

The Cycles of Learning:

A Model for Effective Teaching and Successful Outcomes

By Carey Elizabeth Smith | © 2008 All rights reserved

Introduction

This model illustrates two fundamental dimensions in teaching. The first is the primary phases of any endeavor and explores the cyclical nature of learning as a framework for teaching – beginning, middle and ending. The second depicts four aspects of human experience – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. The *Cycles of Learning* model explores these two dimensions as a template for effective teaching and generating successful outcomes. This article describes and explains the characteristics of these dimensions and how they manifest in the classroom. A companion article demonstrates the practical application of this model to inspire and motivate students through a massage therapy program.

RHYTHMS EXIST IN ALL THINGS

It is essential that massage program instructors recognize the ebb and flow of inspiration and motivation within themselves and their students. There are days, even weeks, when inspiration and motivation may be at a low point or periods of time where there is so much moving in the classroom that there is a sense of too much, too fast, of chaos. There are periods of excitement and exhaustion, of paying attention and staring out the window. Every student has their own rhythm; their own way of initiating, moving through and responding to the world. In *The Anatomy of Change*, Richard Strozzi-Heckler, PhD presents a model called *The Rhythm of Excitement* that offers profound implications for understanding and working with student's unique yet universal rhythms within the classroom:

We all have a particular energetic rhythm or style. We can see it in the way we make contact, the way we move through transitions, how we work or play, the way we bring something into form, or even how we live our days. Our excitement, in its rhythmic pulse, passes through four distinct stages: awakening, increasing, containing and completing. These stages can be used as a map to look at the way we use ourselves energetically ... In the case of the body, our excitement revolves through the seasons of a birth or beginning awakening stage, a period of growing and building, a maturation or containment, and then expression and completion.

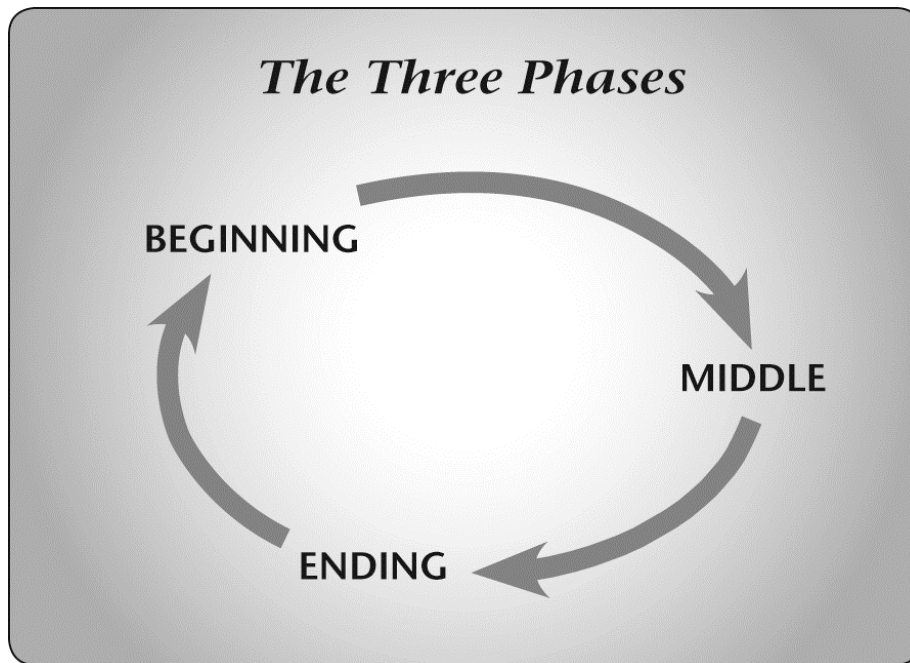
The Cycles of Learning

	Beginning Phase	Middle Phase	Ending Phase
PHYSICAL ASPECT	<i>Initiating</i>	<i>Sustaining</i>	<i>Completing</i>
MENTAL ASPECT	<i>Curiosity</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Application</i>
EMOTIONAL ASPECT	<i>Idealism</i>	<i>Realism</i>	<i>Manifestation of the Dream</i>
SPIRITUAL ASPECT	<i>Departure</i>	<i>Transformation</i>	<i>Return</i>

CYCLES EXIST IN ALL THINGS

Students express these rhythms of awakening, increasing, containing and completing through their own unique pulsatory nature. These “rhythms of excitement” within each student take place within a vast array of cycles from the macrocosm to the microcosm: life cycles from birth to death, seasons, relationships, a day, a night, an hour. These cycles are universal and exist in the full expression of all things; massage therapy programs, people, endeavors. They are indigenous to the learning process so to recognize and utilize them is a wise and effective strategy.

