BUILDING EFFECTIVE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ONLINE COUNSELING COURSE: FACULTY AND STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article will provide an outline for counselor educators and their students on how to develop and maintain solid supervisory relationships in the online classroom. Counselors-in-training are required to complete practicum and internship experiences during their graduate academic preparation. These field experience courses typically involve 100 to 300 hours of on-site practice in school or mental health settings, under the supervision of certified or licensed counseling practitioners. In addition to the experiential learning, counseling interns participate in a weekly seminar of two to three hours in duration with a counseling faculty instructor serving as the faculty supervisor. These seminar courses allow for interns to examine their skill and technique development, review specific cases, and engage in self- and peer-evaluation of their overall on-site performance. The faculty supervisor plays an important role in providing ongoing guidance, mentoring, and constructive feedback for interns to facilitate their professional growth during the course (Sweitzer & King, 2014). As more and more traditional seminar courses are offered in the online classroom, the development of effective online supervisory relationships, a crucial aspect of counseling trainee success, must be considered. The responsibilities of the counselor educator and counseling student in the online internship course will be discussed to ensure that the supervisory relationship supports, rather than hindering the growth and development of the future professional counselor (Hollins-Alexander, 2013). Successful communication and evaluation practices will be emphasized.

Keywords: Counselor Supervision, Counseling Skill Development, Counselor Education, Counseling Interns, Online Classroom, Online Counseling Courses, Online Instruction, Relationship Building, Supervisory Relationships, Virtual Classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Student success is often the result of a combination of the teaching, learning, and communication processes that occur during the span of mostly any academic course. This is particularly true in the case of field experience courses, which involve on-site practice and classroom discussion or seminar components (Cicco, 2012). This article will focus on graduate counseling courses that prepare school and clinical mental health counselors for future professional practice. Counselors-in-training must complete several field experiences during their academic programs, with each of these courses requiring 100 to 300 hours of on-site field work under the supervision of a certified or licensed counselor. These practicum and internship courses also require weekly supervision in a small-group seminar course, taught by a counselor educator who also serves as a faculty supervisor (Erford, 2015). The counselor educator serves as the course instructor and overall supervisor, but frequently also becomes a mentor, practitioner model, and advisor to students during internship experiences. The ideal seminar experience will facilitate the improvement and refining of counseling skills and techniques in students, while allowing them to engage in self-reflection and peer-review. The week of on-site counseling culminates in the seminar experience, which can and should incorporate discussion of cases and client needs, sharing and debriefing, role-playing, review of ethical behaviors and emergency protocols, and self- and peer-evaluation. The

provision of relevant and timely feedback allows counselors-in-training the opportunity to recognize in themselves and their peers, specific counseling strengths, weaknesses, and ways of improving (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010).

The growing number of online counseling courses propels counselor educators and students to consider the conversion of internship seminar course to online classroom modality. The course objectives and goals may be equivalent in traditional and online seminar courses, but there are clear differences in the ways in which faculty supervisors and their interns will communicate and interact with each other. The virtual classroom provides educators and students with countless opportunities for discussion, but it is the responsibility of each course participant to maximize course tools to creatively collaborate so as to build, cultivate, and maintain effective supervisory relationships (Swenson & Taylor, 2012). The faculty supervisor and counselor-in-training share the common goal of rendering quality professional counseling services to clients, i.e. the successful performance of the counselor-in-training and future counselor. Therefore, it is of interest to the course instructor and student to recognize personal responsibilities and roles in the online supervisory process and to actively participate in the online seminar course on the basis of shared mission, commitment to the profession, and mutual respect (Sweitzer & King, 2014). The following sections will highlight the roles and responsibilities of faculty instructor-supervisors and those of their counseling trainees in online internship courses. The goal of this article is to provide a framework for the healthy interaction of supervisors and interns in building effective supervisory relationships in seminar courses, which have traditionally been offered in the classroom setting. The virtual classroom possesses valuable tools that can be employed to optimize the seminar experience (Cicco, 2013).

