A PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTION ON COUNSELING SKILLS IN ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The online environment provides a unique opportunity for students from wide-ranging locations to participate in academic activities to develop collegial abilities or vocational skills. The training process for working in the counseling field consists of graduate level learning pertaining to mental health issues, self-exploration, ethical and moral development, and reviewing contemporary research topics affecting diverse populations of people. Perhaps most importantly, it also involves developing the skill to be able to translate knowledge into a new counselor's skills and dispositional presentation. Since online courses are typically delivered in synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid formats, it is reasonable to reflect on the differences experienced by students in skills-based courses and consider possible impacts the varied online learning environments could have on their development towards becoming counseling professionals. This reflection seeks to blend research and publication findings for counselor education in skills courses through the experiences of faculty and students exposed to varied learning environments utilizing the online format.

Keywords: online learning, counseling skills, asynchronous courses, COVID-19 and online education

PEDAGOGY FOR ONLINE SKILLS

Originating from Greek language, the literal sense of pedagogy in Greek means the "art of teaching children" (Persuad, 2019, p. 1). A term often utilized in the field of education, pedagogy encompasses skillfully integrating the theory and practice of meaningful teaching and learning. Specifically, pedagogy includes the intersection of teaching and learning strategies, cultural considerations, and an educator's philosophy of teaching and learning. Pedagogy, grounded in a collaborative approach, involves mutual respect between educators and learners and requires the intentional deliver of instructional materials and content. Pedagogy primarily focuses on the context in which learning occurs and aims to meet the needs of individual learners.

Online counseling pedagogy involves teaching counselors in training via technology by building on previous knowledge to develop new and advanced knowledge, skills, and beliefs (Chen et al., 2020; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). Moreover, counseling

skills are a foundational concept in counselor education for teaching and learning (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights a need for increased access to quality education online. However, some counselor educators may hold to the belief that counseling skills are better taught in a traditional classroom setting due to the ability to teach and practice clinical skills in class (Barrio Minton, 2019, Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011; Chen et al., 2020; Perry, 2017).

Historically, the research indicates that online counseling skills pedagogy and delivery models are as effective as traditional classroom models (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998; Robinson & Kinnier, 1988). Specifically, researchers examining student clinical skill development online found no significant difference in the clinical skill development of traditional and online students. Furthermore, multiple studies indicate that clinical skills can be effectively taught online (Chen et al., 2020; Murdock et al., 2012; Wilke et al., 2016), which situates online teaching and learning as an ideal delivery modality for counseling students.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) embrace online teaching pedagogies. Grounded in constructivist and humanistic philosophical approaches to learning, online courses can expose students to many activities that prove to be similar to those experienced by their synchronous counterparts. Online pedagogy emphasizes the importance of feedback and assessment when facilitating counseling skills development online and recognizes the important role of interpersonal educational relationships between the instructor and the student (Chen et al., 2020). Online counseling skills development is a expanding area of research as online counseling programs continue to grow and flourish. The following thoroughly outlines the variances between synchronous and asynchronous learning, comprehensively discusses the online learning environment for teachers and learners, and provides best practice recommendations and tools for developing effective pedagogy for counselor educators teaching in an online environment.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

Today's educational offerings include asyn-chronous and synchronous learning opportunities for students and faculty, both of which have advantages and disadvantages. While some students and instructors prefer synchronous learning, others prefer the flexibility of asynchronous education. Research has found that asynchronous education environments are conducive to effective learning (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011); however, other reviews have provided various degrees of concern over what it takes for faculty and students to feel competent and comfortable learning the art of counseling in this manner (Huang & Hsiao., 2012).

An oft-stated downside of online learning, for some, is the lack of social interaction, which means that online students and faculty must deliberately seek out interactions with others (Haddock et al., 2020). This effect is exacerbated in asynchronous education, where students rarely interact at the same time. Online faculty may choose to offer opportunities for student interaction, which may be difficult to arrange (Haddock et al., 2020). These activities must be geared to online interaction—a challenging feat (Haddock et al., 2020). Emails, how-to videos, and even converting classroom resources such as the lecture into a video-on-demand format are often time consuming but necessary so that students avoid the need to send an excess number of emails to bridge the gap between the absence of classroom instruction and the technicalities of completing graduate level work in an online format (Huang et al., 2012; Kaufmann, 2019).

