DESIGNING INNOVATIVE COUNSELING COURSES: COMBINING TECHNOLOGY, THEORY, AND PRACTICE

By

GINA CICCO

Assistant Professor of Counselor Education, St. John's University.

ABSTRACT

This article will discuss the development of an innovative instructional design for teaching graduate courses in counselor education programs. The teaching strategies that will be highlighted evolved during a collaborative team-teaching project conducted by two counselor educators. These two faculty members worked together to redesign a course in organizational and administrative theory for school counselors-in-training. Their project will be described as well as the resultant conceptual model for integrating technology, theory, and practice through employing differentiated instruction. The proposed instructional design includes consideration of students' learning-style preferences. Countless studies document the many benefits of accommodating students' learning styles in the classroom, as doing so improves students' academic performance, learning outcomes, and overall attitudes (Cicco, 2009; Dunn & Griggs, 2003). The instructional design model presented incorporates techniques for engaging students through strategic lesson planning, emphasizing faculty expertise and interests, and providing students with assignment options so they can optimize their learning experiences. The instructional model ideally would combine thoughtful, meaningful technological tools, instruction of theory through various instructional strategies, and opportunities for application and evaluation through practical, experiential learning. Recommendations for enhancing lessons in the classroom by integrating resources from online course management systems will also be addressed. Utilizing faculty collaboration, peer-review methods, and experiential learning has been shown to produce positive learning outcomes in counselor preparation programs (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2005; Orr, Hall, & Hulse-Killacky, 2008).

Keywords: Innovative Instructional Design, Counselor Education, Collaborative Team-Teaching, Integrating Technology, Theory and Practice, Differentiated Instruction, Strategic Lesson Planning, Online Resources.

INTRODUCTION

This article will describe a conceptual model for creating an innovative instructional design for use in graduate counselor preparation courses. This model grew out of the team-teaching experience of two counselor educators in New York City who sought to improve the traditional instructional delivery of an organization and administration course. These two professors collaborated to redesign a five-week summer course. Their initial course planning process focused on combining their professional expertise and experiences to teach both theoretical concepts and practical applications for future leaders of pupil personnel services in K-12 schools. The course curriculum emphasized the new vision for school counselors and the corresponding principles put forth by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) in its model for comprehensive school counseling programs (Cobia & Henderson, 2007). The results of the professors' collaborative project included a creative evolution of various teaching strategies, a renewed enthusiasm for mentoring students involved in field courses, and a deeper interest in differentiating instruction in lessons to respond to individual students' learning-style preferences (Cicco, 2009). Their summer course exemplified an exercise in engaging students in their own learning processes by providing them with opportunities to select from an array of challenging assignments. At the same time, the course integrated diverse teaching styles, technology and media enhancements, and opportunities for learning theory while practically applying lessons learned in individual and small-

group activities.

Collaborative Team-Teaching Project

The work of two dedicated counselor educators to redesign a five-week summer course is described here to provide the context within which the instructional model outlined below emerged. Two professors, described hereafter as Professor A and Professor B, began a partnership to creatively improve and enhance the instructional delivery of a traditional course in organization and administration of pupil personnel services in K-12 schools. Each of 15 class meetings was planned to allow each professor to highlight personal expertise and professional experiences. Class meetings were two hours in duration and separated into two parts. The first hour was taught by Professor A, a former school counselor, and current full-time faculty member in a counselor preparation program at a major metropolitan university. She is an active educational researcher with a strong publication record. Her main professional and research interest is in organizational and administrative theory. She encourages her students to become familiar and comfortable with the process of conducting original research studies. This view is aligned with ASCAs new vision for school counselors, who are now accountable for demonstrating the effectiveness of school counseling interventions and charged with employing data-driven decision-making (Cobia & Henderson, 2007; Dahir, 2009). The second hour was taught by Professor B, a former school counselor with a quarter-century of experience in New York City public schools. Her current position is the coordinator of field experiences in the same major university where her colleague, Professor A, is employed. Her main interest in supporting counselors-in-training is to allow them ample real-life opportunities to gain practical experience during their graduate preparation program. She is also concerned, as the university liaison with the community schools, to maintain relationships with counseling professionals to sponsor student interns during their practicum and internship field experiences.

