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STRATEGIC LESSON PLANNING IN ONLINE COURSES: SUGGESTIONS FOR COUNSELOR EDUCATORS

By

GINA CICCO

Assistant Professor of Counselor Education, St. John's University, Utopia Parkway Queens, New York.

ABSTRACT

This article presents instructors with a myriad of strategies for lesson planning in online courses. There are many inherent differences between the traditional classroom and the virtual classroom. Factors such as student experience with online courses, instructor availability, and the compatibility between instructor teaching style and student learning style may impact on student performance and satisfaction in online courses (Cicco, 2009; Haberstroh et al., 2008). These variables are important to consider when designing innovative and engaging online courses (Cicco, 2012). A five-step plan for creating online courses will be reviewed, with an emphasis on strategies for accommodating specific learning-style preferences within the context of online graduate counseling courses. This plan includes syllabus revision and differentiated instruction. The concerns associated with relationship-building in the virtual classroom will be highlighted, especially those relevant to counselor-preparation courses (Cicco, 2012; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). Creative instructional strategies that correspond to perceptual and sociological learning styles will be addressed, including learning activities that increase the possibilities for accurate assessment of student performance and for relationship-building among faculty members and students (Burke, 2000; Dunn & Griggs, 2003; Fearing & Riley, 2005; Haberstroh, 2010).

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Learning Style, Online Assessment, Online Classroom, Online Courses, Online Instruction, Relationship-Building, Strategic Lesson Planning, Student Performance, Virtual Classroom.

INTRODUCTION

This article provides an overview of diverse lesson planning strategies for online course instructors, particularly counselor educators. The differences between traditional and online classrooms will be reviewed, with implications for accommodating students' learning-style preferences in the virtual setting. Strategies for designing engaging online courses follow along a five-step plan that includes syllabus revision, differentiated instruction, integration of activities that respond to perceptual and sociological learning preferences, opportunities for relationship-building, and triangulated assessment (Cicco, 2012). Relationship-building is a special concern for counselor educators because of the interpersonal skills that are modeled and practiced in courses that teach counseling skills and techniques and those that require field placement in a school, clinic, or hospital setting (Trepal et al., 2007). Student success in such courses relies upon rich supervisory

experiences with faculty and site supervisors (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). The fundamental skills that are learned and mastered in these skills-based courses were historically conveyed in a face-to-face setting. The conversion of the curricular objectives aligned with these courses to the virtual modality will be considered as part of the syllabus revision process discussed below (Cicco, 2011). Exercises for increasing the accurate evaluation of skill mastery in online courses will also be suggested.

Traditional Versus Online Classroom

There are many similarities and differences between traditional in-class courses and their online counterparts. The primary stakeholders in each setting are always the faculty members and students. In counselor-preparation programs, another important stakeholder is the recipient of the counseling services, i.e. the client. The processes that occur in traditional and online classrooms are also similar, with the foci being teaching, learning, and the evaluation

of performance and overall satisfaction in the course. The major differences between the two instructional settings are how the experiences of teaching, learning, and evaluation actually take place. The location, time, and means of communication may be slightly or very different. In completely online courses, faculty and students may never meet in person or ever engage in a live conversation. Communication in the online course may be exclusively asynchronous, allowing for flexibility of one's schedule for participation in course assignments but eliminating the possibility of live exchanges of information. The delay in provision of feedback is especially significant in counseling skills courses, where the delivery of constructive criticism immediately following a counseling session is vital to counselor reflection, growth, and development (Haberstroh, 2010).