Another concern about asynchronous learning is the quality of communication between instructor and student, as well as that between students. Research has found that miscommunication occurs more often in asynchronous environments, as these are typically text-based, as compared to synchronous environments (Cicco, 2012; Huang et al., 2012). When communicating by email, the nuances of facial expression, empathy, support, and kindness could be missed by the message's recipient. Students' assessment of the materials provided and the engagement level of the faculty can alter their perception of the instructor's desire to help them be successful in developing their counseling abilities (Cicco, 2012). For this reason, it can be critical for faculty to use their communication technologies with empathy and patience so that students with varied and undefined

self-awareness can still experience their learning process positively (Jena, 2015).

Asynchronous classes provide equal opportunities for all enrolled students to participate. By contrast, synchronous classrooms allow fewer people access to each individual course, which limits the number of classes offered and the resulting academic conversations students and faculty can be exposed to during class time. Additionally, with faculty being a limited resource often spread across a greater number of courses when teaching asynchronously and online, the resulting scarcity of time to directly interact with every student could leave many students feeling like they have little to no voice in a classroom discussion (Hsiao, 2012). The quality of written discussion posts is often higher in asynchronous environments due to the increased time students have to create and polish their responses, as compared to synchronous situations (Hsiao, 2012). The debate over which is better comes down to the strength of research directly exploring this issue and the perception of the faculty delivering the instruction. The natural flaws in an unfiltered response tend to be what the student would actually deliver to a client in a counseling session, perhaps indicating this is the truer delivery in comparison to the manufactured Google/info-drive response that took many additional minutes to polish before submitting for faculty and peer review.

Counseling programs that offer many of their academic courses asynchronously will offer clinical courses synchronously, which increases live student interactions (Haddock et al., 2020). Students may complete practicum and internship requirements in person or via tele-mental-health, but these experiences will be synchronous. The practicum and internship experience can also represent a disruption of flow to the online asynchronous philosophy as well, because it is the first time students have to comply with scheduled activities in their online program. While this is a necessary reality in order to facilitate the practicum experience in line with the standards provided by CACREP (2016), the fact that some programs deliver these particular courses via synchronous online methods poses a discussion of how appropriate it is for the most critical phases of a counseling program conducted asynchronously to forsake this when students are likely to be over-stressed and have to adjust to a distinct shock to the flow of their lives.

The choice of synchronous vs. asynchronous depends upon the students' needs, interests, and flexibility concerns. Some will prefer synchronous instruction, while others will perform better in an asynchronous environment. The decision of how effective these varied content-delivery approaches may be from student to student probably relies upon how developed the student's personal goals are and what the perception of their future self as a clinician is in the face of difficulties in academic coursework (Morisano et al., 2010). Students with distinct goals featuring intrinsic motivations (Sheperis et al., 2020) will tend to be more driven, resourceful, and possess the ability to stay dedicated in the face of adversity. These qualities prove to be critical on a weekly basis when online students are faced with deciding whether or not to do the various graduate level learning tasks for practicing counseling skills in a solitary setting with only friends and family to offer guidance in a role-play scenario. Learning counseling alone can be difficult since it is a skill- and disposition-based profession, but it is even more difficult when those providing support are not counselors nor as capable as a faculty would be in a room with other peers also receiving the same instruction. This is the complication many students face in their asynchronous skills courses. Many students choose their counseling programs based on flexibility and convenience without considering how learning certain courses this way might pose increasing difficulties based on their own qualities related to personal motivation, time management, organization, and grit (Chen et al., 2020).

Microskills Development for Online Students

Whether traditional or online, one of the primary knowledge and skill trajectories in any counseling pedagogy is microskills training. The multiformity of these skills expands from informational (i.e., reflection of feelings and content), metacognitive (awareness, self-correction), and behavioral (i.e., attending, showing empathy) skills (Ridley et al., 2011)—which are often assimilated and modified to meet the needs of the client(s) being served. Counselors use these skills to consistently communicate and understand with meaning as they navigate the therapeutic process. Moreover, microskills are essentially the foundational

competencies that help structure the therapeutic process as counselors establish a relationship, evaluate presenting concerns, and conceptualize to address the concerns (Geldard et al., 2015).

