

ASSESSMENT IN ONLINE COURSES: HOW ARE COUNSELING SKILLS EVALUATED?

By

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ABSTRACT

Online courses are a necessary addition to most graduate education programs. Offering students the option of completing program requirements online makes the program more competitive, convenient, and attractive. Responsible online instructors and program administrators must consider whether or not specific courses that are offered in the traditional classroom setting can be delivered in the virtual classroom to produce comparable student learning outcomes (Aisami, 2007; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). Courses that teach counseling skills and techniques are highlighted in this article, as they require ongoing contact among students, faculty, and clinical associates, and ideally involve role-playing, modeling, and immediate exchange of feedback. Face-to-face evaluation methods are typically employed by faculty in these skills-based courses, often with the use of checklists and rubrics. This article will discuss the possibility of designing similar evaluation methods that would be appropriate and realistic for the online setting, including engaging students in rigorous self- and peer-review assignments (Yang & Chou, 2008). In addition, the use of audio- and video- taped counseling sessions and live media enhancements such as Skype, will be presented as supplements to text-based online courses (Ash, 2011). The goal for counseling faculty and students is to ensure that quality instruction in the virtual classroom results in solid skill development. Demonstration of skill development would be evidenced in the practice of appropriate interpersonal skills, and counseling techniques and strategies within the context of a counseling session. Ethical counseling faculty and program decision-makers interested in producing qualified professional counselors to serve schools and communities will carefully examine the assessment methods employed in online courses to ensure that they are fair and strong enough to accurately measure counseling skill development (Meyers, 2008; Trepal et al., 2007).

Key words: Online courses, Assessment of Skill Development, Evaluation of Learning Outcomes, Virtual Classroom, Self- and Peer-Review Methods.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Versus Virtual Classrooms

Online courses are continuously growing in popularity and changing the face of graduate education programs worldwide. The traditional classroom setting, equipped with faculty-lecturer, students, physical on-campus location and in-class technology, may still be the preferred learning environment for many students. The virtual classroom, when it is an option for students, may appear more attractive because it can be accessed from almost any location, at any time during the day (Ciccio, 2009). The challenges for faculty and students in online courses arise when the course content, such as instruction and practice of counseling skills and techniques, requires the immediate

exchange of feedback and synchronous interaction that are easily achieved in face-to-face classroom settings. Courses that teach students to exercise appropriate interpersonal skills, and particularly counseling strategies, typically require some degree of live interaction among faculty and students. Faculty teaching such skills-based courses online will have the option of incorporating synchronous methods in asynchronous courses, or selecting hybrid instructional designs with face-to-face sessions, or alternately they risk the loss of some faculty-student interchange by relying on mostly text-based instructional material. Perhaps the most important issues to be considered when comparing the traditional and virtual classrooms are the extent to which students achieve

learning objectives and the ability of faculty to accurately evaluate their development of specific skills (Meyers, 2008; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

Special Courses

The purpose of this article is not to compare the overall effectiveness of traditional versus online courses. It is clear that online courses can be excellent alternatives to traditional in-class courses, with comparable, if not better, student learning outcomes. The effectiveness of the instruction in online courses will depend on several factors, including the pedagogical and technological skills of the instructors, the technological skills of the students, and the students' learning-style preferences (Fearing & Riley, 2005). Students enrolled in online courses, like those enrolled in other courses, will be required to follow directions, complete various assignments, and prepare for exams. However, successful students in online courses may need to exercise higher degrees of self-motivation and self-discipline than they would in similar courses delivered in the traditional classroom. Online courses frequently rely on the abilities of students to sort through course documents and materials independently, and to work within a structural framework that may be predominantly text-based. Not every student will have a learning style that is necessarily compatible for learning via the virtual classroom (Cicco, 2009; Fearing & Riley, 2005).

