ASSESSING SKILLS & ABILITIES THROUGH ORAL & PRACTICAL EXAMS

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:
This course explains how to align student assessments with the knowledge, skills and abilities they are expected to grasp from a course.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:
This course explains the role of oral and practical assessments and how to amend current courses to align the information presented and with the assessments. When you finish this course you will be able to:

- Align assessments with objectives and competencies in courses.
- Identify the plan and goals of an oral or practical assessment.
- Describe the criteria of fair and valid assessments.
- Describe three levels of both oral and practical assessments.
- Outline performance standards for an assessment.
- Define subjective skills and abilities.
- Distinguish between the 4 taxonomies of knowledge using task terminology.
- Apply a rubric as a scoring tool.
- Explain the roles of content, student expectations and feedback in testing formats.

HOW MASSAGE THERAPY INSTRUCTORS CAN BETTER ALIGN STUDENT ASSESSMENTS WITH THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES THEY’RE EXPECTED TO ABSORB IN THE CLASSROOM.
As consumers of massage, each of us knows when a session meets our goals, our personal standards and is enjoyable. As instructors of massage, we observe students applying proper strokes, using effective draping and safe body mechanics. The challenge we often face as educators is to create a method of assessment that is easy to use, provides information on areas needing corrections, aligns with both course and program goals and objectives, and reflects workplace skills.
While the information in this course can be used when creating new exams, it is primarily designed to assist in examining and modifying current oral and practical exams to produce a more effective and usable tool. Quality assessments allow both the instructor and student to recognize if and when certain standards have been reached. If one of the main purposes of assessments is to improve student learning, then quality assessments produce a positive effect on a student’s behavior and performance. An added benefit is that they also help in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the design of the course materials and activities.

Effective assessments provide feedback on how well the objectives have been met and identify the need for interventions to improve upon any objectives or competencies not reached. Agencies such as accrediting bodies examine programs to determine if the standards are consistent with state, regional or national requirements, if the information is presented in a manner that allows it to be understood and applied by the student, and if assessments are used as tools to both reinforce learning and evaluate progress. Schools who are not accredited will benefit from having a better understanding of how to create and use quality assessments consistent with these standards.

As a profession we are identifying higher standards for student learning and performance in school and in the workplace after graduation. Quality methods of assessing performance help reach those goals. Most teachers of massage therapy are not trained as educators and therefore don’t know all of the educational tools that have been developed. This course is designed to help in one area—the performance assessment. There are many ways to make sure that what you’re testing, how you’re testing and what you’re doing with the results is effective. Look through this information, find a way to use one, two or all of the criteria recommended, and see what happens. After the normal learning curve, the results will most likely show as an improvement in student performance and a decrease in your stress level.

If you’re in a small school and responsible for all course design and materials, see what you have that works well, and identify those areas that could benefit from modification. If you’re in a larger school, have a colleague or teaching assistant think about how assessments are designed. If you offer a teacher training program at your school, invite apprentice instructors to add input. If you’re comfortable networking with instructors in different parts of the state or country, let them take a look. Collaboration works.

If one of the main purposes of assessments is to improve student learning, then quality assessments produce a positive effect on a student’s behavior and performance.

**HOW DO YOU GET THERE FROM HERE?**

During a massage, we first assess the client, and then begin to apply techniques that will help reach mutually agreeable goals. Throughout the session, we adapt as needed, based on what we see or sense, and from the client responses and feedback. Oral and practical exams sometimes operate in a similar pattern. Ask the student a question, and get a blank look? Rephrase the question and the answer comes. Instead of seeing the exam as the final copy, take some time to use it as a draft in progress, that is modified based on the information and feedback in this course. The benefit of oral and practical exams is the human factor that allows for the personal interchange, as with massage.

Your personal method of sequencing may be logical and follow a “first this, then that method.” For those who do not do things in a linear manner, work back and forth to make sure all information is available. For example, to determine if a test question is valid, look at the phrasing, then look back at the objectives in both the exam and the course. A mind-map or non-linear method can be just as effective when used to create a new assessment or to evaluate a current one.

Forward and backward planning is not a new concept. In an ideal situation, a course is designed and assessments are created at the same time to meet the standards identified. Most of you already have your courses and assessments completed. Look back to see if the learning objectives are in alignment with the exam. Ask yourself, is what the student will know at the end of the course being tested? Feel free to use this as a yardstick to identify those areas where things are working well and those areas where there are problems. The problem may be with the actual assessment or with the course design. This course is focused on the assessments themselves, and provides only brief ideas as to where other causative factors could be at hand.

**WHAT WE’RE MEASURING**

Performance assessments are created to identify how
the student is doing at a specific time in the educational process. When done right, they also reflect the caliber of the learning environment, the course objectives, the educators and materials used.

