

# USING FRUSTRATION AWARENESS TO ASSIST COUNSELING STUDENTS IN SUCCEEDING WITH THEIR ONLINE CURRICULUM

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## ABSTRACT

*Online education alters the expectation for graduate-level engagement in relation to classroom engagement and student evaluation. Whereas the process of achieving a graduate degree in counseling has historically required learners engage in self-exploration, ethical and moral development, and reviewing contemporary research topics in counseling, online learners may experience a different process in their journey through completing task after task of counseling related coursework. It is also common for people in situations of expected personal growth to experience frustration when faced with their inability to overcome a given task upon exhausting a reasonable amount of effort per said task. Due to this task-based focus of many online counseling programs, student growth and the ensuing frustrations, along with avenues for alleviating such frustrations, may come from courses of triumph more commonly observed in other electronic media vastly different than would be expected in higher education experiences: the play of video games. This study explores the contrast between the experience of and response to frustration for students in online counselor education programs, traditional/classroom-based counselor education, and players of online video games to better understand student-consumer expectations for achieving success in adverse scenarios.*

*Keywords: frustration, instructor feedback, counselor development, online learning*

## INTRODUCTION

The perception of communications between faculty and students are impacted by the decision to experience the graduate school process via online education (Cicco, 2012). While research does outline the perceptions of both groups in relation to how various counseling skills can or cannot be taught in the online forum, there is a need to explore the difference between successful and unsuccessful faculty/student relationships throughout the teaching and mentorship process (Pipoly, 2013). The importance of clarification in this area becomes enhanced with the reality that counseling skills create a different target for skill development than many other academic programs

that translate more readily through the online medium. The very notion of interacting with an online system more often than the course instructor can shift the perception towards experiencing the classroom tasks through a different lens. While it is possible for some students to develop a new learner identity that utilizes this shift to improved effect (Kaufmann, 2018), other students could struggle to differentiate this set of technology-driven goals from other forms of technology present in other areas of their lives (Trepal et al., 2007).

A study conducted to examine the development of the learner identity towards becoming a “good student” identified a list of traits that lead to classroom success in child learner populations

(Bianchi & Lancianese, 2005). This list included child attentiveness, task persistence, eagerness to learn, learning independence, flexibility, organization, and work habits. While adult learners bring different degrees of interpersonal development with them into a graduate-level classroom, the online format poses several challenges that can lead to frustration if faculty input does not override the natural resting state of an “unmanned” online course (Trammell & LaForge, 2017). This can lead to the student selecting a frustrated stance in retaliation to the design of the course, the lack of expected human communication, the task-oriented nature of class activities in lieu of experiential learning, or its confusing expectations. When this occurs, frustration can lead to an aggressive approach where task completion becomes prioritized by the learner over skill development (Pipoly, 2013). Such a stance reflects the loss of student engagement in addition to the negative affective traits that have permeated the experience of the online learning, which can be difficult to overcome in an effort to earn back the student’s trust.

In the experience of the prospective researchers, students assuming such a stance in their online course often highlight the grade in their complaints more prominently than they do the process of counseling skill development and learning towards professional development. With certain approaches to course design heavily emphasizing task-based learning over experiential elements (Trammell & LaForge, 2017), this study seeks to identify why this frustrated communication might be reinforced in the minds of the student consumer.

In order to explore this question, the structure of the study will utilize an alternate form of technology that can result in equal amounts of frustration with design and implementation of tasks: online video games (Liao et al., 2016). Many gamers also view their time investment as being task and outcome oriented, with little attention spent on the process of play. When the design is deemed confusing or poorly constructed, frustration or even discontinuing to play can result. This indicates a scenario in which the tolerance for frustration is overrun by a variety of drives and perceived needs inherent to the individual. This study seeks to utilize a tool called the Frustration Discomfort Scale (Harrington, 2005) to review

the relationship among these traits and affective states across three populations: online counseling students, campus-based counseling students, and online game players. The result will establish the degree of intensity in overall frustration tolerance in each population and the degree of similarity between experiencing in-game tasks versus the tasks established to earn graduate credit in online counseling courses. The outcomes from this study should extend the conversation on how to enhance the experiential elements of counselor skill development for online learners in order to avoid this tasked based frustration, which could become an obstacle for emphasized learning processes.

