Article 54

A Dialogue on Strategies for Effective Online Counselor Education Instruction

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Abstract

Higher education is increasingly facilitated by either full or partial use of Web-based instructional technology. For continuation of quality education, it is essential that educators hear the voices of students who receive instruction through technology. We initiate a discussion on best practices of online teaching by sharing our experiences in online instruction based on theories of adult education and the voices of our students.

Higher education in the 21st century is affected by advancements in technology. Teaching at a college today can mean that you never go to campus due to these advancements in technology. College coursework currently offers traditional face-to-face courses, distance learning, or a combination of both. Distance learning encompasses a number of formats including video conferencing between separate locations to online classes. Classes offered within the online environment have two subtypes. The first subtype is completely online with no physical interaction between the instructor and students or student-to-student. The second subtype is known as a hybrid class. In a hybrid class format, the instructor meets with students face-to-face a couple of times during the semester, while the rest of the course is provided online. Therefore, working as a faculty member in higher education today requires both an understanding of and use of effective pedagogy, as well as an understanding of the capabilities of Web-based education technology (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007) including design and management (Osborne, 2010) of an online course.

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) "emphasizes the need for quality education and supervision of counselors in all work settings" (ACES, n.d.), and the vast prevalence and continued growth of online teaching warrants a discussion of its utility. A search of the counselor education and supervision journals in the past 5 years for online instructional strategies provided no results. We believe it is

necessary to begin a discussion on effective strategies when conducting online courses in counselor education to maintain quality education for counselors. As an initial article on this topic, we have included adult learner characteristics, learners' experiences of an online class, and best practices in design and management.

Adult Learner Characteristics

"Learning is an act of hope… [learners] view this experience as a purposeful choice for a new and different future of hope and possibilities" (Kasworm, 2008, p. 27). Students in counselor education programs, which are predominantly master's and above, are adult learners and therefore understanding their characteristics is important. It is widely agreed that children and adults learn differently, although there are some similarities (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). There are many theories of adult learning; however, the focus of this discussion will be on the three that provide the most illumination for teaching in an online environment: andragogy, self-directed learning, and experiential learning. According to Knowles (1990), who first used the term andragogy, adult learners bring life experiences that are pertinent to acquiring specific course knowledge. Adult learners seek to acquire knowledge that helps solve real-life problems, engaging knowledge into practice immediately.

Adults tend to be very self-directed learners, a second theory of adult learning. Characteristics of learners best suited for online course work are those who are highly motivated self-starters (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). This ability, however, is developmental. Some learners have become used to the banking model or instructivist type of education (Freire, 1970/2000), where knowledge is poured in by the instructor to students who are assumed to be empty vessels; the instructor is the ultimate decision maker of knowledge students need to learn. In turn, the learner regurgitates the information to the instructor with little engagement on how it can be integrated, applied, or thought about in a critical manner. Because this model of instruction is common in K-20 learning environments, adult learners usually need to develop their skills in self-directing their education. Self-directed learning develops with time as learners are provided the opportunity to decide what they need to learn, determine ways of acquiring knowledge, and then decide how they will know when they have acquired the knowledge (Taylor, 2006).

A number of self-directed skills are required for learners to be successful in an online learning environment. First, in addition to basic computer literacy, access to a computer, and a reliable and efficient Internet connection, learners need to be flexible to address technology issues that may arise. Second, learners need to be able to manage their time and generate a schedule for routine participation that provides a structure for them to complete and submit timely assignments. Such dedication requires that learners commit approximately 1-2 hours per week per credit hour, similar to a traditional class. Learners must be motivated to independently read, write, and participate as needed and requested, as passive learning is non-present in the online course environment. Finally, learners must be able to ask questions and ask for help when needed (Conceição, 2007).

The third adult learning theory with application to online learning is experiential learning. Experiential learning is important because it helps learners translate experience into reflection. Then from reflection they can learn or formulate theory or abstract

concepts with the goal of moving back into action to test the learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In online courses, the discussion space can open up a deep and rich conversation (Ramalay & Zia, 2005), thereby providing one form of experiential learning where learners collaboratively achieve understanding by sharing experiences and reflections (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005).

Assignments can be another form of experiential learning which engage the experience of the learners, direct them to reflect, tie the experiences and reflections to the theories presented in the course, and then ask the learners to plan a course of action to test the theories or to demonstrate their new understanding of the course material. For instance, one assignment might be to have the learners watch a movie that depicts experiences in a given area in counseling. Then the learners would participate in an online discussion about how the movie characters or plot relate to personal experience, the course readings, and ultimately would reflect on the implications for their own practice. Conceptualizing the design of online coursework with these three theories of adult education can help instructors to provide effective online instruction.