There are certain goals identified in every learning process. As the process continues, the students acquire new knowledge, abilities or skills. Assessments are snapshots taken at different stages of this process to see if the student is progressing at an expected rate. With oral and practical exams for massage, we’re looking to see if the massage student can explain and/or perform at these various stages.

We’re also measuring the effectiveness of the course design and teaching. If one or two students have a problem and perform below expectations, we turn our attention on the students. If multiple students have problems and perform below expectations, our attention starts to move to the instructor or instructional material. Was the information modified to meet student abilities? Was it reinforced after it was taught? Was there sufficient supervised practice with corrections made? Was the assigned instructor absent? A layered and connected method of presentation—where one skill builds directly on another—is important in massage. Assessments work best when they match the same layers.

Look at the big picture, as well as the details. In career-based programs the tests are reflective of the skills needed to perform in the workplace. Standards set by accrediting bodies or identified by professional organizations or licensing boards provide guidance on the minimum expected of a student. There is a difference between what must be taught and what else would benefit the student. Tests need to be reflective of the decisions made by your school as to the higher importance of the two standards.

Check to see how many topics are represented in your assessment. Are the questions well distributed on the topics and objectives, or do they tend to lean towards a single item? A well-rounded exam balances the test items with the subject matter and objectives.

In the best case scenario, tests are created as the course is being designed. That allows them to be in alignment with the information being presented, and directly tie in to the objectives. It also helps identify the quantity and scope of tests needed to effectively evaluate the students. In the case of oral and practical exams, it helps connect the delivery method with the evaluation method: items demonstrated and practiced in the classroom are tested in practical exams, while reading assignments and general knowledge are best tested in written exams.

Many educators have designed the tests after the entire course has been developed almost as an afterthought. Some include test materials that are not directly related to the course or objectives, which tends to decrease the effectiveness and reliability of the test. If something is worth teaching and worth learning, it needs to be identified as a learning objective before being evaluated. If you are using this material to evaluate current exams, those are the items to check: where is it taught, how is it taught, and what part of the competency and learning objectives are reflected in the exam.

Identify any items or criteria on the test that is not reflected in the above and determine if they can be removed from the test or added to the course material. In the case of delivery or evaluation method, is there a better way to test or evaluate? Are the items tested in a manner reflective of how they will be performed in a work setting?

**CRITERIA OF A QUALITY ASSESSMENT**

The standards on which judgments or decisions are based are referred to as criteria. They provide guidance on what is and is not acceptable. All educational assessments have similar criteria that are separate from the subject or topic. They assure that the student performance will be based solely on what the student does, and not be biased by outside influences, other people or materials.

A well-designed performance exam must meet the following criteria:

- **The student must know** what is required to pass the test; this also means the student has been taught these skills and had sufficient time to practice while supervised.

- **The person(s) doing the evaluation must know** what answers and activities are acceptable and the criteria for rating them. That also includes a thorough understanding of the tasks required and any order in which they must be presented.

- **The setting, materials and equipment must be** available and in good working conditions. That requires planning, especially if multiple classes are sharing the same room.
for designing and implementing oral and practical exams for massage therapy students.

Fairness
Student knowledge, skills and abilities evolve over a period of time. A fair and equitable test allows for some variation in individual style without sacrificing the goal of the education.

Who is your student? If you have entry level standards for skills such as reading and math, does your test reflect the diversity of how quickly and well students learn? If the majority of students can learn to do a basic relaxation massage in half of a semester, what is your allowance for those students who take an extra two or three weeks? What about the student who can perform at a high level yet is unable to write chart notes at anywhere near the expected level? Although those are decisions to be made within your own program, it's important to look at the way assessments are written or implemented to make sure that the average student can achieve high level of performance.

Is the test realistic in that it reflects what a massage therapist would be expected to do in the workplace? For example, the standard of a one hour massage is not met when a student completes a full body massage in either 30 or 90 minutes. The test criteria and standards need to reflect that. Check to make sure that all of the information tested within that time frame has been presented in the classroom in that time frame.

For example: have students had the opportunity to perform this with 90 minutes in the classroom and not just as homework practice? The setting is important; having a new client is important.

If the class subject matter is business, and a massage therapist is expected to handle front desk duties in a reasonable amount of time while also providing quality customer service, does the exam test the speed and accuracy of the calculations made as well as the personal interaction with the client? That is an example of a higher level taxonomic measurement.

Examples of fairness criteria:

- Students informed on test content and delivery method.
- Students provided with clearly identified scoring criteria, including what is and is not acceptable in responses and performances.
- Only tests skills that have been taught and practiced in a supervised setting under same or similar conditions.
- Test primarily in the same method as presented.
- Are expectations high for all and not just designed to allow poorly performing students to pass?
- Avoid educational, cultural or other forms of bias, stereotypes and offensive questions.
- Use a variety of questions to allow student to show full range of subject knowledge.
- Is there a different way of testing this information?
- Within the framework of skills and abilities expected of a student, does it meet any special needs a student has?

