

UTILIZING WEB TECHNOLOGIES IN A MASTER OF COUNSELLING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines Canada's first web based/residential Master of Counselling program. Since the program is open to students from around the world, the program is designed to be accessible, innovative and flexible. To meet these operational goals, the program is structured around interactive online discussion forums, video web-conferencing, media clips, podcasts, Screen Flow, and Skype. This article describes how the technologies are integrated into the program by including sample e-course assignments, outlining how discussion forums are actively utilized, and highlighting the exit option of an e-portfolio. Recommendations to address online workload issues are addressed.

Keywords: Canada, Counselor Education, Discussion Forums, E-learning, E-Portfolio, Master of Counselling, Online courses, Web-based Education, Web-conferencing.

INTRODUCTION

To offer Canada's first primarily web-based Master of Counselling (MC) degree program required an extensive needs and market analysis. The results from this research, conducted in the late 1990's, formed the delivery objectives of the program (Collins & Jerry, 2005). For example, it was readily apparent that there was a need to offer a MC degree for mature learners who were located in rural areas where travel to a city to attend, on a regular basis, an on campus program was not feasible. In addition, the master degree needed to be flexible in its course offerings (e.g., time, frequency) because the majority of potential learners would be working full time making it necessary to complete course work during the evenings and weekends. As a result of these findings and others (Collins & Jerry), three leading universities in the province of Alberta, operating in a collaborative fashion, admitted the first cohort of MC students in 2002. In 2008, the MC program was decentralized with each university, for the most part, independently running the program. However, all three institutions remain committed to the original intent of the MC program, which is to offer an accessible, innovative, flexible graduate counselor education program. This article will focus primarily on University of Lethbridge's implementation of the online MC

program.

The article will begin by describing the design and course structure of the program. The main body of the paper will be focused on how to integrate web-based learning into counselor education courses. The article will conclude by offering recommendations for future investigations.

Design and Course Structure

To earn a Master in Counselling (MC) degree at the University of Lethbridge (U of L) students complete 12 courses (36-credits) and a culminating activity (e.g., capstone or a final project with direct application to the counselling community such as a group manual for a specific client population) over a three-year time span if in the full time stream. Part time students have six years to complete the program. The program year has three, 13-week semesters: Spring/Summer, Fall and Winter. New cohorts start every May. All e-courses run from Wednesday to Sunday with the weekend having the most student-faculty interaction. Face-to-face components include attendance at a minimum of two summer institutes (SI), which are held at U of L for either one or two weeks in July. In addition, three to four day face-to-face graduate seminars are offered for each practicum course.

The admission requirements are outlined on the program's

webpage (www.uleth.ca/edu/master-counselling). Unique to the program is that a psychology related degree is not a prerequisite as long as the applicant has significant work experience within the helping profession (e.g., police, teacher, nurse). To this end, a significant portion of the candidate's application is weighted heavily on work experience particularly demonstrating experience with a variety of age groups and presenting problems. Students are informed that if they wish to pursue registration as a psychologist, they will need to take additional courses during or after their MC degree. Short listed candidates are interviewed by at least two faculty members using a behavioral motivational interviewing approach (Turner, 2004). Candidates are usually given a choice of medium for the interview (i.e., web based video conferencing, telephone conferencing, or in person). To maintain a class ratio of faculty to students that is most beneficial, up to 20 of the top students are admitted on an annual basis.

All new students are required to participate in the program's online orientation held in May and typically facilitated by a Teaching Assistant (TA; usually a graduate of the program). The orientation introduces the students to the technology used in the program, the etiquette and requirements of online posting, and the writing and formatting standards (APA) required for all assignment submissions. Faculty or the TA will typically initiate one-on-one contact with each new student to provide him or her with extra support and guidance. In addition, students receive a library orientation that is conducted via podcasts or in person during one of the summer institutes. Of relevance, the orientation material remains in an accessible link open year around to all students and faculty.

Time expectations

Students are told that they should expect to spend an average of 15 hours per week per course completing weekly independent and small group assignments, as well as actively participating in the discussion forums (DF). Students new to the program and those inexperienced using technology often find the first two months of the

program much more time intensive than anticipated. These students profit greatly from regular instructor and TA coaching via telephone as well as postings on study tips and time management strategies.

