ARTICLE

VIRTUAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL TOOLS: PERFECTING THE WEEKLY ROADMAP

By

GINA CICCO

Associate Professor of Counselor Education, St. John's University, Queens, New York.

ABSTRACT

This article will provide details on the importance of providing structure within an online graduate counseling course in the form of a weekly roadmap tool. There are various instructional tools that may be useful in providing students with differing levels of structure, to meet their learning style preferences for structural stimuli (Cicco, 2013). The Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model lists structure as an element of learning style within the emotional domain of an individual's learning style profile (Dunn & Griggs, 2003; Rundle, 2006). Recent research indicates that student satisfaction in virtual classrooms is often related to faculty-student interactions, levels of available support for students, and course structure, among other variables (Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Effective online instructors will be cognizant of their roles and available tools in creating increased or decreased levels of structure in virtual classrooms. The weekly roadmap tool, though sometimes pre-crafted and embedded in course management systems, may be customized by a faculty instructor to provide improved faculty-student interactions, assignment clarifications and resource support, and structure that marks and guides student achievement of sequential course learning objectives (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). This article will outline clear methods of creating and perfecting a weekly roadmap tool in online counseling and other graduate education courses and point to the need for further formal study of its academic impact.

Key Words: Counseling Courses, Course Structure, Graduate Education, Instructional Methods, Learning Styles, Online Courses, Online Instruction, Virtual Classroom, Virtual Learning Tools, Weekly Roadmap.

INTRODUCTION

There are a multitude of tools available to instructors and students that may improve their online course experiences. Each of these tools may be more or less valuable, depending on individual learning needs and preferences (Cicco, 2013). Faculty instructors who are cognizant of their options and resources in online courses may greatly improve their students' learning experiences when they employ the appropriate tools. The number of weekly assignments, course syllabus and timeline, and level of faculty-student communication should be considered as potential contributors to overall course satisfaction and success (Grady, 2013). Although online course management systems create shells or templates for each course that pre-establish certain aspects of course setup and presentation, there is still ample room for faculty creativity to incorporate unique course designs and to implement tools that will individualize the virtual learning environment and provide opportunities for meeting a diversity of student learning-style preferences (Cicco, 2013; Smaldino & Yamagata-Lynch, 2015). This article will focus on meeting students' emotional needs for more or less structure in the virtual classroom, through strategic creation and implementation of a weekly roadmap tool. The content, layout, communication and interaction, and evaluation elements involved in creating and perfecting a weekly roadmap will be outlined so as to provide online counseling and other graduate education instructors with a blueprint for incorporating structure to improve their students' performance and satisfaction. Expansion of current understanding of the effects of the roadmap tool on performance and satisfaction in online courses can be best achieved through formal scientific investigation.

Structure and Satisfaction in the Virtual Classroom

Course structure in online courses has been linked to

students' satisfaction in online graduate academic programs (Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). These findings are clearly aligned with prior research on the Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model that revealed the improvement in graduate students' attitudes, academic performance, and course satisfaction when their learning-style preferences were accommodated by conscientious and strategic faculty instructors, who planned on and purposefully incorporated varying levels of emotional stimuli, such as structure (Cicco, 2009; Rundle, 2006). The structural element of learning style falls within an emotional domain and it can be more or less meaningful with respect to student success depending on their preferences, levels of autonomy, and previous experiences with online courses. Structure can be noted, observed, and measured in various aspects of the course, such as the syllabus, assignment instructions and descriptions, rubrics, formative and summative evaluation methods, and in the provision of assignment alternatives and options (Cicco, 2011; Cicco, 2013; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008).

Faculty instructors who aim to improve their students' retention, success, and satisfaction levels in online courses may consider creating a weekly roadmap, which responds to an array of students' potential learning needs and preferences for structure within the virtual learning environment. This simple but rich tool may serve to provide structural stimulation in virtual classrooms while encouraging student autonomy, management of selfdirected learning experiences, and flexible timelines towards meeting course objectives (Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008; Zacharis, 2011). The weekly roadmap is intended to be a student-friendly guide to navigate each week of the online course experience by breaking down complex syllabi and course calenders into realistic, step-by-step guides that facilitate the communication process between faculty and students and foster interaction among students during discussions and team-learning exercises (Cicco, 2013). This form of organization and structure has not been examined carefully in recent research on online instruction and merits further empirical study.