Many adjustments can be made within online courses to better accommodate a variety of learners. Some examples include incorporating video and audio media, providing for independent and group work, allowing for completion of requirements through optional assignments, and integrating live communication through chat and Webcam technology. These modifications to the typical online course may seem simple to the outside observer, yet to the student they may create a completely different learning environment (Aisami, 2007; Ash, 2011; Scheuermann, 2010). These changes would be of particular importance in online courses that intend to teach counseling skills and techniques and those that evaluate performance in field experiences. These courses are special because they require more intense and ongoing levels of communication among instructors and

students. These courses also tend to involve the assistance of clinical associates, professional counselors that currently practice in the field. They serve as neutral, outside practitioners, who help to evaluate students' counseling skills. The instructors/experts, practitioners, and students exchange ideas and opinions on how to tackle particular counseling cases. Their discussions on selecting appropriate counseling techniques and strategies are instrumental to successful student performance, especially at field sites during internship and practicum experiences (Trepal et al., 2007).

Student success in counseling skills and techniques courses is fundamental to overall success in counselor preparation programs. Counselors-in-training are continually and vigorously evaluated on their execution of skills and techniques, considered to be threshold concepts in counselor development (Bernstein & Bass, 2005). Therefore, skills and techniques courses lay the foundation for development of increasingly sophisticated counseling skills. These skills, called microskills, are conceptualized along a hierarchical pyramid, with basic skills at the bottom and more difficult and complex skills at the top. Ideally, counselors will acquire all skills along the pyramid, and integrate them when appropriate in practice. Such sequential skills include: attending behaviors; open- and closed- ended 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. Development of attending behaviors and basic listening skills can be noted in observable patterns such as eye contact, body language, vocal qualities, and verbal tracking (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). Instructors charged with evaluating development of such counseling skills and behaviors clearly will need to see their students in action.

Skills and techniques courses provide students with opportunities to witness live modeling of microskills by their professors, clinical associates, and peers. In addition, they are able to role-play scenarios, testing their counseling abilities and immediately receiving constructive feedback. Students will perform as if they are actual counselors,

responding to impromptu scenarios created by professors and carried out by student actors. The live counseling sessions are viewed by the entire class or by smaller subgroups, and then analyzed and critiqued. The exchange of information among faculty, clinical associates, and students serves to help students identify their strengths and weaknesses. When errors or areas in need of improvement are discussed in an open and respectful forum, students are less likely to repeat inappropriate practices. The level of skill development improves with ongoing practice and reflection, which should be experienced in core skills and techniques courses, whether they are offered in traditional classroom settings or online (Ivey et al., 2010; Trepal et al., 2007). Because such intensive and immediate communication is the basis for improvement and ultimately stronger counseling performance, it must be made available in online skills courses to best serve counselors-in-training and their eventual clients.

Evaluating Skill Development

Fair methods of assessment would determine whether or not students mastered the learning objectives set forth in the course syllabus, only after they have been properly instructed and allowed opportunities for practice. If online courses in counseling skills and techniques are to be effective in measuring student learning outcomes, they must utilize methods of assessment that allow for clear demonstration of skill development. In other words, counselors-in-training must be evaluated based on actual counseling performances, not simply on discussions of how they would incorporate skills and strategies in hypothetical practice (Blackmore, Tantam, & van Deurzen, 2008; Trepal et al., 2007; Wang, 2010). Most instructors would agree that students should be evaluated on an ongoing basis, not only at the conclusion of a course, to be afforded opportunities for improvement. The appropriate evaluation will be closely connected to the curriculum that was taught, or in some way delivered, during the course (Irvine & Carmichael, 2009; Kiley & Wisker, 2009). It seems logical that counseling skills and techniques courses, whether they are delivered in traditional classrooms or online, will have similar learning objectives. Consequently, they must both

offer various opportunities for the type of experiential learning that takes place in mock counseling sessions or role-plays (Trepal et al., 2007; Yang & Chou, 2008).