Effective Supervisory Relationships

The effective supervisory relationship consists of frequent, ongoing, and open communication between the faculty supervisor, who is typically the counselor educator and course instructor, and the counselor-in-training or student. The communication that occurs between these two individuals must be one of mutual respect and based on humanistic principles such as empathic understanding, genuineness, and trustworthiness (Neukrug, 2012). An effective supervisory relationship is one in which the supervisor provides fair, constructive, and objective feedback on the counselor-in-training's performance on-site and in terms of his/her development and mastery of counseling skills and techniques. This type of relationship also allows for the counselor-in-training to debrief about specific counseling cases, to discuss concerns about his/her development, and to obtain support during challenges and obstacles encountered during the internship experience. An effective supervisory relationship is essentially defined by the outcomes in terms of faculty and student attitudes and satisfaction regarding their rapport and communication as directly related to the student's professional growth and development. Effective supervision is linked to counselor development and overall counseling outcomes (Sweitzer & King, 2014). Though there are many potential advantages of the online supervisory relationship, there are also many concerns, specifically with maintaining confidentiality and providing ample and rapid support for interns when needed (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007). The following sections will describe the specific responsibilities of faculty and students to ensure that their supervisory relationship results in a positive internship experience.

The Faculty Supervisor

The faculty instructor is also the overall seminar course supervisor. Although the counseling intern is supervised on-site by a counseling practitioner, it is the faculty instructor who oversees the interns' on-site performance based on site supervisor evaluations, the coursework produced for the seminar portion of the course, the self- and peer-review processes, and the improvement of counseling skills and techniques throughout the course. The course supervisor provides support and guidance for counseling interns as well as invaluable feedback on their demonstration of skills and techniques. The supervisor also serves as an academic liaison when there are potential difficulties at the field placement. The counselor educator is also a researcher by profession, and shares information on

carrying out various types of basic and action research (Erford, 2008).

In converting the traditional seminar course to online modality, the faculty supervisor is also challenged to creatively engage interns to enhance the development of solid supervisory relationships by clarifying roles, rules, and expectations, setting the tone for honest and ongoing communication, and recognizing and responding to the diverse needs of adult learners (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Swenson & Taylor, 2012). The faculty supervisor should not feel limited by the online modality, instead, explore the resources available for student growth such as e-portfolios and triangulated assessment and also feel free to hold group meetings in hybrid format, if appropriate, and to replace routine with diverse and optional assignment alternatives that may appeal to different learners (Cicco, 2011; Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010).

Clarifying Roles, Rules, and Expectations

Course syllabi bear the fundamental importance to the success of faculty members and students in graduate online courses. The syllabus is the reference document for quick information on course objectives, required assignments, scoring rubrics, performance and behavioral expectations, and supplementary resources (Bernstein & Bass, 2005). Faculty supervisors should share the course syllabus with students prior to the start of the course, whenever possible, so that students have the advantage of reviewing and preparing for their course requirements. Although the syllabus is intended to allow for some revisions during the semester, it should provide a clear listing of course milestones and realistic expectations of students' time investment for individual course assignments on a weekly basis (Cicco, 2013; Swenson & Taylor, 2012).

In addition to drafting a detailed syllabus, the instructor may schedule a telephone conversation to review the roles and expectations of the faculty supervisor, site supervisor, and counseling intern. A brief conversation may serve as a more personal introduction between the faculty instructor and student and as an icebreaker in opening the lines of communication. Even though rules, contact information, and behavioral and ethical expectations are explicitly

stated in the syllabus, it is helpful to review those during a verbal conversation, and perhaps to allow for a question and answer session on what course expectations mean in terms of virtual classroom participation and performance. Conversations should be scheduled ahead of time and allow for student expression of concerns. The course syllabus and phone conversation must involve clarification of course rules including required and measured presence in online discussions, participation in group work, on-site responsibilities and hourly requirements, online etiquette such as use of respectful and appropriate language, and there is a reminder that it is important to ask questions and communicate on a regular basis. Samples of scored anonymous student assignments may also be shared to demonstrate the standards of satisfactory or acceptable written work (Cicco, 2013; Swenson & Taylor, 2012). It is also recommended that, faculty supervisors emphasize the importance of student feedback to the success of the course process and they should clearly provide the avenues for students to assist them in improving the course by providing anonymous suggestions, feedback, and course evaluations (Reiner & Arnold, 2010).

