

COVID-19 and Massage Therapy Education Impact and Future Implications

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<https://doi.org/10.3822/ijtmb.v15i3.761>

Massage therapy education processes, practices, and research are rarely described in the scientific literature, and the Covid-19 pandemic may have caused dramatic shifts in how massage therapists were being educated. To date, findings of the impact of the pandemic pivot on massage therapy education have yet to be reported. This editorial explores the trends in hands-on education of other professions during the pandemic and relates these trends to massage therapy education. Currently, it is unknown how institutions supported massage therapy educators in preparation for the shift to online and hybrid learning.

KEYWORDS: massage therapy education; distance education; Covid-19; faculty; technology; curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that caused most educational institutions to move learning online, massage therapy classes were primarily taught in person. In 2019 prior to the pandemic, only 14% of schools offered online entry-level courses, which was 5% lower than the previous year.⁽¹⁾ Not much has changed since a decade ago when researchers noted that massage therapy educators and schools were slow to adopt online teaching technologies, and that massage therapy educators could not see the relevance of online course design and delivery in the massage therapy field.^(2,3) Compared to data from the Education Department's National Center for Education, statistics show, pre-COVID, that approximately one-third (37%) of students enrolled in fall 2019 took online

courses.⁽⁴⁾ However, because of COVID, more massage therapy programs moved classes online; nearly half, according to the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) 2021 Massage Therapy Association Research Report.⁽⁵⁾ Kim et al. noted that COVID-19 required universities, instructors, and students to move to an online educational environment without the needed preparation, planning, or training.⁽⁶⁾ It is unclear if online offerings will remain in place in massage therapy education as the global pandemic moves into an endemic period. There exists a distinct lack of research evaluating massage therapy education, particularly related to online and blended learning and andragogical theories. This editorial will explore the trends in hands-on education during the pandemic, specifically the move to hybrid or online learning, and the preparation of educators to deliver course material in this format.

Education Response to COVID-19

To create a more complete look at how COVID-19 has impacted other hands-on professions, a comparison to physical therapy, as well as nursing education, was undertaken. Similar to massage therapy, physical therapy and nursing involve hands-on, manual therapies. Physical therapy and nursing similarly require critical decision-making skills that can impact a person's health. Like massage therapy education, physical therapy and nursing education encompass theoretical and practical education. Both professions have traditionally been taught in-person, from lectures to labs to clinical experience.⁽⁶⁻¹⁰⁾ Blackinton reported that 90% of physical therapy instruction was face-to-face prior to the pandemic.⁽⁹⁾

With the pandemic, however, in both physical therapy and nursing, it was reported that education content that was typically delivered face-to-face or hybrid went fully online, and the face-to-face course content had to be quickly adapted to online delivery.^(6,9,11-13) In fact, 91% of physical therapy programs reported that the Covid-19 pandemic required them to remove their students from the clinical environment or resulted in students being unable to begin their clinical rotations.⁽¹²⁾ In addition, of those surveyed, 73% of National Nurses Associations (NNA) reported that undergraduate nursing programs were interrupted by COVID-19.⁽¹⁴⁾ However, more than half (57%) of NNAs reported that COVID-19 had a positive effect on nursing education, with the biggest gains found in the adoption of online learning (International Council of Nurses, 2021).⁽¹⁴⁾

Educator Preparation for Online Course Design & Delivery

This move to online education also means educators were quickly making adjustments to accommodate that shift. Unfortunately, many faculty members lack experience with online course design and delivery.⁽¹⁵⁾ This problem was not unique to massage therapy education. In physical therapy education, it was noted that at the program level, there was no scientific literature documenting online, blended, or hybrid physical therapy education.⁽¹²⁾ The lack of educational technology use and online delivery of massage therapy education was discussed more than a decade ago⁽³⁾ and continues to be reported.⁽¹⁰⁾ Furthermore, faculty lack appropriate levels of technical support and theory needed for online teaching.⁽¹⁶⁾ In physical therapy education, Gagnon et al. stated that the pandemic required a quick pivot to hybrid or online learning with minimal to non-existent time to train faculty in technology or online pedagogy.⁽¹²⁾ In nursing education, Morin described how faculty were offering online courses without well-considered, reliable, and reproducible plans.⁽¹⁷⁾ For the massage therapy profession, the reluctance to adopt online education prior to the pandemic could be because many massage therapy educators feel that the hands-on nature of the profession is paramount and, therefore, the required instruction disallows for learning in an online environment.^(2,3,10)

Massage Education Post-Pandemic

While other health professional programs have been actively reporting on the educational pandemic pivot, we could find no current research that evaluates this shift to online learning for massage therapy education. Although the *IJTM* has twice called for submissions of pandemic massage education papers, currently none have been submitted.^(18,19) Research is specifically needed to evaluate in which courses hybrid learning and online learning, both asynchronous and synchronous, are being implemented. It is also important to evaluate massage educator perceptions of online education, educator knowledge for online course design and delivery (andragogy, problem-based learning, and other theories), and what support and professional development educators are receiving to prepare them for online course design and delivery. Although massage therapy has historically been an industry opposed to moving coursework online, despite the growing popularity of the method and the fact that it is supported by andragogy, there is a need to understand the lasting impact that COVID-19 will have on massage therapy education and educators.

CONCLUSION

Little research exists regarding the formatting choices of massage education as a result of COVID-19. While other programs are reporting the effects of COVID-19 on education programs, none can be identified in the massage therapy industry. It is unknown how institutions support educators in preparation for formatting changes, as well as massage educators' knowledge of andragogy and other related adult learning theories. Research on these topics is sorely needed for necessary pivots caused by future pandemics. This future research can also be used to inform decisions regarding moving coursework to an online or hybrid format outside of a pandemic situation. Lastly, this future research can inform professional development choices for educators.

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