Learners' Experiences With an Online Course

Next, we present two different learner scenarios of a fully online course experience to illuminate best practices of online learning. Learner Scenario A was created by the comments we received in national workshops on online course instruction. Learner Scenario B was developed from comments we received in our own online courses. As you read the two scenarios, it will be apparent which scenario is preferred. In the final section of this article, we discuss the intersection of the ways that adults learn, design considerations, and managing or teaching considerations to facilitate an effective learning experience.

Learner Scenario A

First, I had no instructions on how to even begin taking an online class. I was not provided with any directions after I registered. I found out from a peer that I am supposed to log on to the online class. When I did figure out and log on, I had trouble with knowing what I was expected to do. There were lots and lots of uploaded documents. I did not know what I was supposed to do with all this information on the homepage. There were no directions at all. So I sent the instructor an e-mail and left a voice mail. I did not hear from the instructor for another 3-4 days. Even after the instructor answered my questions, I was not clear on how many posts and responses were required. I decided to read and answer as many questions as I could. But I had no clue throughout the semester if I was doing well, if there was anything that I was missing, or how I could do better. The assignments did not relate well to the topics. Overall, this online course was a waste of my money, time, and energy.

Learner Scenario B

This course met the objectives stated and exceeded my expectations. It was clearly stated how the course was broken down into learning modules that correlated with the learning material (text, research articles and links) on a time continuum over the semester. Each module built upon the other and blended into a cohesive and

comprehensive presentation of the course material. The navigational exercises were great to get me to look at the entire course. I would never have looked for some of the information otherwise. I found the information about the expectations of this course in the orientation letter very helpful because I do want to do well in this class. The textbook, journal articles, assignments, and discussions provided the information needed to see the practical application of this information in counseling. The Web site links are wonderful! The discussion questions were a great opportunity for me to learn more about my classmates' real life experiences, share thoughts and experiences of my own, and learn new ways of thinking. I felt like our professor never directed our discussion, but always added clarity and real experience. This course did a great job of allowing us to create our own learning experience in a way that caters to our goals as students. Great class!

More information on learner Scenario B is integrated into the discussion below under Lessons from Scenario B.

Lessons From Scenario A

In Scenario A, the student is dissatisfied with his/her online course experience and has provided some clear areas of dissatisfaction. By addressing these concerns, instructors can facilitate a successful online learning environment. We have categorized the learner concerns into two elements (Table 1). The first relates to design and the second relates to management of the online course.

Design concerns. Concerns related to the design include two very important components; the organization of the material to be completed and the relevance of assignments to the course content. Organizing uploaded material and providing it in a format that the learner can easily access creates a meaningful learning environment. A standard online course format should include: a) aims and objectives; b) content; c) model of delivery; d) active learning; and e) assessment (Grosjean & Sork, 2007). A thematic or a weekly module system with all information necessary to complete that module organized and placed in one section of the course is beneficial. This module system will help the learner manage his or her time in completing the necessary work to gain expected knowledge and practical application. It also presents a consistent format so that learners know exactly where to look for material and assignments, as well as what to expect from one module to another.

The learner in Scenario A wanted assignments that were relevant to course content, perhaps more experiential (Baker et al., 2005) with immediate practical application benefits (Knowles, 1990). Counseling students who are adult learners are more likely to benefit from assignments they see as relevant and with practical application. Therefore, when designing an online course, it is prudent to determine which assignments would be most meaningful to the learners. This is a concern shared with teaching in the traditional environment. The difference in the online environment is to provide assignments that can be completed using the tools available to the learner. For instance, a presentation or a group counseling session are difficult to create in the online environment without the availability of more sophisticated tools to the learner and more sophisticated technological knowledge by the learner. At the urban university where we both teach, this is a concern, since not all of our students have access to the latest and best technology. In this environment, our goal is to design assignments that can successfully be completed by those who do not have this level of access.

Table 1. Addressing Learner Concerns in Online Courses

Elements/Issues	Student Concerns	Solution
Design Concerns		
✓ Organization of material	Unsure how to navigate the course; not sure what I need to do for this class.	Organize the course and individual modules in a manner that helps learners access things easily with clear instructions.
✓ Relevance of assignment	Want assignments that are relevant to course content and to the actual practice of counseling.	Purpose of assignments should address relevance to the topics being studied; best assignments are experiential with immediate practical application.
✓ Well-designed introductory module	What will the online environment look like? Where are the resources that I need? What if I am unable to handle the technology?	Design an introductory module that asks learners to access all the various components they will encounter throughout the course. For instance, have them use the discussion board and upload an assignment.
Management Concerns		
✓ Clear communication of expectations to students	What do I need to do and why?	Provide a format where each unit includes learning objectives, content (e.g., readings from text; PowerPoint), active learning activities, and assessments.
✓ Clear communication about what the instructor will provide	How and when will I get feedback?	Instructor should provide information in the syllabus about such issues as turnaround time to answer e-mails; timeframe for grading major assignments, (e.g., 10 days from due date)
✓ Technology concerns	What if the technology is not working? Whom should I contact?	Address this in the introductory letter. Provide the telephone number and an e-mail address for technology support.
✓ Use of discussion	How often and when do I need to post? What constitutes a quality post?	Set expectations upfront; grading rubric can be very helpful here. Remember that the instructor needs to be part of the discussion to direct and guide as necessary to help students engage and gain deeper awareness.

