

# Turn Your Cameras On

By Noah Watson, SPT

*Congratulations to A.T. Still University's Arizona School of Health Sciences Doctor of Physical Therapy graduate student Noah Watson, a finalist in the annual physical therapy student essay contest co-sponsored by the ACAPT Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics, and Professionalism (CHEP) and JHR. This writing competition is designed to encourage deep thinking by students about the role and value of humanities, ethics, and professionalism in academic training and professional life. The fifth in an annual series, the CHEP-JHR essay contest offers a creative opportunity to ignite critical reflection in PT students across the nation, to support holistic approaches to patient care. This year's essay prompt was, "The pandemic highlighted a critical need to reimagine education in physical therapy, as programs had to quickly pivot to adopt virtual learning environments. Standing on the edges of the crisis, we are emerging forever changed individually, institutionally, and professionally. As you consider the challenges and benefits of remote learning from a student perspective, how has this unique experience impacted your image of yourself as a physical therapy professional? Using details and analysis from a specific experience, explain how your idea of physical therapy education, training and practice have changed."*

*"Although these are challenging times, your commitment to your chosen health profession remains an exciting and transformative time for you."*

I averted my gaze from the email bulletin sent by the Dean of my University, instead focusing on the "Welcome Class of 2023" poster hanging on my wall—

its once shiny and vibrant appearance made dull and faded over time by the Arizona sun, a semblance of my own visage.

In March 2020, some claimed the coronavirus would last "two weeks, tops." In April, others said the virus would be "over by summer." And yet, in June, just two weeks before starting the first semester of my physical therapy program, three things became irrefutable: COVID-19 would become endemic, our physical therapy education would shift to a hybrid-virtual format, and we as students and future healthcare professionals would be forced to adapt.

## DAY ONE, 'PSYCHOSOCIAL'

"Please wait, the meeting host will let you in soon," the screen read. "Turn your camera on." I sat in my makeshift office—once a spare bedroom, now reimaged amidst the pandemic. Dreams of seeing relatives, scents of holiday meals cooking and sounds of laughter dissolved into nightmares of midterms and scents of eucalyptus candles trying their best to soften the sounds in the air of a disgruntled student barely awake.

"Okay Noah, this one *should* be easy," I thought. During a semester full of anatomical figures, metabolic pathways, and theories of motor development, I was told the course "Psychological and Social Aspect of

Illness and Disability” (we gave it the moniker ‘Psychosocial’) was a much-needed respite.

That morning, I hit the “Join Meeting in Progress” button at 7:59am—fully anticipating I’d “Leave Meeting” at 8:00. But I soon learned how mistaken I was about the importance of this class.

Perhaps it was the tired faces of 63 students before their morning cup of coffee that alerted her, or perhaps it was just her kind personality, but our professor began and ended that class—and each ensuing meeting—with the empathy and respect that our weathered souls had so desperately craved for the past 10 weeks.

She, who we had never met in person before, and who we would continue to see only through a Zoom screen for the next 10 weeks, always made a point to ask how *we* were doing before presenting her material—and listened to any grievances that we, almost too willingly, shared. ‘Psychosocial’ was a course aimed at exploring difficult topics such as dealing with loss and grief through the lens of how it relates to our past and future as healthcare professionals. Little did we know the healing it would offer us as well.

## AN AWAKENING UNDERSTANDING

Few were initially brave enough to contribute to these tough early-morning discussions—myself included. As the weeks went on, however, our cohort became more trusting of one another. Our professor shared a continued reminder that while you were not under any obligation to disclose anything you were not comfortable sharing, you *were* obligated to be an empathetic listener, self-reflector, and friend.

During the pandemic, the major concern I’ve heard amongst my cohort was the lack of time that we were authorized to be on-campus practicing our manual skills. Sure, you can lecture over a PowerPoint virtually, but being restricted from using treatment rooms on campus combined with the fear of meeting classmates out-of-school did little for our self-confidence. After all, our profession is called “*physical*” therapy for a reason.

Admittedly, I was also questioning how well the palpation I practiced on Bentley, my 6-month-old Havanese puppy, would translate to patient care in the clinic. It was as I was sitting in my living room, contemplating if dogs even have a greater tubercle (for those at home—yes, they in-fact do) that imposter syndrome started to set-in. Was I meant to be a physical therapist? How could I compete with other students who had a more “traditional experience” in physical therapy school?

As physical therapy students, we tend to become obsessed with the nitty-gritty aspects of patient care. At our university, hands-on manual intervention is heavily emphasized. As such, the ramifications of the pandemic and hybrid nature of our program seemed to be amplified.

However, through the remote nature of my Psychosocial course, I discovered, session-by-session, the true importance of “soft skills” in physical therapy. When I eventually found my own voice and shared my deepest thoughts—and experienced the empathetic response of my colleagues—that moment fundamentally changed my perspective on the healing process. Developing communication and exhibiting traits such as empathy, patience, and compassion now are, in my mind, the *most vital* skills a physical therapist can possess.

## THE CHALLENGE OF CARING

While everyone has been universally affected by the pandemic, individual experiences have been far from homogenous. And I've realized these experiences are reinforcing a basic truth about physical therapy practice:

You can see 100 low back pain clients and no two will be alike. Each patient you treat has a different background, fears, and their own adversity that they must overcome.

The Dean was correct in that email quoted above: these are indeed challenging times. However, through

her guidance, I've learned how the COVID years have made it ever more clear to me that we owe it to ourselves and our clients to develop our "soft-skills" as well as our clinical prowess. We need to understand how and when it is beneficial to lead our patient encounters with our own authentic, empathetic voices—and our hearts.

Call it a real-life "virtual moment." That realization I experienced just through a screen was a moment void of touch yet full of listening, empathy—and hope for a brighter future.

### *About the Author*



**Noah Watson, SPT** is from St. Louis, Missouri. He is enrolled as a third-year physical therapy student at A.T. Still University in Mesa, Arizona. He currently serves as the Director of Education for the APTA Oncology Student and new Professional Subcommittee, APTA PT-PAC Student Liaison, as well as a Core Ambassador for APTA Missouri. Outside of school he enjoys spending time with his wife Erynn, dog Bentley, and cat Charlotte.