaching style. This indicates that she has already developed the capacity to think beyond execution, attending instead to the subtleties of communication and expression.

At times, masterclasses are followed by Education Sessions. In these segments, Presenters explain how to perform and teach movements that are unfamiliar or potentially confusing. Jasmine remarked, "Education sessions are useful for learning the technique and getting more ideas for coaching." These sessions further support instructors in refining their delivery and extending their coaching vocabulary. Instructors are expected not only to master the movements themselves but also to determine how the Five Key Elements can be used to create an engaging and effective experience for participants.

The release cycle acts as an accelerator for embodied fluency. While it involves less scrutiny than the Initial Module or mentorship, it still requires instructors to work toward integrating choreography, technique, and communication within a short period. Within three to four weeks of the Workshop, instructors must memorise the new choreography, internalised the movement patterns, and prepared ways to apply coaching, connection, and performance in real-time. By the official launch date, all instructors at The Fit Stop are required to use the new release in their classes.

These repeated cycles of learning and application create a rhythm that sustains the instructor's growth. Every new release presents an opportunity to re-engage with the Five Key Elements. Each quarter becomes not only a deadline but also a ritual of return, through which readiness-to-hand is reinforced. What may have once required conscious effort is now renewed through structured immersion, ensuring that technique, connection, and performance do not settle into routine but

remain alive to the evolving demands of the practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has examined how Les Mills instructors develop and sustain their teaching through the application of the Five Key Elements: choreography, technique, coaching, connection, and performance. Through the IMT and mentorship processes, instructors learn to use these Elements in an intuitive, embodied manner that reflects Heidegger's concept of readiness-to-hand. From the perspective of participants attending a Les Mills class at The Fit Stop, instructors' movements and cues may appear spontaneous. These are the outcomes of structured training and repeated rehearsal.

The same oversight is apparent in the academic studies of Parviainen (2011) and Andreasson and Johansson (2016), who characterised Les Mills programs as wholly homogenised and imitation-based, leaving little space for instructor creativity or expression. Parviainen (2011) argued that since instructors present predetermined music and choreography to their participants, the classes are forms of "imitation-based fitness" (p. 536) activities. As the author notes, the movements of both instructors and attendees are regulated, with minimal opportunities for "kinesthetic creativity" (p. 537).

In the established literature, Les Mills programs have been likened to factories that follow the principles of Frederick Taylor's (1911) scientific management. The assembly line was choreographed such that workers' movements were standardised, and they had no opportunities to deviate from the process. Parviainen's (2011) conclusions emphasised the constraining nature of Les Mills classes, compelling instructors and participants to perform specific movements in a particular way. Despite this, she recognised that teaching a group fitness class is not a typical "McJob" (p. 536), as instructors need to possess "performing skills" (p. 536), which they use to demonstrate their creativity. Unfortunately, the study in question did not elaborate further on this point.

Andreasson and Johansson (2016) described Les Mills as doing for group exercise what McDonald's did for hamburgers. By producing programmes with standardised music, choreography, and technique, there is a homogenisation in the delivery of classes worldwide. This standardisation in group fitness, they argued, is a manifestation of McDonaldization, a term coined by Ritzer (1996), who posited that the logic and processes used by the popular fast-food chain have been internalised into other aspects of social life. McDonaldization is characterised by four key characteristics: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Chen & Ritzer, 2015).

According to Andreasson and Johansson (2016), Les Mills programs are efficient since they have been designed to achieve specific fitness goals in the shortest amount of time. However, the authors also remarked that despite the demonstrable McDonaldization of group fitness programs, there remain significant differences between exercise routines and hamburgers; as they put it, "It is easier to calculate…how long it takes to satisfy hunger than how much time is needed to complete exercises or 'sculpt' the perfect body" (p.162). Differences among individual exercisers and instructors undermine the homogenisation of group fitness. Despite recognising the differences, the authors failed to consider the potential for spaces, moments, or opportunities for adaptation within Les Mills programs.

Both the works of Parviainen (2011) and Andreasson and Johansson (2016) emphasised the standardised aspects of Les Mills programmes, albeit with token recognition of space for creative expression. However, neither publication was able to elaborate on what that entails. Their lack of detail may be attributed to the approach the authors took to studying Les Mills programmes, which lacked access to insider knowledge about instructors' thoughts and experiences. Having undergone the classes as participants or observers, it is unsurprising that choreography and technique drew their attention more than the other Key Elements, since they are the most easily observable to the uninitiated. It is only the instructors themselves who could potentially explain how and why they applied coaching, connection, and performance, but their perspectives were not presented.

This paper presents a phenomenologically informed account of how the Five Key Elements become embodied through training and experience. Instructors at The Fit Stop demonstrated not only technical proficiency but also a strong sense of affective and moral responsibility towards their participants. Their coaching involved not just delivering routines but also responding to real-time shifts in energy, mood, and engagement. This attentiveness depends on having the Five Key Elements ready-to-hand. Only then can instructors allocate their cognitive and emotional resources to connecting with participants and adjusting their performance accordingly. These insights have important implications for instructor education. They suggest that training programmes should extend beyond technical drills and scripted routines, providing opportunities for reflective feedback, real-time experimentation, and embodied practice. Continuing education can also foreground affective skills such as attunement, presence, and improvisation, which are central to sustaining meaningful participant engagement. Rather than viewing standardisation and responsiveness as a trade-off, instructor development initiatives can be designed to integrate both, encouraging instructors to adapt shared templates fluidly within live class environments.

These findings complicate the assumption that standardisation eliminates the possibility of individualised or responsive instruction. Instead, the study suggests that standardisation and improvisation may coexist. The Five Key Elements serve as a shared framework that enables consistency across Les Mills programmes, while also allowing instructors to exercise discretion in their application.

Although the data in this study are based on a single gym in the Philippines, the findings are likely relevant to the broader Les Mills community. The Five Key Elements are a universal standard across all Les Mills programmes, and instructors worldwide are expected to develop fluency in their application. While the specific methods of training may vary, and some instructors may not have undergone auditions or mentorships like the participants in this study, the goal of embodied mastery remains constant.

This research opens several potential avenues for future inquiry. First, it may inform coaching education by demonstrating how instructors can internalise structured models in ways that still preserve room for adaptation and individual expression. Second, the findings contribute to broader discussions on standardisation and

personalisation in sports and fitness instruction. Rather than treating these as mutually exclusive, this study shows that both can be achieved through embodied fluency. Third, there is a need for further research into how local conditions shape instructor development. Comparative case studies across gyms, cities, or national contexts could reveal how global standards are adapted to fit different institutional cultures and resource environments.

Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of the concept of readiness-to-hand in comprehending the embodied labour of sport and fitness professionals. Although the present research focused on Les Mills instructors, the theoretical insights apply to other domains. Athletes, performers, and recreational exercisers all cultivate skills that eventually become pre-reflective and immediately available for action. Future phenomenological studies would benefit from applying the concept of readiness-to-hand to explore how such embodied responsiveness is achieved in various fields of practice.

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