

Letter To the Editor

To the Editor:

I enjoyed reading Jan Schwartz's article in the recent issue of the *IJTMB*⁽¹⁾. There appear to be parallels in the discussion regarding the place of online learning in complementary health education in the United States⁽²⁾ and New Zealand⁽³⁾.

As Schwartz notes, the transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching can be a fraught experience for teachers and administrators. From my own teaching and administration experience in massage therapy programs I would agree, however, the end results can be substantial.

A student's question about accessing class lecture notes online was the catalyst for me to investigate learning management systems (LMSs), also known as virtual learning environments⁽⁴⁾, several years ago. At the time, the college did not have an LMS in place. Both the student and I had previously studied at other institutions that used the Blackboard LMS and were accustomed to accessing learning resources in this manner.

Traditionally, LMSs have required significant commitment in resources for software licensing fees, hardware, and technical support staff. Only large tertiary education institutions could support such endeavors. However, in recent years, the advent of open-source, general public license LMS software has significantly lowered the financial barrier to implementing these systems. The developers of one open-source LMS software claim nearly 41 million users across over 50,000 installations of their software⁽⁵⁾. The elimination of the upfront licensing costs, decreasing hardware costs, and the ease of use of these software applications puts them within the reach of almost any educational institution. The caveat is that technical support is still required in many instances.

External consultants who assisted the development and deployment of the LMS were a little taken aback that a massage college would want to implement such a system. This perception reflected the attitude of some teaching staff: the complex psychomotor skills involved in massage therapy could not be effectively taught online. Indeed, some subjects are more readily envisaged as being delivered in an online learning environment, such as more academically oriented courses. However, courses that are traditionally thought of as delivered strictly face-to-face may benefit from a blended or hybrid approach—in-class instruction augmented by online learning.

One of the major obstacles to the implementation of online learning is that complementary therapy teachers often have little or no training in adult education pedagogy. They are primarily selected for their subject knowledge, technical skills, and desire to teach. Some are lucky to have a mentor, an apprenticeship, or training provided by their employer. Without a fundamental base of pedagogy, teachers are often faced with a "sink or swim" situation in the classroom. By taking content online, there is a risk of student discontent, not only because of the difference in online pedagogy curriculum design, but also because the immediate feedback in the classroom context to gauge satisfaction or comprehension may not be apparent in an online course. Teachers need help acquiring the skills to transition from in-class pedagogy to online pedagogy and curriculum design.

A second obstacle is the wide variety in pre-existing information and communication technology (ICT) skill sets within the teacher and student body. Competency in a minimum skill set is required to enable users to effectively use LMS systems. Therefore, ICT skills training needs to be offered to make the transition to effective online learning. The implementation of an LMS has implications for the management of academic record systems, and thus administration staff also require training and support in the transition.

The debate about whether online learning is relevant or has a place in complementary health education is largely over. The literature indicates that online learning continues to gain in usage and popularity in the workforce training and professional development industry at large⁽⁶⁾. Massage therapy education providers may experience increased demand for online learning from the so-called digital natives or net generation familiar with acquiring information from the internet and mobile devices. Additionally, with increasingly busy lives and financial pressure to work part-time while they study, students will demand more flexibility in acquiring the knowledge they require to forge a career in massage therapy. The only questions are how online learning will be implemented and the extent to which it will be built into course curricula. What are some of the possible applications? Online formative and summative assessment via quizzes with instant feedback; online submission of essay assignments with automated plagiarism-checking software; students having 24/7 access to their grade book and attendance record; forum discussions and class collaboration on contraindications to a treatment knowledge base project

using a wiki; a video library of instructors demonstrating massage techniques; webinars featuring special guests; LMS integration with web-based student record systems—there are numerous exciting applications.

Will massage therapy instructors need to upgrade their skills to implement effective online learning programs that are equivalent to classroom learning? Yes. Will these instructors require the training and support of college administration to make the transition? Absolutely. Without such support, staff can become overwhelmed and resentful of the added demands. Acquiring new skills is challenging but not insurmountable; indeed, instructors assist their students in such a process every day.

Matthew D. Stewart,
BCom, BAppSc, MOst, CMT, NCTMB
Formerly Programme Leader,
musculoskeletal anatomy
Programme Leader, research methodology
New Zealand College of Massage
Auckland, New Zealand

CONFLICT OF INTEREST NOTIFICATION

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

COPYRIGHT

Published under the [Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

REFERENCES

1. Schwartz J. Faculty perception of and resistance to on-line education in the fields of acupuncture, chiropractic, and massage therapy. *Int J Ther Massage Bodywork*. 2010;3(3):20–31. <http://www.ijtmb.org/index.php/ijtmb/article/view/96/123>
2. Mayrhofer P. Have we seen the demise of hands-on seminars? *Massage Magazine*. 2010;Dec(175):18-19.
3. McQuillan DJ. Massage therapy education online: student satisfaction and achievement, part I. *Int J Ther Massage Bodywork*. 2010;3(2):3–13. <http://www.ijtmb.org/index.php/ijtmb/article/view/82/111>
4. Reis R, Gomes T, Reis B. Learning management systems in vocational schools. *WSEAS Trans Adv Eng Educ*. 2008;5:580-590. <http://www.wseas.us/e-library/transactions/education/2008/27-1378.pdf>
5. Moodle.org. Moodle stats. <http://moodle.org/stats/>. Updated February 2011. Accessed March 17, 2011.
6. Allen IE, Seaman J. *Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States, 2009*. Babson Park, MA: Babson Survey Research Group; 2010.