

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT ON ONLINE INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS: A PROTOCOL FOR COUNSELOR EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

This article will address the importance of properly training faculty members to teach online courses within graduate counseling programs. The number of online course offerings among graduate education programs is steadily increasing across colleges and universities. This trend is of particular interest for counselor educators because counseling courses, particularly those that teach and assess counseling skills and techniques, have traditionally been delivered in the face-to-face classroom setting. Converting skills-based courses to the online modality requires appropriate faculty preparation, ongoing and strategic planning, and frequent evaluation exercises (Cicco, 2013; Fish & Wickersham, 2009). This article will present counseling and other education faculty members with a protocol for faculty development on online instructional methods. The protocol consists of five major steps including an introduction to navigating through online courses, learning-styles training, online course simulation experiences, review of tools for relationship-building, and finally the launching of an actual online course under the supervision of a mentor. Faculty members that are assigned to teach online courses should complete a series of training sessions, such as those presented in this sample protocol, prior to the start of their first online course. The protocol is intended to serve as a training model for novice online instructors, who have not previously taught completely online courses, especially those who have a commitment to teaching within the online classroom. Participation in this type of faculty development is encouraged because appropriate training and preparedness typically result in improved levels of faculty and student performance and satisfaction in online courses (Cicco, 2012; Santovec, 2004).

Keywords: Counselor Educators, Faculty Development, Faculty Training Protocol, Instructional Methods, Learning Modules, Learning Styles, Online Classroom, Online Courses, Online Instruction, Virtual Classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Online course offerings have steadily increased among graduate education programs worldwide. Faculty members with little or no experience in online instruction are frequently asked to complete the sometimes challenging task of converting courses that have traditionally been delivered in the face-to-face classroom to a completely online course modality. This task may be particularly perplexing for faculty members that aim to teach skills-based courses, namely counselor educators, in a completely virtual classroom (Cicco, 2012). Educators are by nature life-long learners and eager to take on new and perhaps difficult assignments, even with limited time allowed for planning and preparation. Consequently, seasoned educators teach themselves how to navigate through online course shells and transfer a great deal of

material used in face-to-face courses to the online classroom. Their efforts often produce satisfactory and functional online courses. The purpose of this article is to present a training protocol for novice online instructors to help them to design and launch high quality online courses. Each of the steps in the training protocol aims to assist faculty instructors in maximizing learning experiences for students by providing them with creative and differentiated instructional modules. The protocol itself is designed in hybrid fashion, including face-to-face and completely online training sessions, to accommodate the varying learning needs of novice faculty members (Cicco, 2013; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

Converting Traditional Face-to-Face Courses to Completely Online Courses

It may seem that converting a face-to-face course to the

online modality is a tedious yet simple task. In reality, this task does not have to be tedious and is not necessarily simple. Converting a course in counseling skills and techniques, for example, from the traditional classroom to a completely online classroom may raise multiple concerns for faculty instructors. How will counseling skills be modeled or demonstrated effectively by the instructor in a completely online setting? Will the virtual classroom provide adequate opportunities for counselors-in-training to role-play their skills during mock counseling sessions? Is it possible to accurately assess a student's counseling skill development by utilizing asynchronous media, recorded video sessions, or through the lens of a Webcam? The answers to each of these questions are not clear (Scheuermann, 2010). Though there are extensive tools available to enhance the online learning experience for faculty instructors and students, they serve no real purpose if the instructors are not aware of how to implement them effectively. Counseling faculty members have an ethical responsibility to accurately and responsibly assess their students' skill development to ensure that they will be prepared to enter the field and best serve a diversity of clients (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). These considerations clearly indicate that converting a skills-based course, as opposed to a theory-based course, to the online setting, may require more intensive preparation and planning.

Converting a face-to-face course to the virtual modality involves careful examination of the course curriculum and clarification of course goals, objectives, and expected outcomes. The online course syllabus may include a revision of required assignments, assessments, and lesson plans. Each course objective should be matched with an appropriate, meaningful, and realistic assignment or assessment. Although the syllabus is a dynamic and changeable document, it must provide a clear overall direction for the course, and should be prepared and disseminated to students in advance of the start of the course (Thompson, 2007). Online instructors must also focus their attention on designing engaging, student-friendly, and diverse online lesson plans. Learning modules that are text-saturated or cluttered may confuse and discourage students. Therefore, clear and attractive presentation of each lesson will be crucial in optimally

accommodating students' diverse learning styles. As part of the course conversion or new online course creation process, a series of training workshops for novice online instructors is recommended (Fish & Wickersham, 2009). The protocol presented below aims to provide faculty members with ample planning time and tools to prepare, design, and launch online courses that are not simply satisfactory, but outstanding.