Validity
An assessment that is valid measures what it’s designed or intended to measure, and the results are used for what they are intended. Some questions to ask:

- Is the correct domain being fully assessed?
- Does success in the measurement predict work-related success?
- Is it logical and related to work skills?
- Does it make sense?
- Is it meaningful for both students and educators, and provide accountability for performance?
- Does it discriminate against any group?
- Is it current, as in not the same test given every year without looking at changes in workplace skills?

Example of validity: Teaching a student to center, to meditate, or to perform Tai Chi in order to connect and be present during a massage. Are the tasks being tested in these skills related to their relationship in massage or for self-help use? Although both are valid reasons, you need to be sure the reasoning is clear to the student.

Reliability
Can the results be repeated if another observer is involved?
- Are results stable and consistent over a period of time?
- Will retesting show similar results?
- Will testing material in segments produce same results?
- The types of activities tested reflect the objectives.
- A rubric or list of acceptable answers is available.
Example of reliability: A student misses the exam due to a verified emergency and sets up a make-up practical for another day with another instructor. Allowing for the natural subjectivity in human nature, will both parties have a clear understanding of what is being tested and how it will be scored? If the student had been present on the original date, would the results be similar?

Practicality

→ Can the test be administered within the course with the number of students and faculty you have? If 20 students must perform two massages during the year and there is only one instructor doing the evaluation, how will this be done? Is this inside or outside of class time? If additional testers are needed, are there funds and facilities to bring them in?
→ Is the size of the exam appropriate?
→ Smaller assessments lessen fear and anxiety.
→ Larger assessments may be more representative of work applications.

Efficiency

The test should be relatively easy to administer, and take only as much time as necessary.
→ An assessment of a single, 60-minute Swedish massage might take 90 minutes to administer. Under normal circumstances, the massage should not take three hours because a workplace does not allow three hours between appointments.
→ An oral exam that requires students to identify 20 bony landmarks on a skeleton could take between five and 10 minutes, not 30.

Intend Positive Results

The result of the test will show the average or above average student how skilled they are. It is a combination of fairness, neutrality and positive encouragement. Beyond natural test anxiety, the student goes into the exam with a positive attitude. Using the informed consent process here, the student is informed of plan and criteria, and is ready to proceed. This step may also be done at the start of the course and after each section of material presented depending on the complexity.

If possible, allow students to assess themselves either before the test (as a review) or after their test and compare feedback from instructors, classmates and any other observers.

Effects and Consequences

→ Does the exam produce the information needed by both instructors and students?
→ Are results shared in a manner that the student understands what was done well and what was missed and how that can be improved upon?
→ Is constructive criticism about judgment of the actions or judgment of the person?

Have Clear Goals

A quality assessment has clear goals and targets. It identifies what the student knows and can do.

Clear Criteria for Judging/Evaluating

Both the student and the examiner know what is and is not acceptable for each of the items on the assessment.

Appropriate Placement

Assessment is in the appropriate area in the instructional segment. It evaluates student performance after the natural learning and skill development have taken place.

Appropriate Method of Testing

Skills and abilities that a massage therapist will be required to perform in the workplace are assessed by a practical exam. The knowledge, skills and abilities that a therapist will communicate in the workplace are assessed by an oral exam. Information that can be looked up in a text and is not part of a traditional work environment may be better assessed in a written exam.

PERFORMANCE TESTS

One of the benefits of teaching massage is that we have the ability to assess students on their performance ability at various stages of the training in realistic settings. These are considered criterion-based tests because they have certain criteria that can be met and measured. A culinary training program offers similar real-world simulations for assessment, though the same can’t be said for brain surgery. Realistic holographic models have been created to evaluate a surgeon’s skills, and many of them are very close to the real thing. Yet there is no student clinic for them to practice and receive feedback from their customers.

Performance tests are designed based on the type of assessment/response, the level of assessment/skill and the performance standards identified.

Two types of assessments have been identified based on the type of response given by the student: selected response and constructed response. Oral
and practical exams are best tested using constructed response.

**Selected response: “pick one”**
- Primarily used in written exams
- Question given with two or more responses where student is expected to choose a response, such as a true/false question, for example.
- With this method, instructors have very little control over student’s guessing the answers.

**Constructed response: “provide one”**
- Can be used in written, oral or practical exams
- Involves thinking, judgment
- Can test the simple or more complex
- Reduces the chance of a student guessing
- Brief, usually one correct answer, like a fill-in-the-blank
- Performance: produce a ‘product’; evaluated by observer; benefits from rubric
- Essay: subject and time restrictions; benefits from rubric
- Oral: asking questions that have either brief or involved responses
- Self-assessment: student processes thinking and attitude on their progress
- Harder to score; often benefit from a list of acceptable responses such as a rubric

A performance test is designed based on the level of knowledge and skill needed, as well as the incremental method in which students learn.

