PERSPECTIVE

The Value of Assessment in Yoga Therapy Programs

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As IAYT moves forward with the process of accrediting yoga therapist training programs, the need for schools to formalize evaluative processes to ensure that their students meet or exceed the Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists and the Competencies Profile is imperative. Without evidence that the education of yoga therapists meets these quality standards and that students graduate with a baseline skill level, we cannot expect that yoga will be regarded as a credible therapeutic modality in the eyes of the public or with health care providers. In essence, without comprehensive assessment of student proficiency, the standards and the Competencies Profile are rendered ineffectual.

Numerous concerns have been voiced about the nature of assessment and the appropriate means with which to evaluate the skills of yoga therapists that are in alignment with the lineage of yoga. Some contend that assessment places judgment on students in a manner and form that is intrinsically nonyogic. In this perspective I offer some personal and scholarly support to reduce the concerns regarding assessment. My intention is to encourage yoga therapy schools to actively engage in the development of assessment tools that will support their program's growth and will establish competency amongst their graduates.

The Function of Assessment

Although educators often claim to know which of their students comprehend and assimilate the information being presented, perceptions are often biased. These biases may inadvertently lead new yoga therapists into the profession who lack the essential skills to responsibly engage in the practice of yoga therapy. Assessment tools that reliably measure student comprehension, achievement, and assimilation of skills and competencies are needed.

In the first chapter of the yoga sutras, the word *vairagyam*, often translated as nonattachment, is discussed (Dass, 1999). The colloquialism "I'm not attached," which is frequently referenced in the yoga community, implies a degree of freedom from desire or expectation of outcome. Yet it is essential that mentors and educators of emerging yoga therapists be highly invested in student learning and outcomes and able to offer objective evidence that trainees attain the essential competencies identified in the standards. The Sanskrit root of vairagyam, *raj*, means to color. The prefix *vi* negates what follows (Carrerra, 2006). The interpretation of vairagyam to mean seeing without color supports the notion of bias-free assessment and discourages educators from making assumptions about their students, curriculum, and personal effectiveness. Using this framework, educators can approach the task of assessment with due interest in their students' progress yet also evaluate that progress in a way that is objective and free of attachment to the outcome.

Defining Assessment

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is an independent corporation and one of two commission members of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), which is responsible for institutional accreditation in the United States. The HLC accredits degree-granting postsecondary educational institutions in the North Central region of the United States. As such, they are invested in the assessment of educational outcomes.

The HLC describes assessment of student learning as a participatory, iterative process that

- provides data/information about students' learning
- engages the educator and others in analyzing and using this data/information to confirm and improve teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes
- produces evidence that students are learning the intended outcomes
- guides educational and institutional improvements
- evaluates whether changes made improve/affect student learning and documents the learning process (The Higher Learning Commission, 2006).

Assessment in Practice

My first encounter with the need for formal assessment of student progress occurred while I was teaching the Foundations of Yoga Therapy course at Mt. Royal University. In this setting instructors are required to evaluate the extent to which students assimilate the information presented. The experience was new and daunting and raised the question about how to best appraise their knowledge. It was particularly challenging because the course included foundation principles without any form of experiential practice. The development of assessment tools for this class not only allowed me to find innovative and effective methods with which to evaluate students, but also provided the opportunity to assess my teaching skills and the effectiveness and import of the information presented.

Tools of Learning and Tools for Learning

Although there are many models of assessment (Black & William,1998), one of the more useful paradigms draws a distinction between tools of learning and tools for learning (Stiggins, 2006). In general, tools of learning represent formal, objective, quantitative measures that are typically administered at the end of a course to ascertain whether a student has an understanding of factual information. Tests or quizzes on anatomy and physiology are examples. Tools for learning represent informal, subjective, qualitative methods. These methods typically support the developmental learning process during

which feedback is provided in the context of mentorship. Here, strengths are accentuated and strategies to deal with unsatisfactory skills acquisition are addressed. Supervised student practica that use client logs or videotaped sessions with feedback from mentors are examples. It is vital that the assessment of yoga therapist trainees includes the combination of these assessment strategies to ensure that the rich nuances of yoga therapist competencies are captured while measuring the extent to which programs meet or exceed IAYT's Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists.

Face Validity

Face validity refers to a test's ability to accurately measure what it is intended to assess. A great deal of caution must be exercised when devising assessment tools to ensure that the items listed measure the skill or competency being evaluated. In the context of yoga therapy, this matter is complex and multifaceted. Certain assessment tools, such as surveys or quizzes, may be used to obtain information about a student's ability to locate a particular anatomical structure (tools of learning) but they may fail to assess the degree to which he or she understands the application of therapeutic concepts to clinically address issues related to that structure (tools for learning). For this reason, assessment batteries for yoga therapists must be diverse in their ability to not only capture static information, but also identify the dynamic skills required to effectively operate in the clinical milieu. In our training program we have adopted numerous assessment tools, including oral presentations, group feedback and supervision, review of case studies, quizzes on physiology and Ayurveda, practice portfolios, and client logs for practicum. Each shines a different light on students' acquisition of knowledge and clinical skill and the effectiveness of our program. This approach enables us to assess what is working and for whom as we prepare emerging yoga therapists for professional practice.

The word *assess* comes from the Latin *assidere*, which means to sit beside (Stefanakis, 2002). In the context of educating student therapists, perhaps we can view the process of assessment as collaborative, interactive, and inclusive of the perspective of the student. At this stage in the professional growth and development of yoga therapy, we all are engaged in the process of collaborative learning. The more information that can be gleaned about how to effectively prepare students to do the complex work of yoga therapy, the more confident we all can be that competencies are being met, that our graduates are worthy, and that our field will emerge as a robust healing profession.

References

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