

Article 41

**Online Instruction of Counselor Education Coursework:
Maximizing Strengths and Minimizing Limitations**

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Introduction

Going to college in the 21st century does not require students to leave home and go to a classroom to receive instruction. With the advancements in communications technology and the cultural ascendance of Internet use in most countries, higher education in counseling now occurs across a spectrum of instructional formats ranging from purely face-to-face to fully Web-based course instruction. With the incorporation of Web-based instruction as part of a course or as the complete method of instruction, it is necessary to understand the benefits and limitations of the online medium to maximize the strengths and to minimize the limitations when delivering Web-based instruction to future counselors. We assert that counselor educators can create meaningful and effective instruction through deep familiarity with and the use of Web-based instructional tools. This requires counselor educators to understand the capabilities of Web-based education technology (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007), in addition to effective pedagogy, as well as extensive preparation and design (Osborn, 2010) considerations when planning to deliver a course either with Web support or as a completely Web-based experience.

Understanding the Web-based learning environment and pre-planning to utilize its strengths to maximize learning will result in high quality instruction. Although the medium of Web-based instruction is new, student focused learning, also known as active learning, engaged learning, problem based learning, or constructivism, which occurs in the Web-based classroom is not a new concept (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Active

learning includes both individual work as well as collaborative work (Dewey, 1997) in the Web-based learning environment. The contribution of the individual learner to the learning environment is expected to benefit both the individual and the community of learners in that course (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). This active learning environment is developed based on the premise that the counseling students who are adult learners are self-directed and desire to engage in active learning (Knowles, 1980). The instructor's general role in this active learning environment is that of a supportive facilitator.

The main online technology that is currently utilized in Web-based instruction is the learning management system. This is a system in which information is generated and stored by a developer (usually the instructor) and shared with students via access to a secure online platform. Some common platforms available for such learning management systems are Desire2learn.com, Moodle, and Blackboard (Learn/9.1; Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006). Blackboard now includes what was formally known as WebCT and Angel. In this manuscript, we will focus specifically on the widely-used Blackboard platform (Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006), specifically Blackboard Learn, as this system typifies both the common strengths and limitations of Web-based instructional technology.

Benefits and Limitations

There are both benefits and limitations to teaching in the traditional classroom with face- to-face contact or in either a Web-supported or totally Web-based environment. A comparison table of the totally traditional and totally Web-based courses is provided in Table 1. The overarching benefits of an online environment for the student include access, convenience, and flexibility (Conceição, 2007). Support for better learning outcomes due to easy access to Web-based tutorials was found in a comparative study (Osborn, 2010) where psychology students in a Web-supported research design course had better learning outcomes than students limited to the use of paper-and-pencil and face-to-face resources alone.

A Web-based course designed to be fully asynchronous affords students the ability to attend to and complete coursework at any time and from any place that is most convenient to his or her lifestyle and schedule irrespective of the presence of instructor or peers (Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006). A Web-based course may be accessed by students from across the globe pending that each student meets the pre-requirements for enrolling and have the appropriate technology (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007). The Web-based course is normally accessible for a period longer than face-to-face class time. The instructor may be available online at hours that an instructor is usually not present on campus. In addition, depending on the design of a Web-based course environment and the time required to create useful and/or meaningful content, students will have the opportunity to engage in increased private and/or public interaction. This access and the asynchronous learning dynamic help students to conveniently negotiate factors such as: a) a schedule; b) reliable transportation; c) driving time; and d) associated costs for travel, child and/or elder care, and parking (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Along with access and convenience, the flexibility of online instruction provides students the ability to work at their own pace and provides the instructor the ability to tailor instruction to individual needs. For instance, an instructor can provide additional resources related to improving a student's writing skills, with a hotlink directly to the material, on an individual basis when needed. Limitations related to these predominant strengths of access, convenience, and flexibility in Web-

based instruction includes the requisite to have access to a reliable and adequate Internet service and computer system, which can be expensive.