Course structure

Nearly all of the online courses follow a similar format in presenting content and in the delivery of the weekly lesson plan. In WebCT, students are presented with the course material as well as the relevant course policies and procedures (e.g., confidentiality statement for DF participation). Each lesson opens with an online "lecture" authored by the instructor and delivered in-text (e.g., pdf or html coded document) or as a video/audio clip with or without screencasts using QuickTime (e.g., ScreenFlow at www.telestream.net/screen-flow/overview.htm). Next, students are presented with a list of readings for the week. The journal articles are posted online if electronic and follow copyright procedures. Paper copies of the course readings are compiled into a course-reading package and ordered online from the university's bookstore. In the weekly lesson, an extensive description of at least five to eight independent and partner/small group tasks are provided and, for the most part, need to be completed by the students before becoming active in the discussion forums. The details regarding the use of DF will be explained shortly.

Courses

The first two courses students take in the program are Professional Ethics and Foundational Counselling Skills, which begin in late May. The first five weeks of each course are devoted to online work actively using discussion forums, podcasts, screencasts, video clips, and independent study tasks. Thereafter, each course is offered at the SI for one week from 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday. During the SI, students attend numerous social events and professional development talks hosted by the faculty/staff (e.g., meet & greet BBQ, "how to become a psychologist", "How to write a project", and "everything you wanted to know about APA writing"). After the first SI, students take a variety of core and optional courses in preparation for their practicum experiences. All of these

courses are offered online, except for three blended courses which are held in the Spring, and include attendance at the second and/or third SI (i.e., the blended courses are assessment, interventions and group counseling/process skills). Blended courses have both online and face-to-face classroom based components. The practicum courses as well as a selection of the MC courses are elaborated upon in the next section.

Utilization of Technology in the MC Courses

The program is structured around WebCT, interactive online discussion forums (free source software phbBB), podcasts, media clips, Skype (a free video web based communication where three individuals can engage in synchronous conversation), and video web-conferencing (an advanced software program called Marratech; allows 50+ people to participate simultaneously in conversation along with the use of whiteboard and chatroom options). In terms of the latter, McBride and Muhlbach (2008) described this useful technology and how it is actively integrated into one of U of L's MC first year courses elsewhere and therefore will not be addressed here due to word restrictions. Discussion forums (DF) will be elaborated upon next given they are core to the MC program.

Discussion Forums

All courses in the MC program actively utilize DFs with 15% to 30% of the student's overall course grade based upon the frequency and the quality of the student's DF comments. The specific grading criteria for these two components, standardized throughout the U of L program but instructors can modify as necessary, are outlined in Figure 1. Additional details about the use of discussion forums in the MC program can also be found in Collins and Jerry (2005) philosophical overview of the program.

Students are advised to regard participation in the discussion forums as roughly equivalent to the three hours traditionally spent in an on-campus graduate seminar. Reading, preparing for participation in the DF, completing small group tasks, and working on the lesson/course assignments take place in addition to the three weekly hours. Students taking a 13-week online course are

Evaluation Component & Weight	Grading Criteria NOTE: This is the minimum criteria students need to meet to receive a pass (grade of a B)
Extent & Type of Participation Weekly: 10 marks	Two referenced postings (minimum) per week per core questions/issues set by the instructor (usually 2-3 questions). At least two of your postings should incorporate specific reference to the core readings for the week. At minimum, two quality responses (minimum) in response to the postings of other students.
Quality of Comments Weekly: 10 marks NOTES: 1. With a greater number of posts you increase your ability to address each of the criteria items for 'quality'.	These posts are not the same as "cheerleading" posts. Each post must have a new subject line and be a maximum of 200 words. APA standard is required for all postings (grammar/spelling error free, citation of references, etc.). However, please use first person.
2. Marks are awarded for a pattern of responses; individual responses are not graded.	Ability to critically analyze information from a variety of relevant perspectives Ability to synthesize, personalize, and apply learning to personal development demonstrated Core constructs accurately identified, described and/or compared Material from previous units integrated to formulate ideas and generate dialogue New and related perceptions of an issue raised Personal perceptions, attitudes, values are reflected in the contributions Relevant readings and research cited to support points Self-awareness, sensitivity to others, and openness to personal growth demonstrated

Figure 1: Discussion Forum Expectations in the U of L, MC program permitted to skip discussion forum participation for one week of their choice without impacting their grade (the skip week is typically referred to as the student's "reading week").

Instructors utilize a variety of formats for marking DF posts. For example, in the Theory of Counselling course (first year course), the instructor typically marks the first three to five weeks of DF posts to reinforce the high standard for quality DF participation. Thereafter, the students mark their remaining posts with the instructor evaluating the student's justification for each DF score. In a third year course, such as Group Counselling, students do not typically require extensive coaching on how to meet the posting requirements but still benefit from the external motivation (marks). In this course, students submit their self-evaluation scores on a bi-monthly basis by completing a chart and/or checklist to evaluate how well they met the quality and quantity (frequency) criteria for DF posts. For example, Figure 1 is copied onto a spreadsheet with columns

representing each posting week and rows listing the quantity and quality criteria. Students then rate themselves for each week using this grid as well as attach samples of their best weekly posts. The instructor will review the students' self-assessments and provide students with their monthly forum mark.