The Process and Results

Professors A and B planned their summer course project for several weeks prior to the start of the semester. Their communication continued on a regular basis during the course of the semester and after its conclusion to collaborate on scoring students' capstone assignments to submit final course grades. They shared ideas for covering threshold concepts in the course curriculum in ways that represented their individual strengths as faculty instructors and in ways that would engage students and maintain their interest (Bernstein & Bass, 2005). They planned each of the 15 class meetings together.

Professor A began her segment on organizational theory with some type of technology- or media-based introduction or motivation exercise. Some examples included incorporating YouTube video clips, Power Point presentations, online surveys, useful Websites, and university Digital Library tools. She combined lectures with in-class discussions on text readings and supplementary research article readings. She engaged students in question-and-answer sessions to ensure understanding of major concepts and counseling program models. She followed such discussions with individual or small-group activities that provided students with options on how to demonstrate their mastery of learning objectives. For example, students would be able to choose between orally presenting their outlines for peer-mentoring programs or creating a handout or Power Point presentation to share with colleagues that included a diagram of the process of implementing and evaluating their peer-mentoring programs. Professor A also utilized the online course management system, i.e. Blackboard, to allow for ongoing threaded discussions that served as follow-ups to the in-class lessons (Reiner & Arnold, 2010). Blackboard was also used for posting Power Point presentations and for administering quizzes and exams. These activities and assignments were planned deliberately to respond to students' varied learning-style preferences. In particular, the assignments and in-class activities were intended to meet preferences along perceptual, emotional, and sociological domains (Dunn & Griggs, 2003). The use of the virtual classroom was considered another form of enhancing students' learning experiences because it allowed for professional relationship-building, networking, and collegiality outside of the limitations of a two-hour in-class meeting (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

Professor B delivered her segment to enable students to actually put into practice the lessons they had learned with Professor A. For example, Professor B would present students with real-life scenarios depicting school crises to elicit student responses as future organizational leaders. Her students would also engage in role-plays to demonstrate their abilities to serve in the ASCA roles of school leaders, systemic change agents, advocates, and team-members and collaborators (Dahir, 2009). Students would then create and use original rubrics to score their performances along with those of their peers. The processes of self- and peer-evaluation, and particularly rubric construction, were employed to encourage deeper learning and understanding among students of the necessary skills and techniques for professional, thoughtful, and ethical school counseling practice (Andrade, 2008). Professor B also included discussions, debates, reflective essay writing, and site visits in her lesson plans. Students participating in site visits would be able to interview and observe practitioners in a valuable form of experiential learning. The culminating capstone assignment would be a portfolio that summarized activities that were directly aligned with course learning objectives. An alternative option would be to conduct a program evaluation to delineate the strengths and weaknesses, and to explore possible improvements for an existing counseling program. The levels of difficulty in such capstone assignments also correspond to the higher-order thinking skills along Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson, 2005). The course requirements became gradually more challenging as students gained knowledge and experience. Again, the two faculty members involved in this project planned lessons in logical sequences to encourage students to more clearly demonstrate their critical thinking skills.

The results of the team-teaching project indicated the power of presenting students with diverse instructional approaches and varied professional experience on the part of their professors. Students completed formative and summative assessments throughout the course of the semester, in the forms of quizzes, exams, and essays. They also completed weekly feedback forms and surveys at the end of the semester to comment on their instructors' pedagogical approaches, their own learning experiences, and their overall levels of satisfaction in the course. Professors A and B also scored assignments and class participation together to provide reliable, consistent evaluations of academic performance. Various forms of assessment supported student growth and improvement while providing instructors with invaluable feedback on their coverage of learning objectives. The students' assignments indicated strong levels of academic performance, with satisfactory or above satisfactory mastery of learning objectives. Their capstone projects were clearly above average, and considered exemplary by both professors. Student output evidenced their practice of higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving in situations that depicted realistic counseling dilemmas. Final course grades ranged from A to B+, also providing a mark of strong academic achievement. Students' comments on their instructors' teaching strategies were overwhelmingly positive as were their levels of overall satisfaction in the summer course. Professors A and B also reflected on their growth as instructors during the team-teaching project. They agreed to work together again on similar projects in the future. They believe that their students can also provide future counselors-in-training with deeper insights as peer-mentors, especially after having experienced this unique summer course. These results are similar to those found by other researchers who evaluated team-teaching approaches in counseling courses (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2005; Orr, Hall, & Hulse-Killacky, 2008).

