

COUNSELING INSTRUCTION IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM: A SURVEY OF STUDENT AND FACULTY PERCEPTIONS

By

GINA CICCO

Assistant Professor of Counselor Education, St. John's University, Queens, New York.

ABSTRACT

This article will review the design, procedures, and results of a recent study conducted to survey the perceptions of counseling students and professionals regarding the delivery of counseling instruction in online courses. Few studies have addressed the appropriateness, effectiveness, and evaluation procedures of counseling skills instruction via the online classroom (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). Counseling skills courses, especially those requiring field experiences, typically involve intensive and ongoing communication among counselors-in-training, their faculty supervisors, peers, and clinical or on-site supervisors. The frequent exchange of information among learners, faculty, and evaluators is primarily centered on critiquing and improving specific counseling skills and techniques. Exercises such as role-playing and mock counseling sessions are viewed as appropriate and necessary for the healthy development and practice of core counseling skills. Such skills are viewed as hierarchical, from basic attending skills to advanced development of personal theory (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). Essentially, courses that teach counseling skills provide opportunities for practice, review, and assessment of core and advanced skills and the interpersonal skills that are prerequisites for their development. The study described in this article utilized a researcher-made survey instrument to obtain the perceptions of counselors-in-training, counseling faculty, and active practitioners on the instructional procedures, learning, and evaluation of counseling skill development within the online classroom. Many participants offered suggestions for the improvement of instruction within online courses and the incorporation of live interaction to supplement strictly asynchronous exchanges. The results of the survey revealed participants' concerns about the opportunities for students to practice skills sufficiently in online courses and the ethical responsibilities of academic program faculty to confirm skill mastery prior to graduation. Study findings also hold implications for pedagogues on the importance of considering learning styles in online classrooms (Cicco, 2009).

Keywords: Counseling Skills Development, Counseling Skills Instruction, Learning Style, Online Classroom, Online Courses, Online Instruction, Skill Mastery.

INTRODUCTION

This article will discuss a recent exploratory study conducted to examine the perceptions of graduate counseling faculty members, counselors-in-training, and counseling practitioners on the appropriateness of fully online courses for the instruction of counseling skills and techniques. The growth of completely online graduate programs across the globe has propelled educators to consider converting courses that were offered exclusively in the traditional in-class modality into online courses. This transition to the online modality has been smooth for many course designers, but problematic for others, particularly

due to the courses' instructional subject matter. There is no set procedure that standardizes the method for ensuring that the curriculum in traditional in-class courses and in their online counterparts is delivered and assessed with the same rigor. Instead, the conversion relies on the instructional expertise and professional judgment of individual instructors. Some institutions have offered training workshops to provide educators with some guidance on the inherent differences between the in-class and online modalities, in an effort to provide guidance and troubleshooting assistance (Cicco, 2009; Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002).

The discussion of teaching skills-based courses, particularly in the discipline of counseling, which involves often complex interpersonal skills demonstration, has caused some controversy, particularly because of the ethical concerns for counselor educators to serve as initial gatekeepers in the profession. It is imperative that counseling skills and techniques be practiced and mastered prior to graduation from counselor education programs to promote the highest quality of care for eventual clients, the recipients of counseling services. The profession of counseling has also changed dramatically in recent years, due to a greater emphasis on counselor accountability (Dahir, 2009). The controversy on teaching counseling skills online circles around questions as to the capacity for fully online courses to allow for proper instruction and accurate assessment of students' development of basic and advanced counseling skills and techniques. It is also important that the relationships between instructors, students, and supervisors are developed appropriately in the online modality to promote effective and ongoing communication and solid supervisory practices. Quality supervision requires that students are engaged in frequent self- and peer-evaluation to monitor the healthy development of counseling skills. Few studies have investigated the formation of supervisory relationships in fully online courses and the appropriateness of the online classroom for instruction and assessment of counseling skills and techniques (Cicco, 2011; Trepal et al., 2007). These concerns provided the rationale for conducting the study described in this article.