Creating a Weekly Roadmap

The weekly roadmap may serve as a tool for instructors and students to enhance their overall virtual learning experience. For faculty, simplifying weekly assignments for students into smaller and more achievable objectives that appear less intimidating may be more beneficial in terms of generating regular and consistent student output. A short list of weekly assignments may encourage student participation as opposed to a lengthy course syllabus that requires extra time to sort through, interpret, and digest. While the course syllabus is an important document, these short weekly checklists may allow faculty to track student performance more closely and to provide more focused feedback, commentary, and suggestions to improve the eventual quality of a larger capstone assignment. Additionally, weekly assignments will allow the instructor to clearly capture ongoing progress towards mastering course objectives and to intervene when necessary to avoid the possibility of students missing threshold concepts (Bernstein & Bass, 2005; Cicco, 2013).

For students, the weekly roadmap may facilitate their understanding of the sequential nature of complex course objectives while eliminating the guesswork in prioritizing course assignments. The roadmap creates a realistic to-do list to factor into weekly responsibilities and provides a timeline and timeframe for successful completion of weekly objectives. Furthermore, the roadmap creates an ongoing communication system between faculty instructors and students, so that questions can be addressed promptly and well in advance of assignment deadlines. This system of interaction eliminates a greatdeal of stress while facilitating the development of faculty student trust and rapport when communication is regular, ongoing, and predictable (Cicco, 2011; Grady, 2013). The online management system may have a built-in roadmap section or the instructor may post the roadmaps in a specific area of the course for each week of the semester. For online courses, it is recommended that roadmaps be posted for each week of the course from the beginning of the semester but students are encouraged to follow the weekly schedule rather than jumping ahead and possibly missing important concepts and necessary objective milestones. The creation of a weekly roadmap clearly has implicit advantages for both instructors and students in virtual classrooms, and merits formal research investigation

that would verify the academic and performance outcomes and satisfaction levels that result when this tool is employed.

Content

The weekly roadmap must be in sync with the larger course syllabus. However, each week of study is outlined into simple, achievable goals that are available at the start of each week of study. The content of the roadmap should include the following: weekly reading and research assignments; available resources such as presentations, media, Websites, and supplementary articles; specific individual and group assignments due that week, such as participation in discussions and/or other written assignments with their due dates; links to rubrics, assignment descriptions, and other evaluation criteria; opportunities to ask for support from the instructor; and reminders of upcoming assignments. It is of particular importance to integrate differentiated instructional resources and assignments to meet students' diverse learning styles (Cicco, 2013; Rundle, 2006; Swenson & Taylor, 2012). For example, the weekly resources should include auditory and visual stimuli as opposed to exclusively text-laden presentations or articles. The weekly assignments should offer students the choice, at times, of doing a field visit or interview as opposed to a traditional research paper or essay. Offering choices and assignment alternatives empowers students and expands their autonomy by allowing them to utilize and capitalize on their strengths and interests (Rundle, 2006). Examining the results of incorporating specific elements in the weekly roadmap should be further explored as inclusion of specific items, such as video links or audio-taped lectures, may be linked to students' perceptions and performance in the online course.

Layout

The presentation of the weekly roadmap is perhaps as integral to its impact on student success as is its very content. If the roadmap appears overly detailed, complex, intricate, and busy, it is unlikely to foster student interest and creativity. Instead, a simple, itemized roadmap, with no more than 10 items or sentences for a week of study is more likely to provide support in a user-friendly way. Each item should be cross-referenced with a specific course objective so its inclusion in the unit of instruction makes logical sense to students. In some ways, the roadmap conveys to the student the image of the instructor in the virtual classroom. If the instructor is speaking in language that students understand, they may be challenged while remaining active and involved. The instructor who is regularly present through a roadmap that elicits student concerns and predicts particular needs for troubleshooting allows the student to feel supported and respected. On the other hand, the roadmap that appears as daunting as a 50-page syllabus, may create the perception in students that the faculty member is confusing or incompetent, aloof, or unapproachable. The language of the roadmap, therefore, should be clear, concise, and helpful so as to convey faculty trustworthiness and competence (Haberstroh, 2010). Instructors may be creative in posting the roadmap as a checklist to allow for student selftracking, or as a brief outline, but a simple and decipherable layout is imperative to serving the purpose of the roadmap as a helpful weekly navigation tool to encourage student progress and improve student confidence while mitigating the challenges of multi-tasking amidst the busy schedules of many graduate students. The appearance of the roadmap may also be relevant in matching students' learning-style preferences and their subsequent use of the tool and/or performance outcomes, and these indicators of the roadmap's utility warrant further research investigation.