Suggestions for Online Instructors

Enhance the Learning Experience

Online courses in counseling skills and techniques have the potential to produce learning outcomes that are comparable to those of their traditional classroom counterparts (Warren & Holloman, 2005). To do so, they must incorporate vigorous counseling modeling from experts and practitioners. These models may be presented in the virtual classroom setting through the use of podcasts or video clips, created specifically for illustration of microskills along the conceptual pyramid. These podcasts and videos, embedded within learning modules, may begin a unit of instruction, to be followed by analyses and critiques in a threaded discussion board forum. The discussion will capture the questions, concerns, and comments of faculty, students, and clinical associates. The student practice sessions on audio and video tapes, submitted and reviewed on a weekly basis in traditional classrooms, may be likewise posted as attachments in online discussion boards. These can be submitted on a rotating basis, by pre-assigned students working in dyads or triads, and displayed for review and commentary by all class members. The importance of integrating video and audio media in the online learning modules cannot be overemphasized. These elements will provide invaluable opportunities for viewing and assessing model counseling sessions (Ash, 2011; Glassmeyer, Dibbs, & Jensen, 2011; Trepal et al., 2007).

Offer Frequent Feedback

As students strive to master learning objectives, they must be provided with feedback on their counseling performances. Though immediate feedback may not always be possible in any type of course, there should not be a lengthy wait because such delay in response-time would not serve to help students improve practices prior to conducting further counseling sessions and producing additional tapes or videos (Glassmeyer et al., 2011). Faculty should state at the onset of the online course, what the expectations are for submitting audio- or video-taped

counseling sessions, and within how many hours or days students can expect to receive feedback from faculty, clinical associates, and classmates. Every tape or video recording should receive constructive, respectful commentary. Counseling sessions should be practiced on a weekly basis, so faculty and students themselves can monitor progress. Podcasts and pre-taped audio and video sessions can be replaced by live sessions that are performed and viewed via video-conferencing, using Webcam technology. Examples of such media are Skype and Windows Live Messenger (Ash, 2011). Discussion boards may also be replaced with pre-announced live chat sessions, allowing for class members to communicate rapidly, exchanging comments and responses almost instantaneously. Utilizing live interaction would change the asynchronous classroom dramatically by incorporating synchronous methods (Scheuermann, 2010).

Model and Teach Assessment Procedures

The unique setup of virtual classrooms requires that students remain attentive to posted announcements, changes, and important assignment instructions. In the traditional classroom, students may simply observe the work of faculty and classmates to clarify unanswered questions. This type of self-checking should also be readily available to students in online courses. Frequent and required participation in discussion boards will allow students to check their own progress by reading the questions and answers of their peers and instructors. Online faculty must present clear, step-by-step instructions for assignments to avoid confusing students. Faculty should also explain how they will be evaluating students by sharing their grading forms, checklists, and rubrics. Every completed rating form or other type of assessment that is delivered to students in their online gradebooks should be accompanied by verbal faculty commentary. It is helpful to model how rating forms will be used by presenting a sample counseling video and the resultant faculty evaluation (Glassmeyer et al., 2011). Such examples will provide students with an indication of how their work will similarly be evaluated.

A helpful assignment to be utilized during the early part of the course is to ask students to perform an evaluation of a mock counseling session, using a rubric that scores the use

and degree of particular counseling skills exercised (Andrade, 2008). These skills, the criteria to be scored along a Likert-type or other scale in the rubric, should resemble those found along the hierarchical pyramid of skills (Ivey et al., 2010). Another assignment that helps to teach the assessment process is to ask students to work collaboratively to create their own rubrics for scoring counseling sessions. Agreeing on appropriate criteria and scoring for rubrics allows students to actively participate in the assessment process, maintain objectivity, and take ownership for adherence to assignment guidelines (Andrade, 2008). Using varied and alternative forms of assessment also allow for expanded communication among faculty and students. Examples would include submission of collective performance histories or e-portfolios (Blackmore et al., 2008; Wang, 2010).

Provide Opportunities for Self- and Peer-Evaluation

Traditional in-class counseling skills courses utilize various evaluation measures, with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods components (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Observer rating forms, checklists, and rubrics are often completed by faculty, students, and clinical associates while viewing practice counseling sessions or role-plays. These evaluation methods can also be used in online courses and ideally would not be limited to simply numeric data. Electronic self-evaluation forms may be collected by faculty as a follow-up assignment to submitting a counseling tape. Alternately, electronic peer-evaluation forms may be collected by students following their individual role-play assignments. When students are asked to critique a mock counseling session, their comments and observations may reveal to the instructor their development of attending and analytical skills. When students are asked to evaluate their classmates' practice counseling sessions or role-plays, their comments are collected and delivered to the students being evaluated to create a collaborative, non-competitive, learning experience. These evaluations, along with those of faculty, may be very helpful to the counselors-in-training that are interested in refining their skills. The exercise of evaluating others' counseling sessions also helps students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their own performances

(Wang, 2010).