**KNOWLEDGE: LEVELS OF TESTING AND ASSESSMENT**

**Simple understanding:** use selected response or constructed response.

**Deeper understanding and reasoning skills:** use essay or performance/practical requiring some problem solving.

**Performance of skills, creation of product:** practical with observer comment.

**Deeper involvement, which can include affective domain and human connection:** practical, observer and self-assessment; oral

**SAMPLE APPLICATION**

Here are examples of oral and practical assessments that could be used to evaluate effleurage skills at the end of each of these levels:

**LEVEL 1:**
Basic knowledge and fundamental skill

**Oral exam:** student explains application and effects of effleurage.

**Practical exam:** student follows instructions and demonstrates direction of stroke, smooth and even application.

**LEVEL 2:**
Comprehension of use and application of technique.

**Oral exam:** student identifies indications and contraindications for effleurage, explains effects and methods of application.

**Practical exam:** student organizes strokes in sequence and flow, effective application of lubricant, manipulation of tissues, smooth transition between regions of the body and when changing strokes.

**LEVEL 3:**
Skillful performance

**Oral exam:** student clearly defines stroke and describes possible reasons for modifying pressure or rhythm of stroke.

**Practical exam:** student demonstrates well-developed skills, adapts and alters stroke over regions of the body and in response to sensory cues.
Having information pertaining to imitation, practice and habitual performance is valuable because you’re better able to identify the degree of skill and understanding to be evaluated.

During the **imitation level** the student learns to move through the activities in a slow sequential method. This is where the information moves from a cognitive domain to a manual skill, or, in other words, from head to hands. During **practice**, the student repeats the activity in an attempt to create a smooth action. The fundamentals become learned activities, and students display some confidence and proficiency in performance—with occasional reminders or coaching. Self-correction becomes evident as practice continues, and also allows for linking of related applications. Practice is extremely important in a skill-based profession such as massage, where unused skills may be quickly forgotten.

During the **habitual performance** phase, the repeated practice begins to show in a more skillful performance, with no coaching or hesitation. Student confidence level increases.

**WHAT ARE YOUR PERFORMANCE STANDARDS?**
You need to be consistent in the standards expected of a student, as well as the method of feedback. These standards should be provided to students in writing so they can access them when studying or practicing. Here is a list of sample standards:

- **Grading method is identified:** either pass/fail, letter or number grades.
- **If grading methods include terms such as excellent, good, fair, poor, you need to list the criteria for each.**
- **Skills and performances are identified as basic, proficient and advanced.**
- **Be sure that students know what is required to pass—individual course scores or a capstone exam that combines everything before they can move to next semester or graduate, for example.**
- **How good is good enough?**

There is consistency in feedback and corrections between a student who almost meets the standard and one who is nowhere near the standard. No one is “carried through.”

- **The exam score—is it the last word?** If there is a chance to improve, some leeway, or extra points available, all students need to have the same options.
- **If the course has a minimum score in order to move forward to other courses, students need to be aware of this fact.** If the individual test has a similar requirement, tell students that information, as well.
- **At what level is the test being presented—are your grades weighted dependent upon what is tested?**
- **Are students demonstrating basic skills?**
- **Are they showing critical thinking and problem solving?**
- **Does student see the value of the test and tasks, especially as they relate to job skills?**
- **What benchmark standards are set, and what goals are in place to achieve them?**
- **Are goals phrased in direct and positive manner, without the use of negative statements (will do this, won’t do that.)?**
- **What have others done?** Why reinvent the wheel when other schools or programs may have something they’re willing to share. If you’re in an area where local schools may be competing for the same students you are, then look at schools in different cities or states.
- **What skills are needed to meet minimum job standards, as well as prepare for more advanced trainings?**

**TESTING STANDARDS**
Testing standards are the measurable criteria that identify the level of performance that will be accepted for a task. Can it be seen, measured, felt, heard or touched? Remember to keep any job-related conditions and requirements in mind. Following are a few examples:

**Time:** perform a relaxation massage within 50 to 60 minutes.

**How well:** apply sufficient lubricant to allow fluidity of stroke, and make certain that charting is legible and student uses accepted abbreviations and terminology.