Faculty Development Protocol

Preparing online instructors to design and deliver their first online courses can be accomplished through a series of training sessions, which will be outlined below. The protocol recommended for this type of faculty development includes a combination of face-to-face and online learning modules. The arrangement of modules is intentionally delivered in hybrid form to accommodate diverse learning styles. Each of the training sessions was included based on best practices and reflections on the experiences of online instructors and their students (Cicco, 2012; Meyers, 2008). It must be noted that faculty instructors do not always have the option of creating hybrid courses. Instead, the protocol intends to prepare instructors to deliver completely online courses. The protocol is particularly designed to assist counselor educators who are contemplating the conversion of skills-based courses from the face-to-face to online classroom modality. Embedded in the sections below are a repertoire of excellent pedagogical tools that can be invaluable for the effective delivery of online counseling courses.

Navigating through the Online Course

The first session of the faculty development series aims to acquaint instructors with the appearance of the online course and to present them with a tutorial on the various tools that are accessible within the course shell (Cicco, 2013; Fish & Wickersham, 2009). This two- to three-hour intensive session will be delivered in a computer lab in the face-to-face modality and facilitated by a fellow faculty member who has already mastered the online instructional process or by a certified trainer or instructional technology specialist. During the first half of the session, the course management system utilized by the college or university will be described in detail. Each faculty member

completing this module will be able to work on his/her own computer to view each of the course tools. The presenter and his/her assistants will be available to work with participants individually and to answer specific questions. After the sections and tools of the online course shell have been discussed, participants will be asked to design a sample course homepage, utilizing colorful and customized text, an attractive course banner, and a welcome announcement.

The second half of the session will be devoted to small-group exercises, through which faculty will practice uploading, organizing, and posting documents for students to review. Additionally, faculty members will be asked to create a personal biographical sketch, assign hypothetical students to work groups, and create and post a sample assessment tool, such as a brief test or quiz. Lastly, participants will review students' performance and insert final scores in the course gradebook. This session is intended to uncover the basics in managing the online course shell, but is in no way exhaustive. The setup allows for support during troubleshooting and assists individual participants in developing creative design and evaluation ideas through collaboration and teamwork with colleagues (Cobia & Henderson, 2007; Fish & Wickersham, 2009).

Learning-Styles Training

Numerous research studies document the benefits of accommodating students' learning styles during instruction (Cicco, 2009; Dunn & Griggs, 2003; Fearing & Riley, 2005). The second session of the faculty development protocol provides an in-depth training on learning-styles theory and instruction. This two-hour face-to-face session will be facilitated by a certified learning-styles trainer who will present participants with information on each of the domains of the Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model (Rundle, 2006). As each of the elements of the emotional, environmental, perceptual, physiological, psychological, and sociological domains are discussed, corresponding lesson planning strategies will be outlined. Suggestions for incorporating differentiated instruction into online learning modules will be demonstrated with examples of offering assignment options and varied forms of assessment. The

next part of this session will allow participants to review and interpret sample learning-style profiles and to complete the *Building Excellence Survey*, an instrument that assesses adult learning-style preferences and strengths (Rundle, 2006). When participants complete the online survey, they will immediately receive their individualized learning-style profile, which can help them to understand and capitalize on their own learning and teaching styles. The session will conclude with an activity that offers instructors the opportunity to design a brief lesson plan for an online course that exemplifies use of learning-style pedagogy. Participants will receive a how-to manual of tips for accommodating diverse learning styles in the online classroom through use of asynchronous and synchronous methodology, live media, and interactive games (Cicco, 2013).

Online Course Simulation Experience

Participating in an online course is a crucial step for potential online instructors. This form of experiential learning allows instructors to view the online course through the student lens. The third session of the faculty development protocol involves participating in an online course about teaching online. A seasoned online instructor will teach the four-week course, which has four major objectives: creating an online course syllabus for an actual online course of the individual participant's choice; writing appropriate lesson objectives, assignments, and assessments for the actual online course; designing a complete online course shell with discussion board assignments posted for each week of the course; and evaluating each learning module provided during the simulation course to rate its effectiveness in modelling engaging learning-style pedagogy (Reiner & Arnold, 2010). This third phase of the module will be delivered in a fully online modality, to focus the participants' attention on a truly online learning environment, which may or may not respond to their own learning styles and preferences. The processes of syllabus revision, strategic lesson planning, and triangulated assessment will be highlighted during this course (Cicco, 2013). At the conclusion of this third part of the protocol, successful participants will receive a certificate of completion, allowing them to teach online

courses at their institution of higher education.

Tools for Relationship-Building

Faculty members and students in online courses have reported greater success and satisfaction when they were able to communicate with each other comfortably and frequently (Cicco, 2012). In planning the transfer of a counseling skills course to the online classroom setting, faculty members must incorporate multiple opportunities for students to communicate with their faculty supervisors each week. These forms of communication are often limited to discussion through email messages and feedback commentary for online assignments. The fourth session of the faculty development protocol consists of a one-hour Webinar that challenges instructors to consider alternative and improved means of communicating with students, thereby building solid instructor-student relationships. Participants will be asked to devise plans for maintaining regular communication with students in their online courses through student-made rubrics, telephone conversations, reflective journal writing, campus advisement meetings, and attendance at off-campus professional events, conferences, or workshops (Andrade, 2008). This phase of the protocol is intended to be offered as a refresher course, with revisions and updates to the Webinar offered multiple times throughout the academic year. Online instructors are encouraged to complete the Webinar at least twice annually to keep up with technological and theoretical updates on online pedagogy.