*Follow-Up Topic (Benefit to the Field/Why is This Necessary?)*

This study proves important to the field of counselor education by adding relevant data to understanding the differences in frustration tolerance among online and ground students. This data informs the field of counselor education on instructional delivery. If online students see online instructors more as a video game boss to beat or a robot on the other side of the computer arbitrarily assigning grades to assignments and ground students see instructors as the experts helping them learn content, this will inform the field of possible measures needed to humanize online instructors. As online education is task oriented based on a student’s ability to self-motivate to learn the material, ask relevant questions, and check off the boxes of assignment completion, and it is likely that frustration tolerance for anything less than their expected score on an assignment will be seen as a personal assault against their effort. Add this dimension to the dehumanization of online instructors and students are more likely to become unable to tolerate the frustration of the assigned grade and become unable to see past the grade to learn the content mistakes they may have made. This negatively impacts counselor development for those students. Therefore, this study is a positive step in learning how instructors can help students more effectively develop as counselors through modifying the delivery of communication and instruction.

Since online learning is task oriented, much like online video games, the hypothesis is that online students will approach their online education in

much the same way online gamers approach battles against a difficult boss. This study provides some insight into how online students, online gamers, and ground students approach events or scores that elicit a frustration response. This study may help provide insight into the process of student engagement in online classes informing the field of counselor education of areas that may be modified to more deeply engage students in the learning of counseling rather than just task completion and to increase student frustration tolerance for online education through more humanizing forms of online instruction and communication.

#### *Theoretical Orientation from the Online Education Perspective*

Research has indicated that online education is often approached as a task and outcome-oriented experience (Trammel & LaForge, 2017). Students approach online education as a series of boxes to check off, followed by a grade given by the instructor, and then move on to the next section of learning. While learning does occur in this manner, it lacks the experiential element of traditional ground education with a live instructor and class time to practice, discuss, ask questions, and gain clarification in understanding. Students who attend ground classes are still likely to be task and outcome oriented to a degree, but they are exposed to the experiential element of education on a larger scale than those who choose the online only delivery method.

An issue with online delivery of counseling classes is that it isolates students from regular connections and contact with other students and faculty (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). In a field where human contact and verbal communication is essential, this piece of counselor development is often missing in the online environment. This adds to the frustration for online students as they have less faculty and student support than traditional ground students experience.

Connected to the isolation of online learning is that students miss opportunities traditional ground students have to collaborate with each other that often help students develop critical thinking skills (Adams et al., 2007; Bejerano, 2008; Crimando et al., 2004). Critical thinking and analysis skills are vital in counseling and missing these opportunities to develop these skills through interaction with

other students and faculty can be detrimental to counselor development. These skills are necessary in coursework for counseling as well, which seems to put online students at a disadvantage and can increase frustration with online education as they are not developing these skills at the same rate as traditional ground students.

Online education also significantly diminishes the instructor's ability to advise and mentor students (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). Students in an online environment often feel less connected to the instructor and are less likely to reach out with questions and concerns than traditional ground students. Benshoff & Gibbons (2011) indicate that instructors are less likely to reach out to students in an online environment as well. Instructors are less likely to initiate advising and mentoring with individual students because of the time constraints of reaching out to each student individually coupled with the lack of relationship development with students that plagues the online learning environment.

Research on online delivery of counseling programs has found that programs containing a synchronous component in the online classroom result in more positive student outcomes (Oswald et al., 2015). Many online programs do not require a synchronous component, as is true with the online program used for this current research study. The synchronous component alleviates some of the issues previously described. It diminishes isolation by being present, albeit in an online classroom, with other students and the instructor at the same time, and it allows for collaboration, learning from the experiences of others, the incorporation of some experiential components, and students to ask questions. The instructor and student are also more likely to form a better relationship as the synchronous component humanizes both the student and instructor and removes the virtual barrier of not knowing who you are talking to in the online environment. A synchronous component may be what is really missing in the online classroom to break down the barriers and differences in frustration tolerance between online students and traditional ground students.