Instructors in massage therapy programs are like river guides who have navigated the journey many times through all the cycles. They know how to prepare and gather the necessary supplies, launch the boats, and keep everyone paddling downstream for however many days until they arrive at their final destination. All the while, they remember their commitment to the mission of a safe river journey for all the participants. They travel in drought and flood, around boulders, through good weather and bad, by sunlight and moonlight, in rapids and calm water, during all seasons. Through each of these cycles, every traveler carries within them their own rhythm of excitement.



FIRST DIMENSION:

THE THREE PHASES - BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND ENDING

The full expression of every endeavor has a beginning, middle and ending. Just as the moon has phases from the first sliver of the new moon expanding into fullness, then the gradual receding to the last crescent and darkness, education provides an opportunity to explore teaching and learning in all its stages. There is no ideal phase, although both instructors and students will have preferences born of natural inclinations, historical experiences, and habitual patterns.

Successful completion of a massage therapy program requires that students participate effectively in all three phases. As instructors become skillful at recognizing and meeting the demands of these different phases of the program, they are more able to respond creatively by offering practices and strategies that inspire and motivate students to stay engaged in their learning. Of greatest importance is that students gain the skills to develop positive attitudes and actions on their own. This is vital to their ability to traverse the complex demands of each massage therapy session and an ongoing professional practice with its inherent ebbs and flows.

The Beginning Phase

The **beginning phase** in the classroom setting starts on the first day of school. The process commences with that initial spark of curiosity, nervousness, excitement and anticipation. This is the courageous step across the threshold into a process that will change students' lives and take months of ongoing, committed effort. Students enter an

environment where everything is new: instructors, classmates, textbooks, assignments, massage strokes, muscle names, schedules, etc. Students learn one another's names, share stories, begin to build a community of fellow travelers who have goals and missions in common. They are going on a journey – both literally and metaphorically. This time is often referred to as the period of idealism or “the honeymoon phase”. There is an atmosphere of excitement, possibility, curiosity and adventure. Gradually, over the first few weeks, the workload increases as they learn layers of information that somehow are mysteriously interconnected. Enthusiasm is still present but the students start to pace themselves now for the long haul. Then there is the first exam – the realization that it is school – not just giving and receiving massage with other like-minded people.

The Middle Phase

Next arrives that long period called the **middle phase** where there are constant academic demands. The enthusiasm for starting a new program subsides as the rigor increases. The adventure has now become a routine where classes occur day in and day out. A level of predictability arises for better or worse. Best behaviors give way to old patterns and habits. School becomes a commitment with assignments, due dates, challenges, consequences and responsibilities. What may have initially seemed ideal is tested and an atmosphere of realism permeates the classroom.

The transition into this phase is often known as “the honeymoon is over”. Students who were motivated by their early enthusiasm and momentum may fall behind. Unexpected occurrences in their personal lives demand far more time than they anticipated. Disagreements between students arise and instructors are more likely to be challenged. There is a roller coaster of emotions. Students begin to change and many feel like everything is falling apart. Students may question themselves and those around them, and begin to wonder whatever led them to massage school in the first place: “What was I thinking? I must have been crazy!” This is the point in the program when students realize they have gone too far to turn back, yet there is still a long way to go before they reach the finish line.

