

## Article 44

### Using Wordle in Counseling Ethics Education

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Amanuel H. Asfaw, Jane A. Warren, Courtney McKim, Lay-nah Blue Morris-Howe, David Meggitt, Phillip Mullins, Noor Syamilah Zakaria, and Nikki Rossetter

Asfaw, Amanuel H., is an assistant professor at Austin Peay State University. He received his PhD in counselor education from the University of Wyoming, and studies substance abuse and ethics education.

Warren, Jane A., is a professor of counseling at Saybrook University. She studies addictions, ethics, and online education in counseling.

McKim, Courtney, is a professor of educational research at the University of Wyoming. She studies enhancing research education.

Morris-Howe, Lay-nah Blue, is an assistant professor at the University of Wyoming. She received her PhD in counselor education from the University of Wyoming and studies multiculturalism

Meggitt, David, is a PhD candidate in counselor education at the University of Wyoming and studies resilience and addictions.

Mullins, Phillip, is a PhD candidate in counselor education at the University of Wyoming and studies wellness in counseling.

Zakaria, Noor Syamilah, is an assistant professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia. She received her PhD in counselor education from the University of Wyoming and studies ethics in counselor education.

Rossetter, Nikki, received her MA in counseling from the University of Wyoming and practices counseling in Colorado.

#### Abstract

There are educational techniques that can positively impact teaching in the counseling profession. This paper describes an educational technique using Wordle. Wordle is word cloud visualization of text and is used in research and education. We present the use of Wordle in counselor ethics education to show how it can illustrate change in thinking and, ultimately, learning.

*Keywords:* ethics education, Wordle, creativity

Educational techniques, utilized carefully, can enhance learning in a classroom (Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, & Yaates, 2014). Moran and Milsom (2015) and Zakaria (2013) demonstrated in their research that experiential learning facilitates knowledge acquisition. Wordle can be a supplementary research tool as well as offer experiential learning. This paper will discuss counseling ethics education and illustrate how Wordle was utilized as a teaching technique and evaluation tool in an ethics education classroom.

### **Counseling Ethics Education**

Ethical competence includes knowledge, self-reflection, awareness, dialogue, interaction, decision-making, and education (Ametrano, 2014; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014; Rogerson, Gottlieb, Handelsman, Knapp, & Youngren, 2011; Zakaria & Warren, 2016). As early as 2004, Dufrene and Glosoff identified how ethical competence evolved from an external focus with adherence to rules, to a more internal focus with an orientation to the client combined with “self-chosen principles of conscience and internal ethical formulations” (p. 3). Lambie, Hagedorn, and Ieva (2010) found that counseling ethics education could enhance complexity and flexibility in thinking, as evidenced by improved ego development and social cognitive development.

Counselor educators expect counseling students to learn the codes of ethics, have self-awareness, and be able to effectively integrate and apply knowledge to ethical challenges in counseling services (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015). However, given the complexities and ambiguities of ethical issues and decisions in counseling, teaching ethics effectively and learning to be ethical is not easy (Warren, Zavaschi, Covello, & Zakaria, 2012).

As early as 1986, Kitchener stated that counselor education curriculum needs to sensitize counselors to ethics-related issues to experience the “the ambiguity of ethical decision making” (p. 306). Decision-making is not black and white nor easy in counseling. The use of a decision-making model can slow down reactivity; enable awareness, tolerance, acceptance, and competence; and provide a strategic, analytical, normalizing, and objective approach when making difficult ethical decisions (Crowley & Gottlieb, 2012; Evans, Levitt, & Henning, 2012; Rogerson et al., 2011). Even with rules and principles found in decision-making models, “neither principles nor virtues are absolute guarantees of ethical responses to others” (Kitchener, 1996, p. 95). There are many layers to decision making that address personal, emotional, contextual, and professional values. What is considered ethical does not stay the same from one year to the next because there are fluctuations in values, technology, training, and professional expectations (ACA, 2014; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014; Neukrug & Milliken, 2011).

