

Bringing Life to e-Learning: Incorporating a Synchronous Approach to Online Teaching in Counselor Education



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Recently, many counselor education programs have considered whether and how to offer courses online. Although online counselor education courses are becoming increasingly common, the use of synchronous (real-time) teaching approaches appears to be limited at best. In this article, we provide a context and rationale for incorporating online synchronous learning experiences, discuss the use of simple technologies to create meaningful educational experiences, and present one model for combining synchronous and asynchronous instructional approaches online. We also share our perspectives on the contributions of synchronous learning components, reflect on student and instructor experiences, and discuss issues to be considered in developing online counselor education courses.

Keywords: online teaching, counselor education, synchronous learning, implementation, technology

Use of technology in counselor education is commonplace today. Email, PowerPoint presentations, and online grading are accepted and utilized on a daily basis. In addition, many counselor educators use online teaching platforms such as *Blackboard* as a way of incorporating asynchronous communication, discussion, and resources to enhance face-to-face (F2F) courses. In this hybrid model of instruction, the asynchronous component is utilized but a significant part of the course is taught in a traditional (F2F) classroom. What is less prevalent, however, is the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in place of F2F classroom meetings. Online synchronous discussion (OSD) is one approach to CMC that includes a range of activities which occur online in real time, including chat and instant messaging. These technologies allow participants to have conversations much as they would if they were physically in the same space. The purpose of this article is to review the literature on the effectiveness of CMC, to provide an example of how online synchronous discussion (OSD) (combined with asynchronous use of *Blackboard*) has been used effectively in counselor education, and to discuss the possibilities and limitations of this approach. This article is intended for those with little or no experience in online teaching as well as for those who have primarily used asynchronous teaching approaches online.

Technology in Counselor Education

Although technology is not the primary focus of this paper, some introductory definitions of terms are necessary to approach this topic. Distance education is an overarching term used to describe teaching that includes the use of various technologies in order to serve students who are not physically present in the classroom. Often, this involves using audio- or videoconferencing tools to allow people from various locations to participate in a course. In video- or teleconferencing, students may report to various satellite classrooms in order to access the technology. Students in each classroom can then view both the instructor and other students (Woodford, Rokutani, Gressard, & Berg, 2001). Computer-mediated communication (CMC), which involves the use of computers and web-based technology as teaching tools, can be divided into two types. Online asynchronous discussion (OAD) involves learning that is not restricted to classroom time and that can be accessed at any time; often, this includes discussion boards, email, and postings of course materials on an Internet-accessible site (e.g., webpage or *Blackboard* course pages) (Jones & Karper, 2000). Alternatively, online synchronous discussion (OSD) involves audio, text, and/or video connections through the Internet for real-time communication (Slack, Beer, Armitt, & Green, 2003). Because the advantages of distance education often include the opportunity for students to attend class completely on their own schedule, many distance education courses depend on asynchronous approaches to instruction since these do not require that all students and the instructor be in the same space (physical or virtual) at the same time.

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Two studies have examined the use of technology in counselor education programs. Wantz et al. (2003) surveyed CACREP-accredited counselor education programs on their use of distance learning and found that the majority of programs reported not using distance learning and that these programs had no current plans to implement these types of courses into their curriculum. A second group (Quinn, Hohenshil, & Fortune, 2002) examined the use of technology in general by CACREP-accredited programs. Although technology frequently was utilized within a traditional classroom setting, few respondents reported offering online courses in their programs. It appears that advancement in the use of CMC has been slow within the counselor education community.

A Conceptual Framework for Online Teaching

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) created a conceptual framework that includes the required components of what they considered to be a powerful online educational experience. Their model, termed a community of inquiry, included three aspects of the educational experience: *Social Presence*, *Cognitive Presence*, and *Teaching Presence*. *Social Presence* refers to the ability to bring student and instructor personalities into the learning community. Included in this social component are expression of emotion, open communication, and development of group cohesion. *Cognitive Presence* is the ability to construe meaning from the educational experience, with critical thinking or inquiry being the major focus. Finally, *Teaching Presence* refers to the design, delivery, and facilitation of the course content. This component includes three aspects: instructional management, creating understanding, and direct instruction. Garrison et al. suggested that all three components are necessary for a successful online course.