In the midst of this, the benefits of the middle phase are abundant. Students are changing and beginning to create a new self who can model the positive attributes of a successful massage therapist. Students are learning to use their resources wisely, make good decisions, manage their time in such a way that they can actually sustain the effort needed to achieve their goals. Students have a framework now to begin to analyze and integrate the information they are studying. A deeper sense of dignity and purpose arises as they recommit to their future. This is the key: that students recommit to their mission. They achieve this by working through internal and external obstacles in order to implement realistic strategies to complete all the necessary tasks.

The Ending Phase

Lastly, students enter the **ending phase**. This is the phase in the program where students most fully integrate the information and their experiences into a cohesive whole. They flesh out more fully their vision and goals in a business plan. They intentionally access anatomical structures and affect the physiology of the body through skillful touch. Students design and deliver massage therapy sessions which implement all their hands-on skills. Their work embodies ethical considerations, communication skills and professional behaviors. Final papers, exams and evaluations are due. There is a preparation for graduation and completions of each course.

This phase of the program contains an emotional duality: “I can’t wait to get out of here – and I never want to leave”. Students are ready for the work to be finished. Some are nostalgic while others are already turning away, disconnecting, on to the next project. Farewells are bid to instructors and classmates, the last day of the program arrives. The graduation ceremony is filled with acknowledgement, tears, laughter, pride, astonishment, grief, disappointment, exhaustion, satisfaction. Full cycle. Complete. Resting before a new cycle begins as a massage therapist.

Summary of the Three Phases of Learning

Looking at this dimension of the model, instructors can see that there are phases within phases in a massage therapy program. A beginning, middle and ending live in the overall progression of the entire program, within each course, every class, exercise, assignment, exam, discussion, lecture. Some cycles are short like a ten-minute experiential exercise. Some are as long as a class or seven classes in a course. Some cycles are long like the many months of an entire program.

Ask Yourself: Exploration of Phases

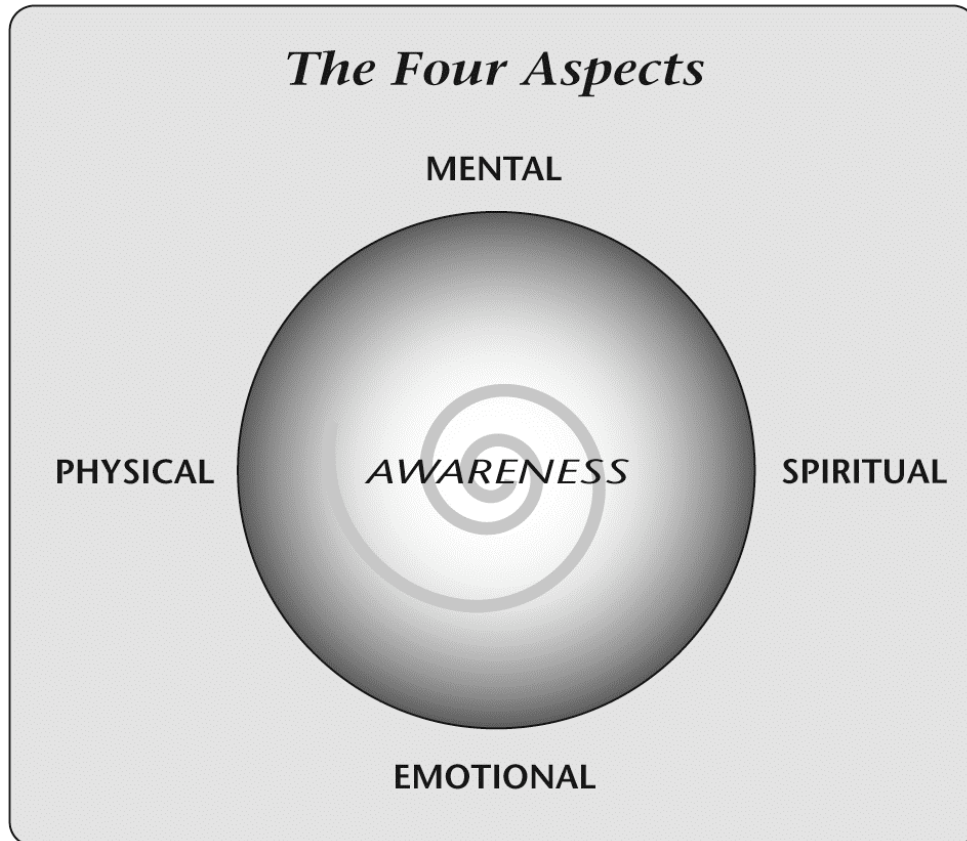
At the end of a course or program it is helpful to explore the Phases to enhance your own learning and growth process. Ask yourself (as well as your students):

