Developing an Online Counseling Skills Course

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ABSTRACT
Outlined here is the development and implementation of an online counseling skills course at a Rocky Mountain University in the western United States. Techniques were used in reference to how a traditional counselor education classroom operates to teach counseling skills and were modified to fit an online setting. The design of this course used best practices from research regarding online learning, as well as techniques specific to online learning environments. Additionally, the course implemented a learning community utilizing peer collaboration and the encouragement of positive student and instructor relationships. Finally, the course underscored the uniqueness of the individuals enrolled in the context of community membership with careful consideration of diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: Counseling Skills, Counselor Education, Learning Community, Online Education, Peer Collaboration

DEVELOPING AN ONLINE COUNSELING SKILLS COURSE

Online and distance learning has become a common feature in higher education in recent years. For many students, online and distance learning may be the preferred or only method to further their education as they attempt to balance it with other life responsibilities such as family and employment commitments. In 2000, the United States Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) noted a total of 1,363,670 enrollments in post-secondary, credit-granting distance learning courses (CHEA, 2000). By 2007, the number reached 12,153,000 total enrollments in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2008). With the growth of online and distance education and fields of study such as those involved in human services educators should consider delivering courses in this manner to accommodate the growing student population choosing to pursue further education through this medium. Currently, there is debate regarding whether an online environment is appropriate to teach students courses such as beginning counseling skills (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009). Teaching the necessary interpersonal skills in
an online environment presents challenges, as students do not have the same opportunity they would have in a traditional classroom to interact on an interpersonal level. Furthermore, teaching in online environments requires different pedagogical methods and that instructors rethink their previously utilized teaching practices (Reid, 2012). However, as described in detail below, certain measures, techniques, and activities can be integrated into an online counseling skills course to ensure that necessary student learning outcomes are being met.

This particular online counseling skills course, *Fundamentals of Counseling*, was developed and modeled after its on-campus counterpart, which has been in existence for a number of years as an introductory counseling skills course. “There is a multiplicity of potential approaches to the basic course in counselor preparation in a college or university program of studies” (Farwell, 1968, p. 98). This particular beginning counseling course presents basic skills of interviewing and listening and introduces the field of counseling to students. It is a three credit dual-listed course that allows for both undergraduate and graduate enrollment. Prerequisites for the course are students who had achieved junior standing. The on-campus course typically enrolls around 20 undergraduates and 5 graduate students.

An introductory course in counseling usually serves a diverse population with a larger class enrollment than other counseling courses with students from a variety of backgrounds (Farwell, 1968). One of the course objectives of the *Fundamentals of Counseling* course is to assist students who are in helping fields such as audiology, kinesiology, psychology, family and consumer sciences, and education to improve their interaction with others through more effective communication and listening skills. The *Fundamentals of Counseling* course emphasizes the basic skills involved in communication and utilizes modeling practice and feedback to learn one skill at a time (Authier & Gustafson, 1975; Gormally, Hill, Otis, & Rainey, 1975; Hill & Corbett, 1993; Ivey & Ivey, 1999). In this method of instruction, skills are clearly defined for the student, and the student then views videotapes of counseling skills being performed, participates in short practice interviews, and receives reinforcement and comments from the instructor (Authier & Gustafson, 1975; Baker & Daniels, 1989; Gormally, Hill, Otis, & Rainey, 1975).

Another objective of the *Fundamentals of Counseling* course is to socialize or expose students to the field of counseling in hope they will see counseling in a positive manner. The beginning course is generally meant to acquaint the student with the counseling field and promote an opportunity for personal awareness (Farwell, 1968). In addition, a number of students consider counseling as a career and take the course to assist in a career decision.

The online counseling skills course was initially developed using an existing format or system following the structure of the on-campus course. The Department of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) approached the Department of Counselor Education to include this course in a newly developed online bachelor’s degree program offered by FCS. The on-campus course is now included as an elective in the FCS degree program. Offering the course online allows it to be an elective to distance education students. The online course is open to FCS students first and then to any student who meets the prerequisite requirement of junior standing. The enrollment limit is initially set at 20 undergraduates and 5 graduate students for both courses.

This course uses the same textbook as the on-campus course: *Interviewing in Action: Relationships, Process and Change* by Murphy and Dillion (2003). This text also has an accompanying VHS tape linked to the in text exercises and provides students with examples of counselors and other helpers working with clients and demonstrating skills discussed in the text. The online course is formatted to have specific requirements, activities, and responsibilities for students and the instructor each week. Students are informed during registration and
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