#### *Frustration Orientation from an Academic and Gaming Perspective*

With online learning being a self-driven process

with the majority of tasks occurring independently of the synchronous guidance of a knowledgeable faculty member, the question of whether the learning management system could be considered a game environment seems like a reasonable and creative one to consider. Many prompting events for an investigation of this kind can become easily relatable to online and classroom-bound faculty. One is the receipt of an email/forum message from an online student possessing an unstable attachment to the individual meant to provide guidance in the manner a faculty member typically would, i.e., through grades and messages for improvement and encouragement. An example of this kind of message is:

Hi professor, I completely reject your criticism of my work. I used the textbook and included at least one sentence for each topic. I should not have to do any of these assignments only the way you want me to. You are unclear, and your assignment instructions do not make sense. You mentioned comments on the rubric, but that doesn't make sense because we only see the gradebook score you entered. I demand that you update my grade and restore every point involved in the problems I just mentioned. Let me know when you have made the update so I can make sure my grade is fair and this course does not ruin my GPA. Thanks, Your Student.

This form of concern coming from a student highlights many of the traits commonly explored in research on frustration for different populations undertaking various tasks.

Regarding online settings, video games seemed a reasonable and accessible population to compare to this design of frustration. Research conducted by Van Den Hoogen et al. (2012) explored facial response and brain activity during various experiences of within-game failure amongst their participants. They identified the loss experience as being a nuanced event with implications reaching far beyond the concept of having a goal and failing to reach it. When a player loses in a video game, is common for them to smile, make a joking comment, engage a defense mechanism of some kind in a lighthearted way, and show many other forms of aftermath resolution. The moment when

a player loses an event provides a transient relief from the focused state they maintain during game engagement, which releases the tension of the moment from their neuro-emotional experience. Going beyond this experience of relief comes the moment of feedback. The distinction of losing the challenge indicates that the player must improve their skill level in order to benefit from other kinds of enjoyment most often associated with winning. Victory pertaining to the in-game task serves as a mark of mastery that is meant to spur the player on towards the next challenge in the scaffolded series of tasks. While failure itself is not normally considered enjoyable, the relief from initial failure coupled with feedback that makes the task feel attainable to the player does result in positive neurological activity and an increase in hope for future success.

Relating these considerations to online learning, there are a few important considerations related to the message of the student mentioned previously. First, the student identified that they felt judged by their grade, questioned the fairness of the assignment, and identified some fear for the implications of this low-grade on their future standing as a student in the form of their GPA. This form of message reads very similar to what you would expect from a game player who is coming to believe that their in-game challenge is unfair, the game is cheating them out of their experience, and the game is too hard to consider playing any further. The difference is, on the surface, the implications of walking away from a video game would not normally have ramifications for future career prospects and one's ability to engage in their intended profession. In the student's message, they struggle with their own intolerance of uncomfortable feelings, have a sense of entitlement, and focus on achievement outside of the concept of personal growth. They also identified their personal rejection of the very errors that likely resulted in the low score evaluation from the instructor even as they admitted completing their assignment in that manner. Just like a game player who is walking away from a game instead of repeating a challenge they are presently performing at an unsuccessful level, they are disregarding the feedback provided by the system of play through an unacknowledged defensiveness that activates when they are evaluated in a way that feels incongruent to their sense of self.

### *Understanding Intellectual Challenge in a Technological Setting*

From this vantage point, it is important to continually research how faculty members can become more present for their students through synchronous engagement to help their students be more aware in their journey to learn their subject area and overcome the traits of the frustration experience. As academic challenges can be intellectually taxing in addition to being sometimes time consuming, it seems unreasonable to focus research efforts on preventing the academic setting from prompting the experience of frustration. Instead, this study seeks to understand what kinds of students are drawn to different kinds of academic settings and how frustration style is impacted by student type.

#### *Research Question #1:*

Do online counseling graduate students experience difficulties in the classroom more similarly to (a) video game players who are losing a game or (b) traditional classroom counseling students struggling with low academic performance?

