



Many subjects can be taught online, but hands-on massage therapy at the beginning and novice level, in my opinion, cannot.

## Online Education

### A Convenient and Inexpensive Way to Learn

By Ben E. Benjamin

**Not long ago, learning was restricted to attending** class on campus or through mail correspondence. But today, if we take a look at any student under the age of 30, they have lived nearly their entire life with access to computers, and it seems only logical that education would be accessible in the medium to which younger generations are accustomed. But how does online education measure up as a platform for presenting massage therapy education, a manual therapy that is all about touch?

At first, I thought online education was quite limited. I didn't believe you could learn information that was usually gained by hands-on experience on a computer, let alone teach the anatomy of the human body in an online format.

But now that I've experienced this medium, I realize that I was wrong. There are, in fact, many surprising benefits to online learning, even in massage therapy. A large portion of massage therapy education is rooted in textbook learning, not just hands-on practice. With the wide array of learning styles, delivery of this content can be more successful through the use of an online environment: visual learners can watch videos and PowerPoint presentations, auditory learners can listen to recorded lectures and terminology pronunciations, and kinesthetic learners can follow along at their own pace while performing palpation exercises.

Online education does not have as many limitations as I once perceived. I remember a story of a young medical student who had to take a break because of the grueling schedule of medical school. She told me that she had 28 teachers, and when she stopped going to classes and stayed home to do the work on her own, not only did her grades improve, she learned more and had more time for herself. For a student such as this, online education is very beneficial.

## VARIABILITY

The benefits of online education are still expanding with the progression of technology. Today, the Internet offers interactive methods such as blackboards, Skype, Facebook, YouTube videos, and webinars. People can learn from home at any time of the day or night without time constraints or the pressure to absorb the material from the instructor during an allotted day or hour. This is especially valuable if the student works a full-time job and can only take classes during nontraditional hours. Likewise, online-based education and continued learning programs provide a much more affordable option by cutting down on commuting costs, time, and energy. It allows learners to study at their own pace without comparing themselves to others, and it also gives many more students access to well-known instructors from across the country.

On the other hand, I am by no means endorsing the notion that massage therapy should be taught solely online. It is very important for

learners to be assessed in person to ensure they are implementing the technique correctly, are physically able to perform bodywork, and are ethically deserving of licensure and certification. However, it is also important to note the effectiveness of online learning within this field.

At present, there is no hands-on testing for massage therapy licensing, only a written examination (on a computer). The downside of learning online is that there is a decreased value placed on practical learning within the classroom. And while I definitely think those beginning an education program in the body therapy field need classroom experience to learn how to use their hands and to connect with people, I am also aware that teaching practical skills in the average bodywork program does not require each and every student to perform practical application skills on the instructor. Such individualized attention is not only costly, but time consuming. Instead, teachers demonstrate a skill that the students then practice on one another as the instructor observes.

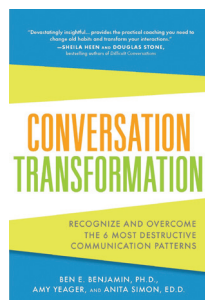
## NOVICE VS. ADVANCED

I make a clear distinction between beginner and novice education and more advanced training. Many subjects can be taught online, but hands-on

massage therapy at the beginning and novice level, in my opinion, cannot. When I teach a class of 30 students, no matter how much I walk around and check on their technique, I know how their work looks but I really don't know how their work feels. I can only get that experience by having them work on me in a private tutorial. Though a student may appear to have impeccable body mechanics and technique, many important details can be missed if the instructor does not experience the student's touch firsthand (e.g., depth of pressure, transition of their movements, responsiveness to the actual tissues under their hands, sense of the therapist's intent, and many other things that can only be taught and assessed through hands-on teaching). For many years, I taught all of my students one-on-one. It's the only way to teach every facet of bodywork.

For the more advanced student, online education is almost the same as in-classroom education; without in-depth, individual feedback on practical skills as described above, teaching students in person is actually no better than teaching people through DVDs or webinars.

Having taught a number of people who studied my DVDs or took my webinars and then came in for a private tutorial, I have noticed




*Conversation Transformation*, co-authored by Ben Benjamin, trains readers to recognize the specific behaviors that cause communication breakdowns in personal and professional life. The book explains how and why conversations fail and provides practical skills to convert disputes into productive dialogues. Available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

that after participating in an in-person hands-on workshop, the skills of an in-person classroom student were no different than the students who took my DVD or webinar courses. In fact, in some cases, students who took the DVD or webinar courses had superior skills to those who took in-person courses because the students had plenty of time to practice and hone their skills by watching me perform the technique in a webinar, close-up and repeatedly, before they came in for the lesson.

Some massage schools offer online courses where, for several months, the students have contact online followed by on-site learning. During the online learning portion of their program, the student completes the written hours by solving problems, learning SOAP note protocols, asking questions, and so on. This can be achieved through the use of online blackboards, education websites, or even Facebook for the class participants to ask questions and receive answers. For advanced practitioners, online learning provides a convenient and inexpensive way to learn and obtain continuing education hours for maintenance of certification and licensing.

#### OH, THE POSSIBILITIES

There are various ways that people use technology to achieve educational goals. Some people purchase a DVD after taking a workshop so they can continue to practice what they learned in the class. Others take a series of webinars and utilize video clips, or purchase books, manuals, and DVDs to reinforce and continue their learning. Due to the increasing success of such methods, I have no doubt even more new technologies will arise to enhance online learning. **m&b**

 Ben E. Benjamin, PhD, holds a doctorate in education and sports medicine, and is founder of the Muscular Therapy Institute. Benjamin has been in private practice for more than 45 years and has taught extensively across the country on topics including orthopedic massage, Active Isolated Stretching and Strengthening, and ethics. He is the author of *Listen to Your Pain* (Penguin, 2007), *Are You Tense?* (Pantheon, 1978), and *Exercise Without Injury* (MTI, 1979), and coauthor of *The Ethics of Touch* (Sohnen-Moe Associates, 2003). Presently, he is offering continuing education for massage therapists around the world via webinars. He can be contacted at [ben@benbenjamin.com](mailto:ben@benbenjamin.com).