Research on OSD

Studies of online learning communities have been conducted in various realms. Shea (2006) surveyed students participating in various online courses and found that the stronger the *Teaching Presence*, the stronger the overall learning community. Students rated the classroom community higher when their instructors were more active facilitators, including keeping students on task, creating an open and accepting learning climate, and acknowledging student input and contributions. Results of another study (Perry & Edwards, 2004) revealed that effective online instructors both challenged and affirmed their students, and that high levels of *Cognitive Presence* and positive *Social Presence* directly added to students' positive reactions to online learning. Clearly, research to date supports the potential for successfully creating a community of inquiry online.

Other researchers have conducted studies examining the effectiveness of synchronous learning experiences online (OSD). Wang (2005) found that the use of open-ended and comparison questions in a real-time online classroom was effective in engaging students and fostering cognitive development. Another study (Walker, 2004) helped identify those teaching strategies that could help develop critical thinking and debate in an OSD-based course. Participants in one debate course indicated that Socratic strategies such as open-ended responses, including challenges and probes, were most likely to elicit student response, and that encouragement and countering also were helpful. Slack et al. (2003) found that online discussions where group cohesion had occurred promoted cognitive development in students better than in classes that lacked cohesion. This suggests that instructors must give attention to rapport building in their OSD classes in order to increase levels of critical thinking and involvement. Finally, Levin, He, and Robbins (2006) surveyed preservice teachers before and after their participation in a series of OSDs. Prior to the online discussions, the majority of participants believed they would prefer asynchronous discussion; afterwards, however, the majority indicated that they actually preferred synchronous discussions online. Reasons given for this change in preference included the opportunity to receive immediate feedback, the real-time pace of the discussions, the convenience of having the entire chat completed in one sitting, and the challenge of having to think critically and learn from peers. In addition, participants in OSD demonstrated higher levels of critical reflection than did OAD participants. These studies demonstrate the potential effectiveness of OSD and point to the importance of appropriate facilitation in order to promote student growth.

Although Garrison et al. (2000) stated that "all three elements [*Social Presence*, *Cognitive Presence*, and *Teaching Presence*] are essential to a critical community of inquiry for educational purposes" (p. 92), they also noted challenges involved in developing such an online community of inquiry. These authors proposed that "... the elements of a community of inquiry can enhance or inhibit the quality of the educational experience and learning outcomes" (p. 92). In addition, they clarified that the kind of OAD they addressed, although collaborative, was quite different from F2F environments. It is this difference from traditional F2F learning that makes the obstacles in using online courses to

train counselors unacceptable and virtually insurmountable. Because counseling is a person-to-person experience, it can be particularly difficult for counselor educators to envision how counseling students could be trained and evaluated effectively through a text-based, online experience where course participants cannot see and interact with each other in real time.

The online group course described in the following section was designed to address all three of Garrison et al.'s (2000) elements of a community of inquiry by combining synchronous and asynchronous experiences that much more closely simulate an F2F educational experience. Moreover, our experience has been that use of readily-available technology has allowed us not only to more closely simulate face-to-face classroom experiences, but also to take advantage of features unique to the online experience.

The Online Course: Group Counseling in Schools

To meet the needs of practicing school counselors for additional post-master's degree training in school counseling, the counselor education program at one southeastern university created an online-only Post-Master's Certificate (PMC) in Advanced School Counseling. This program was designed to provide working school counselors with 12 hours of additional training that also would qualify them for a significant salary increase in the state system. Over a two-year period, four graduate-level courses were developed for this program. The first of these courses, Group Counseling in Schools, was created and used to pilot test an instructional model for the remaining courses. To do this, the first author worked closely with university instructional technology consultants to create an online learning environment that could be process-based and provide a student-focused learning environment in which student participation was critical to the quality and success of the course itself. The result was an online course that incorporated both OAD and OSD components.

