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Beyond the Myth of the Pajama Party: Delivering Quality Online Counselor Education and Supervision

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Abstract

Students increasingly are seeking online education (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The growth of online counselor education programs (Reicherzer, Dixon-Saxon, & Trippany, 2009, along with increasing numbers of Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)-accredited online counselor education programs (CACREP, 2012), reflects this trend. Online counselor educators must train students well academically and prepare them to be competent clinicians; however, many faculty are not provided much training to teach online. We introduce basic, practical elements of online teaching. We also review the current state of online education and contextual considerations of online learning. Additionally, we propose practical elements of setting up online classrooms, as well as ways to creatively and effectively deliver course content in the unique online environment. Finally, potential ethical issues specifically related to online counselor education are discussed.

Introduction

The need to develop and deliver quality online counselor education continues to increase as more students seek online graduate training (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The goal of online education must be to train competent and effective counselors, just as in traditional face-to-face classroom environments. However, inherent in distance milieus are distinct challenges and opportunities, and many instructors are not provided much training to effectively teach online (Allen & Seaman, 2011). This article introduces practical elements of creating and effectively utilizing online classrooms. Specifically, current literature related to online education and online counselor education in particular is addressed. Additionally, practical ideas to create and enhance online counselor education learning environments, as well as ways to creatively utilize technology to deliver course content, are explored. Finally, potential ethical issues unique to online counselor education classrooms are discussed.

Current State of Online Counselor Education

In a survey of more than 2,500 colleges and universities within the United States, Allen and Seaman (2011) found that more than 6 million students took at least one online course in the fall of 2010. Enrollment in online classes grew 10% in 2011, compared to only 1% growth in overall student enrollment within higher education. Additionally, more than half of chief academic officer respondents reported that online education is an important part of their institutions' long-term strategies (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Some have suggested that tight budgets and challenging economic circumstances make online education an especially valuable resource for students, educators, and institutions (Friedman & Weiser Friedman, 2011). Specific to counselor education, many institutions are expanding their typical face-to-face counselor training programs into partial or fully distance formats (Reicherzer et al., 2009), and (as of the time this article was written) five universities offer CACREP-accredited fully online counselor education programs, including one doctoral program (CACREP, 2012).

Although online learning has been well studied in other professions and some fields have begun to identify what constitutes excellent online education (Perry & Edwards, 2005), few studies specifically examine aspects of quality online counselor education (Ekong, 2006). While limited, existing research about online counselor training provides some understanding of what makes online counselor education effective. Ekong (2006) suggested that a key element of successful online learning is faculty interaction with students. Other researchers noted the importance of faculty recognition of and sensitivity to student learning styles (Flamez, Smith, Devlin, Ricard, & Sherrill Luther, 2008). However, despite the proliferation of online learning, faculty often receive minimal training in distinct online pedagogy, and training that is offered most often is a combination of informal mentoring and non-standardized training (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Reicherzer et al. (2011) suggested that online counselor educators should value and develop distinct pedagogy, rather than trying to replicate face-to-face courses in online formats.

While there have been discussions in the literature about general concepts for doing this, concrete, practical teaching tools for the online classroom rarely are discussed.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to describe real-life tools that counselor educators can use to effectively create and deliver quality online counselor education.

Understanding the Context of Online Learning

Learning is a process based on a student's acquisition of knowledge. Socrates taught from a hillside and found engaging ideas to be the best teaching resource. His student, Plato, founded the Academy with a broad range of subjects constituting a curriculum similar to the modern undergraduate university, and the park adjacent to the Academy also was part of the learning environment. Plato's pupil, Aristotle, returned from teaching young Alexander the Great to establish his school, the Lyceum, within a traditional building. The lineage of these great philosophers, who continue to influence education, shows that learning occurs in traditional (building) and non-traditional (hillside, park) settings. Fast forward to the 21st century where physical locations (online vs. face-to-face) are less important than students' ability to engage with knowledge, ideas, and a capable instructor as a guide.