**How many:** have student identify five bony landmarks.

**Variables:** positioning is modified as needed, such as when working on a pregnant client, for example.

**At what performance level:** demonstrates effleurage showing direction of stroke and smooth application. Or, does the student demonstrate well-developed skills, adapting and altering stroke in response to sensory cues and client feedback.
SUBJECTIVE SKILLS AND ABILITIES

Much of what we do in massage that works for the client involves those hard-to-define and hard-to-measure qualities that add to success. That's one of the reasons massage therapists have been hesitant to perform research: a fear of losing the special qualities inherent in massage. Those are the same reasons many massage educators and administrators have resisted portable standards and accreditation: losing the heart of what we do.

None of those soft skills are missed in any of these processes: research, accreditation, licensure or assessments. In fact, by identifying them, we can expand upon them. Massage research attends to the objective scientific data while remaining as neutral as possible with the amenities. Teaching and evaluating those amenities means we need to identify their qualities.

Here is an example of how to examine subjective criteria.

1. A student is performing a general relaxation massage for a midterm exam. The objective items include draping, body mechanics, and the application of effective strokes to meet goals and outcomes.
2. Two instructors watching the same exam may not see the same things.
3. If the student performs two massages, will both clients have the same feedback?
4. If two different students do exactly the same massage with the exact same strokes while only one client enjoys the treatment, how do we measure the immeasurable? It's not enough to say you'll just know when you see or feel it.

The first step is to identify qualities inherent in the information you've taught, and then list the range of the components. Take a simple word like “connection.” In massage, we make connections with our clients. If a quality massage does not require there to be a human connection between the therapist and the client, then it could be performed by a robot. A mechanical device may have an easier time being programmed to adapt to different shapes and sizes of clients, applying pressure and adapting to depth of tissues, as well as remaining in contact with the client. Yet I can't think of anyone who would rush out to be massaged by a robot.

Here are three abilities identified in the Ethics section of the Massage Therapy Body of Knowledge under self regulation. As an experienced therapist, an instructor may not have a problem demonstrating and blending these abilities. It's very different for a student, however, and some of the descriptions used might sound like they're in an entirely different language.

1. Regularly sense both the therapist and the client/patient body systemically as one whole continuum of fluid, bone and membrane.
2. Scan own body periodically in order to sense areas of tension and holding during a session and release when appropriate.

A student may have difficulty staying present for a client at the same time they're scanning their own body. They may compartmentalize each of these activities and not easily blend them. The client may sense this as a disconnect, especially if the student takes time to reestablish presence when moving awareness to regions of the body.

Such items at first seem hard to assess. This is where collaboration between instructors and teaching assistants—as well as input from the students—can be beneficial. Each will bring a different definition or
quality that they use to identify this ability. Discussion can lead to identification of traits that can be seen or felt by the student, observer or both. Listing them along with identifying what it’s like when they are missing leads to the beginnings of an assessment. If possible, speak with experienced clients to find words to identify the qualities.

**TASK TERMINOLOGY AND HIERARCHY**

The objective of an assessment is to tell if a student can perform the task. In order to make expectations and abilities clear to both the instructor and the students, the overall objective can be broken down into segments. For simplicity, we’ll refer to those segments as tasks.

In each portion of the test—both objectives and instructions—the verb used identifies the level of difficulty of the task. They are frequently the same verbs used in the competencies and learning objectives.

Massage uses terminology common to the work performed. A term such as effleurage can be a noun (the technique) or a verb (the application). Although it’s acceptable to use technical terminology when designing the test, most educational lists use standard verbs. There are multiple ways to say the same thing.

For example, on a practical exam, when a student is required to show the correct application of a technique, there are multiple ways this could be written:

- **1. Demonstrate effleurage on the prone client …**
- **2. Perform effleurage …**
- **3. Effleurage …**
- **4. Show effleurage …**

As long as the verb is in the correct domain and level, and has been presented to students as implying the same action, the choice of the exact word is up to you. Be sure, however, that you use a single verb to define each task, as using more than one can lead to confusion. For example, you might say:

- **1. Identify the bony landmarks of the skeleton**
- **2. Demonstrate the joint movements of the arm and shoulder**
- **3. Perform a relaxation massage**

**ALIGNMENT**

Think of alignment as the consistent thread that allows for a smooth and effective flow. During a massage the physical alignment of both the therapist and the client (as well as the table and the room layout) provides for a graceful exchange of potential and kinetic energy to achieve the objectives. If body mechanics are incorrect, if there is insufficient space for the therapist to walk around the table, or if the client is in an awkward position, the flow can be disturbed enough to change the focus or intent. The result is often that the therapist’s body hurts and the client is not satisfied.

In school, the alignment of the standards, competencies, learning objectives, lesson plans and assessments provides the same potential for smooth flow of information and learning. If the skills measured in the assessments do not reflect the learning objectives, or if the classroom presentations do not reinforce the manual skills, then there can be disorder and confusion. The result is often that the student may be unable to perform at the level expected.

