Researching of the Art and Science of Rolfing® SI

By Valerie Berg, Rolfing Instructor, Rolf Movement® Practitioner

We are all observers. Rolfers™ are taught to 'see', to open our focus and observe all aspects of a client's way of being in gravity. We approach our clients with questions in our minds: "What would happen if. . .?" We take this inquiry into our sessions. Through trial and error, the ever-evolving methods developed by seasoned colleagues, and the tried-and-true effects of the 'Recipe', we gain experience that affords us the ability to predict certain outcomes.

We educate our clients with movement and functional input. We find articles and research to share with clients who wish to understand the reasoning behind the efficacy of Rolfing Structural Integration (SI). We explain the anatomy and function of fascia based on what we have learned and continue to study. We dazzle them with the beauty of the latest research on fascial connections and relationships.

Dr. Rolf was a scientist. She was concerned that the public image of Rolfing SI be linked to science in order to be taken seriously by the scientific and medical communities. She made research one of the missions of the Rolf Institute® of Structural Integration (RISI). Acupuncture and massage therapy programs already include a research component (making them eligible to apply for grants). However, RISI is still working to engage faculty and students in the relevance that research plays in our practice and profession.

Why is this so? Some of us recoil at the idea of research. Perhaps we believe it's not how our minds operate. Maybe we prefer to think of what we do as magical, more ethereal, mysterious. And while the effects of our work do sometimes seem magical, Rolf's legacy is not well served by this resistance to the scientific method.

Research in the RISI Curriculum

Research literacy is a place to begin. The RISI faculty and Board of Directors believe we should elevate the standard of understanding and discussion about relevant research in our field. Online resources boast a myriad of claims in the name of 'new studies'. But how many of us are educated to assess the legitimacy of the research that is out there? Four years ago, RISI offered half-day workshops in research literacy. Unfortunately, these were not taught in ways oriented to our work. The inclusion of research in our basic certification must be relevant to the clinical work we do to be accessible and applicable to new RISI students. To this end, the Research Committee will offer an online research literacy course for Rolfers interested in creating solid research.

Most students come to RISI motivated by some aspect of the work that changed their life. What if they could pursue that interest and passion in a way that educated the world on the effects of our work? What if we could capture and nurture that interest from the beginning? Paula Stal (who has published research on Rolfing SI and fibromyalgia) and I will be helping RISI faculty create ways to harness the inherent curiosity of beginning students.

Advanced Rolfing Instructor Pedro Prado introduced the case study into our curriculum. Prado (2016) notes:

> I believe science is a communitarian effort and not solely the result of one well-intended mind. We need to develop a community that thinks scientifically and that communicates [its] thinking. As an instructor, I try to include case studies in all classes and give brief orientation to the students. As students see the results of systematic thinking around their clinical work in class, they get 'enlightened' (if this is not too strong a word . . .) and encouraged to continue investigating, thinking, and sharing.

The case study required in Phase III of the basic Rolfing training teaches students how to think about the Ten Series and understand each client's response to the work. Students are taught to assess, reflect, work, and re-assess. Throughout Phase III they develop observational skills and clinical strategies. They utilize SOAP notes (subjective, objective, assessment, and plan) for each session of the Series and the three movement sessions. They then write their case into a paper for presentation to the group. Following the presentation of the paper, I have had small student groups come together to discuss each others' case studies. Before-and-after client photos are included for the group to analyze. Students evaluate practitioner-client progress.

This is beginning science: observing and 'measuring' according to a given standard. As research goes, the case study is a 'soft' design. Richard Ennis [(2016), whose article appears on page 9] notes, "The strength of this design is it often informs about interesting specific cases that might not be found in a larger study with many participants. It can also be the initial basis

of interest for designing more complex studies. However, just because a change might be observed after a treatment, this cannot be generalized to every person who presents the same."

Case studies encourage students to think holistically – to consider context, to regard their clients within a psychobiological milieu (insofar as this can be known) – and to determine and justify the Principles of Intervention and the taxonomies that apply to each client.

Supporting Research

The nature of Rolfing SI – a holistic approach to psychostructural well-being – makes it challenging to study. What are we trying to measure? How does it differ from the effects of, for instance, massage? How do we control for variables? Which ones? What are the ethical implications? How do we organize a meaningful number of subjects within a consistent, controlled environment?

We have competent research scientists within our membership who have already begun this work (Eric Jacobsen, Tom Findley, Stephen Evanko, Karen Price, to mention a few). Meaningful, outcome-based research is being conducted through the Ida P. Rolf Research Foundation, such as a study of the effects of Rolfing SI on chronic low back pain (see http://rolfresearchfoundation.org/fund-structural-integration-back-pain-study).

RISI has an active Research Committee that tracks peer-reviewed research. The committee reviews research proposals and solicits donations to support meritorious research projects. The Board of Directors recently approved a scholarship fund (created by the Research Committee) for students who will do research once they have finished our training. Our newly revised website provides assistance for creating research projects. The Committee solicits and evaluates research proposals from experienced and new investigators for potential financial support from RISI, and members of the Committee are available for consultation as a prospective investigator prepares his/her project ideas for grant/funding application. The RISI website provides guidelines and outlines the process for grant application submission, acceptance, review, and approval.

Conclusion

Within the magical, transformational work we all experience in the privacy of our practices we witness outcomes that are repeated with different clients. Aspects of the work that deeply interest us could easily be transformed into a paper, a study, and even a research project. The art of Rolfing SI does not have to exclude science, and vice versa. Hopefully, we can all begin to utliize our inherent curiosity and observations to further our work in the world.

Valerie Berg was certified as a Rolfer in 1988 and has been a member of the Rolf Institute faculty since 2003. She did her Rolf Movement training with Hubert Godard and Rebecca Carli-Mills and her Advanced Training with Jeff Maitland. She has been practicing in Albuquerque, New Mexico for twenty-nine years with a side step to Guatemala for five years. She also travels to San Diego and sees clients there. Valerie is particularly interested in the structural aging that occurs in the body – what she calls 'non-essential patterns of aging' – and teaches workshops on this subject. Another focus is teaching the depth and layers of the Ten Series.

Bibliography

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