Setting the Tone for Honest and Ongoing Communication

Faculty instructors have the power to begin setting the tone for quality communication in the online seminar course. Providing students with various opportunities to post and comment on their work and that of their peers may be very useful in opening the discussion on effective and ineffective counseling practices. Required assignments may include posting video or audio recordings of mock counseling interviews or actual counseling sessions where client identities are not revealed. Those recordings may be evaluated by the students and their peers by employing faculty or student made rubrics in online discussion boards (Andrade, 2008). The faculty supervisor should be visibly involved in these discussions as a monitor and facilitator, but specific individual feedback and scores should be shared with students in private communications, such as through the course gradebook or email or telephone conversation. Building an atmosphere where students feel comfortable with being honest about counseling practices also involves a certainty that one's privacy, integrity, and

self-respect are never compromised (Cicco, 2011). Setting the tone for positive communication is largely accomplished by modeling the behavior in online discussions, by providing assignments evaluations consistently and in a timely manner, by responding to student inquiries and feedback on a regular basis, by being approachable and reachable when students require support and assistance, by following up on issues that are brought up during the seminar, and by constructively initiating conversation, debate, and discussion on course topics and on-site subject matter (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007; Swenson & Taylor, 2012).

Recognizing and Responding to the Needs of Adult Learners

Contemporary distance education, or e-learning, is the preferred methodology for delivering online instruction. This pedagogy engages instructors and students in rapid asynchronous teaching and learning conversations that recognize the value of timeliness and rapid responsiveness. Additionally, underlying the interactions among adult learners in the online classroom should be a shared respect for each other's time and efforts (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). Graduate counseling students have already achieved a level of academic and professional success because they have learned to develop or possess personal skills and qualities that have enabled them to be advanced in the academic and/or professional world. They have learned ways to capitalize on their learning-style strengths and preferences and the ways to compensate for their deficiencies through their educational progression. The faculty supervisor must recognize the uniqueness of each graduate online learner and realize that individual students will benefit from different levels of support. Though adult learners have experienced success, instructors must not take for granted that each learner will demonstrate varying levels of autonomy. The faculty supervisor must be keenly observant and employ active listening in working with counseling interns. By engaging in ongoing teaching and learning conversations, they should seek to respond to individual learning-style preferences and provide support, clarification, and opportunities for practice and enrichment when needed. The dialogue that takes place

between faculty supervisor and counseling intern is vital to the establishment, growth, and maintenance of solid supervisory relationships (Cicco, 2009; Haberstroh, 2010; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). In supporting the professional development of counseling interns, the faculty supervisor must allow students to participate in rigorous self-evaluation exercises, to develop goals and design plans for personal development, and to take on leadership roles within course activities (Drago-Severson, 2009; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010).

The Counselor-In-Training

The counselor-in-training is simultaneously challenged to take on new roles in preparing to serve clients. Counselors, particularly in academic settings, are asked to respond to the changing needs of their students by becoming researchers, advocates, systemic change agents, team members and collaborators, and leaders (Dahir, 2009; Erford, 2015). The online seminar course is the ideal setting to begin practising those roles because, it combines experiential learning through the on-site component with opportunities for self and peer evaluation in the seminar. Counseling interns must adhere to ethical and professional standards and course codes of conduct. They should review the course syllabus and scoring rubrics carefully, read directions, respect deadlines, ask questions, and always ask for help or support when they need it. Their interactions with faculty and on-site supervisors and student colleagues should demonstrate professional behavior in the ability to multi-task, to show respect, empathy, and concern for others, and to appreciate the importance of self- and other-improvement through the provision of and openness to constructive feedback. The online seminar course should be recognized as a valuable tool for their own self-reflection and debriefing, a rich environment to obtain practice and improve counseling skills and techniques, and a trusting, non-judgmental, collaborative learning environment (Cicco, 2013; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010; Sweitzer & King, 2014).