A New Model for Counseling Instruction

The collaboration of Professors A and B and the results of their team-teaching project led to the design of this proposed innovative model for the instructional design of counseling courses. The model can be conceptualized as a sequential flow chart. Each step in the flow chart will be described hereafter. The prerequisites for instructors prior to creating and implementing such a model are awareness of the diversity of each individual's learning experience due to their learning-style preferences and strengths and a willingness to employ differentiated instructional strategies. Learning style is perhaps the most fundamental concept intertwined in the development of this model. Faculty members are encouraged to administer learning-style

assessments prior to the start of their courses or at the very beginning of their semester of instruction. Students who are provided with their learning-style profiles may benefit from a brief or in-depth discussion on how to maximize their learning experiences by capitalizing on their learning-style strengths. The Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model is a widely researched model that could accompany such discussion in any course (Cicco, 2009). Many research studies document the benefits of accommodating students' learning-style preferences in the classroom as far as the resultant learning outcomes, academic performance, and attitudes (Burke, 2000; Dunn & Griggs, 2003). With learning style as the cornerstone, below are the steps that would allow faculty members in counselor education programs, and perhaps in many other programs, to design more innovative and engaging courses. The proposed innovative instructional design model is depicted in Figure 1.

Revisiting Learning Objectives and Assignments

Faculty instructors frequently find themselves revisiting syllabi semester after semester. The subsequent revisions do not always consider differentiating instruction or linking course input with course output. Each learning objective included in the course syllabus should be carefully reviewed to ensure that it is written in a way that it can be operationalized and eventually measured through lesson and course evaluation strategies. A simple way to do this is to link each objective with an assignment that directly measures students' mastery of the objective. This first step in the design may be considered a brainstorming exercise for the instructor or co-instructors to develop new and creative assignments that engage student interest and participation and respond to varied learning-style preferences. The assignments should be designed to clearly demonstrate that students have mastered the corresponding learning objectives. In addition, each assignment should be matched with an alternative assignment option. This alternative would allow students of diverse learning styles to utilize their strengths while still meeting the learning objective. The opportunity to choose among a number of appropriate assignments responds to students' learning styles and provides them with a sense of ownership in selecting the best match for their learning-style preferences (Cicco, 2009).

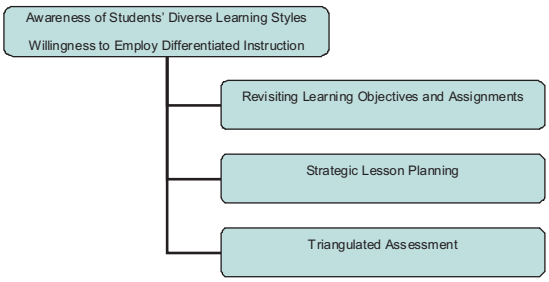

Figure 1. Instructional Design Model.

Strategic Lesson Planning

This next stage allows the faculty instructor to organize lesson plans in logical sequences, while incorporating diverse activities that respond to various learning-style preferences. Each lesson plan should include a set of clear objectives, a list of necessary materials, an engaging motivation exercise that introduces the lesson topic, a list of procedural steps for the entire lesson delivery with special attention given to the instructional strategies to be employed, an evaluation exercise, follow-up activities, and a set of helpful resources. The faculty instructor should plan each lesson carefully and with the aim of providing differentiated instruction. The lessons should include instruction of theoretical concepts and opportunities for practical application of lessons learned. The strategic part of the lesson planning not only signifies the use of differentiated instruction, but also the provision for development and demonstration of higher-order thinking skills along the levels of a hierarchical progression such as that of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson, 2005).

