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Article 27

The Collaborative Counselling Website: Using Video e-Learning via Blackboard Vista to Enrich Counselor Training

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Introduction

With the increased availability of technology on campuses, incorporating technology as a tool in counselor education is becoming commonplace for students and professors alike (Baggerly, 2002; Baltimore, 2002; Granello, 2000). Examples of technological applications include the posting of courses online, distance education, online supervision, and even online counseling. The review of video-recordings is probably the most common technological application in counselor education; however, it is typically a one-off event incorporated in a classroom lecture. This article discusses some useful extensions of that fundamental practice.

The Collaborative Counselling Website was inspired by the pedagogical possibilities suggested by housing video resources at a location accessible 24/7 by graduate students. As the project has unfolded, however, we have come to see that this technology offers expanded possibilities. In particular, two agendas of importance to us are effectively served by the project.

The first agenda pertains to the elevation of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) has called “local knowledge.” We believe in the parallels between counseling practice on the one hand, and counselor education on the other. The collaborative approaches to counseling that inspired this web site (cf. Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Gehart, 2007; White, 2007) construe counseling conversations as sites for uncovering and celebrating client knowledges. We see the same empowering possibilities in counselor education: rather than merely “transmitting” (Sfard, 1998) so-called expert knowledge, we are interested in tapping into students’ existing skills and resources, and showcasing them as a way to circulate accounts of their competence. Indications are that unilateral, top-down transmission of information fails to engage practitioners as active partners in their own learning (Lee & Garvin, 2003; Waddell, 2001). The web site described here offers an alternative that centers students in knowledge production.

A second agenda well served by this initiative pertains to knowledge exchange. Barwick et al. (2005) concluded that “potential users of research knowledge are unconnected to those who do the research, and consequently a huge gap ensues between research knowledge and practice behaviors” (p. 25). *The Collaborative Counselling Website* is a prime vehicle for promoting knowledge exchange (in both directions) between the university and the surrounding counseling community. Indeed, this function is gaining ground as we accumulate additional resources worthy of sharing with diverse stakeholders.

To introduce this pedagogical innovation, we begin with a brief review of the use of video in counselor education. A discussion ensues on how *The Collaborative Counselling Website* was built, structured, and utilized, followed by lessons we learned along the way.

Using Videos in Counselor Education and Increasing Student Accessibility to Videos

There have been mixed reviews on instruction methods using different forms of media and technology, with some indication that technological applications do not necessarily enhance performance (Hayes, Taub, Robinson, & Sivo, 2003). However, there is growing consensus that incorporating diverse technological resources in the learning process motivates and engages students. We believe this engagement is critical to the creation of a vital and creative counseling program. Our own interest in integrating technology into counselor training has centered on (a) expanding access to learning resources, (b) creating a forum for highlighting and sharing student “expertise,” and (c) initiating knowledge exchange activities with the surrounding counseling community.

Video-recordings of counseling sessions or role-plays have long been central pedagogical tools in counselor education, particularly for demonstrating specific counseling concepts, modeling counselor behaviors for future practice, and enhancing the learning process of counselors-in-training in general (Baum & Gray, 1992; Kaplan, Rothrock, & Culkin, 1999; Keats, 2008). We have found video demonstrations helpful for concretizing what might otherwise be abstract theoretical discussions; helping students visualize how an intervention might appear in practice; and providing students with a point of reference from which to plan their own interventions.

The benefits of counseling videos led us to seek ways to increase accessibility of videos beyond the classroom context. In early experiments making videos temporarily available through a campus listserv, we sought informal feedback from our students, asking them what it was like to have the opportunity for multiple viewings of videos outside of class. The advantages they cited included (a) ability to rewind/fast-forward for individualized viewing, (b) assistance in prepping for sessions, (c) opportunity to see full sessions which is time-consuming for classes, (d) point of

comparison between one's own style and that of videotaped counselor, (e) useful preparation for in-class role-play exercises, and (f) particularly effective learning vehicle when paired with a transcript. A frequent comment from students has been their astonishment at the subtle skills and conversational turns revealed upon close, repeated inspection. This feedback is the basis of our growing interest in the use of a web-based medium for showcasing the skills and knowledge of counselors-in-training.