When optimized, today's online learning illustrates Wenger's (2001) construct of "communities of practice" wherein students "share an interest in a domain of human endeavor and engage in a process of collective learning which strengthens a sense of community" (p. 1). The shift to online modalities benefits students in many ways, including expanding student access to learning materials and alleviating capacity constraints within traditional face-to-face classrooms (Volery & Lord, 2000). Additionally, online education can provide individualized learning for students since access to online courses usually is not limited to specific days or times; therefore, online instructors and students theoretically never miss a class (Darnell & Rosenthal, 2000; Rogers, 2001). Moreover, the ability for students and instructors to e-mail one another or post thoughts in the classroom at any time also enhances this possibility. All of these unique elements of online education can contribute to helping students become active learners, rather than passive recipients of teaching (Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994).

From a practical standpoint, online education offers unique pathways to creating classrooms that are communities of practice. Since online learning provides a 24/7 classroom that supports active learning and access to learning resources, instructors can access myriad resources, merely a click away, to enhance student learning by using powerful technologies such as Blackboard, Angel, Moodle, or WebCT. It is incumbent upon educators to strategically use these tools in a manner that invites and fosters learning in online communities, and we will detail practical ways to use these tools to facilitate dynamic online classroom learning.

Setting Up the Online Classroom: Crafting Online Syllabi

Delivering quality counselor education begins with developing an online classroom environment that is welcoming, efficient, and responsive to the needs of students. Several studies (Hara & Kling, 2000; Mason & Weller, 2000; Varnhagen, Wilson, Krupa, Kasprzak, & Hunting, 2005) reported that ambiguous or non-existent rubrics for assignments and classroom participation frustrate online students. Therefore, a detailed course syllabus can introduce structures and processes of classroom logistics to

minimize student frustration and allow students to focus on learning. In addition to typical descriptions of course policies and assignments, effective syllabi for online classes may include specific information about ‘netiquette,’ detailed descriptions about appropriate ways for students to interact online (e.g., expectations for format and tone of written communications), expectations for e-mail (e.g., inclusion of respectful salutations and signatures; professional representation of student status and credentials), as well as instructions for proper use of software and technological resources (e.g., specifying assignments be created in MS Word; how to title and submit assignments in the online classroom grade book). Other expectations that may be communicated in online syllabi might specify students’ mandatory attendance at specific class meetings and a dress code for in-vivo participation in class meetings. Within written syllabi or verbalized instructions, it is important that instructors are consistent in directions, expectations, or other information communicated to students. This can help students feel prepared to participate in online classrooms, including class discussions, Web sites referenced as part of the class, or electronic textbooks (Coates, 2006) that may be used within the class.

People thrive in structured environments where expectations and standards are clear (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Therefore, syllabi specifically designed to address unique online classroom environments can enhance not only the venue in which online learning occurs, but also student learning experiences. In the next section we describe practical ways to deliver course content within the online classroom.

Creatively and Effectively Utilizing Technology to Delivering Course Content

Effective teaching involves engaging dialogue, questions to ponder, and problems to solve (Coates, 2006). Tedious lectures are the essence of a teacher-directed pedagogical style, the antithesis of the later 20th century movement toward andragogy where students are involved in and responsible for learning (Revere & Kovach, 2011). As Ravoï (2002) observed, “the transactional distance” between students and instructors is bridged by frequent and meaningful dialogues in online environments that can occur through various means, such as weekly discussion boards, voice boards, and small group dialogues in asynchronous, online design.

Discussion boards that are limited to requirements for students to simply “read-post-respond” may limit active learning. Even in asynchronous mode, discussion boards can yield genuine, spirited dialogue when instructors periodically join the discussion. To create a community that fosters what Maddix (2010) called “critical reflection and dialogue,” we propose setting up two discussion questions per topic: one forum with an Open Discussion question and a second forum for Structured Discussion. The Open Discussion can invite students’ thoughts and opinions in a manner that does not require specific length or inclusion of scholarly citations. In this forum, instructors can interact freely with students to stimulate thoughts and facilitate active exchange among students. The Structured Discussion can provide a place for longer student commentary, which may require adherence to prescribed length or the inclusion of citations to support students’ comments. Students may be required to read and respond to the posts of other classmates in a manner that challenges and expands the ideas being presented.