Strategic lesson planning also implies including activity alternatives that would allow for the instructor to be flexible in deciding which activity would be most appropriate on a given day with a given group of students to best respond to their learning needs. An instructor may purposely organize the first hour of the lesson to include class discussion and small-group work, exercises that provide auditory, internal kinesthetic, and sociological stimulation. To create a diversified instructional experience, the second hour might incorporate a short film and individual reflective essay writing. These activities would, in contrast, provide visual

and auditory stimulation, with a variation of sociological stimulation for individuals who work best independently. The reflective writing exercise would also respond to diverse psychological learning-style preferences. The instructor may choose to reverse the sequence of activities or may have another alternative, such as a debate or research exercise planned as well. A subsequent lesson might reverse the sequence of activities or incorporate completely different forms of stimulation, such as visiting a site to conduct an observation of a parent meeting, which would meet the needs of kinesthetic learners. An instructor may note that students sit in the same seats in class every day, so he/she may encourage students to work in different small groups throughout the lesson to allow for mobility and varied sociological experiences. To respond to diverse emotional learning preferences, an instructor may assign a loosely defined brainstorming exercise during the first hour of class, and for the second hour he/she might include a lesson evaluation in which the required assignment would be a structured outline or presentation (Dunn & Griggs, 2003).

Examples of other instructional strategies include integrating technology and media into lesson plans through use of video and audio clips, live media such as SKYPE when appropriate, in-class Internet use, live surveys and clickers, and through virtual classroom tools such as discussion boards. These technological enhancements allow the possibility of accommodating the learning needs and preferences of various learners, specifically those of tactual learners and those of students who prefer to work at different times of day (Cicco, 2009). Technological tools may also reinforce theoretical and practical lessons learned, and engage students in diverse activities. Students have opportunities for professional and collegial relationship-building in the classroom setting and outside of the classroom through use of discussion boards, small-group activities, and field trips (Trepal et al., 2007). To further diversify the delivery of instruction, faculty may invite guest speakers that are practitioners in the field of counseling and guest lecturers or visiting faculty to add different perspectives to the course discussions.

Faculty instructors that are strategic in their lesson planning also select activities and discussions that highlight their personal interests and professional passions. For example, a professor that is particularly interested in student advocacy may share articles that he/she has written when covering the topic of counselor advocacy. Faculty research projects and publications can only enrich the class discussion of a related topic. All of the pedagogical methods and variations mentioned thus far are considered strategic when they are selected thoughtfully and because they may be potentially meaningful for students. Faculty collaborations such as team-teaching may also be considered strategic because they may present students with very different teaching styles that would accommodate a greater variety of learning styles (Dunn & Griggs, 2003).

Triangulated Assessment

This last step considers the importance of ongoing evaluation. The feedback that students may provide for their instructors has great potential to improve the delivery of instruction. If students are asked for their feedback on instructional methods employed, on their own learning processes and experiences, and on their satisfaction in their courses, faculty may utilize comments to quickly respond to students' needs and concerns. Instead of waiting for final course evaluations, faculty may elicit feedback early in the semester and throughout its course, to creatively revise existing lesson plans to provide immediate attention to areas of student need and interest. In this way, faculty members are receptive to commentary on the effectiveness of their instructional strategies. These types of evaluation also provide faculty with insight on students' grasp of threshold concepts (Kiley & Wisker, 2009).

In evaluating students' academic performance, faculty members should consider both formative and summative assessments that allow for assignment revisions. Faculty instructors have the primary responsibility of creating valid and reliable scoring measures, such as rubrics, and explaining these tools to students. In this innovative model, students share the responsibility of evaluating their work with faculty. They may take part in the creation of rubrics, and utilize them to engage in self- and peer-review exercises (Andrade, 2008). These tools place additional attention on

the progressive development of higher-order thinking skills. These self- and peer-review assignments also engage students in deeper consideration of the ways in which mastery of learning objectives can be demonstrated and identified. Finally, the evaluation of students' performance on various assignments by different parties, such as the faculty instructor, self, and peers, and perhaps clinical associates and mentors, creates a wider and fairer perspective on students' overall progress and learning outcomes in the course. The processes of self- and peer-review also require higher levels of engagement, active participation, and critical-thinking skills (Bissel & Lemons, 2006).