Online Counseling Skills Courses

The core coursework in most every counselor preparation program involves an in-depth foundation in the development and practice of counseling skills and techniques. Ivey, Ivey, and Zalaquett (2010) conceptualize the progression in development of counseling skills from basic to complex along a conceptual hierarchical pyramid. These skills include the following: attending behaviors; open and closed questions; client observation skills; encouraging, paraphrasing, and summarizing; reflection of feeling; confrontation; reflection of meaning

and interpretation; reframing; skill integration; and determining personal style and theory. Even the earliest skills along this progression, such as attending behaviors and basic listening skills, may be challenging for counselors-in-training to master. These basic counseling skills include a repertoire of observable patterns such as eye contact, body language, vocal qualities, and verbal tracking (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). These fundamental skills are the threshold concepts in counselor education programs (Bernstein & Bass, 2005; Irvine & Carmichael, 2009). For students that do not fully master the objectives of initial counseling skills and techniques courses, it may become difficult, if not impossible, to truly advance within the degree program (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). It is the responsibility of counselor educators to confirm that these skills have been mastered by their students, and that they have been provided ample opportunities for practice, improvement, and evaluation of skills and techniques during initial coursework.

The effective instruction of counseling skills and techniques includes effective modeling by professors and practitioners. Activities such as evaluation of video-taped counseling sessions, role-playing, mock counseling sessions, and transcription of audio-taped counseling sessions each aim to focus attention on the quality of skills usage and demonstration. Counselors-in-training are frequently asked to utilize rubrics to rate the effectiveness of specific skills employed during a counseling session, whether it be their own, that of a peer, or other practitioner model (Andrade, 2008). The process of ongoing evaluation also highlights the areas in need of improvement. Counselors are charged with engaging frequently in self-assessment and reflection to maintain optimum levels of performance. During courses that include a field placement, these processes are accompanied by the intense guidance of site supervisors, faculty supervisors, and clinical associates, acting counseling practitioners. Each supervisor provides support and feedback and formative and summative forms of evaluation on the performance and overall development of the counselor-in-training. Appropriate supervision, therefore, includes frequent evaluation, regular and ongoing communication, and the provision of constructive

feedback (Cicco, 2011; Cobia & Henderson, 2007). If online counseling courses on skills and techniques are to be comparable to their in-class counterparts, they must minimally provide students with such supervisory and practice experiences and opportunities for growth. Various studies have considered enhancements to online courses and these are also considered in the study described herein (Ash, 2011; Scheuermann, 2010).

Study Design and Procedures

The exploratory study presented in this article was conducted during the spring and summer of 2012. The researcher conducted the study at a large, metropolitan university in New York City, after having obtained the approval of its Institutional Review Board. The major goal of the investigation was to gather and describe the perceptions of counseling faculty members, counselors-in-training, and counseling practitioners on the appropriateness of online instruction for the teaching, learning, and assessment of counseling skills and techniques. The survey instrument employed was developed to collect descriptive information on the participants' perceptions, and it included both quantitative- and qualitative-type questions. The data analyses were also performed to provide primarily descriptive information (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The sample, survey, and data analyses will be described further below.

Sample

The sample selected for this study was derived from the larger target population of faculty members and students in counselor education programs in the state of New York that are accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (Cobia & Henderson, 2007). The university selected for participation in this study provided a sample of convenience, not necessarily representative of the target population, therefore making it impossible to generalize the study results (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Every member of the student body and faculty, both full- and part-time, within the counselor preparation program at the university in New York City were invited to participate in the study through an email request. The email message included an

explanation of the study, a statement of informed consent, and a link to the online survey produced through *Survey Monkey*.

Approximately, 60 current students, 60 alumni and practicing counselors, and 20 faculty members were invited to participate in the study. The number of individuals who began the survey actually completed it. The sample, therefore, was composed of a total of 70 individuals, including 11 faculty members, 54 graduate counseling students, and 5 counseling practitioners. Of the faculty members who participated in the study, 9 of them, or 81.8% of them indicated that they had never taught an online course. In addition, 7 of these faculty members, or 77.8% of them, also indicated that they had not completed an online course as a student. One faculty member indicated that he/she had started an online course as a student but withdrew before the end of the semester. Only one faculty participant stated that he/she had completed an online course. These details on the faculty participants caused some concern as to the relevance of their responses to survey items, because of their minimal experience with online courses and consequently, their limited ability to comment on online instruction and learning overall. Of the current graduate counseling students who participated in the study, only 9.3% had never completed an online course, while 13% completed 1, 16.7% had completed 2, and 59.3% had completed 3 or more online courses. Of the remaining participants, each had completed two or more online courses. Of the counseling students who completed the survey, 39.6% indicated that they were currently enrolled in an online course, while 49.1% indicated that they had completed an online course within the last 3 years. The levels of faculty and student experience with online courses may be the result of course offerings at their specific university and within their academic program. Nevertheless, the student participants clearly had more experience with online courses than their faculty. The number of surveys completed was greater than anticipated, despite the known challenges associated with survey research. However, the representation of faculty members and practitioners in the sample was lower than expected. The faculty and practitioner responses together

