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Online Counseling Education: Pedagogy Controversies and Delivery Issues

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The use of e-learning methodologies in higher education has generated considerable controversy, with some educators claiming that online delivery systems cannot prepare counselors while others contend that it is not the delivery system but the content, faculty, and overall program that determine learning outcomes. Because Internet-based education is now offered by almost 90% of public colleges and by over 40% of private colleges (Baer, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), it is incumbent upon counselor educators to enter into the debate about the changes in pedagogy that online education represents.

This article identifies distance education issues that have generated a degree of controversy within higher education and specifically within the counselor education community. As the issues are identified, each is linked to the traditional educational paradigm that historically has energized counselor education pedagogy. The emerging paradigm shift that Internet online distance education represents is then reviewed as a *different* pedagogy, a key term used throughout this discussion. By moving the discussion about online education in counselor education to one that recognizes differences, counselor educators reflect a core theme within the counseling professions: that is, different is neither better nor worse than what is most familiar or comfortable. It is simply different.

Pedagogy in counselor education has historically relied on what is termed a traditional model that typically relies on face-to-face, real time interaction between students and faculty. If contemporary pedagogy is defined as the method and delivery of teaching that is linked to effectiveness of learning outcomes, traditional pedagogy is increasingly being augmented by online learning methods. These methods range from use of the Internet for research purposes, to the design of CD ROMs as companions to campus courses, and to use of the Internet to communicate with students and transfer coursework for grading purposes. These and other strategies that rely on computer technology are currently being used in a variety of counselor education settings (Patrick, 2004a).

In some counselor education programs, the online delivery system is being used to provide complete academic curricula in counselor education as, for example, at www.capella.edu (Patrick, 2004b). These programs use the Internet as a delivery system that promotes asynchronous access to career development for learners seeking entrance to the counseling professions as well as to practicing counselor professionals seeking continuing education (as at ACA's www.counseling.org). This technology-supported delivery of counselor education expands the potential to provide education to adults who otherwise would not be able to achieve professional goals. Of particular relevance to populations who are physically unable to travel to traditional campuses or who reside in isolated geographic areas of the country, the online distance education option provides opportunity to pursue graduate education. In addition, adults who wish to change careers, or embark on a career in counseling for the first time, are often faced with significant obstacles to achieving this goal. The adult learner may be employed full time and not able to leave a job to pursue a degree. Others may have family obligations that preclude attending graduate school in a traditional setting.

In considering the controversies and issues surrounding online counselor education, two assumptions are made in this discussion:

1. There is a need for additional options to access counselor education beyond the traditional model, and there are issues associated with one option in particular: online counselor education.
2. The online delivery method of counselor education is not designed to replace traditional models but to supplement the options available to the consumer of graduate education.

Based on these assumptions, issues are identified and linked to current concerns within counselor

education. The outcome of this review is the formation of a consensus that moves the debate from the either/or stance to one that recognizes how different educational options are of benefit to different populations of counselor education consumers.

In reality, the paradigm shift in higher education is characterized by expansion of options, not elimination of one educational model and substitution of a new one in its place (Cullen et al., 2002). When viewed from this value proposition, online counselor education becomes an option that must meet the same standards for excellence in counselor education that any counselor education program must achieve.

The current transformation taking place within higher education links advances in computer technology with the educational process. This change is led by faculty who view the use of technology as a facilitative tool or bridge for applying innovation in technology to higher education. This process is led by faculty who are often described as early adopters of technology (Jaffe, 1998; Rogers, 2003). Many faculty encounter considerable resistance to the introduction of asynchronous learning as a course delivery method yet are passionate about the potential for enhanced learning that the online distance education option presents (Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2000). For the purposes of this discussion, this resistance is labeled the Five Can'ts of Online Counselor Education.

Can't #1: Counselors can't be prepared through academic coursework delivered online because online courses are not as academically sound as those offered in traditional settings.

Can't #2: Counselor education can't be delivered online because only the face-to-face (FTF) environment of teaching and learning provides direct observation opportunities of behavioral cues presented by learners that are not possible in the online course.

Can't #3: Because the online instructor can't guarantee the integrity of the academic work submitted by the online learner, the online delivery system cannot be effective in counselor education.

Can't #4: The online course environment prevents assessment of learner behavioral qualities that are an essential component of faculty evaluation of learner progress and professional growth.

Can't #5: Counselor education clinical training and supervision cannot be implemented through the online delivery system because the asynchronous

learning environment lacks real time faculty-learner contact.

Each of the can'ts represents valid concerns of counselor education faculty who seek to ensure that the preparation and training of future counselors reflects high standards for academic rigor and supervision of counselor skill development. This same motivation guides faculty who are counselor educators in online counselor education programs. From this perspective, the five can'ts of online counselor education can be reframed as the Five Can's of Online Counselor Education.