Another option for enhancing online class content is the inclusion of periodic live interactive sessions, which offer real time conversations between students and instructors.

Synchronous meeting times may present a challenge for students with variable work schedules or other commitments that are not conducive to attending live classes or for students who live in distant time zones where internet access is limited to daytime hours. In such instances, instructors may make attendance at live sessions optional and record sessions within the technology system so students can review the sessions later. Another way to meet this challenge is to offer the same live session at two different times (e.g., 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. EST), and require students to attend one of the sessions. A third way might be to offer, for example, 5 live sessions, each offered on different days of the week and at different times, over the course of the semester, and require students to attend 3 of the 5 sessions.

There is a proliferation of resources to expand online learning, and Revere and Kovach (2011) found that rather than being overwhelmed by technological advances, most online students want their virtual classrooms to stay up to date with them. These resources frequently are available both within, and external to, the technological platform being used, depending on universities' agreements with vendors. Specific resources discussed here include blogs, wikis, synchronous meeting tools, social media, document sharing programs, and podcasts.

Blogs offer an easy way to encourage students to present and test ideas within online classes. As Dearstyne (2005) described, the blog is another method for "collecting and organizing fresh insights and opinions" (p. 40). Students or small groups may create blogs to develop research ideas for assignments or explore potential projects and solicit classmates' feedback. Blogs may be maintained within online classrooms using some technology systems, or students can create free blogs using programs such as Edublogs.org, Wordpress.com, Google's Blogger.com, Tumblr.com, or LiveJournal.com.

Wikis are the electronic version of information gathering or developing research on a given topic and can be used to promote collaborative learning (Ioannou & Artino, 2009). Instructors can set up class Wikis prior to a discussion or for students or student groups to further explore concepts presented in weekly readings. This is particularly useful for group tasks where information is readily available and accessing information is not dependent upon students having to research and then share their findings. Wikis may or may not be graded.

Another option to consider is live, synchronous class meetings for groups of students, or for the entire class. In the Blackboard technology system, the live online classroom system is called WIMBA. Depending upon technological capabilities, interactions may be audio (i.e., only sounds/voices) or audio and visual (i.e., video that captures picture and sound). Alternatively, students may prefer to connect via a live meeting venue external to the classroom, such as in Google+ or SKPYE. The disadvantage of class meetings outside the formal online technology system is that these meetings may not be recorded and are therefore unavailable within the class archive.

Other online resources such as Google Calendar, Google Drive, and Dropbox offer free means for student collaboration delivery of course content. To create dynamic classroom communication, instructors may establish Twitter feeds, adding students as "followers" and establishing privacy settings to restrict outside access. Instructors also may create a class Facebook page with restricted access. Students of the Millennial Generation (born after 1985) are avid social media consumers and find both Twitter and Facebook to be prime sources for interaction and relationship development (Lenhart,

Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Wetzel (2010) suggested that Twitter gives students access to engage with and get the most up-to-date information from experts in a given field. Other alternative resources to social media are both effective and free. For example, an electronic timeline suitable for any subject or presentation is found at Dipity.com. Conducting a brainstorming session in a live online class meeting can be easily done within an easy-to-use whiteboard on www.Bubbl.us, or by using a recorded presentation within this free online resource.

Instructor podcasts offer excellent ways to enrich course material and add personal communication asynchronously. These can be directly recorded into some technology systems or created separately with programs like Audacity (audacity.sourceforge.net), saved to instructors' computers, then uploaded into online classrooms as audio files. The podcast is *not* a lecture, and should not last longer than 5-9 minutes. Instructors can allow students to subscribe to class podcasts, which automatically send notifications or actual podcasts to students' computers or mobile devices when new recordings are added to the class. Podcasts allow students to enjoy hearing course information relayed in the instructor's voice where personality, humor, and individuality can be conveyed.