The hypothesis for this study is that online students would engage in their online classrooms and related course tasks in a way similar to how video game players tackle complex boss encounters. Additional considerations include questions as to whether the GPA of the student and classroom type (traditional/online) may have a significant impact on factors commonly associated with frustration and discomfort.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The sample for this study consisted of three groups with established differences in their intellectual and technology-based areas of focus. The first and second groups consisted of students attending a university in the southwestern United States that offers both online and traditional campus based (ground) instruction in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. The degree, program, and course schedule are the same for both online and ground students. All students who participated in the study are seeking a Master's of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Ground students are regionally contained while online students are from various states throughout the country. The first group in the sample consisted only

of traditional campus-based learners. The second group in the sample consisted of online students. The final group were not counseling students but were instead players of an online video game from the MMORPG genre. Geographical regions were not collected for any questionnaire completions, but the online student and online gaming samples could potentially be consisting of a diverse and worldwide audience.

Students were recruited through a survey participation link posted in the online classroom for both ground and online students. The researchers sent a request to instructors to post the link in their classrooms asking students to participate. Students were able to click on a link taking them to a survey to determine their frustration tolerance as it relates to their role as a graduate student in a Master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program. In addition, data related to the students' highest and lowest grades in the program, whether they were online or ground students, and how long they had been in the program were collected. Online video game players were recruited through a link posted on one of the researcher's twitter accounts. Online gamers were asked to fill out the same survey to determine their frustration tolerance as it relates to online gaming.

The survey was adapted from Harrington's (2005) Frustration Discomfort Scale. The researchers contacted Dr. Harrington and received permission to use the scale and adapt it to an online delivery through SurveyMonkey. The scale specifically explores four dimensions of frustration: (1) an inability to tolerate feelings of discomfort, (2) entitlement beliefs often involving concerns for situational unfairness in any instance of personal struggle, (3) emotional intolerance involving any situation provoking and experience of emotional distress, and (4) an achievement focus that activates in situations when there is doubt related to the achievement of personal goals (Harrington, 2005).

#### **RESULTS**

The total number of participants for this study involved 237 adults, with 26 traditional students, 154 online students, and 57 online game players. All the students involved in this study were participating in the first half of their clinical mental health counseling program of study. Descriptive

data related to grade-point average (GPA) for both student groups can be reviewed in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Student GPA (by student type)

	n	Average GPA	Standard Deviation	Mode	High	Low
Traditional Student	26	3.73	0.29	4.0	4.0	3.5
Online Student	154	3.44	0.68	4.0	4.0	2.0

Data from the Frustration Discomfort Scale were analyzed using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the variance across the means for the three experimental groups. Significant differences of means were found across two of the subcategories for frustration. Among those significant results were the following: Discomfort Intolerance ( $F(2,234) = 4.03, p < .05$ ), and Achievement ( $F(2,234) = 5.00, p < .01$ ). No significant effect was found for Entitlement or Emotional Intolerance.

After identifying the factors that are significantly impacted by participant group, responses to each of the subscales were converted into averages by participant group to identify the direction of the significant shifts in the frustration experience.

Several inferences can be made from the results of this study. As indicated by Figure 1, all three experimental groups perceive themselves as capable of the highest level of achievement in their subject area. Relating to discomfort intolerance,

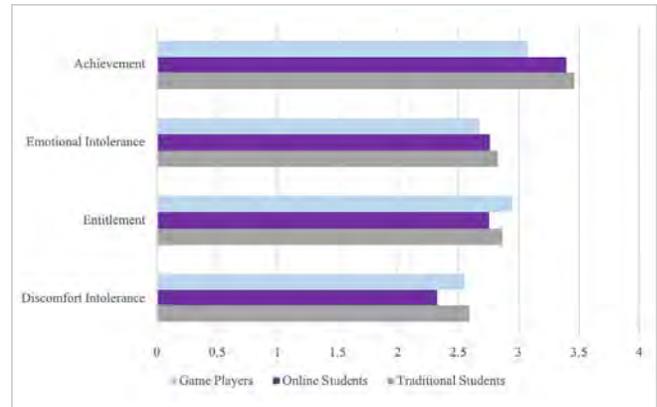


Figure 1. Comparison of Participant Frustration Experiences (by mean)

video game players and traditional students were more likely to admit feelings of discomfort related to their challenges, while online students delivered a self-report of being much more capable during discomfort provoking experiences. Statistically speaking, all participants reach similar levels of discomfort related to the experience of difficult emotions and feelings of deserving the distinction of success in the face of a challenge. Based on these findings, the hypothesis cannot be confirmed for each variable due to students having no significant difference in certain frustration-related variables to game players. Additionally, the two areas with statistically significant differences show the game players actually having (1) a lower expectation for achievement, and (2) unified experience of intolerance for discomfort with the traditional student group but not the online student group.

