

Implementing the Cycles of Learning to Create Successful Outcomes

By Carey Elizabeth Smith | © 2008 All rights reserved

This article demonstrates how instructors can use the *Cycles of Learning* model to inspire and motivate students during each phase of the program. First, instructors develop the skills of observation, tracking, and assessment so that they can offer feedback, appropriate interventions, and assignments that will assist students in developing more effective learning strategies and professional behaviors. Second, examples of both optimal and common classroom scenarios in each phase provide a working template for identifying and meeting challenges. Third, practical examples demonstrate how to work with a student's strengths and challenges in each phase of the program.

INSTRUCTORS' USE OF OBSERVATION, ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK SKILLS TO DESIGN APPROPRIATE INTERVENTIONS

The development of accurate observation, tracking, assessment, and feedback skills takes a great deal of practice. This is one of the most fundamental skills for an instructor to cultivate if she is dedicated to assisting students in progressing through the program. It begins with keeping a notebook where an instructor records her observations of students on a daily or weekly basis. These notes can be very short and to the point, and can be used in the same way that massage therapists keep notes about their clients. This may, at times, include only the students who are exhibiting difficulties, but it's the primary mechanism for being able to deliver accurate and useful feedback to every student.

If an instructor sees something is going on with a student and is unsure of what she is seeing, the best first step is to ask the student. A student always holds the most knowledge about himself. This way, a beginning instructor can begin to assess if what she is seeing is accurate and matches the student's experience. Useful skills and strategies for tracking and intervening with students include:

- **Observation** is a foundational skill for effectively supporting students through these scenarios. It is a discipline, a daily practice of non-judgmental seeing and listening that allows instructors to come to know and understand the demands of the program as well as the unique nature of each student. The observer needs to

remain open minded, without assumptions or biases. Instructors observe students' physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual patterns in relation to their academic progress during the three phases of the program.

- **Tracking** is the act of returning to particular observations again and again to get a full picture of a behavior including what occurs, how often, when, where, and with whom. Tracking is the accumulation of factual observations from day to day, course to course, instructor to instructor. Collecting the facts requires that instructors initially set aside their own thoughts, feelings, and reactions so as not to bias the findings. In the traditions of science and research, this is a skill born of neutrality and objectivity.
- **Assessment** is the practice of using observations to make a clear and effective evaluation. When an instructor delivers an assessment to a student, it contains three components: 1) the observable facts, 2) an evaluation of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the actions in relationship to the student's mission and goals, and 3) its correlation to the program's requirements. The key question is, "Are the attitudes and behaviors supporting the student in developing the required competencies?" Assessments are not discussions about good or bad, right or wrong, should or shouldn't. Assessments are based on carefully observed phenomena that are either impeding or advancing a student's academic progress in the program.
- **Feedback** is one of the most dynamic domains of teaching. Feedback may affirm a student's strengths and what a student is doing well; it may highlight a weakness or limitation that a student needs to further address; or it may point out a behavior that is causing a breakdown in the student's ability to successfully complete the program. In all of these scenarios, feedback is offered with clarity and compassion in the spirit of guiding the student in the direction of her goals and mission. Always check in to see if the feedback matches the student's own experience. If not, ask her what her experience is and re-assess based on the new information that the student offers. In the case of a breakdown, feedback includes the seriousness of the situation and the consequences of allowing this pattern to continue. The student needs to take a new and different action in relationship to meeting the requirements of the program. It may be both difficult and challenging for a student to receive this level of feedback but it can be the pivotal catalyst that inspires and motivates change.
- **Assignments** provide some new action, based on the feedback, that needs to be taken to create a more successful pattern. This assignment needs to include a specific action, number of repetitions, and the completion date. At the designated

time, instructor and student check back in to reassess the effectiveness of the feedback in relationship to the student's commitment and progress.

Instruction in Action:

Using the Cycles of Learning Model to Design Solutions

The following exercise provides an opportunity for instructors to implement the above protocol from observation to assignment in relation to a student's progress. Practicing this on a regular basis will develop a level of confidence in delivering feedback that is useful to the student.