As a counselor in training, learning and applying these skills are very important and enables the capacity to develop stability and structure within the therapeutic process to foster therapeutic change (Hall et al., 2014). Along with additional learned counseling strategies, techniques, and theoretical orientations, microskills can be aligned within various therapeutic models to expand counseling possibilities and strengthen cultural competence. Even so, the use of specific skills has demonstrated an increase in the likelihood of diversification and positive outcomes (Hall et al., 2014). Counseling students become acquainted with microskills through various courses in the program to assimilate their understanding of how those specific skills are critical to their effectiveness, as evidenced by the results in the populations they serve.

For students to learn and develop microskills, instructors generally use a hierarchical system approach (Bakkar, 2012). The students follow this process through a structured course that presents the tangible skills in order from basic to more advanced skills. Generally, the students obtain the information, practice what they have learned, and assess their competence by reflection and viewing feedback. It is suggested that counselor educators follow a constructivist approach to skills training by providing an example of how to use the skills, creating an opportunity to role-play, and engaging in continued supervision with the students (Murdock et al., 2012). Like face-to-face instruction in a traditional learning environment, this model has become the overall standard for measuring the competency of microskills through performance. Therefore, it is imperative that counseling programs include skills-based performance activities within their online pedagogy to increase the knowledge, skill, and disposition standards set by CACREP. The most current revision of the national standards from the CACREP included the requirement for all accredited programs to systematically track students at multiple points with multiple measures of student learning (Section 4, F, G, H; CACREP 2016). The experiential learning practices incorporated into online pedagogies allow for adherence to the guidelines and for evaluation and progression in proficiency to take place.

Performance assessment, also known as authentic assessment, is a form of evaluation that requires students to perform a task assessed by criteria (McAuliffe, 2011). This assessment style seems to be effective because of the observance of student performance. In an online pedagogy, this strategy may appear a little different than in classroom instruction due to the typical observation of technique in video/audio recordings. Although microskills are evaluated based on the utility of counseling students, there is an inability to assess thoroughly as minimal consideration is given to the outcomes or results of the session. Counseling students quickly become preoccupied with the nuances of executing various microskills when lacking a structural basis that provides an overall perspective on their connection to therapeutic change (Ridley et al., 2011). Therefore, a challenge is presented within the online format that needs to be explored further.

Challenges in Defining Best Practices

The instructional strategies for the online environment include the traditional strategies of any educator, such as Socratic questioning (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011), but also additional strategies like video lectures (Kaufmann, 2019). The challenge to defining best practices in the online learning environment is the varying factors. Some of these factors originate from the nature of the online learning environment and others from the technological tools used to expand the learning process (Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012). The following sections will review possible methods for enhancing the learning process that students experience in online counseling courses involving skills-based learning.

Online Learning Environment

Instructors' roles. Online faculty engage in many different roles to accommodate learning in the online academic environment. According to Schultz and Demers (2020), the instructor roles include educator, facilitator, guide, and technology expert. Each of these roles is necessary for online functionality. An educator plans and creates meaningful material and resources. Building off this role, facilitators assist in creating a collaborative learning experience (Heuer & King, 2004). The role

of a guide is similar to the facilitator role; however, it can include more individual communication through answering questions and weekly announcements. The technology expert is solving potential technology issues. Heuer and King (2004) described the multiple roles as shifting depending on the students' current needs. These fluid roles are an example of the complexity of the online learning environment. There is not one answer nor one standard that works for all students or situations.

Students' role. Schultz and Demers (2020) stated that online formats focus more on the students than the instructor. The instructor steps back and becomes the facilitator while the teaching role shifts to the students who use critical thinking to problem solve and answer their own questions. With the students more in control of their learning, this could contribute to the difficulty in setting a standard of best practices. Each student has their own learning styles and strategies they use to process the provided materials (Fearing & Riley, 2005). For example, a student may prefer learning from videos that demonstrate a skill (Table 1). Additionally, the students' ability to manage their own learning experience and their motivation could impact the best practices (O'Sullivan-Gavin & Shannon, 2014). With the focus shifting from the instructor leading the course to the students' initiative, it is difficult for a best practice to be standardized.