Can #1: Counselor education online course work can be taught via asynchronous delivery of courses that are well constructed and that use text communication to engage in review, analysis and discussion of course content. Features of counselor education online courses include

- a. content presentations ("lectures") that integrate theory, research and application to practice;
- b. assignments designed to reflect the theme(s) of the course including textbook and journal readings, literature research, case study analysis, small group or team projects, and homework;
- c. demonstrations of learning through courseroom discussion with instructors and learners; and
- d. assessment of learning outcomes through evaluation of written work and mastery of concepts, themes, research, or application.

Central to the success of the online course is the presence of the instructor (Picciano, 2002) as reflected by substantive replies to learner questions, engaging in discussion of the content with individual learners as well as clusters of learners, timely review of work for grading, and creating a safe, comfortable learning environment through the conversational tone in the courseroom.

Can #2: Well-trained and skilled online instructors can discern certain behavioral cues in the online environment through the rich, voluminous text that learners submit for instructor review and evaluation. Minimum word limits ensure that each learner participates on an equal footing in the online courseroom. There are no back rows in the asynchronous courseroom. Shy learners as well as skilled writers are able to participate in the discussions

in a nonpressured manner. This method of demonstrating learning—text-based communication—strengthens professional communication competencies through requirements to use academic style and form. While this method does not include oral presentations, it does include text-based presentations. It does not include real time debate, but can include asynchronous debate as well as a host of other learning strategies.

It is essential that instructors receive training and preparation prior to embarking on online course instruction. The differences in pedagogy in the online environment are quite different from those used in a campus classroom. Instructors who receive training and have opportunity to practice use of the online course platform prior to teaching have reported satisfaction with the depth of discussion that takes place and a heightened level of familiarity with students in courses (Gold, 2001). In addition, the capacity to teach using contemporary methods that learners expect in a technology-saturated society must be respected. Students are arriving at the doors of graduate schools with very sophisticated capacities to use technology, and they, in turn, expect faculty to reflect the value and effectiveness of technology to facilitate education and their professional development.

Can #3: Maintaining the integrity of academic coursework in the online curricula is challenged by the easy availability of information on the Internet. Issues of academic honesty arise in the asynchronous courseroom in a manner similar to that in traditional settings; that is, learners turn in written work that contains copied, recycled, or purchased content. In general, any course instructor is tasked with identifying plagiarism, for example, and addressing it in accordance with college or university procedures. Contemporary plagiarism detection services are mediated by the Internet, illustrating another benefit of using virtual tools to enhance the integrity of the learning experience. In addition, in the cybercourseroom, the authenticity of a learner's submitted written work is verified through evaluation of the pattern of the learner's work, style of writing, responses and discussion with other learners, and the manner in which the learner addresses questions posed by the instructor or other learners. Online course instructors learn a great deal about the learners in online courses, often describing the degree of intimacy and communication to be more intense and revealing than that which occurs in traditional classrooms (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Can #4: Assessment of counselor education learner behavioral cues is accomplished through a variety of means in online counselor education

programs. The online courseroom provides some insights into the learner's behavior, yet it is the FTF component of these programs that provides personal interaction between learners and faculty. In these settings, the counselor skills portions of the programs are completed, including intense skills development, review of professional growth through portfolio reviews, and 1:1 evaluations of progress provided by faculty. This method of observing and assessing the behavioral preparation of counselor education learners is different in some ways from traditional settings, yet when viewed objectively, each method is used in both settings.

Can #5: Supervision of counselor education learners is accomplished through a combination of FTF direct supervision in internship placements, and online supervision provided in companion coursework. Learners interact in an asynchronous manner with the course instructor, and these exchanges are supplemented with weekly conference telephone calls. Overall, the online counselor education program supervision model, therefore, is traditional at the internship site: it incorporates standard telephone communication and uses Internet technology to further strengthen the learning experience.

As illustrated by this discussion, controversy about the use of online technology to provide counselor education extends beyond the can and can't of the debate. E-learning is now a reality in higher education. It consists of more than the placement of academic content in a virtual space. The issues now facing counselor education extend to the possibilities for interaction and interactive learning that the Internet and online learning promises (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). In recognition of this potential, the ACES Technology Interest Network (1999) published the *ACES Guidelines for Online Instruction in Counseling Education*, suggesting that the counseling profession is aware of and supportive of the use of technology in education and practice. Extending this level of understanding to recognizing that different is neither better nor worse than traditional education delivery will continue to spur the open discussion of a new pedagogy in counselor education.

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