How the Site Works

The Collaborative Counselling Website is hosted on Blackboard Vista (BBV), an educational platform used at many universities. Although traditionally used to post "courses" online, we modified its purpose to become a web environment, accessible by all of the counseling students in our program, for housing counseling videos and other resources. Because BBV is an "intranet" medium, access to the site is controlled by a password, and content can be displayed selectively for the different users. This allows us to delimit consent to particular viewer groups, and tailor the site specifically for each user.

Students create and edit videos of their counseling practice as part of various course requirements in the Counseling Program. Counseling sessions – actual and role-played – are recorded digitally using cameras installed in our facility. A committee of faculty members and graduate students engaged with the web site select whole videos, or portions of videos, as potential additions to the web site. In these cases we solicit students' permission; those interested (clients and counselors) in displaying their work sign a consent form. With the selective release feature, users who log on see only the materials released to them without any sense of sections being "censored." This chameleon-like quality is one of the platform's attractive features because it allows the site to be many things to many people.

To ensure compatibility of multiple video and playback formats, we convert edited video clips from the starting format into Flash format

using a conversion software called Swish. We post video clips on the site using DreamWeaver software, which are then organized into meaningful categories for easy navigation. The site also includes a wide range of faculty-produced counseling role-plays on topics such as sharing the limits of confidentiality with clients, setting goals, and using metaphor. To orient the viewer, each video is accompanied by a brief description and a clickable frame of the clip to start playing the video. In some cases, a verbatim transcript is also included.

How the Site Was Built

While the uploading of videos to the Internet has become a commonplace event (e.g., YouTube), the development of a dedicated intranet web site has been the product of a prolonged process – approximately two years from its inception to its release for student consumption. Our hope is that we might shorten that process considerably for others by sharing our learnings here. The process included multiple steps: consultation, securing funds for the project, project planning and approval, programming and design of the web site, pilot testing, and debugging.

Consultation. We began with a consultation process with the University of Ottawa's Centre for e-Learning, a resource to assist professors in the development of innovative technology-based pedagogical tools. The consultation process enabled us to (a) determine the feasibility of the project, (b) establish key components of the project and a projected timeline for completing it, and (c) identify internal sources of funding we had not considered.

Funding. Web site development requires expertise not always freely available. It is also a time-consuming endeavor for professors, but can be shared with graduate assistants. We secured a \$15,000 grant allotted by an internal funding program with the mandate of supporting the development of innovative use of technology as a pedagogical tool. We also secured two smaller internal grants of \$4,000 each through the same program and our Faculty to hire a graduate student to act as a part-time web site resource manager for

two years. We leveraged these grants by committing some of the funds we had received from a federal body, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The project associated with that grant had a broader mandate, part of which involved the development of a web site.

Project planning. A team from the Centre for e-Learning – comprised of web design and programming specialists – helped us develop a concrete plan to realize our vision of what the finished site would look like and how it would operate. The team engaged us in a prioritizing process to ensure the site be built within the constraints of available funding. Key elements we deemed necessary at this stage were (a) using an intranet system for restricted use by students to ensure confidentiality, (b) a video player function accessible to the widest range of users with differing access to technology and competency levels, and (c) establishing autonomy for site maintenance with minimal reliance on external assistance.

Programming and design. We met every few weeks with the team to consolidate our preferred web features, map out the terrain of the site, and provide content. Using our input for the desired “look and feel” of the site, the programmer generated a template from which subsequent web pages would be built. We then converted and uploaded many self-produced videos we had accumulated over the years.

Pilot-testing and debugging. Once completed, we invited two students to surf the web site. They shared their impressions aloud while navigating the site in the presence of the project manager. Some adjustments were made based on this process.