amounted to a total of 16 out of 70 participants. The disproportionate number of these respondents, when compared to the counseling students, makes even their aggregated totals inconclusive in terms of the entire study. Therefore, the responses of the 54 counselors-in-training will be emphasized in this article.

Instrumentation

The main instrument that was utilized in this study was a researcher-made online survey, available to participants through an emailed hyperlink to *Survey Monkey*. The survey required about 20 to 30 minutes of time for completion. It included 10 items, which sought to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Some of the items gathered basic information on the participants' role in the field of counseling and experience with online instruction. The 6 item in the survey included a subset of 73 items to be completed along a Likert-type scale. These 73 items were aimed at gathering perceptions on the possibility for teaching, learning, and assessing specific counseling skills and techniques in online courses. The specific skills were listed, as described in the hierarchical pyramid conceptualized by Ivey, Ivey, and Zalaquett (2010), and participants provided responses along a Likert-type scale, ranging from one to five, with a five indicating a strong level of agreement with the given statement and a one indicating strong disagreement, and a three being neutral. The remaining items on the survey included a number of open-ended questions to allow for participant feedback on their concerns and suggestions for improving online counseling courses. Each item on the survey was reviewed by a panel of the researcher's colleagues, counselor educators, to provide a level of item validity. The subset of 73 items in Question 6 were viewed as particularly valid for the purposes of this study, as they encompassed counseling skills and techniques that were considered fundamental to the profession in the well-known hierarchical model (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). Internal consistency analyses were computed utilizing only the responses of the largest participant group, the 54 counselors-in-training, to the 73 items included in survey Question 6. These analyses revealed a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .944, a strong indication of internal consistency.

Results

The participants in this study indicated their consent by opening the hyperlink to the online survey and completing it through *Survey Monkey*. The online data was collected and analyzed electronically to produce descriptive information on the participants' perceptions. Crossbreak tables linked participant group response averages with each item on the survey. The initial results of these descriptive data analyses, namely the responses to the subset of questions in Item 6, are summarized in the tables below. The results were examined by the researcher, to note categories such as teaching, learning, practice, and assessment, and then the average ratings by groups of participants that responded. Tables 1, 2, and 3 include a summary of select items taken from the 73 within Question 6, and the percentages of participants that strongly disagreed (1), disagreed (2), were neutral (3), agreed (4), or strongly agreed (5) with survey statements. In parentheses, the frequency counts of actual participants that rated the statements in each of the Likert-scale categories are noted. The researcher would have computed additional analyses to provide comparisons on the mean ratings of each participant group, including counseling faculty members, students, and practitioners, but these would prove inconclusive due to the disproportionate size of each sample group. It appears that the more theoretically-based skills, such as ethics and wellness, were those that participants rated as "teachable" in online courses, whereas attending skills, such as basic listening skills, and interviewing received the lowest ratings, denoting a lack of confidence on the part of participants that these skills could be taught effectively in the fully online modality. It is important to comment on the neutral rating (3) as it does not denote either agreement or disagreement with the given statement. The neutral rating was notably more frequent among faculty participants than student participants, when examining group percentages. This may be a reflection of lack of information on online instruction, particularly for the faculty member sample group, as these individuals were the least experienced with online courses in this particular study. Selecting a rating of "neutral" may simply indicate a lack of information on the setup of the online course rather than on the viability of

instruction on a particular skill within the virtual classroom.

Table 4 summarizes the rating averages, from 1 to 5 on a Likert-scale, of the sample's 3 participant groups, on items that provided statements regarding their preferences for online instruction, and issues of teaching, practice, and assessment in online courses. The group averages were not aggregated or compared because of the disproportionate numbers of participants in each group, and the diversity in participant experience with online instruction, particularly the lack of experience in online courses on the part of faculty participants.