There are many ways to bridge the gaps between in-class and online courses. The first major step is to recognize that there are infinite possibilities for capitalizing on the strengths of each instructional setting. Courses that are taught in the traditional classroom setting are enriched when instructors make a virtual classroom shell available to students, through Blackboard or other course management systems. These virtual classrooms make it possible to post announcements for students along with links to helpful Websites. They offer students the option of participating in threaded discussions that allow for asking questions and giving and receiving suggestions on required assignments. Online instructors also have the power to incorporate some of the benefits of in-class instruction in the virtual setting when they employ strategic lesson planning. Shortening the gap in time from when students submit a recording of a counseling session and when they receive supervisor feedback is one example of a necessary change that would help to optimize students' learning experiences. Another potential improvement in the virtual setting is the integration of live media that would allow faculty members and students to meet in realtime to discuss important concerns at a field placement or a challenging project (Cicco, 2012; Scheuermann, 2010). A summary of potential strategies for improving online course delivery is presented below. The suggestions that will be discussed are in no way exhaustive. There are countless ways to maximize

the online learning process, but a prerequisite is the commitment from faculty members and students to work together and to communicate clearly about their expectations, concerns, and successes.

Strategies for Designing Online Courses

Online course instructors are faced with many decisions in designing and planning the delivery of their courses. Instructors who are new to the online classroom must familiarize themselves with the tools available through online course management systems. It is a good practice to complete instructor training programs at least one to two times per year to receive the latest information on system upgrades and updates on instructor and student tools. The first consideration in online course design is the appearance of the course Webpage. Vivid colors, clear images, and attractive design contribute to the climate of the virtual classroom. Several decisions will follow this first phase and it will be helpful to the online instructor to explore the diversity of student learning-style preferences that could be accommodated by employing certain strategies. Another cornerstone in the creative process of strategic lesson planning is the instructor's willingness to employ differentiated instruction in the virtual classroom (Cicco, 2012; Meyers, 2008). The sections below will address various recommendations for initiating the process of strategic lesson planning in online courses.

Five-Step Plan

Utilizing an innovative instructional design model to teach online courses would include various steps (Cicco, 2012). The first step is to re-visit the course syllabus for the traditional in-class course that will be transferred to the online modality. If an in-class syllabus is not available, it is necessary to start with the core objectives that must be met by the conclusion of the course. For counselor educators, this means locating the relevant standards listed by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and translating them into measurable objectives (Cobia & Henderson, 2007). Students must be able to demonstrate mastery of such objectives through various forms of assessment prior to the conclusion of the course. The methods of documenting student mastery may be different in traditional courses than

in online courses. The second step is to plan lessons that apply differentiated instruction. The third step is to ensure the diversity of instructional methods that accommodate varied perceptual and sociological learning-style preferences. The fourth step is to consider the possibilities for communication among faculty members, students, and site supervisors. The online instructor must evaluate whether or not there are ample opportunities for discussion throughout the course, which translates into the development healthy instructional, peer, and supervisory relationships (Haberstroh, 2010; Trepal et al., 2007). The fifth step is to develop and utilize triangulated forms of assessment to document that students have truly developed and mastered counseling skills and techniques. The use of multiple objective and subjective measures that coincide with evaluation of the stated curricular objectives will allow for the most accurate determination of students' skill mastery (Cicco, 2011).

Syllabus Revision

The process of syllabus revision is intended to create a document that is user-friendly and meaningful for faculty members and students. The presentation of items in the syllabus should be clear, logical, and concise. In creating a syllabus that is appropriate for online courses, the course objectives must be re-visited. The objectives must be written in ways that allow for the instructor to accurately measure whether or not students have achieved them. The ideal syllabus is changeable, sets clear expectations, and allows for revision of due dates and assignment requirements if deemed appropriate and necessary by the instructor. The threshold concepts that are the foundations for students' mastery of course objectives must be taught, learned, and practiced during the early stages of the course (Bernstein & Bass, 2005; Irvine & Carmichael, 2009; Kiley & Wisker, 2009). Mastery of each objective must be measured through completion of a relevant assignment or assessment. Instructors who teach a course inclass using multiple-choice exams as a primary assessment tool may decide to use short-essay exams in the online counterpart. An assignment that requires an oral presentation in the traditional classroom may be presented in the virtual classroom by using live media such as SKYPE (Ash, 2011).

Students may be instructed to log-in to the classroom through a free SKYPE premium account at a pre-established date and time, allowing all class participants to view each other via Webcam technology at the same time and to present their work to colleagues and faculty individually or in small groups. Alternatively, students may be asked to create a podcast of their presentations.

