

Techniques and Tips for Using Computers in Teaching Counseling Courses

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Universities increasingly expect all programs, including counselor education, to participate in outreach to students who cannot come to campus. Online courses using computers are a growing trend in this effort. Counselor educators strive to make online courses as comparable to bricks and mortar or on-site classes as possible. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of basic computer technology in counselor education with a focus on online or distance education. The examples given are easy to adapt to a variety of course topics and are useful in on-site classes as well as online courses. The paper will not discuss ethical and legal obligations nor the pros and cons of online courses.

As with earlier technology, audio and video taping for instance, computers have become tools for teaching and supervising students in counseling programs. The question for counselor educators is not if they will use computers, but how they will use computers in their courses (Goodyear, 1984). At the very least, students will use databases for research. Some classrooms are equipped with computers for each student so that students and teachers can look at the same information during the class. Students may work in groups exploring information online, use the computer to do research through the many journals

that are full text in online databases, look for new sites for information related to a particular subject then email the website to each other, or find resources for a group presentation. For example, students can be actively engaged in learning about the ethics of counseling when they evaluate the compliance of websites for online counselors to ethical guidelines.

E-learning programs provide a template for online courses, two of which are Blackboard and WebCT. Some textbook publishers provide courses already developed, but in most cases the instructor develops the course. Blackboard (2005) reports increases in universities and K-12 schools using their system and WebCT (2005) states that thousands of universities and colleges in more than 70 countries use WebCT.

Perhaps replacing “bricks and mortar” classes by entire courses online is most troubling for counselor educators. There seems to be an implicit assumption that counseling and other interpersonal programs of study cannot be taught online. The general concern is the loss of direct, face-to-face contact and the ability to assess affect. Yet some see technology as a way to increase interactive teaching (Stuart, 1999). Certainly, it requires counselor educators and students to “think outside of the box” (McCarty & Clancy, 2002, p. 153). Stevens, Dobrovolsky, Kent, & Shulman (2003) use journaling to personalize an online Marriage and Family Therapy course.

When courses are taught entirely online students may not come to the campus at all. Communication between the instructor and students is usually through email. Because discussion is one dimensional though the written word and no gestures or facial expressions give meaning to the words, clear precise directions are especially important. Language differences, frames of reference, colloquial patterns of speech are factors since students enrolled in the class may be from any state or even out of the country. Yet, the variety of experiences of students and their locations can enrich the class, particularly in group discussions.

Some students have difficulties when it comes to understanding how to use the computer for a class and can only use the preloaded software on their computers. Also, some of them have very slow systems. Each student seems to have a favorite word processor and way to use the computer in general. The instructor must give specific directions about the nuts and bolts of the course - which word processor, how to send each assignment, the information to put in the subject box of email, etc.

Some educators find a more acceptable approach than an online course is to use the online material to support classroom instruction. One popular way to combine computer and classroom instruction is to meet part of the classes on campus and assign online course material part of the time. Another way to combine the two is to meet the students the first time, develop the relationship and instruct students concerning the course. Students of these online supported courses must be able to travel to the university for the required on-site work.

The purpose of any online technique should not be for student entertainment any more than entertainment is the primary goal of techniques used in on-site courses. Online courses should be equal in quality to classroom courses. Thus, the techniques below are presented to give the instructor ideas for engaging students in a meaningful learning experience. Many of these activities could be used in an on-site course.

When first developing the course keep it as simple as possible. Changes and more detail/information can be added later as needed. Additionally, updates will be easier to incorporate. Equipment failure or lost information can be a nightmare for a really complicated course. A backup CD of the course is essential. Only limited computer skills are needed to build an effective course using basic software - email, chat, discussion boards or rooms, links, PowerPoint, Excel and a word processing tool. Technical support for students should be available, but not supplied by the instructor.

Email is one of the first uses of computers. The one-on-one contact through email can be intense in an online course. Students email frequently and they expect a personal and immediate response to each message. The quantity of email varies throughout the course. Peek times are at the beginning of the course and when assignments are due. A separate email account for the course may be necessary. Some students will email often and others only when required. Some students will disclose personal information through email when they would not face to face (Stevens, et al, 2003).

Email is also used to send assignments to the teacher, usually by attachments. The disadvantage possibly receiving viruses in attachments can be minimized by saving the document to a disk and not opening it on the computer. Advantages include the ability of the instructor to move the document to Trackit or other sites. Additionally the format stays the same as the student typed it. Another option is to provide feedback by typed comments into the document using the Track Changes in the Tools section of Word.

Next to email websites are possibly most widely used and can be an excellent asset for counselors and counselor educators. However, if a link is provided when a student is asked to review a website, the URL should also be given in the assignment in case the link is lost. Again, students need specific directions and guidance about what they are to look for in websites. Specific information or a questionnaire is needed to guide their search.

Professional organizations such as ACA, NBCC, and CACREP have vast amounts of information on their sites. Students could be instructed to search NBCC for the states that do not have a licensure law, CACREP for the core content area for a master level counseling program or ACA for three advantages of belonging to a professional organization (Clark & Stone, 2002). In addition to these, students may research specific institutes, such as the Alfred Adler Institute or look up current information on just about any topic. Before researching topics on the internet or doing a paper using journals, students need to know how to evaluate sources of information as well as how to give credit for references. Links to this information can be included in the course.