Technology Issues. Technology can become a challenge in defining best practices when the dependability of technology is a concern. When technology issues occur in a way that instructors and students cannot access the learning environment or educational materials, this disrupts the learning process. Technology issues are common and often the facilitator will need an alternate plan that incorporates less technology until the issue is resolved. In the Hanna et al. (2013) study, a participant stated, "technology had to be good enough but not perfect" (p. 300). This statement supports trying to adjust technology when issues occur. The inconsistency of technology access and availability could create discrepancies in the learning process (Hanna et al., 2013).

Technology can be used to achieve different course objectives. Online programs can vary in asynchronous or synchronous modalities with some programs incorporating both. It is not only important how the program is designed but how each instructor plans to use technology to expand learning. Each instructor has their own comfort level with incorporating technology within their course (Schultz & Demers, 2020). For example, if the instructor is new to the online learning environment, they would limit using technology as a tool to expand learning. There are, of course, exceptions to this perspective. Some instructors may be new to the online environment but have experience with using various technology in other areas of their personal life. These experienced instructors would be comfortable incorporating many different technological tools to expand learning. However, the different experiences complicate defining best practices.

According to Steele et al. (2019), another challenge to defining best practice is the instructor and students' technology abilities. The instructor will need to demonstrate skills appropriate to meet the students' needs. The authors' stated that technology needs to accommodate and adjust to the different levels of students whether undergraduates,

Table 1. Explanation of Learning Styles in Modern Education for Counseling Skills

Learning Style	Description	Course Resources For Counseling Skills
Visual	Student learns by seeing and focusing on visual interaction	Video demonstration, informational charts, graphics, worksheets
Auditory	Student learns by hearing and listening to course content	Recorded lectures, mp3 files, audiobooks, recordings for course text
Kinesthetic	Student learns through physical forms of touch and interaction	Role-plays, recording skills assignments, video responses to course prompts
Visual/Auditory	Student learns through a mix of listening and seeing	Readings, graphics, recorded lectures, Zoom calls with faculty
Auditory/Kinesthetic	Student learns through a mix of hearing and doing	Audio recordings, demonstration mp3/mp4, listening to recorded lectures, phone calls with faculty
Visual/Kinesthetic	Student learns through a mix of seeing and doing	Role-playing with peers, observing videos and demonstrations

graduates, or doctoral students. The instructors will need technology skills that not only navigate through the course materials but can influence the students' learning and needs. The need for varying implementation of technology into the course can be a challenge for setting an online best practice that would incorporate different students' levels and technology abilities.

With the focus on the students finding the information and making meaningful learning, the students need experience using technology. The students need to have general technology skills in several areas: researching, connecting, and collaborating. Each student will need skills to search for information to add to their learning, such as locating the college or university library resources. The student will need to know how to navigate through the Learning Management System (LMS) to aid them in completing and submitting their assignments. Lastly, they will need to know how to collaborate with the other students both in discussion forums and group projects. Some students who are new to the online platform struggle with finding the provided materials and steps to complete and submit assignments. This will negatively impact the

student's experience and could potentially impact them completing the program.

Technology Applications for Faculty
Student Dialog

Challenges to setting best practices in the online learning environment involve many different factors from human skills and abilities to the technology platform. However, it is important to be aware of these challenges to be able to develop better best practices. It is common for universities to include video resources in the course syllabus and within the LMS used for online learning. However, these resources could create a perception of being "skippable" if their integration into the measured elements of the learning process is not delivered to the student in a direct and noticeable way. In order to bridge the gap between the resources developed by content experts and the learners who are new to the content of each course they take, it could be useful for faculty to familiarize themselves with (a) the resources that appear tertiary to their course content and (b) methods for creating content that mirrors those delivered to students if they were teaching in a classroom format.