The Asynchronous Component (OAD)

Blackboard is well known and widely used as an educational platform "for delivering learning content, engaging learners, and measuring their performance" (<http://www.Blackboard.com/Teaching-Learning/Learn-Platform.aspx>) in higher education. *Blackboard* is primarily an asynchronous learning platform which offers a format that provides for easy posting of course information and a wide variety of course resources. Features include a discussion board with forums that provide opportunities for students to respond to prompts, discuss issues, and share ideas in an OAD where postings can be made and responded to at any time. *Blackboard* currently is used widely to supplement F2F instruction. In our online group course, *Blackboard's* discussion board is used to allow students to take more time to reflect on their learning and encourages them to think more critically about online experiences and course material. Because instructors typically do not participate in these discussions, both responsibility and control are shifted to students for the quality and content of their postings. We have been very interested to see how learning conversations develop as students learn to respond not just to instructor-generated prompts, but also to each other, sharing support, differing perspectives, and experiences. Instructors' review of the weekly postings is then used to help guide course content and discussion in the OSD component of the course.

The Synchronous Component (OSD)

LinguaMOO (MOO) is an interactive, synchronous learning platform that is available in its basic form for free (see <http://www.ericdigests.org/1997-4/moo.htm>), with technical support provided by each individual institution. MOO was developed as a community that is designed to simulate F2F environments in many ways using technology that is affordable and easily implemented. MOO is text-based and utilizes a very basic chat environment. More capable, commercial software packages that are now becoming widely used include *Elluminate* (a free, virtual, collaborative web-conferencing system; <http://www.Elluminate.com>) and *Saba Centra Classroom* (which offers a complete set of features for recreating interactive classroom learning experiences online; <http://www.saba.com/products/centra/details.htm>). Both of these packages add greatly enhanced capabilities for using audio, video, whiteboards, and graphics as part of online class meetings, providing a wide variety of tools to use in creating a virtual environment for learning.

In the online MOO class, when students come to class, they enter the instructor's room, which is the virtual classroom.

Each person who enters the online classroom is visible to everyone else already in the room. As with F2F classes, MOO meetings often begin and end with informal chatting among students and instructors. The visual format of MOO is simple and would be familiar to anyone who has participated in online chats. The computer screen is divided into three sections: two sections on the left display the ongoing discussion and provide a place for students and instructors to compose their comments. In addition to text, MOO also provides an emote feature that can be used to add nonverbals and emotions (similar to text-based emoticons) to the discussion, giving participants a different way to express themselves or add expression to their comments. The right half of the screen is used to present PowerPoint slides that support, guide, and facilitate online discussion, as well as provide structure and content for the class meetings. In addition, MOO allows for recording the transcription (complete with links to PowerPoint slides) for each class, permitting students to review what occurred in class if they missed a class or wanted to revisit a discussion topic. This feature also frees students from having to take notes during class.

Class meets for two hours per week during the regular semester. Like F2F courses, class is scheduled for a particular day and time. Thus, students must commit to being able to attend the online class meetings at the same designated time each week; just like F2F, everyone has to attend class at the same time. Unlike F2F classes, however, students do not have to travel, search for parking, and arrive at a physical classroom on time. Both instructors and students have the flexibility to log into class from any location with an Internet connection. Although the same faculty member has taught this course from its inception, different advanced doctoral students, typically with strong background and expertise in school counseling, have been assigned to co-teach each time the course was offered.

Implementation of the Course

A required F2F meeting is scheduled on campus prior to the beginning of the group counseling course. Although the primary purpose of this meeting is to train students in use of the technology to be used in the course, additional benefits include: making social connections with students and instructors; developing a basis for *social presence*; and getting a feel for the instructors' teaching style. Starting in a familiar F2F format and using a standard classroom environment to acquaint students with new technology, a new learning format, and each other seems to work well. In addition, students frequently comment on the importance of this first F2F session for having a successful experience in the course; their F2F experiences help reduce anxiety and create a basis for group cohesion and support throughout the PMC program.