An important aspect of this fourth phase of the series is making online instructors aware of the many possibilities for building healthy working relationships with students. When students experience difficulty in mastering a specific counseling skill or technique, they should feel comfortable enough to seek the support of their instructor, additional clarification, and practice opportunities when appropriate. Faculty responsiveness should be rapid, consistent, and reliable (Cicco, 2012). It is also helpful for students completing skills-based courses online to display their work through live media or pre-recorded counseling sessions, which will receive self- and peer-reviews and constructive feedback (Andrade, 2008; Cicco, 2013). Working in

isolation in this field of study creates a considerable risk for repeating mistakes, harming future clients, and mediocre or inadequate skill development (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). The communication lines must open between student and instructor, and built into each learning module for faculty members to effectively convey their trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertness through the completely online course (Haberstroh, 2010). Faculty members may seek student feedback on the extent to which the online course is meeting their learning needs and expectations. Frequent surveys of student satisfaction are beneficial for online instructors during the process of self-evaluation and course revision (Reiner & Arnold, 2010).

Launching an Online Course

The fifth and final part of the faculty development protocol entails the actual design and delivery of a completely online course. The prior sessions provided the theoretical foundation, tools, and support for participants to arrive at this final and culminating stage of the faculty development series. Participating faculty instructors will be assigned to teach a completely online course within their respective academic departments and to launch it in the subsequent semester, which will allow them at least three months of planning and preparation time. As soon as the online course is assigned to a faculty member, a seasoned online faculty instructor will begin communicating with the participant as his/her mentor. During the planning stage, and throughout the duration of the course, the mentor will have access to the online course to provide a bi-weekly progress report with feedback on learning module strengths and areas in need of improvement. The mentor will be available for discussion, technical troubleshooting assistance, and overall support with the process of launching and delivering the online course. Faculty members will be encouraged to elicit student feedback regularly to monitor student performance and satisfaction. After the close of the semester, the faculty instructor and mentor will meet to debrief and discuss the overall faculty and student performance outcomes and interpret feedback to determine whether significant changes need to be made for subsequent online courses. A brief report outlining the course's goals and outcomes will be

produced at the conclusion of the supervision session, with recommendations drawn for lesson alternatives in future online courses (Fish & Wickersham, 2009; Reiner & Arnold, 2010).

Discussion

The faculty development protocol described above can be an effective tool for preparing online instructors before launching their first online course. The various phases of the protocol encourage faculty members to explore new lesson planning strategies and to re-visit the success of their face-to-face pedagogies as well. The protocol can be re-organized, updated, and offered on an ongoing basis at institutions of higher education. It is recommended that research studies be conducted to compare the quality of online courses administered by faculty members who have completed the training series as opposed to those who simply began teaching online with no formal preparation. Student and faculty evaluations of their own levels of success and satisfaction should be utilized in improving the overall design and delivery of online courses. Counselor educators are especially encouraged to consider the multitude of online course tools that would enhance student learning experiences in fully online skills-based courses (Cicco, 2013; Trepal et al., 2007). It will be beneficial to collect participants' perceptions on the benefits and areas in need of improvement in each of the sessions of the faculty development series. An online survey can be created for this purpose and all participants should be asked to evaluate their preparedness for effective online instruction due to participation in the individual sessions and in the series as a whole. The data collected will assist instructors and mentors in assessing the success of each session and in developing plans for protocol revision and follow-up. Additionally, instructors who have not completed the development series can be surveyed on their sense of preparedness for online teaching and their perceptions of personal effectiveness in the online classroom. The responses of participants versus non-participant online instructors could be compared to further document the protocol's level of success in preparing new online instructors (Reiner & Arnold, 2010).

Conclusion

Faculty members who are adequately prepared for the task of teaching online are better equipped to deliver high quality online courses that provide students with positive learning experiences, ample opportunities for practice, and ongoing triangulated forms of evaluation (Cicco, 2013). The faculty development protocol described in this article may provide the groundwork for counseling and other education faculty supervisors that plan on implementing an intensive training series for novice online instructors. Each part of the protocol allows faculty participants to consider employing innovative and engaging online instructional strategies. This extensive series of training exercises focuses on the importance of meeting the needs of diverse learners to produce optimal academic performance outcomes. Faculty participants receive technological and pedagogical training and support throughout the phases of the protocol. An integral part of implementing both the protocol and any successful online course involves continuous communication and evaluation opportunities (Yang & Chou, 2008). It is recommended that institutions employing this protocol for faculty training and development also conduct pre- and post-assessments and comparative evaluations to analyze and document the levels of improvement in the delivery of fully online courses (Erford, 2008; Wright, 2014).

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