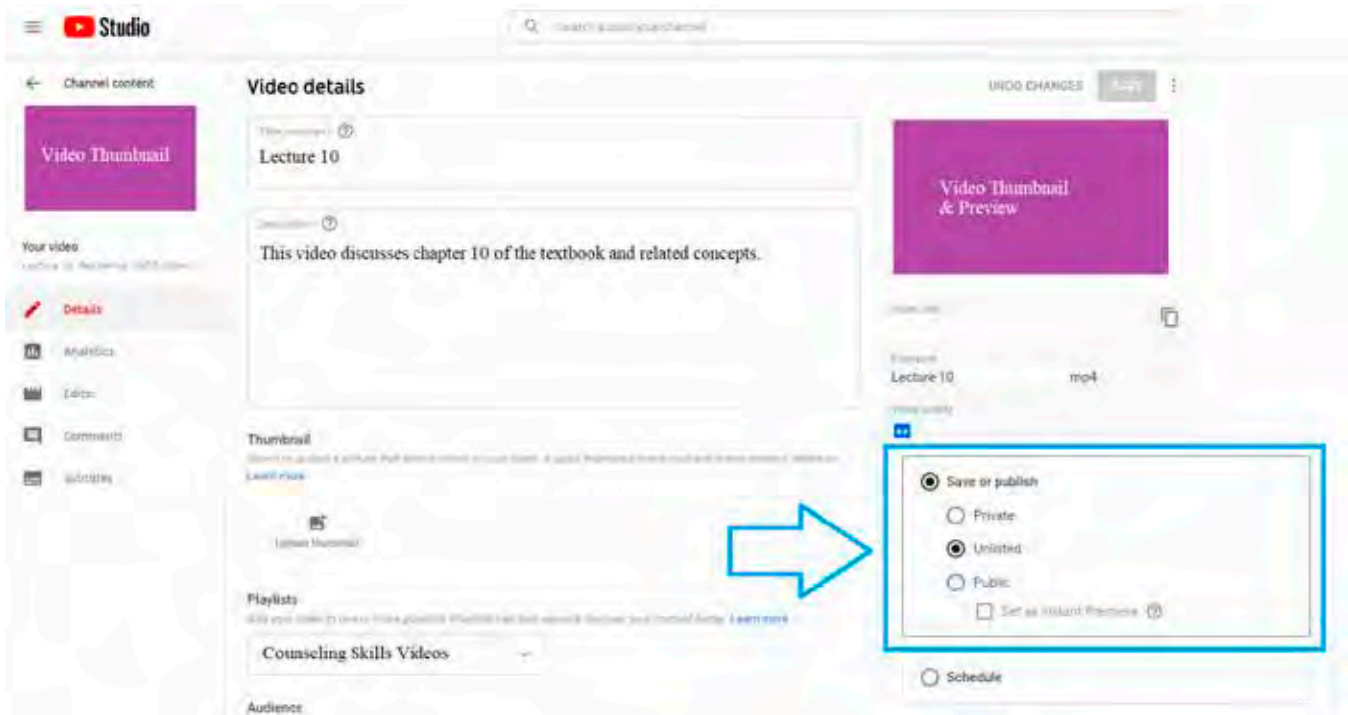Furthering the concept of delivering comparable

Figure 1. Screenshot of Inactive Options for YouTube Videos Created by Faculty

content to online students, methods are available to use Zoom or PowerPoint programs to record screen shares of lectures with faculty included on the screen during their lecture discussion. Additionally, it is possible to store these online at websites such as YouTube with "Inactive" links so only students who have the link and are enrolled in the course can have access (Figure 1). Learning to use this organizational feature for videos can help faculty in online skills courses develop more resources pertaining to the faculty-student and student-student interactions that may be observable in a classroom setting where social learning processes are more easily experienced by nearly every learning style.

Experiential reflections tend to be present in online skill-building courses as well. The benefits of assignments like these are that the student continues to build on their experience after the role-play is concluded. Doing an activity yields a certain amount of experiential benefit to the person, but reflecting has been shown to expand the value of learning experiences by continuing to build insight and strategy for future opportunities beyond the limits of the opportunity ending (Bharuthram, 2018). The limitations seem to be connected with the self-awareness a student possesses in relation to the way they demonstrated a skill and presented in certain interactions compared to norms across professionals in the field (Bejerano, 2008; Kaufmann & Ferguson-Lucas, 2020). Online courses sometimes lose the nuance of distinctions such as whether a course instructor is grading the completion of or the merit inherent within an activity. A student could view a poorly formed reflection that meets the word count and addresses all areas as meeting the "excellent" standard. When this occurs in skills-oriented reflections, the instructor has to find a way to communicate that the academic

qualities of the self-reflection are acceptable, but the awareness of demonstrating the skill has room for improvement. Additionally, assignments of this kind could lose the element of developmental processes in preference for an "instant-mastery" conceptualization of skill building if rubrics are not presented from a growth process perspective across the progression of the course.