- Identify the phase of the program or course.
- Identify which of the four aspects is the student's strength in the particular phase.
- Then identify the primary aspect where the difficulty, limitation or challenge may reside.
- Regularly check in with a student to ask questions and verify that you are on track. Re-assess as needed based on new information.
- Deliver feedback, make sure it corresponds with student's own experience, and design an appropriate assignment to address the particular aspect that is challenging.
- Check back at a designated time and re-assess to determine the student's level of commitment and progress.

THE USE OF OPTIMAL AND COMMON SCENARIOS IN EACH PHASE

The following scenarios illustrate a range of learning strategies and classroom behaviors from highly effective to ineffective. This process of contrast and comparison depicts what is working, what is not working and how to move each student toward greater success. *Optimal* is not what the classroom looks like every day nor is this necessarily attainable for each student as they may or may not demonstrate strengths in all four aspects of the phases. Rather, it creates a framework for possible excellence and an aspiration in learning environments.

The common scenarios illustrate some of the student behaviors that show up regularly in the classroom. Most of these behaviors are just a natural part of the developmental process and do not indicate that anything or anyone is wrong or broken. Students generally move through difficulties on their own within a well-organized and adequately supported classroom environment. It is only when the student is consistently unable to meet the program's behavioral or academic requirements that a direct intervention is necessary.

Practical Examples

The examples given under each corresponding phase are born of real students and actual challenges. The validation of the difficulties each student is facing, coupled with genuine encouragement and action steps, support this student in achieving his mission. These examples are offered as ways of thinking about and approaching similar situations; they are not offered as the right way or the only way, rather as an invitation to design solutions that work. Nor are these offered in a way that says, “Because it worked out a certain way with this student, it will always mean the same thing for every other student”. Students are immensely unique and complex. Do not use these examples as formulas but rather a possibility for exploration. Ask questions, find out if your observations and assessments match a student’s experience, then re-assess based on new information that a student shares with you.

The Beginning Phase

This provides an opportunity to examine the four aspects in the Beginning Phase from two perspectives. These perspectives compare and contrast an optimal scenario with the challenges that may commonly occur in the classroom. An example of a student dealing with the physical aspect in the Beginning Phase demonstrates the use of this teaching model.

Optimal Scenario of the Four Aspects

Students who excel in the beginning phase of the cycle of learning are those who are comfortable with and enjoy the inception and first blossoming of a new endeavor. These are people who can arouse their own curiosity quickly, are open to new challenges, and bring a sense of curiosity, wonder and enthusiasm to unexplored territory.

Physically, these students are on time, in their seats, prepared, and eager to begin. They move into exercises easily and quickly. Mentally, they actively engage by asking questions, taking notes or offering their perspective. Emotionally, these students express a mood of openness, idealism, and hope. They are confident and bring a positive attitude to new opportunities. They are able to generate their own inspiration, motivation, and arrive ready to undertake a journey of meaning.

Common Scenario of the Four Aspects

A student might be physically present at the beginning but emotionally unavailable. A student may be wide open to the adventure of a new and meaningful journey but mentally disorganized, overwhelmed, or always late. There are students who meet the challenges of the beginning phase with trepidation, anxiety, frustration, resistance, and

Beginning Phase
PHYSICAL ASPECT <i>Initiating</i>
MENTAL ASPECT <i>Curiosity</i>
EMOTIONAL ASPECT <i>Idealism</i>
SPIRITUAL ASPECT <i>Departure</i>

false confidence. There are students who arrive believing they already know everything and that they are the authority and have no need to listen to an instructor.

Some students don't like to begin anything new. They groan when the instructor says, "We are going to move into a new exercise so push back your chairs and stand up". Others are filled with doubt and may be cynical. Emotionally, there are students who may defend and close down. Some students experience pessimism and hold back from experiences that touch their hearts. There are students who do not know how to catalyze their own motivation and little inspires them. There are students who stay on the sidelines and check out everything until they feel safe enough to truly risk the vulnerability of exposing what matters to them.

Example of the Four Aspects in the Beginning Phase

In an example of an instructor intervention in the beginning phase, the instructor observes that the student is struggling with the physical aspect. In hands-on classes, his shoulders are rounded forward, his chest is curved in, and he tucks his head down with little eye contact. This student's strength is his mental curiosity and quickness in grasping a new concept. Use this mental agility to explore what happens in his somatic experience when he puts his body in different postures. Give him an assignment of consciously lifting up through the sternum, letting his chest expand and shoulders relax, eyes to the horizon. Have him keep notes daily as to what he is learning (mental curiosity) as he does this bodily practice and turn the notes in at the end of one week. At the designated time, check in and review his notes. What shifts is he noticing? What shifts is the instructor noticing? If this seems to be effective, continue this over a longer period of time during which the student measures and assesses his own progress in relationship to a clearly agreed-upon goal.