An example of a guided search of the ACA website is:

Look for the following information on the ACA Website: (A) Who are the members (students, professionals, parents, general public)? (B) What are the benefits to members? (C) How much does membership cost? (D) What is ACA's public policy? (E) What does it say about certification, licensure, accreditation? (F) How many divisions and regions does it have? Name them. (G) Does ACA have a code of ethics and by-laws? (H) Name three important things about one of the divisions that you find particularly interesting. (I) Does the division have a separate code of ethics?

A questionnaire is used in the activity below. It is a particularly good method of researching the variety of activities school counselors perform across the country. This author requires a total of three to six websites from different states as well as different grade levels, with no more than one from the student's local school system.

School counseling students are required to find the websites of school counselors in elementary, middle, or high schools. This is somewhat difficult because students must locate a school counselor's website, not a professional organization, commercial or information site. The questionnaire has a space for the name of the school and the URL in addition to the following questions. Was the website attractive? Were the

spelling and grammar correct? When was it last updated? Or was the information on the site current? Did it take a long time to open? Who would benefit from the site - parents, students, teachers, other? Was the information helpful? If you were the counselor at this school would you be proud of the site? Why or why not? What is your overall evaluation?

PowerPoint, Corel Presentations, and Harvard Graphic have a variety of purposes (Baggerly, 2002). The instructor may use PowerPoint to illustrate or enhance the written lecture. PowerPoint may also be submitted by the student for a graded assignment. For example, students make a PowerPoint presentation of at least 12 slides suitable for a workshop or teacher in-service. Instructions for the format include; title page, references in APA style, and between 10-12 content slides. Twelve slides are enough for a one-hour presentation with about five minutes of discussion for each slide. PowerPoints that can “stand alone” without discussion would be suitable for a website.

Educators and counseling students can develop action research that will impact counseling conditions using excel charts, graphs, and data functions. Macro and Track Changes are especially useful for research, program planning and consultation courses (Stone & Turba, 1999). If students do a systemic consultation plan, needs assessment and evaluation instruments can be designed using the chart function of Word. Plans for a counseling program in a school or agency could include charts depicting assessment data. The data can be imported to Excel for analysis. If the student has the 2003 version of this software, excellent tutorials are on the Internet.

Movies and movie clips are used in some courses. Copyright laws must be observed therefore including the movies in the course materials may not be possible. A better process is to assign movies for the students to rent. Have discussion points for them to observe in the movie and discuss with the class, perhaps on the discussion board. Some popular movies are Good Will Hunting, Dead Man Walking, Analyze This, and Patch Adams (Baggerly, 2002).

Several objectives can be achieved by linking one assignment to another. For example, using a discussion group, students can be assigned to submit questions they would ask when interviewing a counselor. In the discussion of the questions, students discover new perspectives. Students then select the questions they like best, do the interview and post the interview without identifying the interviewee on another discussion group site. A separate group makes grading the assignments much easier.

The class may be divided into smaller groups for work that is very much like group work in the classroom. Since real time chat rooms require all students to be online at the same time different time zones may pose a problem. Also, some students write long responses and the first person may start typing before the first finishes. Be sure to remind students of rules for chat discussions. A different method is to allow students to post to the message board at any time of day. To encourage participation a grade may be assigned to the activity.

To gain an understanding of the profession field experiences may be included in an introductory course. Some examples of early uses of field experiences are; job shadowing, interviews, mock counseling sessions, tours of agencies or resource centers, and attending cultural events. As with previous assignments, a guide for the experience is needed. Reports may be submitted on a structured form created by the instructor, videotape, paper, still pictures or almost any method used in on-site classes. Evans and Larabee (2002) use digitized video segments, animation, and included graphics and audio in simulations of case studies for integrating multicultural awareness with career counseling.

One assignment that received positive ratings from preservice students is a role play situation. The student recruits a relative or friend to play the client and the student plays the counselor. After they complete the role play from the assigned vignette an evaluation form is sent to the instructor. The form should provide space for basic information such as age and gender of the “client”, theory used, etc. then more detailed information such as summary of session, counselor’s reaction, “client’s” reaction, and overall evaluation of the experience.

Supervision is generally considered a fact-to-face process. Equipment limitations have contributed to counseling lagging behind other disciplines in developing interactive online supervision (Hohenskil, 2000). The quality of cameras and microphones for computers have improved greatly so that now using a good camera and microphone, the instructor and student can see and hear each other without distracting delays. This requires a small investment in the equipment. Also, in supervision and other instances when confidential information is shared the online site should be secure.

With the exception of the supervision sessions using a camera and microphone, all of the above online class activities require only basic computer equipment and skills. These are only a sample of the various possible uses of computer technology in counselor education. Counseling professionals have been careful

in selecting the technology appropriate to the profession. With continuing care for best practices, computer technology can be used to enrich counselor education using these and more advanced techniques.

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