It is important that the required assignments for the online course are diverse and provide students with learning options that may match their learning-style preferences. For example, students may be allowed to choose between producing an oral presentation and creating a detailed pamphlet that summarizes their findings for their classroom audience. Such alternatives may motivate students to capitalize on their strengths while maintaining their interest and generating their creativity (Cicco, 2012; Fearing & Riley, 2005; Yang & Chou, 2008). For counseling courses that require students to perform and evaluate mock counseling sessions, it may be appropriate to engage student participation again through live media such as SKYPE, video conferencing, or through posting digital recordings of sessions on classroom discussion boards to be reviewed by faculty supervisors and peers. Ethical issues must be considered to protect client identity and to ensure that the recordings do not reveal the names or other personal information of actual clients (Ash, 2011; Glossoff & Pate, 2002; Scheuermann, 2010).

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiating instructional methods can be an interesting and creative process for online faculty members. This process should begin with an awareness of the diversity of student learning styles. Various models depict learning styles and their corresponding internal and external stimuli. The Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model (Dunn & Griggs, 2003; Rundle, 2006) illustrates the elements of individual learning style across emotional, environmental, perceptual, physiological, psychological, and sociological domains. Instructional strategies that respond to various learning-style preferences are ideal. An online course can respond to various learning-style needs and preferences simply because it allows students to log-in at various times of day and because it affords students the

possibility of creating as little or as much structure as they need to proceed along a self-directed learning module. An online instructor who has deeper knowledge of his/her students' learning needs can be more purposeful and strategic in planning lessons that involve more or less faculty direction and varying levels of support from peers through discussion boards and small-group exercises. Some students require faculty guidance while others prefer to chart their own course in achieving course objectives. Allowing students the possibility of asking questions at any time and the comfort and reassurance of knowing that their questions will be answered with regularity and within a reasonable time-frame will greatly improve the online course experience (Cicco, 2009; Cicco, 2012; Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002).

Counselor educators have many options for differentiating the instruction of counseling skills and techniques. Activities such as role-playing, mock counseling sessions, and reflective journal writing are not reserved for in-class courses alone. These may easily be transferred to the online setting through live media, use of Webcam technology, and discussion boards. Oral presentations of cases may also be converted to the virtual classroom through podcasts, digital recordings, and video conferencing. Online learning modules may be enriched with more than text-laden presentations and supplementary reading assignments. Instead, learning modules may be presented with images, video clips, audio clips and music, photographs, interactive games, and many other relevant enhancements. Individual module assignments may include independent reading and/or research, required site visits, interviewing, creative writing, attendance at special events, and group projects. These activities would meet an array of learning-style preferences along the domains mentioned above (Cicco, 2012; Drennan, Kennedy, & Pisarski, 2005; Rundle, 2006). Recommendations for accommodating specific perceptual and sociological learning preferences will be addressed further in the next section.

Perceptual and Sociological Learning-Style Preferences

Individual learning-style preferences develop and change along a continuum, with varying levels of need for certain stimuli. Perceptual preferences include the need for or strengths derived from visual, auditory, tactual, and kinesthetic stimulation (Dunn & Griggs, 2003). To accommodate these varying learning styles in the online classroom, instructors must strategically diversify learning modules and assignments. For example, a visual learner might benefit from viewing a video clip of a counseling session. A learner who prefers visual-text stimulation will enjoy reviewing materials presented in textual format. Those who prefer visual-picture stimulation will require images and photos in the presentation of material. The visual learner needs to needs to see things, so the more vivid, colourful, and attractive the presentation of the module is, the more it will resonate with this student. The auditory learner needs to hear information to maximize his/her learning experience. A Power Point presentation prepared with auditory learners in mind will inevitably include audio clips, sound effects, or possibly a recording of the instructor lecturing. The auditory explanation will provide this student with a deeper learning experience. The auditory counselor-in-training will probably benefit more from listening to a recorded counseling session than reading a verbatim transcription of an interview. Tactual learners can greatly benefit from online courses because they are using their hands to type as a means of communicating their ideas. Note-taking, drawing diagrams, drafting outlines, and building models may be helpful learning tools for such students. An exam designed to allow options for various preferences to be accommodated, including those of tactual learners, might ask students to draw a diagram of counselor-client interactions or to write a sample counseling plan for a client. Kinesthetic learners enjoy experiencing or taking part in engaging learning exercises. These students will benefit from role-playing, visiting a local counseling clinic to observe sessions and interview practitioners, responding to simulation exercises, and playing interactive games to review for exams. Assessment tools provided through Blackboard can be presented as quizzes or games, to test student knowledge and comprehension, and reward them when they have answered questions correctly (Cicco, 2009; Cicco, 2012; Rundle, 2006). Each of the suggestions provided can be incorporated as assignment options in