Communication and Interaction

Instructors who communicate regularly with their students during the online course experience greatly enhance the virtual learning environment and accommodate various learning-style preferences. The instructor's regular and ongoing presence offers students a view into his/her care and concern for student growth, development, success, and eventual mastery of course objectives (Cicco, 2013; Haberstroh, 2010). Faculty presence is indicated by posting a weekly roadmap, responding to student inquiries in emails or discussion boards, posting comments on student discussions, and providing formal and informal feedback on each student assignment. The feedback that is

provided should be timely, frequent, clear, and should offer suggestions for improvement. Scoring should not be mysterious, but linked to demonstration of mastering specific course objectives (Cicco, 2011).

The weekly roadmap is one specific opportunity for the faculty member to demonstrate presence in the course and to offer support on weekly assignments. The last sentence of every roadmap should include the instructor's contact information, so students may reach out for help and assistance if needed. A time-frame for responding to student inquiries should also be established at the start of the course, and written into the syllabus. Improving communication also engages students and instructors in ongoing interaction with subject matter. The weekly roadmap should include at least one to two items that remind students of the need to interact with each other to make progress towards objectives. One possibility is including a team or class discussion for each week of instruction. Discussion boards are the rich tool for exchanging ideas and viewpoints and they may integrate a self- or peer-assessment measure. Another option is making work in small groups or pairs a regular activity during the semester, as indicated by exercises listed in the weekly roadmaps. Keeping students engaged, active, and accountable for their involvement in course subject matter is likely to improve their performance and satisfaction in the virtual classroom, but further empirical evidence is needed to confirm these assertions, as the roadmap tool has yet to be studied carefully in formal research (Cicco, 2013; Grady, 2013; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008).

Evaluation

Any effective course design, however creative or differentiated in terms of online instructional methods, should be followed by careful implementation and evaluation. The weekly roadmap may help students to keep track of their progress on a weekly agenda and towards semester-long course goals, but for it to work, it must be monitored regularly by the faculty instructor. Each week, the faculty instructor must provide feedback on student assignments, review students' discussion board postings, and respond to student inquiries in a timely fashion so as to positively impact the following week of work to be completed. Commenting on students' assignments after numerous other assignments have been submitted defeats the purpose of offering formative suggestions for improvement that carry on to future assignments. Therefore, the faculty instructor must be actively engaged in evaluating student work throughout the semester, each week of the semester. The weekly roadmap may conclude with a statement of when feedback and scores will be posted in the virtual classroom, so students know when to check in for constructive support by viewing the grading tool of the course (Cicco, 2011; Yukselturk, Yildirim, 2008).

Instructors may also gain insight on how well the weekly roadmap is working by asking students to complete brief surveys each week, allowing them to express concerns and to share ideas for improving the use of the virtual learning tool. The links to such surveys may be included as the final item in the weekly roadmap. Evaluation is an ongoing process that may improve performance and satisfaction, especially if clear objectives are linked to rubric items used to score assignments. Offering students self- and peer evaluation exercises is also vital to increasing their awareness of progress towards course objectives. These types of activities may become part of the required assignments included in weekly roadmaps. A qualitative investigation of student perspectives on the benefits of such evaluative measures is recommended and would likely highlight their pros and cons (Cicco, 2011; Grady, 2013).