Balancing Multiple Tasks

Counselors-in-training are provided with an abundance of theoretical and clinical coursework prior to the start of the internship experience. The start of the internship, however,

may prove to test the interns' time-management skills. Completing 100 to 300 hours of on-site direct and indirect counseling duties, while reporting to and communicating regularly with supervisors, absorbing and incorporating feedback, submitting a variety of written assignments in seminar, engaging in self and peer-evaluation, and refining skills in any given semester may be overwhelming if time is mismanaged. Interns must achieve a careful balance of performing numerous tasks, but paramount among those is focusing on self-development and improvement as a counselor. Presence, enthusiasm, work ethic, and punctuality on-site should be complemented by active presence and participation in the online seminar course. Keeping detailed logs of service and a calendar or to-do list are a must in successfully tracking required assignments, events, preparation time, and deadlines. These tools may help the intern to plan ahead in working on assignments well before they are due. Additionally, integrating feedback from supervisors and peers into future assignments will demonstrate the concern for others' points of view and the ability to recognize areas in the need of improvement (Cicco, 2011; Cicco, 2012).

Receiving feedback from faculty supervisors and peers will take place to a great extent within the online seminar course. Therefore, it may be helpful to allot time each day to visit the online course, enter into discussions and actually read comments to their own and others' work and provide timely, relevant responses to classmates. Dedicating time on each day to the seminar may make the experience more rich. Because, rapid asynchronous responses are certainly more valuable than slower ones that, over time, become unnecessary and irrelevant (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010). The challenge of multi-tasking in the online seminar course is likely to resemble the on the job challenge of balancing the many roles of the contemporary counselor, such as advocate and team member. The seminar experience is intended to provide the needed preparation to begin journey in the counseling career (Erford, 2015; Sweitzer & King, 2014).

Making the most of each part of the course will require patience, the ability to recognize the value of each facet of the course without neglecting any of these, and the capacity to independently manage and navigate through course tools to maximize their benefits. The successful intern will create methods that are personally beneficial in tracking and completing assignments, engaging in self-reflection and collegial discussion, and scheduling time in each week to the communication progress and concerns with supervisors, which will improve the overall supervisory experience. The significance of this ongoing communication with supervisors should not be minimized because, it is one of the richest resources for interns in the seminar experience, which offers them rapid, if not immediate feedback on their counseling skill development, decision-making strategies, and problem-solving techniques (Drago-Severson, 2009; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Swenson & Taylor, 2012).

Demonstrating Professionalism, Trust, and Respect

Faculty supervisors and counselors-in-training only develop effective supervisory relationships when their interactions are based on mutual respect. The supervisor must value the efforts of the intern in learning more about him/herself and his/her skills and abilities by working continually to refine and improve them. The intern must also value the efforts of the supervisor in taking real interest in the students' professional preparation, development and skill mastery. For the professional relationship between supervisor and intern to work, each individual must recognize the other as a professional or developing professional. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the intern to demonstrate professionalism and competence, sincere dedication to the task of fully preparing to serve clients well in the counseling profession, and taking genuine interest in self-growth, development, and improvement. To be considered a professional or developing professional, the intern must act as a professional in terms of their appropriate academic and non-academic behaviors, ethical and responsible decision-making, respect for privacy and confidentiality, honest description of strengths and weaknesses, use of appropriate language, and trust in supervisors' training and experience and in their ability to provide non-judgmental and valuable feedback (Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013; Sweitzer & King, 2014).

Counseling interns must also take the faculty supervisor and on-site supervisor policies, deadlines, and comments seriously. Each supervisor comes to the seminar with intense preparation, diverse professional experiences, and unique perspectives on how to serve clients best depending on their particular needs and presenting problems. Interns should take comfort in the fact that, they are not alone in the internship course, but supported by professionals and colleagues whose experience and training can be trusted and relied on for help when necessary. They must also place trust in the dynamic seminar process and on the rich environment in which they and their colleagues can learn more about themselves and share concerns and best counseling practices. Trusting in this process also involves participating in it by sharing in online discussions and assignments and being open to group study, suggestions, and projects (Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013; Sweitzer & King, 2014).