With the integration of expanded resources into active learning methods, online learning offers options to instructors to intentionally foster communities of learners within online classrooms. After meeting CACREP (2009) standards for counselor education and training and university expectations for learning, instructors who use multiple technological resources that promote active learning can accomplish Maddix's (2010) goal of providing online experiences that go beyond simply encouraging students' mastery of subject matter to create "effective learning and formation of students" (p. 11) as competent counselors.

Of course, understanding the unique context of online learning, developing effective online syllabi, and strategically utilizing technology to optimally deliver online class content are only part of what constitutes quality online education. To create and maintain effective, engaging, and competent online classrooms, counselor educators also must attend to unique potential ethical issues within online counselor education.

Potential Ethical Issues Unique to Online Counselor Education

The American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics* (2005) calls counselor educators to work from sound theoretical and pedagogical foundations. Similarly, counselor education and supervision standards suggested by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (2011) and accrediting bodies like CACREP (2009) implore counselor educators and supervisors to intentionally engender ethical behavior among students. Students' and instructors' asynchronous presence in online classrooms may present unique ethical challenges. Burge (2008) posited that ethical issues in online education could be foundationally identified in various aspects, including teaching and learning, technology applications, information dissemination and library services, research, course management data, marketing, and quality assurance. Literature suggests ethical issues germane to online education relate to equity, academic integrity, gatekeeping, confidentiality, academic freedom, and appropriate media use (Anderson & Simpson, 2007; Brey, 2006; Garza Mitchell, 2009; Hinman, 2005).

We begin with a discussion of equity (Anderson & Simpson, 2007). The advent of distance formats virtually makes counselor education available to anyone with a computer and Internet access; however, this doesn't mean everyone has equal access to counselor education. As online programs become more desirable and as the number of programs continues to increase, equal access may be assumed, yet there may be social justice implications for socioeconomically disadvantaged students who do not have the means to access suitable technological resources, or for culturally disadvantaged student who are denied access to technological resources (Brey, 2006; Burge, 2008). Consider variations in how students are able to access necessary technology to participate optimally in online classrooms (e.g., having capable computers with larger screens or maximum speed internet connections for viewing audio/video content). Moreover, ponder equity manifested in cultural differences, such as potential disparities among student understandings of how to effectively use technology.

Next, let us consider academic integrity. Honesty and originality of thought is a hallmark of the Academy, and the availability of information on the Internet has challenged educators' abilities to maintain these values. Both faculty and students have responsibility in maintaining standards of academic integrity (Brey, 2006). For example, faculty may be tempted to inflate grades in order to avoid negative student reactions, support administration goals for maximized enrollments, or minimize their workload (Burge, 2008). Likewise, students may be more tempted to plagiarize written assignments by copying information directly from the Internet and omitting citations. Indeed, the Internet offers a plethora of "instant information" including YouTube videos about how to cheat. Literature suggests that online education programs should intentionally promote academic integrity by having clearly stated academic integrity policies that are noted on syllabi and discussed in class, and by utilizing plagiarism detection software to minimize intentional or unintentional infringement upon copyright laws (Simpson, 2001; Weigel, 2000). *Turnitin* and *SafeAssign* are examples of such programs. Another potential issue associated with academic integrity includes licensing and copyright protections for software, along with other improper use of resources (Brey, 2006).

Faculty in online programs face unique gatekeeping responsibilities. Students may "hide behind" discussion posts and other written assignments in ways that keep faculty from fully ascertaining students' true opinions, biases, and personality traits that might be conveyed face-to-face via facial expressions, nonverbal behaviors, and other interpersonal observations. Another concern is the possibility that students can have someone else do their work, inviting myriad potential issues, most notably the advancement of students who have not received appropriate training into clinical settings. This possibility has led some accreditation bodies to require online programs to verify identities of online students (Bailie & Jortberg, 2009). Additionally, faculty must entertain a variety of ethical considerations related to this gatekeeping responsibility when providing online clinical supervision for students taking practicum and internship courses, including overseeing students' responsibility to maintain confidentiality and the security of transmitted materials (i.e., written and audio visual materials), as well as monitoring students' clinical skills and professional behavior at a distance (McAdams & Wyatt, 2010; Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007).