The information summarized in the following tables allow one to infer that the participants in each group of this particular study do not have a great deal of confidence in the appropriateness and effectiveness of online courses for instruction and assessment of specific counseling skills and techniques. This is noted especially in the responses of faculty member participants. However, due to the small

number of faculty participants, it is necessary to highlight the responses of the largest group, the counselors-in-training. These 54 students have generally been exposed to online instruction at various levels of intensity. They clearly favored the in-class instructional modality for counseling skills courses, as per their responses to statements that focused on opportunities for practice, evaluation, live interaction, supervision, and fieldwork in online courses. They did not consider enhancements such as SKYPE to be Satisfactory improvements to the online course modality. However, they did indicate that adding video clips to online courses would improve the delivery of skills instruction. Participants provided several suggestions for improving online courses in their responses to the open-ended questions of the survey, such as the use of video clips, SKYPE, podcasts, and hybrid setups. They also provided various suggestions on appropriate methods for assessing skill and technique development in online courses, and

| Skill | Strongly Disagree (1) % (n) | Disagree (2) % (n) | Neutral (3) % (n) | Agree (4) % (n) | Strongly Agree (5) % (n) | Rating Average 1 to 5 (n) |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Reframing | 18.2 (2) | 9.1 (1) | 36.4 (4) | 36.4 (4) | 0 (0) | 2.91 (11) |
| Skill Integration | 27.3 (3) | 27.3 (3) | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.45 (11) |
| Determining Personal Style | 18.2 (2) | 18.2 (2) | 36.4 (4) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.73 (11) |
| Determining Personal Theory | 9.1 (1) | 0 (0) | 36.4 (4) | 36.4 (4) | 18.2 (2) | 3.55 (11) |
| Basic Listening | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 45.5 (5) | 9.1 (1) | 0 (0) | 2.45 (11) |
| Interviewing | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 27.3 (3) | 18.2 (2) | 9.1 (1) | 2.73 (11) |
| Ethics | 9.1 (1) | 0 (0) | 36.4 (4) | 36.4 (4) | 18.2 (2) | 3.55 (11) |
| Wellness | 9.1 (1) | 0 (0) | 36.4 (4) | 54.5 (6) | 0 (0) | 3.36 (11) |
| Multicultural Competence | 9.1 (1) | 9.1 (1) | 27.3 (3) | 54.5 (6) | 0 (0) | 3.27 (11) |
| Reflection of Meaning | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 27.3 (3) | 18.2 (2) | 9.1 (1) | 2.73 (11) |
| Confrontation | 18.2 (2) | 18.2 (2) | 45.5 (5) | 18.2 (2) | 0 (0) | 2.64 (11) |
| Reflection of Meaning Interpretation | 18.2 (2) | 36.4 (4) | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.55 (11) |
| Encouraging | 9.1 (1) | 27.3 (3) | 18.2 (2) | 36.4 (4) | 0 (0) | 2.73 (11) |
| Observation | 9.1 (1) | 27.3 (3) | 36.4 (4) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.82 (11) |
| Paraphrasing | 36.4 (4) | 18.2 (2) | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.36 (11) |
| Summarizing | 18.2 (2) | 18.2 (2) | 36.4 (4) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.73 (11) |
| Reflection of Feeling | 9.1 (1) | 36.4 (4) | 27.3 (3) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.73 (11) |
| Formulating Questions | 18.2 (2) | 36.4 (4) | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 0 (0) | 2.55 (11) |
| Attending Behaviors | 18.2 (2) | 9.1 (1) | 36.4 (4) | 36.4 (4) | 0 (0) | 2.91 (11) |
| Counseling techniques | 18.2 (2) | 36.4 (4) | 27.3 (3) | 18.2 (2) | 0 (0) | 2.45 (11) |
| | 18.2 (2) | 27.3 (3) | 18.2 (2) | 36.4 (4) | 0 (0) | 2.73 (11) |

Table 1. Faculty Perceptions on Specific Counseling Skills that can be Taught Online

similarly the review of video clips and SKYPE sessions were mentioned. When asked which, if any counseling courses are most suited for the online classroom, participants overwhelmingly indicated that theoretical courses, such as "Counseling and Personality Theories," "Multicultural Counseling," and "Ethics" could be taught effectively online, as opposed to skills-based and field courses such as "Counseling Skills and Techniques," "Group Dynamics," "Practicum," and "Internship."