online learning modules.

The counseling session is particularly linked to sociological stimuli because it requires participation by at least two individuals. Counselors-in-training are consistently asked to practice interpersonal skills. Ivey, Ivey, and Zalaquett (2010) conceptualize the development of counseling skills and techniques that are fundamental to successful counseling as a progression along a hierarchical pyramid. Attending skills are at the base of the pyramid and development of personal counseling style and theory is at the top of the pyramid. Instructing such skills in the online classroom requires engaging students in the same types of simulated counseling sessions and role-plays that take place in traditional in-class courses. Allowing students ample practice in counseling exercises is fundamental to their growth and effective performance as counselors (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). Though students may not meet with instructors and peers in the traditional classroom setting every week, they should be required to conduct counseling sessions with clients under the supervision of certified or licensed professional counselors. Counseling sessions that are recorded may be evaluated by faculty supervisors in individual or group supervisory meetings. To accommodate the diverse sociological needs of online learners, instructors must provide varying forms of sociological stimulation. Students may be assigned to work on projects independently, in pairs, in small groups, or with a faculty mentor. They may also be asked to select their sociological preference in completing a required assignment. For example, students may be given the option of writing a research paper on counseling theory independently or presenting it to their classmates by working with a partner (Cicco, 2009; Cicco, 2012; Rundle, 2006).

Relationship-Building

The process of relationship-building is often different in virtual classrooms than in traditional classrooms. Instructors and students may never meet in person or have live conversations in online courses. It is up to the strategic online instructor to incorporate opportunities for the development of healthy peer and supervisory relationships. These relationships are grounded in clear and effective communication. Faculty instructors and supervisors must be approachable and available to answer students' questions and concerns. Their level of responsiveness must be frequent and consistent (Haberstroh et al., 2007; Trepal et al., 2007). Instructors should specify in the course syllabus how long of a time-frame students should expect when awaiting feedback on submitted assignments, responses to emails, and scores on projects or discussion board posts. Honesty, trustworthiness, and respectfulness are invaluable qualities that faculty members and students must possess and demonstrate in order to lay the groundwork for optimal academic performance, course satisfaction, and healthy professional relationships (Haberstroh, 2010; Jung et al., 2002). Online counseling courses that require students to complete field experience at a counseling site should include one or more site visits by the course instructor. The course instructor typically serves as a faculty supervisor who must communicate frequently with the on-site supervisor for the internship experience. The more effective the supervisory experiences are, the more counselors-in-training will benefit from valuable feedback in their subsequent practice. It is an ethical necessity that faculty members build strong supervisory relationships with their interns because they must be able to confirm that students have indeed developed the skills needed to serve clients as effective counseling practitioners that are duly prepared to deal with the challenges of the counseling profession (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

Improving online relationships can be as simple as reading every intern's email messages and discussion board posts and responding thoughtfully and in a timely manner. Other ways of strengthening communication practices may be to require weekly participation in threaded discussions or bi-weekly in-person meetings with a peer mentor or clinical associate. Instructors should also consider communicating with on-site supervisors and students through phone conversations or live SKYPE sessions to strengthen the supervisory process and to ensure accurate exchange of information regarding counselor performance. The use of SKYPE can be invaluable in a supervision conversation because it would allow for members of the session to view each other's gestures and body language (Ash, 2011;

Scheuermann, 2010).