Web-based courses provide benefits beyond the desired content learning. Online submission of assignments and use of learning management systems facilitates the quicker and more comprehensive documentation of students' communication in the form of e-mails, Web-based chats, and/or discussion board posts while greatly reducing or even eliminating the need to print on paper, saving on resources for printing (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Web-based instruction also facilitates online dialogue and interaction, if students are required to participate, and exposes students to ideas from more students than would reasonably be permitted to contribute during a face-to-face time constrained course. The pseudo anonymity of the Web-based course provides the opportunity for not only extroverts to contribute but also for introverts to partake in classroom discussion with more comfort than can be afforded in the face-to-face environment.

With the availability for vast communication arises some limitations which if not planned for and managed could potentially eliminate the benefits and successful outcomes for learners. One such potential limitation of Web-based courses involves how the increased accessibility, convenience of course availability, and flexibility of submission of content work by students can in fact overwhelm either the instructor or the students, due to the increase in the volume of communication. Therefore, a probable limitation for instructors is the impact on time-management for Web-based courses (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Instructors who do not create and communicate clear expectations for how often and when students will receive feedback may find their time consumed with Web-based instruction and communication. Similarly, lack of clear expectations will affect students' time management abilities. It is also prudent to modify and discuss social rules or etiquette, used in the traditional courses as *netiquette* [sic] in the Web-based course environment, to promote a positive learning climate that may eliminate any other communication related issues (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Similarly, the lack of interaction and communication in a Web-based course can also reduce its usefulness. Although the Web-based learning environment offers abundant opportunity for interaction that could provide an extraordinary learning opportunity, some course developers use the Web-based learning environment for non-interactive education such as uploading a lecture, essentially creating a digital correspondence course (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Pre-planning and developing a course negotiating these limitations will facilitate a successful Web-based learning environment.

There are limitations beyond communication that may arise from student requirements and/or instructor behaviors which must be negotiated in developing and managing Web-based courses. One such potential limitation is based on the assumption and the requirement that counseling students who are adult learners are self-motivated, disciplined, and organized and able to fully participate and benefit from Web-based learning (Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006). It is necessary for instructors to understand and manage the online version of "the dog ate my homework" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Another limitation may arise for some students from the benefit of working at an individual pace, which may generate feelings of isolation due to the lack of the traditional social interaction and modeling of the learning environment, a perceived natural advantage of the face-to-face classroom (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007). Unclear expectations from instructors may also increase the seeming ambiguity of Web-based instruction,

frustrating students who are not Web-proficient or that rely solely on face-to-face interaction to self-motivate and to develop rapport with instructors and with each other. Failing to attend to these considerations may de-motivate students and result in a subsequent decrease in learning.

Considering there are benefits and limitations to Web-based instruction, it is necessary to pay attention to maximizing the strengths and minimizing the limitations. The best method to undertake such a venture is to become familiar with the tools available for Web-based instruction. While the various online learning management systems are configured differently and are designed with different capabilities and functions, deep knowledge of the tools available in one or two platforms facilitates instructors' overall competency and familiarity with Web-based instruction (Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006). Some (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007) assert that training in computer and Web-based technology is both a practical and an ethical imperative for counselor educators engaging in Web-supported or Web-based instruction, training, and supervision. The following is an overview of the widely-used learning management system Blackboard Learn and covers the development, management, and implementation of coursework to maximize benefits and minimize limitations of Web-based learning.

Developing a Course

All tools available through a learning management system are not necessary and are not appropriate for all courses. One of the best ways to maximize benefits of a Web-based course is to determine which tools are best to disseminate and evaluate learned content of a given course and to create a community of active learners. It is assumed that the Web-based course to be developed is not a mere upload of a lecture. The tools available on Blackboard Learn with a brief explanation of each tool are provided in Table 2.

Communication tools. Determining whether to develop synchronous or asynchronous discussion is one of the main decision points in designing Web-based courses to maximize benefits of active learning and limit feeling overwhelmed and/or isolated (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Choosing appropriate communication tools that facilitate interaction and dialogue among students and instructor will provide a richer learning experience. One practical determinant in this decision is if students are traditional or non-traditional (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Non-traditional students by definition have more life commitments than traditional students and may have difficulty with synchronous discussions which require availability during a designated timeframe. Therefore, using synchronous discussion may defeat one of the benefits (i.e., flexibility) of Web-based learning.