How the Site Is Used

The web site is a tool to enrich training and student learning processes by facilitating student exposure to, learning about, and acquisition of counseling skills and concepts through video technology. To date, there are different ways we have utilized the site and ways we plan to use it in the future as relevant resources are consolidated further. Here are some examples:

- “Priming” students with an introductory viewing of a technique to be discussed in class.
- Offering multiple viewings at their own pace prior to practicing the technique.
- Tailoring a video through editing, titles, accompanying text, etc. to achieve specific pedagogical objectives for in-class instruction or course assignments.
- Inviting students to post their work and soliciting feedback from classmates.
- Adding student videos demonstrating effective use of specific counseling skills for use by future cohorts.

We believe multiple viewings can foster more thoughtful and integrative discussion since pre-processing has occurred and different perspectives emerge with subsequent viewings.

Lessons Learned

We have learned valuable lessons along the way that parallel many experiences depicted in the literature regarding counselor educators using technology with counselors-in-training (Baggerly, 2002; Newman & Abney, 2005). These lessons can be grossly divided into those that are specific to technology and to site users.

Technology. The process of developing the web site involved a series of conversations not unlike cross-cultural counseling. We struggled to make ourselves understood, and to understand the technical experts, learning to slow things down and unpack meanings, one by one, to ensure that neither party ended up down a blind alley of misunderstanding. Anticipating the multiplicity of media technologies was the biggest challenge. For example, we had many discussions around which default player should be used on the site (e.g., Windows Media Player, QuickTime, Real Player, etc.). This hinged on the video file type, which hinged on recording capabilities and whether the video would be streaming video, which hinged on whether the server we would use had appropriate streaming capabilities. Several challenges of this nature taught us the complexity that multiple interacting

systems can yield and the importance of anticipating compatibility issues early on. We suspect system compatibility will improve as technology progresses, which may reduce, but not completely eliminate, the learning curve involved.

Site users. Technological competence varies across counselor educators and students. We have learned the importance of (a) helping users navigate the process of simply accessing the site and videos and (b) encouraging users to develop, edit, and post videos of their own counseling work to share with their peers. We have learned that although there is a trend toward increased use of technology in education, competencies, confidence, and motivation vary widely from student-to-student, requiring different degrees of guidance. This necessitates mentorship of students in the technical skills needed to benefit from the site's pedagogical potential. To this end, we plan to offer students a tour of our recording facilities, direct them to library-based workshops on camera use, and generate user-friendly "how-to" documents to guide them in their recording and editing projects.

Supporting Ongoing Autonomy

One of our central goals for this project has been to attain autonomy around managing the web site without the need for ongoing technical consultation and the potential expense associated with it. This autonomy extends to the administration of access to the site by users, the ongoing creation and uploading of new resources, and the selective release of content to various groups.

A vital resource has been the *Web Management Guide* authored by the Centre for e-Learning project team. It details in a tutorial style all the features and functions needed for site maintenance. Further support from a hired assistant with technological savvy has facilitated the general maintenance of the site to date as well as helped address technical difficulties as they arise. This is an ongoing process: the resource manager has continued to generate new documents which we have integrated with the *Web Management Guide*.

Future Directions

While our focus has mostly been on the pedagogical benefits of *The Collaborative Counselling Website*, we are excited by the possibilities it offers for community-building. The web site enables us to connect our graduate students with counselors from the broader community beyond the academic setting. So far our energies have been focused on bringing knowledge and expertise from the community to our campus. We also look forward to initiatives that will promote knowledge exchange in the reverse direction: there are fertile possibilities for our graduate students to share their learnings with local practitioners who have limited means for accessing literature and related resources.

This lateral knowledge exchange is a refreshing alternative to the conventional top-down “expert” approach to training practitioners, and is empowering to the counselors whose work is featured. It also helps to knit together the local professional community, forging ties between our graduate program and local agencies. In this respect, *The Collaborative Counselling Website* has proven to be far more than a repository of pedagogical resources; rather, it acts as a powerful vehicle for community building. We are filled with anticipation for the many knowledge-sharing possibilities that await us.

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