Course management concerns. Concerns related to management of the course include the need for clear communication of expectations for both the learner and the instructor. Even for the most technologically savvy learner, knowing expectations of the

course, including how to get started, is essential as it provides guidelines for the course and reduces anxiety related to the online format. It is possible from the comments in Scenario A that the learner is used to Freire's (1970/2000) model of education where students are passive recipients of knowledge as opposed to being self-directed learners. Providing clear expectations of the learner and instructor's role will be beneficial in this situation. It is possible that the instructor was aware of and was attempting to meet the adult learner characteristic of self-direction in which learners can ask for what they need, acquire knowledge in a method that suits them best, and use the acquired knowledge as suggested by Taylor (2006). However, as educators, it is important to consider that students are on a continuum of passive receipt of knowledge to self-directed learning. Therefore, it is necessary to design and manage a course so it becomes more self-directed as the course progresses (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) allowing for the development of the adult learner characteristic of self-direction.

Lessons From Scenario B

Design. In Scenario B, the composite learner indicated that the inclusion of an introductory module was beneficial to get the learner started. The learner stated that it enabled him/her to become acquainted with the online learning environment, make sure he/she has all of the resources needed, resolve any technical issues encountered, and become familiar with the course content before diving into the remainder of the coursework. The learner also found the first assignment of navigating through the course useful because it forced the learner "to check out the entire course" which the learner *"would never have looked for … otherwise."* Such a navigational exercise also provides the experiential (Baker et al., 2005) and immediate application (Taylor, 2006) valued by adult learners. Supporting this adult learning characteristic further, the learner stated, "It is one thing to learn information by reading it in a book, but practical application further confirmed to me how relevant all of the information is that I learned."

The value of discussion to create a rich and meaningful experience in the online environment (Ramalay & Zia, 2005) is indicated by the learner comment, "I have been so impressed by the insights, passionate commitment, and thoughtful, extended responses to the discussion questions." The learner also shares that the discussion forum provides a form of experiential learning (Baker et al., 2005) by the comments, "My peers raised issues and aspects of topics that I never considered. People were open and responsive, sharing both intellectual analyses and personal experiences. This cohort of students comes from such diverse backgrounds and brings a wealth of experience and insight."

Course management. We found that learners were content with the provision of clear expectations for what they needed to do. "It was clearly stated how the course was broken down into learning modules that correlated with the learning material (e.g., text, research articles, and links) on a time continuum over the semester." The learner indicates that the instructor provided an orientation letter with "what's in the course and how it's put together." In addition, the instructor provided and met stated objectives exceeding the learner expectations. The learner also indicated that the instructor was "readily available" which may mean the instructor was present 24/7, but more realistically, the instructor made sure that they were available according to pre-set expectations because we do attend to basic and advance human needs and have other responsibilities beyond course instruction.

The learner indicates a sense of a learning community in expressing that the learner believed she or he was connected to peers. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) suggested that the learning environment needs to be mindfully created in the online course environment as learners are present at different times and do not have the same social cues to engage with each other as in a traditional classroom. They provide a very extensive selection of activities and resources to facilitate the creation of a learning environment. Some of these suggested activities were included in the course. For instance, the connection to peers commented on by the learner was intentionally facilitated at the beginning of the course by requiring learners to share their anxieties and fears of taking the course online as well as requiring a response to at least one peer.

Another point that the learner expresses is that the "professor never directed our discussion, but always added clarity and real experience" indicating the need of the adult learner to be directors of their own learning experience (Knowles, 1990). However, the developmental nature of this adult learning characteristic may be indicated when the learner states "knowing the expert is 'watching' to help and encourage" was comforting, indicating that there is an expert and a student as opposed to peers in a shared learning environment (Conceição, 2007). Although including a discussion is a design consideration, the depth and breadth of the discussion focus is a management consideration. In Scenario A, the instructor allowed the learning environment to progress without directing to a pre-set conclusion.

Best Practices in Design and Management

The online classroom is similar to the traditional classroom in that learners are at various learning levels. To create a learner-centered environment (Conceição, 2007), which is preferable for adult learners, the design must be flexible enough to evolve based on the learning styles and needs of the learners. Adult learners come with many responsibilities on their plates; the online class that they are taking is only one aspect. They also have a variety of learning styles. One way to allow students to engage with the course using their preferred learning style would be to allow students to look ahead to the next module or to look behind to review previous material (Cercone, 2008).