Mindful awareness of realistic challenges, ongoing education, and use of a decision-making model to address potential ethical conundrums can enhance ethical choices made by all counselors (Evans et al., 2012). Levitt, Farry, and Mazzarella (2015) studied counselors practicing in the field and found four themes in ethical decision making: having awareness of personal values, being mindful of clients’ best interests, showing transparency in decision making, and remaining aware of views of formal training and practice. Ethical decision making includes variables such as self-reflection, values, input from clients, truthfulness, supervision, consultation, utilization of ethical

codes, referral, and experience. Many counselors reported “that what they were taught did not always translate into practice” (Levitt et al., 2015, p. 93). Even though the counseling codes support the use of ethical decision-making models (Corey, Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2015; Herlihy & Corey, 2014; Wheeler & Bertram, 2015), there needs to be continued information, accountability, and research about ethics education in counselor education (Hill, 2004; Neukrug, Milliken, & Walden, 2001; Urofsky & Sowa, 2004; Zakaria, 2013). This paper will explore how Wordle can be used as an educational technique and supplementary research tool; consequently, it can be used to promote and research ethics education in counseling

## **Wordle**

Wordle is a word visualization of text that gives prominence to words by their frequency (McNaught & Lam, 2010). Wordle is a publicly available, free, computer-based technique that places the included words in a form that looks like a cloud. The more frequently a word appears, the larger and more apparent the same word will be in the word cloud. For example, an assignment could be to identify three words used by each of 20 persons to describe happiness; the Wordle would combine all the words together and then visually illustrate the words used. The more a word is used, the larger it would appear in the illustration. In essence, Wordle presents a visual reflection of how words are used (see <http://wordle.net/> and <http://www.zazzle.com/wordle+art> for examples).

Words can reflect ideas such as meaning, creative thinking, stereotypes, cultural trends, and learning (Baralt, Pennestri, & Selvandin, 2011; Kelly, Saitz, & Wakeman, 2016; Pendergast, 2010; Saitz, 2015). For example, Kelly and Westerhoff (2009) showed how words used in describing persons with substance-related conditions can perpetuate negative attitudes and stigmas. In a study using Wordle, Leiuen (2015) measured and assessed the content of writing on gender in archaeology over time. She noted that “analysing words (or their absence) occurring repetitively and naturally in texts is strong evidence for an underlying hegemony about gender” (Leiuen, 2015, p. 419). Wordle can be used as a tool to assess ways that learning can occur.

Hayes (2008) demonstrated that Wordle can enhance critical thinking and creativity in reading and writing skills. His writing showed various examples of how Wordle could visually show the words used and the meaning from those words. His feedback used Wordle to promote predicting, summarizing, and comparing writing skills; it emphasized prewriting, revising, visual poetry, and multimodal literacies (Hayes, 2008). Foote (2009) suggested that educators could utilize Wordle to enhance critical thinking by providing “a whole new perspective on information, revealing key concepts and patterns previously unseen, all using this simple tool” (p. 33). Foote illustrated the use of Wordle in business cards, door signage, research projects, literary analysis, and topic focused events. In 2010, Pendergast used word frequency and content meaning to provide word analysis for today’s home economists. They used the term *folksonomy* to describe “the vocabulary that is being produced from the tag clouds that literally build a word picture of the profession” (p. 301). McNaught and Lam (2010) studied how word clouds were applied to research, many forms of texts such as surveys, literary works, and public speeches.