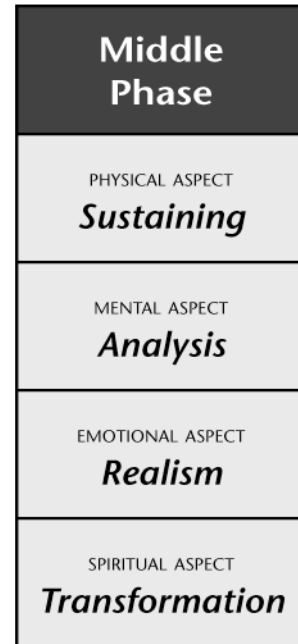
The Middle Phase

The four aspects in the Middle Phase will be explored from two perspectives. These perspectives compare and contrast an optimal scenario with the challenges that may commonly occur in the classroom. An example of a student dealing with the emotional aspect in the Middle Phase demonstrates the use of this teaching model.

Optimal Scenario of the Four Aspects

Students who excel in the middle phase of the Cycles of Learning enjoy challenges and rely upon their ability to organize and go the distance. They meet the pace and rigor of an established routine with maturity and reliability. These students can sustain their efforts over long periods of time by discerning and allotting the appropriate amount of resource to carry out the necessary tasks.

These students are able to self-monitor and self-regulate. They are skilled at containment and managing the details as they move a project forward. Mentally, their curiosity calls them to analyze new information in the context of what they already know. They connect the dots between courses and see how subjects are related. They are interested in practical implications and confident that what they are learning is useful. Emotionally, these students are able to be present with and contain their state or mood. They experience ups and downs but manage them in such a way that they can still participate appropriately in the classroom. They are realistic about the demands of the program and adjust their personal lives so that they can maintain their commitment to massage school. Spiritually, they are encouraged and enlivened in the midst of change. They see challenges as opportunities for growth and transformation, working diligently to overcome obstacles from their chosen path.



Common Scenario of the Four Aspects

There are students who meet the challenges of the middle phase with emotions ranging from pleasure and confidence to blame, shame, resentment, anger, or resignation. Some students have already spent their resources and are over-extended both personally and professionally. These students may be slumped in their chairs, disengaged, or agitated. They roll their eyes or in some way express, “This is already too much, can’t you slow down, lighten up, make this easier?” Rather than analyze the situation in a matter of fact manner, some students shut down. They may become easily confused and no longer trust their intellectual capacity. Old negative tapes may start running and deeply etched habits surface. Emotionally, students may be disappointed in themselves, their classmates and instructors, the entire program. The emotional roller coaster takes over and they are just along for the ride. Fight-or-flight responses are activated. Some implode and seem to disappear, others explode and create difficult classroom dynamics. The commitment to their mission wavers and, in some cases, completely breaks down.

Example of the Four Aspects in the Middle Phase

The instructor observes that the student is challenged emotionally in the middle phase. She cries easily and leaves the room once or twice a week in tears. She is short-tempered when receiving feedback, sits alone during breaks, and no longer participates

in group discussions. This student's strength resides in the spiritual aspect with a deep commitment to making a difference in the world.

To intervene you might speak to how you were moved by the student's initial vision and commitment to healing in the world. Ask her where she is in relationship to that now and how you can support her in pursuing that vision. Let her know that what she is going through is normal in a time of personal and professional transformation, and that there are ways to develop more emotional stability. Remind her that she is in the midst of changing old patterns and building new ways to more fully express and manifest what is most important. Give her an assignment to identify all the ways she has grown, inwardly and outwardly, and that you will support her in achieving her mission. What practices (such as breathing, resting, self-care, appropriate boundaries) has she learned in school that will assist her in achieving her mission? Ask her to choose one of these practices and do it a minimum of five times a day. Require that she makes a specific request for support from at least one person daily for the next two weeks. Require that she does one thing daily that inspires her. Check in weekly for the next month as to the success of these practices in stabilizing her emotions.