Instructors demonstrate different interactional styles while participating in the discussion forums. However, it is expected that instructors, as outlined in the instructor webpage, will post in a manner that is similar to how they would hold a successful classroom discussion. That is, instructors need to frequently introduce/revise questions, make probing comments as well as offer ideas to keep the discussion momentum high, and to move students to a greater depth of understanding of the course content. As once noted on the instructor's webpage, "It is important not to 'hog' the discussion but rather facilitate discussions by making reinforcing comments, replying to student postings, sharing case examples from your field so the theory links to practice, suggesting new perspectives, and offering your opinion as long as it does not 'steal the show'" (McBride, 2006, para 2). Further, it is hoped that MC instructors make, on average, one post for every three to four student posts and that instructors actively participate in the DFs four out of five posting days to ensure instructor involvement is scattered throughout the week. As the instructor webpage advised, "You will be much more efficient with your time if you are responding to 5 posts at a time instead of 50-60 posts at one sitting" (McBride, para 3). Overall, the message sent to instructors is to heed the research evidence that instructors who have an active facilitator style are rated very favorably by their students (e.g., Peterson, 2004; Sutton, 1999).

Building a sense of community online is of utmost importance to build cohesiveness and reinforce motivation (e.g., May & Short, 2003). To this end, the DF also hosts a variety of non-academic forums such as a "coffee room" where students can engage in social conversation. In addition, there are numerous Q & A forums to address IT issues, assignment questions, as well as program's policies and procedures. There are also

forums that list professional development workshops, career postings, course and program wide announcements. Instructors are advised to be responsive to student's inquires by monitoring these forums, particularly the Q & A forums, on a daily basis (Wed. to Sun.). Furthermore, introducing ice breaker activities in week 1, using emoticons in posts, uploading a photograph of self so it appears each time one makes a post, posting photographs from one's life, and inviting students to share important news from their lives while in the course (e.g., set a wedding date, birth of a baby, death of a loved one, received a research grant, etc.) are some of the activities the MC faculty encourage students to do to feel part of an online community.

Integrating Web-Based Learning into Counselor Education Courses

A selection of courses and typical online assignments will be presented next to highlight how web based learning is adapted for counselor education courses. Of relevance, Jerry and Collins (2005) have documented how web-based counseling video clips have been used in the MC program. For example, core MC faculty created a series of scenarios to demonstrate a variety of foundational counselling skills (e.g., reflect affect, probes, structuring the counselling session). Students in the working alliance course complete tasks while watching these web based clips. For example, students are asked to complete a skill grid sheet to track which skills were used and the quality of the skill demonstrated.

Counselling Theories Course

This online first year course has a case study framework that uses DF, web video conferencing for small group work with TA/instructor involvement once a month, clips from interviews with local therapists (e.g., McBride & Powell, 2007), and active online search work. Unique to this course is the integration of information literacy into the lesson plans (e.g., podcasts by a Librarian) and assignments (e.g., summarize a counselling theory's position on a particular theme with one paragraph accurately paraphrasing the content and another paragraph demonstrating plagiarism. Students then post

the two paragraphs in the relevant DF for review).

Counselling Issues Across The Life Span Course

A second year optional course where weekly discussion forums are created to explore four core polarities in developmental psychology according to a specified weekly theme. The polarities are: nature vs. nurture, critical period vs. unlimited plasticity, continuity vs. change, and activity vs. passivity. For example, in week four, students post responses related to the theme of self-concept and socialization in the early years according to each polarity. This can be a challenging set of discussion forums to facilitate however it has proven advantageous because of the different, creative format of discussion forums and the opportunity to address topics through the e-lens of a variety of perspectives.

Group Counselling and Process Skills Course

This optional third year course is a blended course with the first five weeks offered online and one week of face-to-face lab work offered in July. During the online portion of the course students work through a series of tasks related to the stages of group development, using a published workbook and DVD that demonstrates a process group. Insights and observations, as a result of completing the tasks, are actively processed using the DFs. A 50-minute DVD of McBride (2006) demonstrating how to integrate process-based skills into psychoeducational groups is also reviewed online and actively explored in the DFs. Before the face-to-face lab portion of the course, students complete three to four group session lesson plans, which they practice delivering and refining during the lab.