Bandeem and Sawin (2012) identified ways that Wordle could be used in classrooms to engage students in reading assignments. Through Wordle, they enhanced understanding of major themes, identifying unfamiliar themes and missed words, and theorized about connections between words. They further illustrated how the word cloud was used to identify the 100 most frequent words in the Declaration of Independence. Librarian educators showed how Wordle was used in an online educational setting to help students get to know each other better (Jensen & Tunon, 2012). Wordle has also been used in business ethics education to complete an objective quantitative content analysis (Lock & Seele, 2015). The authors identified how a Wordle-based content analysis was used in research endeavors such as in political science, religion, media, and communication sciences. Despite the use of Wordle in a variety of endeavors, there is not substantial research about how Wordle could be used in counseling ethics education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This brief study explored how Wordle can be used as a classroom teaching technique and an evaluation tool in a master's level counseling ethics education class. Basically, this study asked each student in the class to identify the five words they thought of when they considered ethics in counseling before they started the class and once again when they completed the class. The two Wordle visualizations were compared. The evaluation goal was to identify if there were changes in the words used from pre-class to post-class. These changes, evidenced by visual depiction, could imply alteration in thinking and perhaps learning.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants included 17 counseling students enrolled at the beginning of an ethics education class (pre-class) and 16 of the same students after completion of the ethics education class (post-class). One student left the program before the class was finished; all of the students were in the first year of a CACREP-accredited counselor education training program in a Rocky Mountain region university. In the pre-class, there were 13 females and 4 males; ranging in age from 20–25 (6; 35%), 26–30 (7; 41%), and 31–35 (4; 24%). Fifteen (88%) were self-described as Caucasian, 1 (6%) as Central American, and 1 (6%) as African American. In the post-class, there were 12 females and 4 males ranging in age from 20–25 (5; 31%), 26–30 (7; 44%), and 31–35 (4; 25%). Fourteen (88%) were self-described as Caucasian, 1 (6%) self-described as Central American, and 1 (6%) self-described as African American.

### **Procedures**

Following approval by the university's Institutional Review Board, data collection took place during the 2015 fall semester. The ethics education class lasted 15 weeks and included experiential as well as didactic focus areas. There was a diverse list of activities such as a focus on an ethical case, review of the current ACA ethical codes, promotion of understanding of the complexities of ethical dilemmas, development of a professional disclosure statement, dialogue, reflection papers, creation of a summary of a personal ethical decision-making model in a bookmark, and ethics-related content from the

textbooks and class presentations. The three required texts included *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Profession With 2014 ACA Codes* (Corey et al., 2015); *ACA Ethical Standards Casebook* (Herlihy & Corey, 2014); and *The Counselor and the Law: A Guide to Legal and Ethical Practice* (Wheeler & Bertram, 2015). More specific information about the class can be obtained from the authors. It is important to note that the instructors of the activities followed ethical considerations such as promoting privacy and choice making to protect the well-being of all the counseling students enrolled (Morrisette & Gadbois, 2006).

Before the study began, all participants were provided an informed consent apprising them of the goals and procedures of the Wordle study. The participants' involvement was voluntary, not connected to class grades, and no personal identifying information other than general demographics information was requested. They were each asked to write, on a blank piece of paper, five words they thought of regarding ethics in counseling. They did this task two times: at the beginning of the class semester (pre-class) and at the end of the class semester (post-class).

The research team included two individuals who co-taught the ethics education course and six members who were not directly involved with teaching the course. The course was a face-to-face class and did not include any online instruction. The initial review of the pre- and post-class Wordle results were initially conducted by the primary author and the course instructor, who are both counseling faculty in different counseling programs, together with a faculty member in the educational research program, who was not part of teaching the ethics course. The remaining research team reviewed the findings and provided feedback. They included the course co-instructor, a second-year doctoral student in the counseling program, a second-year master's student in the counseling program, a counseling faculty member in the same program, and a counseling faculty member from Malaysia, who had received her doctorate in counselor education and supervision from the same university of this study. This team member now teaches ethics education in Malaysia and was able provide an in-depth review from a cross-cultural perspective.

## **Analysis**

The pre-class and post-class results were put into the Wordle computer program, creating two Wordle images. The ultimate goal was to investigate if there were changes in the words associated with ethics from the beginning of the class compared to the conclusion of the class and to determine what any changes might mean. The analysis of the results was done by the eight member research team .