Combining Synchronous and Asynchronous Modes of Learning

In this online course, OAD and OSD approaches are combined to create the total learning environment. *Blackboard* tends to elicit more formal, traditionally academic, and reflective responses as students reply to instructor prompts (and each other) on the *Blackboard* discussion board. Prompts typically come from readings and OSD discussions. By contrast, MOO has the vitality more characteristic of a F2F class meeting, with more social and informal discussions and responses. Use of PowerPoint slides online helps structure class and provides content to supplement required reading. Like F2F, synchronous online class meetings have immediacy and are fast-paced. The chat aspect of class means that comments, responses, and interactions can move very quickly, challenging students (and instructors) to pay attention. The quick back-and-forth in the chat format requires that traditional academic expectations about such details as spelling and grammar be suspended, helping to create a more relaxed climate online. Also, active participation online requires much shorter comments and responses than in F2F classes because the faster pace requires faster posting of responses and shorter amounts of text for others to read. Thus, online class sessions are reading- and writing-intensive.

Cognitive Presence

In discussing the *cognitive presence* component, Garrison et al. (2000) emphasized the "potential for facilitating deep and meaningful learning in a [virtual learning] environment" (p. 93). We use MOO to provide opportunities for high levels of in-depth interaction during class. The nature of the OSD component is that it requires verbal participation online in order to be actively engaged in class. Students who are not actively posting in the discussion are invisible in class. This is unlike F2F experiences where students can contribute minimally or choose to be passive learners. In MOO, all students contribute very actively to discussions. In interactions with instructors online, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, share their knowledge with others in the class, and combine what they know from practice with new or revisited concepts in class. Thus, instructors strive to address the teaching elements proposed

by Newman et al. (1996), including actively encouraging and inviting new ideas and perspectives as well as helping link together theories, facts, applications, and professional experiences.

With this expectation of active verbal participation online, many students are challenged to modify their usual classroom style. For example, introverts who might be hesitant to share comments in an F2F class often shine online. Conversely, strong extraverts can feel constrained online by having to compose their comments and keep them shorter and more focused. Students quickly adapt to this change and most tend to be active in every class meeting.

Throughout the course, we utilize various techniques to promote critical thinking. Similar to F2F classes, open-ended questions are frequently posed to students. Often, probes are used to stimulate further discussion on a topic. In addition, we frequently make encouraging comments such as “interesting idea” or “well put” to let students know that their ideas are important to the discussion and highlight these contributions for other students. These encouragers reinforce student contributions to class, help promote additional conversation, and help highlight important points in the transcript. Even more than in an F2F class, it is vital that instructors plan for how to use their teaching skills to promote *cognitive presence* online. In the synchronous online learning environment, critical thinking results from instructors’ intentional encouragement, supportive comments, and challenging questions.

Social Presence

Garrison et al. (2000) hypothesized that “high levels of *Social Presence* with accompanying high degrees of commitment and participation are necessary for the development of higher order thinking skills and collaborative work” (p. 93). To create a community of inquiry, students must feel they can be “real” people in the virtual classroom. As noted earlier, we use the on-campus training to help students feel comfortable and competent with the technology. Then, in the first class online, instructors ask students to reflect on their own professional experiences, modeling use of humor, restatement, encouragement, and positive reinforcement along the way. These techniques help build a level of *social presence* in the online classroom.

As students have successful experiences in the online environment, they find ways to contribute their personalities, ideas, and expertise in the virtual classroom. As that happens, the technology becomes just another tool for learning and sharing information, ideas, and resources with each other. The shared experience of doing something new and the commonalities students have as school counselors also help to foster social connections and relationships online. One strong indicator of success in developing the social component online is that students frequently share both professional and personal issues with each other, at the beginning and end of class as well as (appropriately) throughout discussions. Students typically develop strong connections with the group and its members that provide a working foundation for their ongoing development as a group during the PMC program. As Garrison et al. (2000) have observed, “*Social Presence* marks a qualitative difference between a collaborative community of inquiry and a simple process of downloading information” (p. 96).