Content tools. Determining the tools necessary to deliver resources needed for the content to be delivered and evaluated is another important consideration (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Similar to a face-to-face course, practical decisions such as whether a digital or paper based text book is appropriate and what supplemental materials should be made available must be addressed. If utilizing journal articles, creating a link directly from the Web-based course to the electronic form of the manuscript maximizes student access to the supplemental material.

Student learning activity tools. Determining what tools are most appropriate and suitable for delivery of the content and evaluation of learning is another consideration

that affects maximizing benefits of the Web-based learning environment (Perera-Diltz, 2011). The assignment activities will normally determine the evaluation criteria of student learning. So it is essential that attention is given to what assignments and tools enhance the learning experience.

Student tools. Determining what student tools to make available for students to actively engage in their learning through monitoring progress without being overwhelmed is also essential to maximize learning. During the development of a course, it is necessary to address if regular monitoring by students of grades earned using a student tool such as *My Grades* is useful or a hindrance to learning (Perera-Diltz, 2011).

Organizational tools. Determining how to organize the content of the course so students may easily retrieve content in the absence of the physical presence of the developer of the course is the main determinant of this section (Perera-Diltz, 2011). It is important to determine how to organize the material in a methodical and easily retrievable method so students are not frustrated in their attempt to access the information. Easy access which is a benefit of the Web-based learning environment can be maximized by a pre-planned and well organized course. Similarly, learning can be hindered by a poorly planned and disorganized course. Therefore, determining if the course should be organized by content and/or by time frames, such as weekly modules, becomes a central concern to be addressed during the development of the course. Even the best content is useless if it cannot be readily and easily retrieved by students.

Below we provide an example of how to organize a course offered within a semester system organized by 16 weekly modules that students have found useful. On the homepage, a file titled *Orientation Letter*, and three separate folders titled *Course Information*, *Instructor Information*, and *Student Lounge* are available. The Orientation Letter explains the tools used for the course and the expectations from students. The letter also clearly outlines the instructor availability and presence. The Course Information folder contains a syllabus, course policies, and a checklist of work to be completed each week. The Instructor Information folder contains methods to contact the instructor, and an audio-visual introduction of the instructor. The Student Lounge contains an asynchronous threaded discussion labeled *Someone Please Help!* and another thread labeled *Just Some Chit Chat*. The help thread has instructions for students to pose questions related to the course and for anyone who knows the answer to respond. The second thread has instructions for students to share information related to the course and profession that is outside of the discussion questions related to content. The threads within the student lounge folder are intended for development of a sense of learning community among students.

The content of the course is organized in a folder titled *Learning Modules* which appears as an icon on one side of the home page. Within the Learning Modules folder, there are weekly module folders for the 16 week course, building on each module as the semester progresses. Each module folder contains other folders organized for easy retrieval of information. The folders within each module are labeled similarly so the learner knows what to expect after the first module and how to retrieve the necessary information to complete a module. For instance, each module folder is organized as Expectations, Web links, Discussion Questions, Assignments, and Feedback. Within the Expectations folder, course objectives, reading assignments, and any instructor notes are available. Web links folder contains Web-links to Web sites that provide further useful

information related to the topic. This feature allows for the advanced learner to engage, learn, and incorporate more into discussions than that is expected for the course, thus individualizing the learning. The Discussion Questions folder usually contains asynchronous or synchronous discussion tools. The Assignments folder contains assignments relevant to that particular module. Finally, the Feedback folder contains a journal for students to comment on the content and delivery method of each module. We find this feedback loop informative and essential for current and future course refinement which contributes to maximizing student learning and minimizing some of the limitations of Web-based learning. It is necessary to give clear instructions on how to critique the content and method of delivery so you may improve your course.

Besides these basic strategies to maximize learning, we develop our course to provide additional easy access to material. In addition to learning modules, we provide a folder that includes all discussions for the entire course. This provides the students the ability to re-read some discussions when needed without having to identify during which module the discussion took place. Similarly, all Web links are also made available under another folder. Thoughtful consideration to promote easy access may maximize learning opportunities and minimize barriers to learning, such as frustration in retrieval of information, in the Web-based environment.