Discussion

The results of this exploratory study, which were summarized in the above Tables 1 to 4, depict the lack of confidence in the power of online instruction, particularly as perceived by counselors-in-training, to adequately and effectively address concepts such as counseling skills and techniques. The faculty participants who completed the survey had limited experience in online courses, but the majority students and practitioners who participated had

completed at least one online course. Due to the small numbers of faculty and practitioner participation, the findings based on their responses alone are inconclusive. When examining the counseling graduate students' responses in isolation, it seems that those counseling skills that were perceived as most easily taught, learned, and assessed in online courses were those that were based more on theory instead of interpersonal skills. The participants' perceptions are always influenced in some way by individual characteristics and experiences with online courses. Therefore, it will be important for future studies to examine whether or not the students' perceptions might impact on their eventual performance in online courses. It will also be beneficial to examine with greater precision and depth the issues that are concerning to instructors and students regarding online instruction of counseling skills and techniques. This can be achieved through a replication study with a larger representation of

| Skill | Strongly Disagree (1) % (n) | Disagree (2) % (n) | Neutral (3) % (n) | Agree (4) % (n) | Strongly Agree (5) % (n) | Rating Average 1 to 5 (n) |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Reframing | 6.0 (3) | 20.0 (1) | 32.0 (16) | 42.0 (21) | 0 (0) | 3.10 (50) |
| Skill Integration | 9.3 (5) | 46.3 (25) | 11.1 (6) | 29.6 (16) | 3.7 (2) | 2.72 (54) |
| Determining Personal Style | 9.4 (5) | 28.3 (15) | 24.5 (13) | 35.8 (19) | 1.9 (1) | 2.92 (53) |
| Determining Personal Theory | 3.8 (2) | 15.1 (8) | 11.3 (6) | 64.2 (34) | 5.7 (3) | 3.53 (53) |
| Basic Listening | 17.3 (9) | 38.5 (20) | 13.5 (7) | 26.9 (14) | 3.8 (2) | 2.62 (52) |
| Interviewing | 17.0 (9) | 37.7 (20) | 11.3 (6) | 32.1 (17) | 1.9 (1) | 2.64 (53) |
| Ethics | 3.7 (2) | 7.4 (4) | 7.4 (4) | 61.1 (33) | 20.4 (11) | 3.87 (54) |
| Wellness | 5.7 (3) | 11.3 (6) | 15.1 (8) | 60.4 (32) | 7.5 (4) | 3.53 (53) |
| Multicultural Competence | 3.7 (2) | 16.7 (9) | 9.3 (5) | 53.7 (29) | 16.7 (9) | 3.63 (54) |
| Reflection of Feeling | 14.8 (8) | 33.3 (18) | 24.1 (13) | 24.1 (13) | 3.7 (2) | 2.69 (54) |
| Confrontation | 18.5 (10) | 37.0 (20) | 16.7 (9) | 24.1 (13) | 3.7 (2) | 2.57 (54) |
| Reflection of Meaning | 13.0 (7) | 31.5 (17) | 14.8 (8) | 38.9 (21) | 1.9 (1) | 2.85 (54) |
| Interpretation | 14.8 (8) | 27.8 (15) | 20.4 (11) | 33.3 (18) | 3.7 (2) | 2.83 (54) |
| Encouraging | 11.1 (6) | 27.8 (15) | 16.7 (9) | 38.9 (21) | 5.6 (3) | 3.00 (54) |
| Observation | 18.5 (10) | 40.7 (22) | 16.7 (9) | 18.5 (10) | 5.6 (3) | 2.52 (54) |
| Paraphrasing | 11.1 (6) | 27.8 (15) | 13.0 (7) | 38.9 (21) | 9.3 (5) | 3.07 (54) |
| Summarizing | 9.4 (5) | 24.5 (13) | 9.4 (5) | 50.9 (27) | 5.7 (3) | 3.19 (53) |
| Reflection of Feeling | 13.0 (7) | 38.9 (21) | 16.7 (9) | 27.8 (15) | 3.7 (2) | 2.70 (54) |
| Formulating Questions | 3.7 (2) | 27.8 (15) | 11.1 (6) | 51.9 (28) | 5.6 (3) | 3.28 (54) |
| Attending Behaviors | 13.0 (7) | 48.1 (26) | 14.8 (8) | 22.2 (12) | 1.9 (1) | 2.52 (54) |
| Counseling techniques | 20.8 (11) | 32.1 (17) | 17.0 (9) | 26.4 (14) | 3.8 (2) | 2.60 (53) |

Table 2. Graduate Student Perceptions on Specific Counseling Skills that can be Taught Online

faculty and student participants, and with added qualitative research components.