Self-Reflection and Openness to Feedback

Effective professional counselors continue to examine their skills, techniques, and specific counseling strategies throughout their careers. This process helps to ensure that counselors will be actively present in the counseling sessions they conduct, without becoming stagnant, disinterested, or dispassionate. It takes real work, time, and effort to consistently provide high quality counseling services by remaining abreast of new techniques and issues in the field, engaging in ongoing research, and remaining a lifelong learner. The online course seminar gives counselors-in-training a multitude of possibilities for engaging in self-reflection and self-evaluation, and to receive feedback from diverse counseling professionals. To maximize this resource, interns should use self-reflection exercises as tools for real improvement, recognizing their strengths, weaknesses, and the array of opportunities for further development of their personal style. Whether they welcome it or not, feedback and evaluations will be provided to interns from their faculty supervisors, on-site supervisors, and colleagues. Faculty supervisors may also include clinical associates or other counseling practitioners in the student evaluation process during internships to provide further support and suggestions for interns. At all times, the feedback and comments may seem overwhelming and confusing, but at the core of seeking out and utilizing those sources of information effectively is the ability to accept constructive feedback and to select the suggestions that may or may not work for them. Not every suggestion provided by a supervisor or peer intern may be appropriate or feasible to the intern, so discerning those that may in fact prove to be productive when integrated in practice requires real introspection, self-understanding, and a willingness to change and improve when necessary (Cicco, 2011; Sweitzer & King, 2014).

Professional ethical counselors also recognize the value of others' points of view because, individuals do not necessarily notice the same things that their colleagues and supervisors do and this information is to be considered seriously. Improvement of counseling practice is always possible, so the reflection process should become part of regular practice and debriefing, rather than an occasional exercise. The supervisory relationship is greatly enhanced when the intern is open to change and improvement and is willing to provide and receive helpful and constructive suggestions from supervisors and colleagues. This openness to communication and reflection is conveyed through behaviors, responses, attitudes, and decisions made in practice and in the online seminar activities. Rather than interpreting comments and evaluations as attacks or insults, they must be viewed in the context of exchanging ideas that may expand learning and increase counselor effectiveness (Hollins-Alexander, 2013; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013). It is desirable to continue self-reflection and consultation with colleagues in eventual professional practice (Erford, 2015).

Conclusion

Online counseling courses provide counselor educators and counselors-in-training with challenges and opportunities as the processes of teaching and learning evolve during a course. Internship or other field experience courses combined with online seminar classes require steady engagement and dialogue between faculty supervisors and interns to best impact the development of the future counselor's skills. Supervisors and interns must share a commitment and responsibility to build and

maintain productive supervisory relationships that ultimately serve to assist future counselors in achieving mastery of various counseling techniques and strategies. Faculty supervisors create an optimal environment for the development of the supervisory relationship by clarifying roles, rules, and expectations, setting the tone for honest and ongoing communication through modeling, and by recognizing and responding to the needs of adult learners (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010; Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). Counselors-in-training reciprocate by facilitating the creation of healthy supervisory relationships when they are able to balance multiple tasks, demonstrate professional competence, trust in the seminar process, respect supervisors' and colleagues' evaluations, and when they regularly engage in self-reflection and are open to constructive feedback throughout the online seminar course. These diverse roles and responsibilities of faculty supervisors and their interns will cultivate deeper communication practices and opportunities to develop more accurate and triangulated forms of assessing skill and technique mastery (Cicco, 2011; Sweitzer & King, 2014; Swenson & Taylor, 2012).

Recommendation

It is recommended that the guidelines provided in this article is to be studied more closely in terms of their impact on the development of the supervisory relationship and the counseling outcomes demonstrated by counseling interns. Studies that compare the supervision provided in online versus in-person seminar courses and the subsequent development of counseling skills in students may also provide insights into the strengths and limitations of each supervisory modality. Empirical evidence will further document the importance of specific aspects of the online supervisory relationship and provide support for including critical supervisory activities during internship experiences (Erford, 2008).

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