Finally, it may be beneficial to evaluate the quality of a course prior to offering it to students. Quality MattersTM (2010) is a peer review assessment designed to determine the quality of a Web-based course and its components. It is ideal to have someone who is both competent in content and in Web-based teaching pedagogy to evaluate a course. However, at times, such a person may not be available. At such times, it may benefit to have two people, one who is content competent and another who is Web-based teaching competent evaluate the course to determine if it is providing the appropriate content, and best of learning tools and strategies available for a Web-based course.

Managing the Course

Once the course is developed using the best tools available, the next important task in maximizing benefits and minimizing limitations involves managing the course. The central task when managing a course is to utilize the necessary pedagogical foundation to create an effective and positive learning environment, to clearly communicate expectations, and to be present. Engaging students in an active and structured environment is one way to create the interaction that students need to not only learn but also mitigate the potential isolation and subsequent lack of motivation identified as a limitation of participating in totally Web-based courses (Beatty & Ulasewicz, 2006; Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007).

A course developed with consideration for student development in the Web-based format maximizes the benefits for students (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). In such a course, there are suggested roles for both the instructor and student, based on the stage of student development. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) provided a four phase model with an identified instructor role and activities for each phase to benefit student development in a 16 week course. During the initial 2 or 3 weeks of a course, the student is the newcomer and the instructor acts as the social negotiator offering an orientation to the course, clearly communicating expectations, and providing activities that are interactive (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). This is a crucial stage in facilitating an active and positive

environment. Some of the tasks we suggest are: a) an initial contact letter inviting students to log into the Web-based course and become familiar and comfortable with its features; b) an orientation letter on the homepage defining the purpose of the tools and clearly indicating expectations and class policies; c) creating two discussion threads with one to introduce oneself and connect with peers and the other to share concerns about taking online coursework; d) creating a student lounge with a *Help!* and a *Just Some Chit Chat* asynchronous discussions; and e) a navigational exercise (Perera-Diltz, 2011). Again, this builds community among peers. The purpose of the navigational exercises is to locate the information in the course such as asking when each assignment is due or locating the course syllabus. With the exceptions of the initial letter which is sent via campus email and the navigation exercises which are considered the first assignment, all other information is provided on the homepage for the course. It is necessary to be mindful to only assign minimal points for the navigational exercise so students are motivated to navigate the course but are not too anxious about their grade. The above steps are suggestions for creating a positive community of learners.

Once the students are comfortable with the Web-based environment and are functioning as a community, they move into a cooperator role (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). The instructor then takes the role of a structural designer and provides activities that require critical thinking, reflection, and sharing (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Next, around weeks five or six, the student will move to a collaborator role where the instructor then becomes a facilitator who provides activities based on collaboration and reflection of experience (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). By midway through the semester, the student becomes an initiator and partner in learning. At this point, the instructor can become a community member or challenger of that experience by providing activities that are learner designed (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Paying attention to the development of student participation may contribute to a successful learning environment.

Clear communication of expectations, as discussed in the strengths and limitations section, is essential and may reduce anxiety of the learner. Even students who are self starters and with good discipline may have difficulty demonstrating their knowledge if the expectations are not clearly expressed (Conceição, 2007). The next consideration in managing the course and promoting an active learning experience is instructor presence (Perera-Diltz, 2011). It is vital that instructors decide and continuously reflect upon how often they will be present and available for students. This includes a decision on office hours, whether they are face-to-face, Web-based, or some hybrid of both, and communicating this information clearly. Regular or even weekly e-mails that communicate how the instructor views each students' learning and the efforts of the class as a whole can be useful benchmarks of progress that help to keep students engaged. Regular e-mails or announcements that remind students of upcoming assignments, clarify the instructor's expectations, and highlight changes to the course help both instructor and students establish an ongoing dialogue and reduce misunderstanding and potential alienation in the Web-based format.

Finally it is necessary to determine the validity of the course. This evaluation can be done as both formative and summative assessment. A formative feedback loop can be created using the journal tool as indicated in the course development section and is maintained as a private dialogue between the student and the instructor. Such feedback is useful to refining both current and future courses. This dialogue is also beneficial to the

student's learning because it requires the student to mindfully assess which content presented in which format is beneficial for his or her learning. A summative evaluation can also be created using the journal tool.