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA: Frustration Discomfort Scale and Group Type

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Discomfort Intolerance (Mean)	Between Groups	3.104	2	1.552	4.028	.019
	Within Groups	90.151	234	.385		
	Total	93.254	236			
Entitlement (Mean)	Between Groups	1.693	2	.846	1.934	.147
	Within Groups	102.392	234	.438		
	Total	104.084	236			
Emotional Intolerance (Mean)	Between Groups	.481	2	.241	.438	.646
	Within Groups	128.627	234	.550		
	Total	129.108	236			
Achievement (Mean)	Between Groups	4.729	2	2.365	4.995	.008
	Within Groups	110.773	234	.473		
	Total	115.502	236			

## DISCUSSION

### *Clinical Concepts/Awareness to Utilize/Identify*

The results of this study show statistically significant results in two of the four dimensions of frustration tolerance measured by Harrington's (2005) Frustration Discomfort Scale. The first dimension showed a statistically significant result in the area of achievement. The results of this study show game players are less concerned with achievement than are both online and traditional ground students. The difference between online students and traditional ground students is minimal but does indicate that traditional ground students are slightly more concerned with achievement than online students. The difference in results between students and game players is as expected. When playing an online game, one is expected to lose to a difficult boss several times before being successful. In online gaming, the player simply resets the game and tries again. The stakes are significantly higher for online students as their degree and future vocation are dependent on achieving success in the first round (in most cases).

As achievement is important to both groups of students, the differences in achievement should be investigated between the two student groups. It is possible that the differences in achievement are related to factors of isolation, collaboration with other students and faculty, and a less developed or nonexistent advising and mentoring relationship with instructors. These factors have been identified in the literature to be cornerstones for student success and satisfaction with online learning.

The second dimension that garnered statistically significant results was discomfort intolerance. The results indicate that both game players and classroom students are more sensitive to their discomfort than online students. This result indicates that students in the online environment are less likely to be impacted by discomfort. It is possible that this result can be indicative of a lack of self-awareness for online counseling students (as is later discussed as a limitation to the present study). However, the result can also indicate the likelihood that online students do not react as strongly to the discomfort of not comprehending material, which could lead to students choosing not to ask questions or ask for clarification on core concepts. Another possible reason or this result could be related to the lack of

connection online students feel with other students and faculty. Students who do not feel connected are less likely to feel discomfort when getting the material incorrect and less discomfort related to feeling the need to correct the error. Whether or not this result indicates an issue with self-awareness, lack of concern over comprehension, or possibly a lack of connection with instructors or other students remains to be discovered.

The final two dimensions of Harrington's (2005) scale are emotional intolerance and entitlement. The results of this study did not indicate any statistically significant differences between groups for these dimensions. The results indicate that all three groups have similar tolerances for emotional distress and for tolerating unfairness and lack of gratification. It is notable to mention that the results for all three groups, while similar, do indicate that all three groups scored on the lower end of the scale for tolerance for these two dimensions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several recommendations based on the result of this study. The first is for universities using an online delivery method for counselor education to work on humanizing the instructor. The instructor is often viewed as a robot or grading machine in online education because there is limited personal contact. There are several ways to counter this effect in students, including adding videos for feedback, using video lectures, making student phone calls, or having video meetings. Additionally, the research has indicated that online education that includes a synchronous component increases student relationships with each other and the instructor. Having a synchronous classroom experience in the online platform also allows instructors to more closely connect with students, and it serves to humanize the instructor for the student and the student for the instructor.