Relationships among students are also very important, particularly in courses requiring field experiences. These relationships may be strengthened through small group projects or partnering to record mock counseling sessions. Students may share insights on successful practices, note their strengths and weaknesses, and make suggestions for improvement during group supervision sessions that occur in a discussion board forum or in a live SKYPE meeting (Scheuermann, 2010). Talking about situations that occur at site placements enhances the experiential learning exercise by further responding to the needs of internal kinesthetic learners, those who benefit most from discussing their experiences with peers and instructors (Cicco, 2009; Cicco, 2012; Rundle, 2006). Throughout the entire online course experience, the instructor must communicate with students frequently and provide ongoing feedback, support, and constructive criticism. He/she must also demonstrate the qualities of genuineness, trustworthiness, expertness, and attractiveness to achieve the best results in terms of student performance and satisfaction (Haberstroh, 2010).

Accurate Assessment

Counselor educators are challenged to accurately assess their students' development and mastery of counseling skills and techniques. This is an ethical and professional responsibility that counseling faculty members must take very seriously (Cobia & Henderson, 2007; Shaw & Shaw, 2006). To accurately assess the development of these skills in virtual or traditional classrooms, counselor educators must rely on various assessment tools. They should create courses that integrate opportunities for practice as well as regular evaluative exercises. Designing valid, reliable, and multi-faceted performance rubrics is a key step in appropriately assessing skill development. Students can partner with their instructors to create rubrics that they too will employ to rate their own counseling session performances (Andrade, 2008). They can make suggestions for rubric revisions through discussion board activities and team collaborations. Students should also be provided with formative and summative feedback through commentary attached to evaluation scores. Another

vehicle for improving online course assessment is to employ both objective and subjective evaluation forms, such as multiple-choice exams and reviewing of reaction papers, respectively. Recorded counseling sessions can be reviewed and scored by faculty instructors, site supervisors, and peers. No rating should be delivered to a student without room for communication and clear explanation from the instructor. Allowing students to engage in self- and peer-evaluation exercises furthers their reflection on appropriate counseling strategies. An overall assessment of student performance should reflect the evaluations from faculty instructors, site supervisors, and counselors-in-training and their peers. These multiple sources will make for well-rounded, fair, and triangulated assessment processes (Cicco, 2011; Reiner & Arnold, 2010). Communicating expectations with students before, during, and after assessments are administered and providing them with support to accompany feedback also responds to various emotional, sociological, and psychological learning-style preferences (Cicco, 2009; Cicco, 2011; Rundle, 2006).

Conclusion

This article presented counselor educators with multiple recommendations for strategic lesson planning in online courses. The five-step plan presented above may serve as a guide for faculty members that are new to the virtual classroom. Strategic lesson planning essentially involves the processes of syllabus and assignment revision, differentiated instruction, consideration of specific student learning-style preferences, providing for healthy relationship-building, and employing diverse evaluation methods. The conscientious online instructor will be careful to design a course that responds to learners' needs and preferences by providing them with attractive and engaging learning modules, various opportunities for discussion and practice, assignment options, and triangulated assessment (Cicco, 2011; Cicco, 2012; Haberstroh, 2010; Trepal et al., 2007). Many of the strategies presented are also relevant for educators across disciplines, and for in-class, hybrid, and completely online course modalities. Examining and customizing strategies to meet individual student needs will inevitably result in

improved student performance and overall course satisfaction (Cicco, 2009; Cicco, 2012; Rundle, 2006).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Cicco is currently working as a professor in The School of Education, Department of Human Services and Counseling, Division of Counselor Education Programs, at St. John's University in New York. She teaches graduate students preparing to serve as school and clinical mental health counselors. She was previously a professor in the Department of Education at Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College of The City University of New York, where she taught teachers-in-training. She holds a doctorate in Instructional Leadership, with specialization areas in Learning Styles and Administration and Supervision and a Master's degree in School Counseling. Her research interests include achievement and attitudes in online courses, learning-style preferences of online learners, collaborations among counselor educators, and faculty and student perceptions of counseling instruction through the online classroom.