Conclusion

Counselor educators can be expected to increasingly engage in either Web-supported or fully Web-based instruction, especially given clear trends signifying the overall increased use of Web-based technology to deliver courses across the United States and Europe (Osborn, 2010). Rather than assuming that content delivery and other instructional necessities can be easily translated from face-to-face into Web-based formats, counselor educators must make the effort to receive training in the use of Web-based learning management systems such as the Blackboard Learn platform. Deep familiarity with at least one platform like Blackboard can help improve counselor educators' self-efficacy at creating effective and meaningful Web-based learning experiences. Competency in the use of new Web-based instructional methods requires experience, practice, knowledge, creativity, flexibility, and an attitude of openness to the potential benefits of the Web-based format. It also requires awareness of the potential limitations of new methods and skills at mitigating the impact of such drawbacks on the learning of counseling students. Web-based or Web-supported instruction can be an effective pedagogical tool for promoting the learning and professional development of an ever more diversified and technologically capable population of future counselors.

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Table 1.
Comparison table of traditional and online instruction.

	Category	Traditional	Online
Access	Audience	Limited to geographic location	Unlimited
	Accessibility to instructor	Limited to class time or office hours	Dependent on design; can be boundless unless well designed & communicated
	Accessibility to course	Class time	Dependent on design; week to entire semester
	Student interaction	Public and may be limited to class time	Public or private among students; availability is boundless
	Social rules/ boundaries	Discussed and processed	Written and described; discussion is possible dependent on design
	Technology	No technology requirement	Access to a reliable and adequate Internet connection and a computer system.
Convenience	Life commitment and transportation	Must negotiate schedule, transportation, parking, and child and/or elder care	May not have to negotiate one or more of the following: schedule, transportation, parking, and child and/or elder care
	Student learning time	Limited	Boundless
	Going green & saving money	Paper assignment submission	Paperless assignment submission
	Networking	Limited among students	Boundless among students
	Instructor time	Limited	Time consuming
	Instructor competence	Topic/area	Topic and technology
	Student requirements	Attendance and participation	Attendance, participation, self-motivation, discipline, and organization
Flexibility	Instructor focus	Group Accommodation of different learner styles is limited	Individual Different learner styles can be better accommodated
	Learning Pace	Group	Dependent on design; mostly self-regulated

Note: Adapted from Perera-Diltz (2011)

Table 2.
Tools available on Blackboard Learn

Tool Category	Tool Name	Brief Summary
Communication Tools	Announcement	A tool to create announcements to the class similar to what you would provide at the beginning of a traditional class.
	Blackboard Instant Messaging	A tool that facilitates instant connecting and collaborating with instructor and/or peers.
	Blogs	A tool that facilitates an asynchronous discussion on a topic.
	Collaboration or Chat sessions	A tool that facilitates synchronous dialogue with one student, a group of students, or the entire class.
	Discussion Board & Voice Board	Tools that facilitate asynchronous discussions based on posted questions. The voice board adds an auditory component.
	Email and Voice Email	Tools that facilitate communicating with instructor and/or other students. The voice email adds an auditory component.
	Journals	A tool that facilitates reflection on reading or the content. The communication in a journal is private between the instructor and student.
	Messages	This tool facilitates an intranet message system that is limited to the registrants of a course.
Content Tools	Content	A tool to create folders and organize content for class.
	Web Links	A tool to upload and organize Web links with relevant content.
	Glossary	A tool that facilitates compiling important terms and their meaning.
	Higher Education	A tool that leads to more resources through McGraw Hill.
	Podcasts	A tool to facilitate creating content related presentations/podcasts.
	Wikis	A tool to facilitate the creation and maintenance of a number of interlinked Web pages.

Student learning activity tools	Assignments	A tool to facilitate organizing and developing assignments for students.
	Groups	A tool to facilitate creating of groups for collaboration.
	Wimba	A tool to facilitate live classroom environments with both audio and visual ability.
Student Tools	My Grades	Displays detailed information about your grades.
	User Guide	This tool provides a help link.
Organization Tools	Calendar	A tool to facilitate tracking important events and dates.
	Tasks	A tool to facilitate tracking status and due dates of work needing to be completed.