Many student participants clearly preferred the idea of reserving instruction of skills that require immediate feedback, ongoing supervision, and frequent communication for the traditional in-class course modality because the live face-to-face interaction that is possible in a classroom-type setting is not easily replicated in the virtual classroom setting. This may be because media such as SKYPE or video conferencing do not fully capture counselor and client interchanges that depict eye contact, body language, and vocal tracking. Counselor educators that seek to document students' mastery of learning objectives in online courses will likely need to expand the degree of interpersonal exchanges and intensify the depth of communication available through their virtual classrooms. Student success in online courses may also be the result of the match between the instructional style of the faculty member and the student's learning style. Online course

designers should consider the implications of accommodating students' learning styles within the online classroom, to provide varying levels of structure, assignment options, and sociological stimulation. Countless research studies point to the importance of considering learning style in lesson planning, and the positive impact of such practices on academic performance and course satisfaction (Burke, 2000; Cicco, 2009).

Further data analyses will be employed to examine student responses to the open-ended questions in the survey, including qualitative data analyses that underscore any underlying themes. This mixed-methods approach will provide deeper information to inform stakeholders in counselor education programs. The study findings provide the impetus for future research. It is recommended that the study be replicated with larger samples across diverse university settings in the United States and abroad. Further investigation on the appropriateness of online instruction in teaching counseling skills, particularly in introductory skills and field experience courses is merited, preferably through experimental research. A qualitative approach such as interviewing may also yield expanded insight into this growing area of interest in counselor education (Brigman, 2006; Erford, 2008).

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. The convenience sample was selected because of its accessibility to the researcher. The number of respondents, though greater than expected, could have been even larger, perhaps with the use of incentives for the participants. The numbers of faculty and practitioner responses were very small, making their resulting information inconclusive. Though the student participant group was significantly larger, it was clearly not large enough to be representative of counselors-in-training enrolled in accredited counselor preparation programs. The study findings are not generalizable but they are important, especially to educational researchers that may undertake a replication study. The good response rate does indicate the concern and interest of participants by their cooperating with the researcher and contributing 20 to 30 minutes of time, thought, and effort to the study. The survey

| Skill | Faculty Rating Average (1-5) (n) | Student Rating Average (1-5) (n) | Practitioner Rating Average (1-5) (n) |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Reframing | 2.91 (11) | 3.10 (50) | 2.80 (5) |
| Skill Integration | 2.45 (11) | 2.72 (54) | 3.00 (5) |
| Determining Personal Style | 2.73 (11) | 2.92 (53) | 2.80 (5) |
| Determining Personal Theory | 3.55 (11) | 3.53 (53) | 3.40 (5) |
| Basic Listening | 2.45 (11) | 2.62 (52) | 2.00 (4) |
| Interviewing | 2.73 (11) | 2.64 (53) | 1.80 (5) |
| Ethics | 3.55 (11) | 3.87 (54) | 3.00 (5) |
| Wellness | 3.36 (11) | 3.53 (53) | 3.00 (5) |
| Multicultural Competence | 3.27 (11) | 3.63 (54) | 3.00 (5) |
| Reflection of Feeling | 2.73 (11) | 2.69 (54) | 2.20 (5) |
| Confrontation | 2.64 (11) | 2.57 (54) | 2.00 (5) |
| Reflection of Meaning | 2.55 (11) | 2.85 (54) | 2.20 (5) |
| Interpretation | 2.73 (11) | 2.83 (54) | 2.60 (5) |
| Encouraging | 2.82 (11) | 3.00 (54) | 2.40 (5) |
| Observation | 2.36 (11) | 2.52 (54) | 1.80 (5) |
| Paraphrasing | 2.73 (11) | 3.07 (54) | 2.80 (5) |
| Summarizing | 2.73 (11) | 3.19 (53) | 3.80 (5) |
| Reflection of Feeling | 2.55 (11) | 2.70 (54) | 2.00 (5) |
| Formulating Questions | 2.91 (11) | 3.28 (54) | 3.40 (5) |
| Attending Behaviors | 2.45 (11) | 2.52 (54) | 2.20 (5) |
| Counseling techniques | 2.73 (11) | 2.60 (53) | 2.80 (5) |