The next recommendation is to work to increase frustration tolerance among online students through increasing student collaboration. Online students rarely have the opportunity to connect with each other to discuss class concepts and challenge each other's thinking and ideas. Since the research has shown the importance of this in online learning, institutions should consider ways to incorporate student collaboration into the online environment. One way to do this is through the synchronous

component that will allow students to meet online in person to discuss ideas and classroom concepts. Institutions could also increase student collaboration through online student lounges or events to help bring online students together.

Finally, students should have access to instructors for advising and mentoring. There are two reasons this rarely happens for online students: a lack of time on the part of the instructor and the student and a lack of a relationship between the faculty member and the student. This issue could be mitigated through reduced student loads for online instructors with an assigned load of students for advising purposes. Currently, this role is rarely written into job descriptions for online faculty, although it is considered normal for the traditional campus faculty. Online instructors generally teach larger numbers of students than ground faculty and this decreases their available time to provide mentoring and advising to online students.

#### *Reflective Critique/Limitations*

The reason these issues are important is because the field of counseling is not just one where the concepts are to be understood with mastery, but they must also be integrated into the self of the counseling professional in a congruent fashion. In many technology driven teaching formats, typed feedback from faculty to student is often the standard approach to aiding students in their professional growth. When that is common, this form of interaction becomes an obstacle for a student's personal characteristics such as open-mindedness, humility, and the goal of being a lifelong learner able to identify alternate paths of interaction. While coping is an ability that can benefit people in many phases of challenge, if the constant state of interaction becomes frustration in an academic setting, the goal should then become finding a way to deliver the opportunity in a less frustration-inducing manner while still capitalizing on the strengths and accessibility of a technology driven format.

As with any study using a survey, one limitation is the self-report orientation of this study. Data rely on students replying honestly to how they manage frustration. While it is probable that students feel they are answering truthfully, it is impossible to remove bias from this survey as students are unlikely to admit when they do not manage

frustration in what appears to be the healthiest way. In addition, for truthful responses, students must have a high level of self-awareness.

Self-awareness is critical for counselors and is one limitation of this study. Postanalysis of the results indicated a need to measure student self-awareness of their frustration tolerance. It is possible students are answering the questions in the survey on frustration tolerance based on how they would like to be able to handle frustration as opposed to how they actually handle it. A follow up study is being planned to include a self-awareness measure in addition to the frustration tolerance scale.

#### *Future Research*

Future research should include a measure of self-awareness in counseling students. It is possible students with less in-person contact with their instructors are not developing self-awareness at the same rate as a student with weekly contact with an instructor. Counselor educators are tasked with assessing the development of core counseling principles in their students. However, this task is vastly more difficult when there is limited in-person contact with students.

It would also benefit the field of counselor education to learn more about student motivation to pursue an online versus a ground program. Life circumstances leading to this decision could provide insight into other factors impacting frustration tolerance. Is there a difference in motivation between a student who chooses to sit in a classroom four hours a week and learn in a more traditional lecture/experiential based format and a student who chooses to attend online and embark in a more self-directed format of learning?

It would be useful to assess student motivation to pursue a degree in counseling. In the counseling field, students generally pursue a counseling degree for one of two main reasons. First, they genuinely like helping people and they may have had a positive experience with counseling in the past. Second, it is common for students still struggling with mental health issues to seek education in counseling while trying to help themselves. It would be beneficial to this study to see if there are differences in student motivation to seek a counseling degree between online and ground students and assess if this has any bearing on their frustration tolerance.

Finally, another possible variable to consider

is the online delivery style of online instructors. It would be helpful to know the steps each instructor takes to humanize themselves to their online students. The researchers of this study are both online instructors and teach ground classes as well. While some steps are taken to increase our presence as more than grading robots to our students through videos, phone calls, and personal communications in the classroom, perhaps more needs to be done to ensure that students are relating to us as instructors and not anonymous entities who just assign grades to assignments. This would require a more in-depth study to include a survey of the instructors who post our research study in their classes and connect each student to their instructor. This additional survey method would only account for the student's current instructor and not previous experiences with other instructors. Frustration tolerance measures focus on the overall ability of a student to handle frustration through their program, not just in their current course. It is possible this variable cannot be completely accounted for in research. However, having an overall idea of the teaching and communication styles of each instructor could add valuable information to how students mitigate frustration in their counseling program.

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