In designing a course, decisions regarding what materials need to be covered, what tools are available, what tools are best for the course, and how to present the information, have to be determined ahead of time. As indicated in both Scenario A and B, decisions made during the designing phase of the course can either benefit or hinder the learner's experience.

We consider facilitating as a more appropriate term for online coursework than teaching, as adult learners benefit from a mutual learning environment, although lecturing using one of the more interactive tools is available. Two essential points to consider in managing an online course are the instructor role and responsibilities and learner role and responsibilities. These should be communicated clearly in the Web-based environment.

Instructor Responsibilities

From the feedback we have received over the years, best practice includes initial contact with clear instructions on how to begin the learning process online. Most learners find this beneficial, especially if this is their first time taking an online course. Next,

spending time at the beginning of the course facilitating learner navigation of the course material optimizes learning. This can be done as an assignment with minimal points to motivate the learner to complete the activity, while not increasing anxiety in the learner. Third, building a community of learners (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) is necessary. A learning community combats the isolation the learner might experience in online learning and provides a deeper and richer experience to the learner. The isolated learning experience can be equated to a correspondence course where the student merely completes what is provided and does not learn beyond a superficial level. Fourth, clear communication of participation expectations and evaluation criteria is useful. Most adult learners desire to perform at a level that earns a higher grade. Clear communication of expectations and evaluation criteria promotes higher levels of performance. Fifth, clearly communicated instructor availability is advantageous. This provides the learner with the knowledge necessary to manage questions and other needs. Finally, providing directions of how much time to allocate to online learning is valuable. This promotes time management by the learner. Providing some examples, such as set aside 2 hours twice a week or half an hour every day, may be useful for the learner in planning for the course.

Instructors also need to be cognizant that an online course will take as much of their time as a face-to-face class. In general, we spend at least 2 hours per credit hour on a weekly basis (Conceição & Lehman, 2011). However, this will increase when you are grading a major assignment. Just as it is easy for the students to be caught up in other responsibilities, it can be easy for instructors to do so as well. We recommend that you set aside time each day for answering students' e-mails or reading the online discussion and facilitating as needed. It is also valuable to communicate with students if you are unavailable on certain days during the semester. Students need and value the presence of the instructor throughout the course experience.

Learner Responsibilities

Learners must be committed to engaging in the online environment and accept responsibility for managing their anxiety. As an instructor, you can anticipate the anxiety and address it as much as possible. However, ultimately, the responsibility of informing the instructor and managing the anxiety falls on the learner. For instance, in one of our classes, one learner was experiencing a high level of anxiety about taking a class in the online environment. She initiated contact with the instructor to talk about her concerns. Because of her willingness to initiate contact, the instructor was able to help her realize that not only could she successfully complete the course but also that the online experience could enhance her skills as a counselor. Counseling is slowly moving toward the use of online media for interaction between counselor and clients. Therefore, the skills gained in taking an online course can help develop the learner's skills in his or her professional career as a counselor.

Other basic aspects that learners need to take responsibility for in the online environment include understanding the expectations of the class, marshaling their time, and motivating themselves to engage in the course on a regular basis. Learners also need to understand that they need regular access to a computer and the Internet. In the face-to-face environment, the university is responsible for supplying the physical space and tools for effective learning. However, in an online environment, the learners are responsible for

providing their own physical space and the technology tools that are required to interface with the course.

Practice Implications and Future Directions for Research

What we have provided above is a dialogue on what we have found useful through the comments students provided to us about our own courses and discussion content from national conferences. Although we consider such information vital to informing best practices in online counselor education, we also believe that further research is warranted. We suggest investigating which aspects of online learning are most beneficial to students; what type of flexibility in learning contributes to advanced learning; and what types of assessment practices, both summative and formative, are best suited to determine student acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to be a counselor. Furthermore, we suggest an investigation of the attitudes of online instructors toward the medium they use for instruction, while acknowledging that all instructors do not use this online medium due to the possibilities and advantages it provides for education enhancement. We also suggest learning about the training instructors receive for conducting learning through the online platform. We believe knowledge from such inquiries will facilitate counselor educators engaging in best practices for online education.

Conclusion

Developing on online course with an effective design is always a challenge. However, designing the course with an understanding of adult learning concepts and best practices of online design for the discipline of counseling ensure a rich and rewarding learning environment for the learner. Managing an online course effectively is enhanced when the management and expectations of the course are designed from a learner-centered perspective that acknowledges the abilities and limitations of technology from both the instructor and learner's portion of the equation. However, a learning environment that is carefully designed and managed using best practices provides a satisfying experience for both the learner and the instructor. We hope this dialogue on our best practices in engaging in online courses will promote further discussion and inquiry into online counselor education.

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