**EVALUATION CRITERIA**

**Grades** are used as indicators of learning, but they don’t identify a single competency or learning objective.

Rank the value of each assessment and each portion of the assessment as it relates to the entire course. Example: if the course is Introductory Swedish Massage, which would have a higher number: demonstrating effleurage or performing the entire massage within 60 minutes with smooth pacing and flow?

Whichever point value you choose to assign, make sure it is clearly identified to the student at the start of the course and prior to the assessment.

If you chose to make an assessment pass/fail, also identify its value in the entire course as well as for each item. Clearly identify criteria for the pass/fail for students. It does not benefit anyone if a student doesn’t know what is expected.

**Rubrics** are standardized scoring tools. The word rubric, which means “red,” originally referred to portions of text that were printed in red ink to highlight the information. When applied in the educational setting, it is a scoring tool for assessments.

The simplest rubrics have pass/fail implications. Either the student performs the task or does not. Rubrics can increase in complexity based on quality, quantity and skill of the work performed. At no time should the rubric complicate your assessment; in all cases it should add to

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For additional lists of verbs you can use, see the sidebar “Domains and Taxonomy.”
Rubrics are typically given to students before the exam. Contrary to opinion, it does not encourage them to cheat. It doesn’t serve the student or instructor if the exact requirements of an assessment are not clear. Just as in writing a quality test question, the tasks and criteria expected are identified at the beginning.

Rubrics initially take a while to create, yet they are one of the best investments of instructor time. They organize information that allows for checks-and-balances not only of student skills but of the course itself. Although they can be created by one person, using other faculty provides for a better tool. Discussions with peers when creating rubrics bring to light differences in how we each identify the individual processes, the value we see in each item and how a subject is taught.

Once the criteria are identified, rubrics allow for:

- consistency in assessment
- alignment with learning objectives
- less test bias
- repeatability with multiple evaluators
- objective information to provide for students continued progress
- evaluation of how the item was taught; course corrections needed

Rubrics are usually expressed in a grid that contains measurable/observable criteria in incremental designations. It also contains the values for each of those criteria. This allows for consistency and repeatability in assessments by more than one evaluator. A quality rubric will replace vague criteria with specifics. Although it can be applied to a simple pass/fail exam, a rubric allows for expansion and explanations.

The value assigned to any of the elements allows for prioritization of each element. No simple rubric can identify everything. Start simple then identify any important factors that may be missing.

Examples of rubrics:
Rubrics can be simple, giving different points for skill with using lubricant, for example:

See table 1

Notice that the number of points is in a small range. If the use of lubricant is an important factor in your assessments, the numbers can be increased and additional criteria added.
If a task is simple and straightforward, a rubric is not necessary. But be careful when making decisions about the need for a rubric, as sometimes those tasks that seem simple at first glance can benefit from the clarity a rubric provides.

Draping, for example, is done for modesty, as well as comfort and warmth. Since each of us may have a different idea of what is modest and what is comfortable, a rubric would provide clarity for students who are having difficulty performing one or both of these tasks consistently during an exam. Once criteria are chosen, then the formal checklist is prepared:

→ See table 2

A few comment lines can be made available after the grid or on the student exam form for any specifics to individual student performance. For example, let’s say a student keeps the client well covered most of the time, but gets the sheets twisted up or lets them slide around when the client rolls over. In addition to the points given, you can provide feedback for corrective measures.

→ Draping is awkward and therapist hesitant when client is changing positions.

More columns could be added that address the student’s ability in other areas, such as using the draping material as a barrier for hygienic purpose or adding draping materials for a client in side-lying position. If students are graded on the draping material, consider creating a separate rubric, possibly a checklist that includes the expectations. Draping materials are clean, fragrance free, opaque, hypo-allergenic material, size-appropriate for client and table, and sufficient draping material for warmth and modesty, for example.

During a practical exam, students are assessed on multiple techniques. You might start by giving each stroke/manipulation a value of five points toward the total. For example:

→ See table 3

Here is the same rubric designed to assess petrissage specifically.

→ See table 4

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* Student drapes for modesty and warmth at least 70 percent of time. Needed reminder from client to cover exposed leg.