Teaching Presence

Clearly, there is a critical need to establish a strong *teaching presence* online, since this has been described as “the binding element in creating a community of inquiry for educational purposes” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 96). One challenge for counselor educators is to provide familiar kinds of structure, leadership, and facilitation online. We have found that the synchronous learning environment lends itself very well to using group facilitation and process skills to stimulate and involve students in very active ways. We present prompts, share selected information, encourage students to think critically about material, and help students relate course material to their own experiences and work settings. For teaching that is more instructor-centered and more lecture-based, MOO is limited and somewhat lacking. As a platform for process-based learning experiences, however, MOO provides the basic elements to create an online experience that can offer a viable alternative to F2F instruction. In fact, what actually takes place in an online class is largely the same as what would happen in an F2F version of the class; the primary adaptations have to do with effectively using technology to do these things online.

Garrison et al. (2000) noted the importance of students having time to reflect on information as a critical part of the learning process. In our course, students have built-in time to reflect and discuss during online meetings. This reflection

time, however, is limited, and must be intentionally included in the class structure by the instructors. Enhanced reflection can occur through *Blackboard* discussion board postings (OAD) and by requiring students to review and comment on transcripts from online class meetings following online class sessions. With co-instructors for this course, there typically are two instructor/facilitators online in the class. As with co-leading groups, this allows one instructor to serve as lead facilitator to guide the process and cover content while the other instructor keeps a closer eye on student responses and responds to their questions and comments, often playing a major role in supporting and reinforcing student contributions. Because the lead instructor role often shifts midway through a class, each instructor has the chance to be more upfront and facilitative in one part of the class and more of the active listener and supporter in another.

Some examples can illustrate how we create a strong *teaching presence*. First, class size is limited to 12 students. This small number helps the instructors keep track of the students in the class; since students cannot be seen, it is important to watch users' screen names to ensure that everyone participates. In addition, the smaller class size allows activities to be completed without consuming the entire class time. Activities also are used to engage students and model facilitation skills. For example, in one class students are asked to design a tattoo for themselves and discuss its meaning. The instructors use this activity to demonstrate group processing skills by modeling reflections, open-ended questions, and facilitative comments. This type of activity helps lead to *cognitive presence* through strong *teaching presence*. Finally, everything done in the class is purposeful, just as in an F2F classroom. This attention to goals and purpose helps maintain students' interest, keeps students focused and involved during the class, and helps us maintain a strong *teaching presence*.

Reflections on Course Format and Learning Experiences Benefits to Students and Instructors

Surprisingly, one of the benefits for students is a much higher level of consistent, ongoing participation than would be possible in an F2F classroom. One reason is that in a chat (MOO) format, everyone can essentially be talking at the same time, something that can be managed in an online environment, but would create total chaos F2F. In addition, the chat format allows students to address instructors and each other directly to ask questions, share observations, or make suggestions. In many ways, students can have much more contact and interaction with instructors and their peers in the virtual classroom, and we see this as a major benefit of this online learning environment.

Because of the ongoing dialogue in class, students can more readily affect the pacing and depth of material covered in class by having ongoing input into the educational process. We also encourage students to bring their real-life experiences to bear on the material (and vice-versa). This is particularly appropriate for working adult students who consistently have been found to value opportunities to blend experience with new information in the classroom. Many other benefits to students have been mentioned previously, including the opportunity for everyone to participate, availability of class transcriptions, easy access to the class on the Internet, and the ability to use PowerPoint slides to both guide discussion and inject instructors' personalities into the class (e.g., through selective use of photos, images, or quotes).