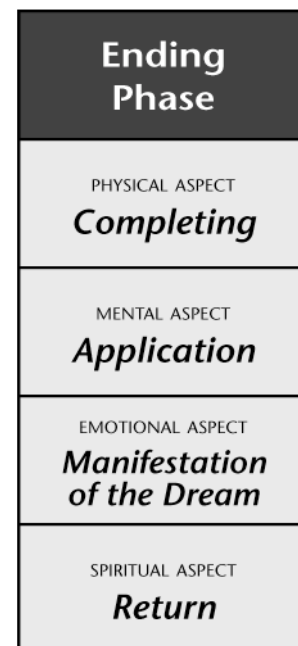
The Ending Phase

Again, from both optimal and common scenarios, are used to explore the four aspects in the Ending Phase. An example of a student dealing with the mental aspect in the Ending Phase demonstrates the use of this teaching model.

Optimal Scenario of the Four Aspects

Students who excel in the ending phase of the Cycles of Learning enjoy checking items off the to-do list. They have experience at crossing the finish line and know what it will take to get there. They know the value of and actually practice self-care. While their focus is on completion, they know how to keep covering the distance one step at a time until that moment arrives. These students gain momentum, clarity and commitment as they near the fulfillment of their goals.

Physically, these students follow through. They can be counted on to complete the task, arrive at the destination, and finish the requirements. They organize their resources for the entire journey and know how to alternate their pace between acceleration, maintenance, and rest. Mentally, they keep their focus on their own tasks and mission. They demonstrate an ability to apply their understanding in practical ways so that they can see the benefit of their academic work.



Emotionally, these students are able to generate moods that motivate them to keep moving forward. They are satisfied with their efforts, able to sustain enthusiasm, and accept the support of others. Their desire to manifest their mission is foremost in their actions, thoughts and feelings. Spiritually, they hold a vision of returning to their community victorious for the betterment of all. They are willing to take on a high level of responsibility and ownership in creating the desired outcomes in their lives.

Common Scenario of the Four Aspects

There are students who suddenly gain a new momentum after faltering during the middle phase. These students may suddenly appear vibrant and alive in the classroom. Others collapse and don't see how they can take another step. Massage therapy school may be just one more failure. Some students begin to focus on life after school and they are already leaving before the program is finished. Students may create an emotional distance by finding fault with teachers, classmates and the program. For these students, the ending phase catalyzes anger, disappointment or frustration. Others begin to sabotage themselves and stop turning in assignments so that they fall further and further behind. Some students finish all the big things but leave small details unfinished. They almost complete the requirements, but not quite. Clinging and over-sentimentality may arise at the ending phase. Students may be afraid to stand on their own and the nest starts looking really good even though they may have rebelled against it earlier. For some students, leaving this community of learning and returning to their own world is the hardest step of all.

Example of the Four Aspects in the Ending Phase

An instructor observes that a student is mentally exhausted in the ending phase. She is demonstrating difficulty in thinking through to a logical conclusion. She is struggling with integrating and applying what she has learned to a therapeutic model. Her practice session documentation illustrates that she is able to perform a massage with a good level of skill but is not seeing how to design an effective treatment plan. Her strength is in the physical aspect as she enjoys performing the hands-on techniques and can sustain a rigorous amount of physical activity.

Take this student back to her body. Make sure she is exercising enough in the midst of deadlines. Encourage her to let go of thinking about school and assignments for at least fifteen minutes, twice daily. Ask what physical practices support her that she would be willing to implement when she becomes mentally fatigued. Perhaps she needs a day off or would benefit by renegotiating for an extension on a certain project. Break the cognitive requirements of an assignment down into smaller, incremental components. Assign just one component at a time to be turned in for review and feedback. This will

allow the student to regain confidence in her ability to think clearly while providing a slow and steady momentum forward. Check in with the student on a weekly basis.

* * *

Summary

All students and instructors relate to and participate in the cycles of life and learning in their own unique and diverse ways. Each person uses her body, mind, emotions and spirit to express her dreams and fears, longings and disappointments, interests and particular way of interacting with the world. With the development of skillful observations, tracking, assessments, check-ins and assignments, instructors can catalyze and facilitate the awareness and actions necessary for students to make conscious choices and changes in support of their learning process.