Table 3. Overall Participant Perceptions on Specific Counseling Skills that can be Taught Online

employed requires further evidence of item validity, and perhaps would benefit from a revision that reduces the overall number of items, as the majority of Likert-type items were included as a subset of the sixth survey question. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, it is likely that several important constructs were not considered sufficiently. Therefore, the researcher plans to gain additional validity data on the instrument by utilizing a larger panel of experts. The analyses of the survey indicate a strong level of internal consistency, and these analyses would be conducted again in a replication study with larger sample groups. The answers to open-ended questions in the survey also require further examination through more rigorous qualitative methods. The survey instrument is also a useful tool to initiate similar studies in the future. A replication study should employ a mixed-methods approach with a larger and more representative sample. Though the study was designed to gain descriptive information, the results of inferential statistical analyses through experimentation would contribute greatly to this area of scientific investigation (Erford, 2008).

Conclusion

The exploratory study described in this article presents a

strong initial effort at furthering the awareness of perceptions on the appropriateness and power of online courses to deliver instruction on counseling skills and techniques. The study results imply that the student participants lack confidence in the effectiveness of fully online courses to provide the intensive interaction, practice opportunities, and live feedback that promote the development and mastery of counseling skills and techniques, from the most basic to the most complex. Counselor education program decision-makers and online skills instructors would greatly benefit from further investigation on this topic, particularly through empirical research (Erford, 2008). The development and improvement of counseling skills and techniques are fundamental threshold concepts in the professional development of any counseling professional (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). The relationships of faculty instructors, students, and supervisors, which develop during field experience courses, are also invaluable to the processes of skills assessment, development, and improvement in counselors-in-training (Trepal et al., 2007). Counselor educators are faced with an ethical responsibility to confirm that their students have mastered counseling skills

| Statement | Faculty Rating Average (1-5) (n) | Student Rating Average (1-5) (n) | Practitioner Rating Average (1-5) (n) |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| I prefer in-class courses to online courses. | 4.70 (10) | 3.72 (54) | 3.40 (5) |
| Counseling skills can be taught well in online courses. | 2.00 (11) | 2.44 (54) | 2.20 (5) |
| I can learn counseling skills well when taught online. | 1.91 (11) | 2.57 (54) | 2.60 (5) |
| Counseling skills are taught more effectively in-person. | 4.60 (10) | 4.13 (54) | 4.20 (5) |
| Counseling skills can be demonstrated in online courses. | 2.18 (11) | 2.43 (54) | 2.60 (5) |
| Counseling skills can be assessed in online courses. | 2.36 (11) | 2.38 (53) | 2.20 (5) |
| Counseling skills can be practiced in online courses. | 2.27 (11) | 2.34 (53) | 2.40 (5) |
| Live interaction is necessary to learn counseling skills. | 3.91 (11) | 4.15 (54) | 4.20 (5) |
| Counseling techniques can be learned in online courses. | 2.73 (11) | 2.62 (53) | 2.80 (5) |
| Counseling techniques can be practiced in online courses. | 2.45 (11) | 2.23 (53) | 2.00 (5) |
| Counseling techniques can be assessed in online courses. | 2.64 (11) | 2.38 (53) | 2.60 (5) |
| Live interaction is needed to evaluate counseling skills. | 4.00 (11) | 4.15 (53) | 3.80 (5) |
| I prefer to complete counseling skills courses in class. | 4.55 (11) | 4.02 (53) | 4.20 (5) |
| Counseling skills are taught better in class. | 4.55 (11) | 4.06 (53) | 4.00 (5) |
| Courses that require instant feedback are better in class. | 4.00 (10) | 3.53 (53) | 3.40 (5) |
| Adding Skype sessions to online courses makes them better. | 3.09 (11) | 3.26 (53) | 3.40 (5) |
| Adding video clips to online courses makes them better. | 3.09 (11) | 3.64 (53) | 4.00 (5) |
| Students lose information when taught to use skills online | 3.55 (11) | 2.87 (53) | 3.00 (5) |
| Field experience courses are better when taught in class. | 4.45 (11) | 3.96 (53) | 4.20 (5) |
| Courses requiring supervision are more effective in class. | 4.45 (11) | 3.96 (52) | 4.20 (5) |
| Every counseling course can be taught online effectively. | 1.73 (11) | 2.25 (53) | 1.80 (5) |
| Students can be graded accurately online. | 2.73 (11) | 3.15 (53) | 3.00 (5) |