The perceived anonymity of the online environment (Freeman & Bamford, 2004) also may facilitate inappropriate behavior among students that may not be observed

within face-to-face classrooms. Consider dynamics that may occur when a student communicates disrespectfully in discussion board posts in the absence of palpable peer pressure that may prevent the behavior from occurring in a face-to-face classroom. Further, imagine the potential for both students and faculty to misinterpret one another in written communications absent of non-verbal cues. Another related issue is how faculty may respond to attention-seeking students who constantly e-mail questions, rather than asking questions within designated discussion boards in online classrooms. These students may be reminiscent of those in face-to-face classrooms who dominate faculty time during class breaks and office hours, rather than asking questions in class. Some online counselor education programs require students to attend in-person annual residencies, which can be designed to assist faculty in observing live student behaviors as well as to provide additional live mentoring and supervision.

An additional concern is the potential for surveillance and textural permanence (Anderson & Simpson, 2007) within online classrooms. Student contributions in discussion boards remain available until the instructor (or administrator, depending on permitted access) deletes them. Discussion board posts later retrieved by someone to whom the comments were not directed may be misinterpreted, may contain inaccuracies, or may be interpreted to be offensive. Student comments in face-to-face classrooms are interpreted in the context of real time discussion and may be quickly forgotten. Further, confidentiality may be breached by supervisors, who typically can access subordinates' online classrooms, potentially exposing multiple dimensions of student disclosure (longitudinally, topical, etc.) to which supervisors would not ordinarily be privy in face-to-face classrooms. For example, supervisors may visit face-to-face classrooms to observe instructors, but students see the supervisors, allowing students to censor what they disclose. Conversely, in online environments, supervisors may log into classrooms any time, unknown to students or instructors, and review any part of classes (e.g., discussion boards, archived synchronous classroom meetings, evaluative feedback). While this may appear to potentially violate students' perceptions of privacy within online classrooms, we have not found precedents that specifically inform students of this dynamic or require them to give explicit informed consent to participate in online classrooms where this possibility exists. As such, we propose that online class syllabi explicitly inform students that other university personnel may see contents of the online classroom at some time.

Finally, academic freedom and the appropriate use of media must be carefully considered by instructors in online classrooms (Garza Mitchell, 2009). Some online programs require all instructors who teach the same class to use the same textbooks and syllabi. Other programs allow faculty teaching the same class to adopt different textbooks and teaching plans, as long as accreditation standards are met. These variances may limit academic freedom that counselor educators expect when accepting online teaching assignments. Further, the nature of online classrooms may allow instructors or administrators to copy entire courses – essentially giving one instructor a whole course developed by someone else – without the consent of the original instructor. Also, some institutions prevent faculty from deleting course material once it is posted to an online classroom. This is radically different from face-to-face faculty collaboration where instructors may share resources in conversation or select certain course materials to share, like syllabi. The potential for these occurrences invites the question of ownership of

course materials. Does material ‘belong’ to the instructor who created and developed it, or the university who employs an instructor, or is it public domain? We submit that students are expected to credit sources appropriately and avoid plagiarism; therefore, faculty should model appropriate use of resources by accurately citing sources and respecting intellectual property of others.

In summary, ethical issues, especially related to gatekeeping, abound within counselor education and online learning presents some additional, unique ethical concerns. The issues presented here offer a starting point, rather than an exhaustive list, of ethical issues to consider in online counselor education programs. We trust that ethical issues in online counselor education will continue to be identified and discussed to benefit students, faculty, and the profession.

Conclusion

Online education is here and we likely will not return to strictly face-to-face classrooms. Therefore, it behooves counselor educators to have ongoing conversations about how to best deliver rigorous online counselor education that adequately prepares students to be competent clinicians. Delivering quality online counselor education requires faculty to intentionally develop and facilitate learning that accounts for unique student needs, learning styles, and thoughtful pedagogy, rather than simply moving face-to-face classes into online milieus. We hope that the practical online classroom structures and processes described, as well as the discussion about unique ethical issues within online counselor education, contribute to ongoing conversations about how to best navigate the present and future development of online counselor education.

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