- Which of the Three Phases is your most preferred? Why? Be detailed and specific.
- Which of the Three Phases is your least preferred? Why? Be detailed and specific.
- What challenges are present for you in each phase?
- What gifts are present for you in each phase?
- What new actions or practices can assist you in effectively meeting the challenges?

Tips for Success: Utilizing the Three Phases of *The Cycles of Learning*

- Teach students the phases of the Cycles of Learning so they can understand that these phases are universal and are born of the natural, organic process of learning and growing.
- Acknowledge students in each phase so that they can be inspired by the depth and meaning of their undertaking. Speak the virtues of their professional calling often.

- Assist students in gaining the perspective of both large and small phases; and that wherever they are in the phase, they can still be in motion towards their goals and mission.
- Acknowledge accomplishments, both minor and major.
- Pause periodically in the program to examine where students are in the phases. Discuss possible breakdowns and strategies for success at each stage. Knowing how to navigate difficulty as well as experience success are both inspiring and motivating.



SECOND DIMENSION:

THE FOUR ASPECTS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE – PHYSICAL, MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL

This dimension of the model recognizes the integral nature of human beings as a dynamic unity of the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. When students are invited and encouraged to participate fully in a learning process that embraces and teaches to these four aspects, they can bring all their personal resources and life experiences to the endeavor. This approach recognizes that the embodiment and expression of all four aspects contribute significantly to whether or not a massage

therapist is successful. The commitment of a massage therapy program is to educate and train future therapists who are intellectually knowledgeable, physically skillful, emotionally respectful, and able to infuse each session with real meaning and a deep sense of vitality.

Most traditional educational settings teach primarily to the mind, operating in a world of ideas for analysis and application. By contrast, instructors in the massage therapy classroom have the opportunity to deliver lesson plans that go beyond cognitive learning to include physical, mental, emotional and spiritual exercises that build the competencies required to become a masterful therapist.

Physical Aspect

Massage therapy education trains the body as the primary vehicle for delivering an effective treatment. One of the greatest gifts of massage therapy education is the focus on bodily experience and expression. <cross 2B> Students arrive with every body type imaginable and each student has the opportunity to use their body in new ways. As students open to learning through their bodies, they learn how to initiate and carry out meaningful actions that build the world of their future.

Since massage therapy is a body-based modality, students develop physical skills that promote endurance, strength, flexibility, coordination, stamina and stability. Some of the many methods implemented in the curriculum to build these skills include body mechanics and stretching exercises, hands-on techniques and practice sessions, palpation, experiential and movement exercises.

Mental Aspect

Each student comes into a massage therapy program with their own ideas, opinions and views of the world. They have patterns of thinking that are both successful and limiting. Many students are figuring out how they learn now as adults. This curiosity of mind parallels and supports the body's ability to open to and initiate new movements.

The overall purpose of developing the cognitive aspect is to assist students in applying their knowledge and critical thinking to make good decisions. A massage therapy program offers opportunities for students to develop awareness, attention, observation, tracking, organization, analysis, assessment, decision making, strategic design and implementation. The learning activities that strengthen these competencies include awareness and attention training, lecture, discussion, debate, memorization, research, measurement and assessment, treatment protocols, deductive reasoning, position papers, case studies.

Emotional Aspect

The emotional history of each student shapes their way of orienting, relating and responding to the world. They have predominant moods and dispositions; patterns of

reactivity, openness and defense; paces, styles and ranges of expressing emotional states. Choosing to attend a massage therapy program is a potent expression of what matters, the longing to have a profession that allows expression of the heart's ideals.