Table 4. Summaries of Participant Perceptions on Select Survey Statements

and techniques prior to graduation so that they can provide a high quality of care to clients. Online courses in skills and techniques, whenever offered, must be effective in providing rigorous skills instruction, opportunities for practice, and accurate evaluation of skill development. They should also produce a sense of satisfaction in the learners, future counseling practitioners. The concerns of educators, students, and practitioners are important in identifying areas for improvement in the delivery and evaluation of online counseling skills courses (Reiner & Arnold, 2010). Conscientious counselor educators must utilize this information to apply creative lesson designing and alternative methods of assessment to optimize the online course experience for counselors-in-training. Strategic lesson planning for online skills courses should also consider the provision of ample opportunities for practice and reflection, self- and peer-review, and ongoing supervision (Cicco, 2011).

References

- [1]. Andrade, H. (2008). Self-assessment through rubrics. *Educational Leadership*, 65(4), 60-63.
- [2]. Ash, K. (2011). Teachers make the move to the virtual world. *Education Digest*, 76(5), 32-34.
- [3]. Bernstein, D., & Bass, R. (2005). The scholarship of teaching and learning. *Academe*, 91(4), 37-43.
- [4]. Brigman, G. (2006). Research methods in school counseling: A summary for the practitioner. *Professional School Counseling*, 9, 421-425.
- [5]. Burke, K. (2000). A paradigm shift: Learning-styles implementation and preservice teachers. In R. Dunn & S.A. Griggs (Eds.), *Practical approaches to using learning styles in higher education* (pp. 85-94). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- [6]. Cicco, G. (2009). Online versus in-class courses: Learning-style assessment as an advisement tool. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 8(2), 161-173.
- [7]. Cicco, G. (2011). Assessment in online courses: How are counseling skills evaluated? *i-manager's Journal of Educational Technology*, 8(2), 9-15.
- [8]. Cobia, D.C., & Henderson, D.A. (2007). *Developing an effective and accountable school counseling program* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- [9]. Dahir, C.A. (2009). School counseling in the 21st century: Where lies the future? *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87, 3-5.
- [10]. Erford, B. (2008). *Research and evaluation in counseling*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- [11]. Fraenkel, J.R., & Wallen, N.E. (2006). *How to design and evaluate research in education (6th ed.)*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- [12]. Irvine, N., & Carmichael, P. (2009). Threshold concepts. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(2), 103-119.
- [13]. Ivey, A.E., Ivey, M.B., & Zalaquett, C.P. (2010). *Intentional interviewing & counseling: Facilitating client development in a multicultural society (7th ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- [14]. Jung, I., Choi, S., Lim, C., & Leem, J. (2002). Effects of different types of interaction on learning achievement, satisfaction and participation in Web-based instruction. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 39(2), 153-162.
- [15]. Kiley, M., & Wisker, G. (2009). Threshold concepts in research education and evidence of threshold crossing. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(4), 431-441.
- [16]. Reiner, C.M., & Arnold, K.E. (2010). Online course evaluation: Student and instructor perspectives and assessment potential. *Assessment Update*, 22(2), 8-10.
- [17]. Scheuermann, M. (2010). Engaging students with synchronous methods in online courses. *Online Classroom*, 1-8, January.
- [18]. Trepal, H., Haberstroh, S., Duffey, T., & Evans, M. (2007). Considerations and strategies for teaching online counseling skills: Establishing relationships in cyberspace. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 46(4), 266-279.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Cicco is a professor in the School of Education, Department of Human Services and Counseling, Division of Counselor Education Programs, at St. John's University in New York. She teaches graduate students preparing to serve as school and clinical mental health counselors. She was previously a professor in the Department of Education at Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College of The City University of New York, where she taught teachers-in-training. She holds a doctorate in Instructional Leadership, with specialization areas in Learning Styles and Administration and Supervision and a Master's degree in School Counseling. Her research interests include achievement and attitudes in online courses, learning-style preferences of online learners, collaborations among counselor educators, and faculty and student perceptions of counseling instruction through the online classroom.