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**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUE</th>
<th>QUALITY</th>
<th>CRITERIA NO. 1</th>
<th>CRITERIA NO. 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>In command of stroke</td>
<td>Effectively accesses and mobilizes tissues, identifies areas of restriction</td>
<td>Performs with skill and ability to change pressure levels and speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Some hesitation</td>
<td>Effectively accesses tissues with some mobilization; unsure of areas of restriction</td>
<td>Performs mechanically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tentative</td>
<td>Accesses tissue with no attempt to move or mobilize</td>
<td>Unable to perform without coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Unskilled</td>
<td>Did not perform; does not know technique</td>
<td>Did not perform; does not know technique</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUE</th>
<th>QUALITY</th>
<th>CRITERIA NO. 1</th>
<th>CRITERIA NO. 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>In command of stroke</td>
<td>Lifts and mobilizes tissues, identifies areas of restriction</td>
<td>Performs with skill and ability to change pressure levels and speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Some hesitation</td>
<td>Lifts tissues with some mobilization; unsure of areas of restriction</td>
<td>Performs mechanically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tentative</td>
<td>Pushes or rolls tissue with no attempt to lift or mobilize</td>
<td>Unable to perform without coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Unskilled</td>
<td>Did not perform; does not know technique</td>
<td>Did not perform; does not know technique</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE FORM
The form contains the written information needed for recordkeeping, scoring and feedback. If the testing form is written in an easy to follow manner, the grading process is easier and students can better sequence the material in their head before they demonstrate or explain it.

The era of electronic communication has changed the way we read and write. So, unless the form is sent via text message, there are some basic formatting issues you should attend to:

* Font is in a traditional style (no script or creative styles)
* Font is readable (10 to 12 point)
* Layout is organized and not crammed in to save space

You should think of how you are going to give directions to the students, and how you’re going to ask questions. For oral exams, be sure you identify the time limit and that the questions are not too vague or too long.

Because the practical is a lengthier process that might address a wide range of knowledge, from basic activities to critical reasoning and thinking skills, your form may need to be more involved. Here, you again need to identify a time limit, and phrase the question clearly and specifically. Be sure, too, you identify all the criteria needed before the student begins, and create a rubric for evaluation and response.

You need to account for any variables that might be present. Student abilities will vary, and the parameters that identify what is acceptable need to be set. If your curriculum requires that assessments take place in a certain sequence and time period, the limits will be stricter than those that allow students to take their exams when they believe they’re ready. The Americans with Disabilities Act has very clear standards for modifications allowed in the classroom and under test conditions, so be sure you’re getting the right information from the appropriate counselor or advisor at your school.

In an oral or practical exam, both students and instructors are able to see a more comprehensive guide to what the student can apply at any time. Where a written exam provides information on the cognitive skills—what the brain knows—the performance exam expresses the ability to do, to create, to form. Performance exams also allow for a glimpse at critical thinking skills in action, so instructors can directly observe the activities and behaviors expected of a massage therapist.
When thinking about types of assessments, constructed responses work better than selected responses in oral and practical exams. Again, this is reflective of the real-world experiences that will demand therapists to think on their feet and respond to a situation in a timely manner.

Remember, however, that students must know what they are expected to perform during the assessment. In the early stages, that might involve breaking down the steps into manageable parts. For example, in an introductory massage course, the topic might be how to perform a relaxation massage within 50 to 60 minutes. For this task, student should know each of the strokes, how to apply and blend lubricant, body mechanics, draping, client positioning, table height and sanitation.

Even in a more advanced course, students are still going to need information on what is expected, though you can assess them on their ability to perform in a manner more closely related to workplace experience. For example, ask them to perform a therapeutic massage for a single session, where student should know postural and gait assessment, as well as applications of techniques for modifying areas of dysfunction.

AFTER THE EXAM: CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM VS. FEEDBACK

There are multiple ways to let a student know the quality—and the concerns—with their performance during class or in an exam. Too often, the disapproval is an expression of disappointment, while the praise is filled with fluff and not quality reinforcement. When providing feedback, you need to continually ask yourself if what you’re saying is useful. If it’s not, then you need to reframe your discussion.

Whether you call it constructive criticism or feedback, the information shared needs to be more than what was done wrong. You need to provide details for the concerns you have that are directly identifiable in the course materials or exam expectations. The same is true for those items done effectively. Ask yourself: What part of the criteria was met and how could you tell?

The art of providing quality feedback is just that—an art. It requires skill, tact and the ability to interact.

Effective feedback does so much more than list “three skills and three areas of improvement,” for example. As with a client intake, feedback is a dialogue that provides information about a process along with objective data on where the process would benefit either from being continued or being modified.

The intent of educational feedback is primarily to assist with appropriate interventions. Think about setting up standards for student feedback. For example, you might want to make sure all the feedback you provide meets three criteria:

Kind. Is the feedback presented in a manner that remains about the process, with a courteous tone of voice, without using the word “you?”

Useful. Does the information tie directly in to the process being discussed or evaluated? Is there objective data that can be used by the receiver so they can make changes?

True. Does it remain about the specific process, with no prejudice, favoritism or dislike showing?

For teachers, knowing how to assess students when looking at knowledge and skill can be difficult. But there are ways to make this process easier—for both instructors and students. The oral and practical exams are the most reliable methods we have to predict workplace skills and abilities. Their design and implementation can be simplified when there are clear objectives, alignment with course competencies, and easily identifiable tasks.
In the 1950s, Dr. Benjamin Bloom identified three domains to help design and evaluate all types of learning. It is presented in a structured list known as a taxonomy.