This review was guided by interpretive perceptions of the two Wordle images. This approach is based on the view that reality is not absolute; consequently, individual, emergent, and multiple views will change over time (Charmaz, 2010). This process was considered as similar to an ethical decision-making process: identifying a problem, obtaining feedback, reconsidering options, and eventually making a decision (Wheeler & Bertram, 2015).

The philosophy behind the analysis work was that there is no ultimate truth; views are created over time and influenced by many factors such as imagination, culture, relationships, experiences, time, and circumstances (Charmaz, 2010; Creswell, 2007). Perceptions are not an exact replication of reality (Woodside, Oberman, Cole, & Carruth,

2007). This visually-based qualitative research approach reflected the participants' diverse voices (words) with their unique perceptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The large number of persons in our research team provided multiple perspectives during the analysis process. The findings were integrated and resulted in themes representing the eight research members' perceptions of the Wordle results.

## Results

Each participant was asked to identify five words that occurred to them when they thought of ethics. During the second week of the semester, the counseling students reported the following words, which were all consolidated and formatted into a Wordle (see Figure 1).



### Figure 1. Pre-Class Completion Wordle

Themes in the pre-ethics education class were primarily:

1. Following external rules (guidelines, laws, rules, guardrails)
2. Being professional
3. Having respect, integrity, and morals

At the final week of the ethics class, the counseling students again were asked to write five words they thought of regarding ethics; the words were consolidated and then formatted into a Wordle (see Figure 2).



### Figure 2.: Post-Class Completion Wordle

Themes in the post-ethics class completion were primarily:

1. Documentation
2. Consultation and collaboration
3. Subjectivity and uncertainty (being grey, values, personal judgment, debatable, truth)
4. Responsibility and being “right” (morality, codes, laws, fairness, legality)
5. Safety and professionalism (confidentiality, boundaries, codes, vigilance)

### **Discussion**

This Wordle review was intended to visualize words used in before taking a counseling ethics education class compared with those used after completion of a counseling ethics education class. Our findings suggested that there were changes in the words used as well as changes in the absolute number of words used pre-class compared to the post-class responses.

Overall, one observation was that there were more words in the second (post-class) Wordle than in the first one. Although we had 17 students in the pre-class group and 16 in the post-class group, we had 66 words and 92 words respectively. This meant each participant responded with approximately four words each in the initial group and six words each in the post-class. Although we asked that they each identify five words, we did not set an absolute number. Without more detailed feedback from the participants, we can only speculate on reasons why there were more words in the second Wordle.

It could be that following ethics education, counseling students defined ethical issues, as evidenced in their words used, in more complex and diverse ways, thus using more words in the post-class Wordle. Perhaps, this fits the understanding that ethical decision making can be “grey,” in that it is harder to define succinctly. The higher quantity of words identified in the post-class Wordle seemed to reflect and imply the complexity of concepts that the students gained over the course of the class related to their understanding and mindset of professional ethics. This tentative position aligns well with the beliefs presented by McNaught and Lam (2010) who studied how word clouds can be used, but the results are useful as a research tool only for preliminary analysis and validation. They emphasized that using Wordle allows reviewers to “quickly visualize some general patterns in text,” but interpretation needs to consider the context and actual meaning of the words used (McNaught & Lam, 2010, p. 641).

We interpreted the changes in words to imply there was a change in counseling ethics meanings. Based on the Wordle results at the beginning of the semester, it appeared counseling students often thought “professional” when thinking of ethics. They often mentioned respect, law, and morals. Perhaps examining the pre-class completion, Wordle results implied the counseling students viewed ethics more in a legal, professional manner. They also mentioned words relating to legal world such as “laws,” “rights,” and “rules.” In the pre-ethics class completion, perhaps to the students there were rules and guidelines to follow and to be professional meant to have respect, morals, and integrity. Perhaps counseling students considered ethics as the outside forces putting rules and laws in place to hold one accountable or telling them how to behave. This

finding might fit with the suggestions by Dufrene and Glosoff (2004) who considered that ethical competence evolved from an external strict adherence to rules to a more internal decision making process.