The primary purpose of educating the emotions is to create a container for appropriately exploring, managing and expressing emotional experience in order to build and maintain effective, professional relationships. Massage therapy students receive training in the emotional realms through the development of clear and meaningful communication, sensitivity, the practices of non-judgmental attitudes and acceptance, extending warmth and compassion in a professional, sincere manner. Students learn how to be in the presence of another's experience without intrusion, and offer a safe, supportive haven for their future clients.

The learning activities that serve as the foundation for this process of emotional maturity include all hands-on exchanges, small and large group exercises, ethical discussions and homework, problem resolution, touch sensitivity and contact exercises, classroom policies regarding respect and kindness, communication and boundary skills, case studies, student clinic and fieldwork.

The Spiritual Aspect

This aspect refers to the secular meaning of the word spirit which includes attributes such as vivacity, courage, vigor, enthusiasm, and essential nature. Students express these life-giving qualities to varying degrees and through many different avenues. Some students have ready access to this expression; others are more reluctant or guarded in this domain. Contacting and mobilizing this aspect is critical to the student's capacity to inspire and motivate themselves and others. In this light, spirit is the source of creative, life-giving action. Many schools are reluctant to address this aspect of human beings in their curriculum for fear that it may be interpreted in a religious or dogmatic way. One way to work with this concern is to use a different reference in the classroom such as "the courageous or inspirational aspect of human beings".

The primary purpose of developing a student's ability to fully express their spirit is so that massage therapy students learn to bring enthusiasm, integrity and creative fire to their work. Every session holds the potential of infusing the client with renewed courage and life force; of not only addressing the body but alleviating the deep weariness and sorrow that lives beneath the surface of daily life for so many people.

The learning activities in the curriculum that provide opportunities to deepen the expression of spirit include personal and professional stories of courage, failure and triumph; any offerings of beauty and wonderment; every anatomy class as a demonstration of the marvel of the human body; expressions of appreciation and gratitude; exploration of the lineage and history of massage, case studies, student clinic

and fieldwork; career planning discussions about what really holds meaning for students.

Summary of the Four Aspects of Human Experience

Motivation and inspiration thrive in the classroom, as instructors invite these aspects of a human being into the learning process through their lesson plans, homework assignments and student interactions. When students bring their bodies, minds, emotions and spirits in response to this invitation, there are multiple avenues to pursue in order to assist students in fully expressing themselves in a successful and professional manner. The result is a shared commitment to learning which results in shared responsibility and ownership of the outcomes.

Ask Yourself: Exploration of the Aspects

At the end of a course or program it is helpful to explore the Aspects to enhance your own learning and growth process. Ask yourself (as well as your students):

- Which of the Four Aspects is your most preferred? Why? Be detailed and specific.
- Which of the Four Aspects is your least preferred? Why? Be detailed and specific.
- What challenges are present for you in each aspect?
- What gifts are present for you in each aspect?
- What new actions or practices can assist you in effectively meeting the challenges?

Tips for Success: Utilizing the Four Aspects of *The Cycles of Learning*

- Offer students opportunities to reflect upon and discuss the ways they are growing and changing as well as the different areas of mastery they are developing. Review where they began on the first day of school and highlight the skills they have since acquired. In what new ways are they building both competence and confidence?
- Design exercises where students can notice and assess their growth and transformation in the four aspects. What changes and benefits do they notice physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually?
- Highlight a skill from each aspect that correlates directly to creating and sustaining a successful massage therapy practice.
- Design role playing exercises that call students to appropriately bring each of the four aspects into a client/therapist scenario.
- Acknowledge the value of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development in the context of students' goals, mission and career.
- Discuss how the integration of these four aspects impacts the potency and therapeutic outcomes of a massage therapy session.

(continues)

Summary of the Cycles of Learning Model

The Three Phases

- **Beginning** – a new, exciting adventure; sense of idealism and possibility
- **Middle** – the routine of ongoing demands; realism of challenges and consequences
- **Ending** – a sense of accomplishment; integration and manifestation

The Four Aspects

- **Physical** – bodily experience and expression; the senses
- **Mental** – ideas, opinions, worldview
- **Emotional** – moods and feelings; caring and relational skills
- **Spiritual** – vivacity, enthusiasm, creative life force