**Cognitive** knowledge and mental skills.
**Affective** attitude, feelings and emotions
**Psychomotor** manual or physical skills.

Additionally, these three domains are divided into hierarchies that list the simplest behaviors to the most complex. Each of the domains provides a list of verbs that can be applied to multiple subjects and courses:

**Cognitive domain questions target knowledge and reasoning skills:**

**Oral:** tell me five contraindications or cautions in massage for the integumentary system.

**Oral:** point to the individual attachments of the four quadriceps muscles.

**Practical:** demonstrate positioning and draping for a client in the side lying position.

**Affective domain questions target attitudes and emotions:**

**Oral/practical:** your client is 15 minutes late and is angry because directions to your business were incorrect and she blames you. What are some items to be considered before you respond?

**Psychomotor domain questions target the performance of manual skills:**

**Practical:** contrast the end feel of your client’s elbow joints.

In the past, most higher learning institutions did not teach many manual or physical skills, so Bloom’s psychomotor domain was limited in its scope. Beginning in the 60s, however, there was an increase in the performance arts and skill-based careers offered in K-12, post-secondary schools and colleges. As a result, other educators produced more comprehensive versions of taxonomies that primarily focused on the psychomotor domain. Three of them are shown here. Each identifies the common instructional levels of imitating, practicing and habit in sequential listing. They also provide massage educators with a look at other categories and verbs that can be used in assessments, as well as examples of the hierarchies of skill development.
In 1972, **Elizabeth Simpson** identified seven major categories of the psychomotor domain, which includes physical movement, coordination and motor skills. → See table 5 below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflex movements</td>
<td>reactions that are innate, not learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental movements</td>
<td>basic movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>responding to stimuli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abilities</td>
<td>stamina developed for further activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled movements</td>
<td>advanced learned movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No discursive communication</td>
<td>body language, gestures, facial expressions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also in 1972, **Anita Harrow** organized six categories of the psychomotor domain based on the degree of coordination involved in involuntary responses and learned abilities. → See table 6 below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>KEY WORDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception: using sensory cues to guide motor activities</td>
<td>chooses, describes, detects, differentiates, identifies, relates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set: the readiness to act</td>
<td>begins, explains, moves, reacts, shows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided Response: beginning stages in learning a complex skills; includes imitation, practice, trial and error</td>
<td>copies, follows, reacts, responds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism: middle stage in learning complex skills; some confidence and proficiency</td>
<td>displays, manipulates, organizes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex Overt Response: skilful performance of complex movement patterns; performs without hesitation</td>
<td>constructs, displays, manipulates, mixes, organizes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation: well developed skills; movement patterns modified to adapt to special requirements</td>
<td>adapts, alters, changes, reorganizes, varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origination: create new movement patterns; creativity based on highly developed skills</td>
<td>arranges, combines, creates, designs, initiates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note that some key words are same as mechanism; adverbs or adjectives are used to indicate performance quality: better, quicker, more accurate)
In 1975, R.H. Dave presented five categories that reflect learning and development that fit well in an apprentice or work environment. → See table 7 below

### TERMINOLOGY
The following is a list of terms used in this course.

**Definitions from Massage Therapy Body of Knowledge**

- **abilities**: demonstrable behaviors—both innate and learned—that result in an observable outcome in the treatment setting
- **competencies**: the Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs) that enable massage therapists to perform their work in a safe and effective manner.
- **knowledge**: the technical information, theory and research that support the practice
- **skills**: the psychomotor capabilities a massage therapist utilizes
- **standards**: established and documented norms or requirements for the profession
- **values**: unique attributes, qualities and principles that are embodied by individual massage therapists, as well as by the institutions and organizations that comprise the profession

**Definitions in reference to assessment**

- **alignment**: the consistency and connection of components of education (curriculum, instruction, assessments) in achieving the desired goals
- **evaluation**: an organized procedure for collecting and using information in order to make a decision or judgment on the effectiveness of either a person or a process. It can be composed of single or multiple assessments or sources
- **rubrics**: standardized scoring tools
- **test**: an organized process for measuring knowledge, skills or abilities; frequently used interchangeably with the word “assessment.”
- **validity**: the degree to which an assessment can be considered accurate; includes elements of non-bias and consistency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>KEY WORDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitation: patterning a behavior or action after someone else</td>
<td>attempt, copy, repeat, imitate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation: performing an action by following instruction and practicing</td>
<td>demonstrates, shows, follows, completes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision: refines an activity</td>
<td>reworks, details, performs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulation: coordinating activities</td>
<td>adapts, coordinates, harmonizes, produces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalization: high level performance; natural action</td>
<td>naturally, perfectly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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