Instructors share many of the benefits noted above for students. The most obvious instructor benefit may be the flexibility of being able to teach from any location with reliable Internet connections (e.g., the lead author has taught this class from New Zealand and Italy). Also, guest presenters can easily participate in the class no matter where they are located geographically. One class featured a guest presenter from India who shared information about her culture and responded to students' lively questions. Additionally, the simple format of MOO allows instructors the opportunity to exercise their creativity by adding color, graphics, photos, and design elements to visually enhance and enliven the online experience. These creative elements also can help to stimulate and harness the live energy and the excitement of collaborative learning experiences. Graduate student co-instructors have found that teaching online has given them additional teaching skills they can market as new counselor educators, in addition to influencing how they view both online and F2F teaching. Even for the experienced faculty member, the online teaching experiences have positively affected how he plans for and conducts F2F classes.

Student Feedback on Online Experiences

As we reviewed student evaluations from several semesters of this online course, the most striking thing was how similar ratings and feedback were to student evaluations of F2F classes taught by the counselor educators. In

addition, very little mention was made about the technology used for class; the few comments that were made were positive. The vast majority of student comments focused on instructor effectiveness, skills, and knowledge. Related to *teaching presence*, students commented positively on organization of the course, group leadership/facilitation, clear communication, and instructors' knowledge. In the area of *cognitive presence*, key themes were instructors' ability to stimulate interest in course content and stimulation of critical inquiry. Finally, students addressed *social presence* in the course with comments about instructors' approachability and helpfulness, respectfulness, and ability to foster group cohesion.

Precautions and Practical Considerations

We believe there are three keys to success with online learning: (1) incorporate an energetic and well-planned interactive component; (2) keep things as technically uncomplicated as possible; and, (3) provide necessary training and tech support (e.g., backup) upfront. Students regularly cite the importance of the initial F2F technology training and the comfort of knowing they can contact university tech support if they experience difficulties. As noted above, the MOO platform provides basic tools for creating live classes online without many of the frills that can make things unnecessarily complicated and intimidating to students. Classes really come alive with the interactive component that MOO offers, due in no small part to instructors' establishing a norm for active and enthusiastic participation in online sessions. Instructors also act as if these classes are F2F, using familiar language (e.g., "see you next week," "see you in class") and familiar structures (agendas for class, balance of information-giving and discussion, even having a break midway through class) that subtly replicate familiar F2F instruction experiences.

To be able to accomplish all three areas of presence (teaching, cognitive, and social) identified by Garrison et al. (2000), instructors must be very intentional in designing and conducting the OSD component. For example, to teach effectively in this environment, instructors need to closely monitor student participation so that they can see those who are sitting quietly in the online classroom and encourage or call on them to bring their voices to class discussions. We have found it very helpful to have co-instructors to help keep up with the flow of discussion, maintain energy in the online classroom, and reach out to quieter or less involved students. To create and maintain *cognitive presence*, instructors need to be very intentional in cultivating an environment of critical inquiry, including asking good, critical questions and encouraging constructive dialogue among students and instructors. *Social presence* primarily involves encouraging students to connect with their peers and with instructors in class, and can include appropriate use of humor, liberal use of names, and attention to time for socializing at different points in class (beginning, end, break).

Conclusion

Numerous approaches exist for offering and teaching online graduate courses. If the primary goal is communication of large amounts of information, the approach described in this article likely will not be the most effective or efficient option. Counselors and counseling students, however, like to be able to interact with each other—whether F2F or online—and the MOO/*Blackboard* (OSD/OAD) approach to teaching and learning online allows for much discussion and processing of course material. Over the past several years, we have found that student responses to this online format have been overwhelmingly positive. Even students fearful or skeptical at the beginning, readily become active and engaged class members. This approach has worked particularly well with more advanced students where their F2F coursework prepared them with fundamental counseling knowledge and skills. It is our belief that a community of inquiry can be established effectively in an OSD format and that the elements of teaching that counselor educators hold dear—social contact and interaction—can be created successfully in an online environment. The increasing availability of more sophisticated platforms for synchronous online class meetings (e.g., *Elluminate* and *Saba Centra Classroom*) should make it even easier for counselor educators to use OSD for online only or hybrid courses in their programs. For us, the ability to interact with students online in real time has been a key to making online instruction come alive in ways that rival what we do in our F2F classes.

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