Learning Process Course

This is second year optional course that utilizes group presentations in the discussion forums. This graded assignment requires groups of students to post a synthesis of the literature related to an assigned topic, a practical illustration of the application of learning to counseling, and the development of two critical reflection discussion questions for the class to actively explore/debate during the week. The members of each group are responsible for posting the questions and facilitating an active online discussion with their peers. Marks are awarded for

facilitation of the discussion forums and this student led strategy has proven very effective to combat discussion forum fatigue that we have observed in students who have taken five or more online courses.

Practicum Courses

The MC has two required, 13 week, practicum courses. Each practicum course has 8-10 week online lessons and students log a minimum of 16 hours of work per week per course (effective 2010; in the past it was 12hrs/wk) at their U of L approved practicum, secured at least six months in advance. The practicum online lessons actively utilizes DF and small group work using Skype or Marratech to promote debriefing of internship experiences (without mentioning client names), practicing working alliance skills, and learning how to more fully integrate process work into their sessions through case analysis. Practicum students also attend one three to four day face-to-face seminar per practicum to engage in case consultation and practice advanced counseling skills. Due to ethical and security issues, the practice of showing client tapes to fellow practicum peers (e.g., during the seminar) was eliminated in 2009. Thus, it is now imperative that students are directly observed conducting sessions by their on-site supervisor on a weekly basis. This is followed by a feedback session with their supervisor based on the observation. Students are also required to receive at least one hour of case review supervision each week. Upon completion of the first practicum, students start work on their final project or a capstone. The latter will be explained next.

Capstone

This online exit option course (the other option is a final applied project of approximately 75 pages that has direct benefit to clients and/or counselors) encourages exploration and reflection of students' academic, personal and professional growth resulting in an e-portfolio. This course is designed to provide a dynamic and interactive learning process for graduating students. The use of interactive technologies allows for a close collaboration with peers and instructor, a key component of the capstone experience.

The interactive nature of the capstone can be illustrated through presentation of sample online course tasks. For example, in preparation of the production of a counseling-focused curriculum vitae (CV), the students are required to research and post samples in the DF for critique and discussion prior to writing their own CV. A subsequent task requires the students to prepare an updated summary of their counseling philosophy. In the discussion forums the students post aspects of their philosophy that have changed as well as those that have remained the same over time. The student interactions that follow allow for the consolidation and presentation of thoughts in a more concise and comprehensible manner. An example of the use of Skype in the capstone course requires the students to demonstrate the application of their philosophy of counseling and skills within a mock counseling session. A second example of the use of Skype is illustrated in a task that focuses on professional development and professional registration/certification. The students post in the DFs research findings on the interview process as well as share possible interview questions and answers. Following the discussion forum component of the task the students engage in a mock webcam interview using Skype followed by a peer evaluation of their performance as both interviewee and interviewer.

The use of Maratech is demonstrated in a culminating class activity requiring students to share a creative expression of learning. The nature of the creative presentation is of an individual personal choice and can take a variety of forms (technological, written, images). The students are able to upload and share video/audio presentations and incorporate the use of whiteboards into their presentations. Maratech is also used for a final group debriefing of the Capstone course and the overall MC program. The opportunity to debrief as a group provides the students with closure and helps to facilitate the transition from academics to work life.

Caution: Online Teaching

The overarching goal in web-based education is to strive for an ever-increasing level of e-sharing of academic

learning, personal aspects and expertise in a connected and immediate manner. Utilizing a multitude of e-technologies as outlined in this article is one way to address this goal. However, it is also just as important to address the demands of online teaching. Future studies need to address the rate of burn out among instructors of web-based learning due to intensive workloads that are often not recognized by program administrators and classroom only instructors. It has been our experience that web-based instruction is quite different compared to classroom teaching. For example, web-based courses require instructors to plan, develop, mount, and post lessons often months before each e-course begins. Also, weekend teaching (the time most online students are available) with regular work scheduled during the rest of the week rarely allows one to have a day off with no academic obligations. Further, the high number of student-faculty contact hours required compared to classroom teaching can be draining. In addition to addressing the wear and tear online teaching has on its facilitators, solutions need to be developed that adjust workloads to compensate for the extra time needed to provide high quality online instruction that maintains academic freedom for course design without resorting to the old correspondence practice of distance learning.

Conclusion

This Canadian Master of Counselling Program successfully demonstrates the use of a variety of interactive technologies. The technologies such as discussion forums, Skype and video web-conferencing are woven throughout the program and provide students with a rich interactive learning experience. The use of these web-based technologies effectively bridges the geographical distance gap between students and faculty as well as provides a well-rounded multi-media study environment for graduate level counseling students.

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