Conclusion

Responding to students' learning-style preferences, particularly in terms of course structure, may enhance performance and satisfaction in virtual classrooms (Cicco, 2009; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Among various tools and strategies that online instructors may employ, the weekly roadmap is recommended as a common sense approach that may make a marked improvement in one's virtual learning experience. The weekly roadmap may provide a simplified and focused agenda for each week of study throughout the course of the semester. The content, layout, and consistency of the roadmap may allow forexpanded faculty creativity and presence in the online course, opportunities to build dialogue and rapport among

faculty members and students, and the ongoing exchange of constructive evaluations and feedback. These improvements in faculty and student engagement and supervision may make a significant impact on student progress and mastery of comprehensive course objectives (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). It is imperative that online course instructors consider the repertoire of instructional and learning tools that may improve the quality of virtual classroom experiences by allowing students to remain engaged and accountable for their own success (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). The weekly roadmap is a practical planning tool that instructors may implement to support student learning and self assessment and in so doing, enhance the overall delivery of online graduate courses. There are strong implications for the need for continued research on the effects of the roadmap tool's implementation and use in virtual classrooms as the findings of such studies would possibly point to key indicators and predictors of student retention and success in online counseling courses.

References

[1]. Bernstein, D., & Bass, R. (2005). *The scholarship of teaching and learning.* Vol. 91(4), pp. 37-4.

[2]. Cicco, G. (2009). "Online versus in-class courses: Learning-style assessment as an advisement tool". *International Journal on E-Learning*, Vol. 8(2), pp.161-173.

[3]. Cicco, G. (2011). "Assessment in Online Courses: How Are Counseling Skills Evaluated?", *i-manager's Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol. 8(2), Jul-Sep 2011, Print ISSN 0973-0559, E-ISSN 2230-7125, pp.9-15.

[4]. Cicco, G. (2013). "Strategic Lesson Planning In Online Courses: Suggestions For Counselor Educators". *i-manager's Journal on School Educational Technology*, Vol. 8(3), Dec- Feb 2013, Print ISSN: 0973-2217, E-ISSN: 2230-7133, pp. 1-8.

[5]. Dunn, R., & Griggs, S.A. (Eds.). (2003). *"Synthesis of the Dunn and Dunn learning-style model research: Who, what, when, where, and so what?"* New York: St. John's University.

[6]. Grady, J.R. (2013). "Improving student satisfaction with large-scale, compressed timeline online courses". *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, Vol.14(4), pp. 195-208.

[7]. Haberstroh, S. (2010). "College counselors' use of informal language online: Student perceptions of expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness". *Cyber Psychology, Behavior & Social Networking*, Vol.13(4), pp 455-459.

[8]. Kasworm, C. E., Rose, A. D., & Ross-Gordon, J. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. Los Angeles: Sage.

[9]. Rundle, S. M. (2006). *An introduction to the Building Excellence Survey*. Pittsford, NY: Performance Concepts International.

[10]. Smaldino, S.E., & Yamagata-Lynch, L. (2015). "The course-in-a-box design issues". *Techtrends*, Vol. 59(4), pp. 71-77.

[11]. Swenson, P., & Taylor, N.A. (2012). *Online teaching in the digital age*. Los Angeles: Sage.

[12]. Trepal, H., Haberstroh, S., Duffey, T., & Evans, M. (2007). "Considerations and strategies for teaching online counseling skills: Establishing relationships in cyberspace". *Counselor Education & Supervision*, Vol 46(4), pp. 266-279.

[13]. Yukselturk, E., & Yildirim, Z. (2008). "Investigation of interaction, online support, course structure and flexibility as the contributing factors to students' satisfaction in an online certificate program". *Journal of Educational Technology & Society,* Vol. 11(4), pp. 51-65.

[14]. Zacharis, N. Z. (2011). "The effect of learning style on preference for web-based courses and learning outcomes". *British Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol. 42(5), pp. 790-800.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Cicco is a Professor in The School of Education, Department of Counselor Education at St. John's University in New York. She teaches Graduate students preparing to serve as school and clinical mental health counselors. She is also the Chair of the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) Training Program Committee and DASA certifying officer for St. John's University. 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, Optimizing Online Counseling Instruction, and Faculty-Student supervisory relationships in Online Courses.