Based on the post-class Wordle results, it appeared that counseling students more often thought of documentation, consultation, uncertainty, and safety when thinking of ethics. The post-ethics class Wordle results suggested that students viewed ethics not just as a code or protocol to be followed, but a procedure that needs to be documented and involve others. Often, there is not one right way or outcome because being ethical can be uncertain and “grey,” but it does include responsibility. This position seems to align well with those identified by Kitchener (1986, 1996), who stated that ethical decisions are more than just principles and also can include variables such as the relationship, the counselor’s character, and interactional feedback. Ethics are complex and there is more to ethics than just rules. Perhaps the Wordle visualization means the codes are guidelines but not absolutes.

Although there was not a large frequency of emotion-based words, there were more in the post-class Wordle, which perhaps implied increased emotional reactivity (e.g., terrifying, intimidating, annoying). This may be related to the idea of how emotions can affect ethical decision making; thus teaching a decision-making model is useful as it can provide more time to think about outcomes and slow down emotional reactivity (Evans et al., 2012; Levitt et al., 2015).

At the conclusion of the class, it appeared that the counseling students in this study increased their creative and critical thinking, as evidenced by moving from selecting words associated with rules into selecting words based on more complex thinking processes. They used more complex ideas beyond just descriptions, and this is paralleled in the general research findings on using Wordle (Baralt et al., 2011; Hayes, 2008). It appeared the students seemed to think of ethics less in terms of rules and more in terms of action. Perhaps they thought more about what they were doing and how best to serve their clients, protecting them with responsibility and safety. Ethics was viewed less from an outside force and more from an internal barometer to be mindful of. The intention became protecting one another more than a set of rules to follow. Research promoting ethical decision making often includes others in the process (Levitt et al., 2015; Rogerson et al., 2011; Wheeler & Bertram, 2015).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The findings from this study are primarily limited by the biases in interpretation. The actual meaning of the words identified was determined by the researchers who analyzed the data; the exact opinions or views of the participants were not known but simply interpreted. The text analyzed was specific to the five words reported from before a counseling ethics education class and after completion of the class. Some participants used either less than or more than five words. Realistically, there is more to understanding change and learning than just words.

The feedback was from only one classroom and one semester experience; thus, further research is needed. Additional counseling ethics education classes need to be included to verify change. Wordle can be used in other counseling classes, such as addictions, diagnosis, and multiculturalism, to assess possible changes in perspectives and understanding. Because Wordle is considered by some only as a useful adjunct tool

to traditional analysis methods (McNaught & Lam, 2010), it could be used in conjunction with concurrent measures of learning.

### **Conclusion**

Ethical competence evolves with knowledge and practice and is ever changing. Complex and diverse skills are needed to be ethically competent (Ametrano, 2014; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014; Lambie et al., 2010; Zakaria & Warren, 2016). Our findings suggest that there could be an evolution in thinking from dependence on external rules to a more internal focus with more feelings, dialogue/consultation, and documentation. The developmental progression from an external focus to a more internal focus is aligned with the research findings by Dufrene and Glosoff (2004), who studied the development and progression of ethical reasoning. Moving from external rules to collaboration, documentation, more unknowns, and increased feelings, could mean that there were changes in views of ethics and this can imply learning.

Wordle is an educational technique that is inexpensive, easy, safe, and anonymous. To “see” what the words used were in the pre-ethics class and compare this visual depiction with the same post-ethics class can be used by students to help them visualize their beliefs about a topic and literally view what a post-class perspective might look like. Wordle can visually show what ethics means to counseling students. Perhaps there is a folksonomy (Pendergast, 2010) of words associated with counseling ethics education, evidenced in words such as documentation, consultation, professional, responsibility, and grey.

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