Just as it is imperative to be able to recognize the appropriate and inappropriate counseling behaviors of peers and models, exercising ongoing self-evaluation should be a regular activity for conscientious, ethical counselors. Students enrolled in skills courses, and especially those enrolled in field experience courses, should be able to rate themselves objectively, recognizing their need for additional practice in specific techniques, while remaining open to constructive criticism from faculty and peers. The overall evaluation of students should incorporate self- and peer-evaluations, as well as evaluation from faculty, clinical associates, and site supervisors when applicable. Counselors-in-training may not agree with the objective and subjective evaluations they receive, but as growing counselors, they should be interested in continual learning and professional growth. The unique setup of the online course makes it easier, in some ways, to share and collect peer comments. At the same time, the fact that individual comments are often displayed to all students in discussion boards, will encourage students to take greater responsibility for the comments they make. Students may be offered the choice of having their evaluations remain private or open for classmates to view. Because posted evaluations can be identified and rebutted, which is not always possible when submitting paper evaluation forms in the face-to-face setting, students are likely to be more sensitive and thoughtful in their comments and scoring. The activities of self- and peer-evaluation engage students and help them to remain active learners in the virtual classroom setting (Andrade, 2008; Glassmeyer et al., 2011; Reiner & Arnold, 2010).

Ethical Concerns

The goal of counseling faculty and program decision-makers is to ensure that the quality of instruction is maintained in both traditional in-class courses and online courses. It is the responsibility of counselor preparation program faculty and administration to confirm that their graduates complete rigorous programs of study that result in strong development of counseling skills and techniques. Program planners should be as concerned with the output

of their programs as they are with the input. The learning outcomes should be just as important as the instruction. Professional counselors will be serving children and adults in schools and mental health agencies. When they receive graduate degrees from accredited programs, they take major steps toward licensure and certification, which will enable them to serve many individuals in various communities. When the fundamental counseling skills and techniques are taught and learned via the online course, faculty must be able to accurately assess the degree to which skills have been developed, practiced, and mastered (Blackmore et al., 2008; Trepal et al., 2007). Engaging students with various forms of instruction, offering diverse practice experiences, and utilizing multiple forms of assessment increases the possibility of producing well-prepared future counselors. Counselor preparation program faculty can then fulfill their ethical obligation to graduate only those students who are well-prepared and qualified to serve their communities (Andrade, 2008; Reiner & Arnold, 2010).

Conclusion

Counseling skills and techniques courses are fundamental to overall counselor development (Ivey et al., 2010). It is the responsibility of counseling faculty and program decision-makers to ensure that these courses deliver quality instruction and effectively measure the development of students' counseling skills, whether they are offered in-class or online. Instructors of online skills courses are challenged to introduce engaging learning modules and ongoing and effective evaluation measures. Live meetings that include simulations viewed through video-conferencing technology and chat rooms may compensate for the asynchronous nature of online courses and sometimes delayed receipt of feedback (Scheuermann, 2010). When students are assessed through various evaluation methods, and by various sources, a more reliable picture of their performance is presented. Evaluation forms that incorporate quantitative and qualitative components may provide instructors and students with rich information that serves to enhance skill practice and development (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Conscientious students also benefit from opportunities for frequent and regular

communication with faculty and peers, as well as clinical associates and field supervisors when available. Self- and peer-evaluation exercises and practice with creating and using rubrics also assist the processes of teaching, learning, and assessment, particularly in online courses when immediate feedback is not always readily available. To accurately determine levels of skill development, it will be necessary to view actual practice of the skills of interest, preferably through live media such as Skype and or through multiple video-taped counseling sessions. Collecting multiple samples of counseling performance, rated by various evaluators, can only serve to increase the possibility of accurately and reliably measuring skill acquisition and levels of skill development (Blackmore et al., 2008; Glassmeyer et al., 2011; Wang, 2010).

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