Recommendations

The suggestions for counselor educators provided by the innovative instructional design model described herein are in no way exhaustive. There are limitless possibilities for improving instructional delivery in both traditional and virtual classrooms. Lessons can be enhanced by diversifying their typical or routine delivery by incorporating thoughtful and meaningful strategies that respond to students' learning styles. Faculty instructors that devote the time and effort required to differentiate their pedagogical strategies are frequently rewarded with deeper student engagement, interest, and achievement. The classroom is clearly not the only location for learning to take place. The resources available through Blackboard, such as discussion boards, live surveys, and variations in assessments, may be very appropriate as enhancements for in-class courses. When faculty members make a commitment to collaborate in team-teaching projects, they open a window of opportunity for exposing students to various teaching styles and to potentially more creative lessons. Educators may also consider site visits and assigning original research study projects to add to their repertoire of experiential learning exercises. Students that experience putting their learning into practice through such methods may experience more positive learning outcomes, greater interest in exploring the concerns of their profession of choice, and deeper introspection on their professional development (Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002).

Conclusion

The conscientious counselor educator continually seeks to improve instructional strategies to respond to the ethical responsibility of producing well-prepared, professional counselors. Counselor education programs include rigorous coursework, skill and technique development and opportunities for practice, and challenging field assignments. Field courses provide unique opportunities for exploration of school crises, ethical dilemmas, and difficulties in balancing multiple roles and responsibilities, particularly in large urban schools (Brown & Trusty, 2005). The innovative instructional design described in this article aims to provide a framework for instructors to respond to the demands of their profession while simultaneously accommodating the learning needs of their students. Differentiating instruction increases the possibility of engaging students and meeting their learning-style preferences. Combining theory, practice, and technology to design strategic lessons also enhances the students' learning experiences with various opportunities for mastery of learning objectives and for demonstration of higher-order thinking skills (Anderson, 2005). Allowing students to conduct self- and peer-reviews immediately makes them active participants in their own learning while providing a model of professional growth and development in the activity of giving and receiving constructive criticism (Andrade, 2008). There are endless opportunities for improving and enhancing instructional delivery when faculty instructors are open to exploring their own creativity to provide optimal circumstances for student development and learning.

References

[1]. Anderson, L. (2005). Objectives, evaluation, and the improvement of education. *Studies in Educational Evaluation,* 31(2/3), 102-113.

[2]. Andrade, H. (2008). Self-assessment through rubrics. *Educational Leadership,* 65(4), 60-63.

[3]. Bernstein, D., & Bass, R. (2005). The scholarship of teaching and learning. Academe, 91(4), 37-43.

[4]. Bissel, A.N., & Lemons, P.P. (2006). A new method for assessing critical thinking in the classroom. *Bioscience*, 56(1), 66-72.

[5]. Brown, D., & Trusty, J. (2005). School counselors, comprehensive school counseling programs, and academic achievement: Are school counselors promising more than they can deliver? *Professional School Counseling*, 9(1), 1-8.

[6]. Burke, K. (2000). A paradigm shift: Learning-styles implementation and preservice teachers. In R. Dunn & S.A. Griggs (Eds.), *Practical approaches to using learning styles in higher education* (pp. 85-94). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

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

[8]. Cobia, D.C., & Henderson, D.A. (2007). *Developing an effective and accountable school counseling program* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

[9]. Corey, G., Corey, M.S., & Callanan, P. (2005). An approach to teaching ethics courses in human services and counseling. *Counseling & Values*, 49(3), 193-207.

[10]. Dahir, C.A. (2009). School counseling in the 21st century: Where lies the future? *Journal of Counseling & Development,* 87, 3-5.

[11]. 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.

[12]. Jung, I., Choi, S., Lim, C., & Leem, J. (2002). Effects of different types of interaction on learning achievement, satisfaction and participation in Web-based instruction. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 39(2), 153-162.

[13]. Kiley, M., & Wisker, G. (2009). Threshold concepts in research education and evidence of threshold crossing. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(4), 431-441.

[14]. Orr, J.J., Hall, S.F., & Hulse-Killacky, D. (2008). A model for collaborative teaching teams in counselor education. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 47(3), 146-163.

[15]. Reiner, C.M., & Arnold, K.E. (2010). Online course evaluation: Student and instructor perspectives and assessment potential. *Assessment Update,* 22(2), 8-10.

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Gina Cicco is 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 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. She also holds a Master's degree in School Counseling. Her research interests include achievement and attitudes in online courses, learning-style preferences of online learners, and faculty and student perceptions of counseling instruction through the online classroom.