One method for reducing the risk of these miscommunications would come from video-based feedback and faculty demonstrations. Reframing what the student presented in their interaction with a skill into what the faculty would like to see evidence of in future attempts is one way to maintain the hands-on communication a classroom student might receive but an asynchronous online student typically would not. Web 2.0 tools that could facilitate this kind of faculty student interaction include Loom, Zoom, Flipgrid, or Kahoot! for quiz style microskills response selection (Table 2). All these technological instruments provide faculty with unique opportunities to share counseling skill ideas around implementation and clinical strategy that the student would not experience in a purely asynchronous LMS environment.

Another approach entails aiding the student in connecting with the instructor in ways where they experience a face and the instructor's name. It is possible in asynchronous online courses for students to not retain memories pertaining to who instructed them across their academic program. Scheduling technology-based meetings as additional teaching moments infuses an otherwise asynchronous course with synchronous components (Huang et al., 2012). This opens the opportunity for better relational investment within the course rather than the instructor being someone remote and perceived to be unreachable or not invested. Likewise, the students can experience a connection to the course

Table 2. Description of Interactive Feedback Tools in Counseling Courses

Online Tool	Description	Application for Counseling Skills Courses
Loom	Quick webcam recording	Assignment feedback, quick message responses
Zoom	Webcam meetings with screen share and audience interaction	Lectures, recorded role-plays with students, question and answer sessions
Kahoot!	Online quizzes and fun-based learning competition	Quiz prep, summative assessment, decision making challenges, knowledge evaluation
Flipgrid	Quick response video responses in a back-and-forth presentation	Discussion questions, fill-in-the-blank conversations, decision making, conversational practice, skills implementation

and become more inclined to participate through asking questions to better understand ways for addressing skills, growth, assignments, and overall classroom experiences. While this can be time consuming, it could encourage students to be more present throughout their learning process (Trammell & LaForge, 2017).

Areas for Growth

The counseling skills course is one particular series of experiences in the CACREP (2016) curriculum that represents the need for the student to practice abilities utilized during a range of various communication situations. While this can be easily accommodated in classroom-bound courses delivered synchronously, the online format, where most if not all student work is conducted asynchronously, poses specific challenges. Most LMS sites do not seem to include embedded processes for video interaction or on-the-go scheduling of calls where all members of a class would be notified in real time to become part of a class activity. As a result, students experience greater perceived distance from faculty in courses of this kind than they would in knowledge-based courses.

Feedback from counselor educators in online learning is critical for getting the student engaged continuously in their learning processes. When a role-play assignment is watched, since the videos are recorded with third-party apps and then submitted to the online learning environment, there is no clear opportunity for direct feedback short of the instructor submitting time-stamped comments on an additional form and also submitting additional materials into the LMS. The issue here is that these assignments do not always fit as nicely into the foundational decisions of the developers of the learning environments, which increases the chance of students getting confused during the completion and submission of their work.

Instructors frequently have high student volumes or full course loads with multiple sections when teaching in these environments, making it even more critical for students to utilize the technology efficiently. Not losing a student in the mass crowd of courses taught by an instructor would be an area of focus in these situations. Having the ability to track students from course to course instead of receiving new students in each

course as a one-off interaction would significantly aid the mentorship process inherent in the skills/growth process. Implementing best practices for shepherding students through online programs via faculty interaction and mentorship could prove pivotal in skill-based growth areas since the students can become more invested and develop trust related to the feedback they receive during the vulnerable process of attempting a new skill and growing with each attempt.

Training counselor educators in technology is another area of growth. Not all instructors in the counseling field have had the exposure and confidence to implement technology. Only in the last 5–8 years has there been a larger shift and demand for online instruction. Tenured faculty who are complacent exist and face the challenge of educating themselves and becoming savvy to the tools available to them. Developing professional development opportunities to incorporate technological advancement would be a great support to counseling educator faculty, which can also lead to demonstrating a version of what tele-health and enhanced remote learning has become in wake of COVID-19 demands. This further supports the overall field and what counselor educators strive to complete when in this field.

CONCLUSION

Individuals possess a unique set of strengths, interests, and insecurities that require a supportive and stimulating learning environment to promote intellectual and personal development. The term pedagogy refers to an instructor's ability to guide students towards the acquisition of knowledge and concurrently fostering academic, professional, and life skill development. When instructors understand the meaning and relevance behind their students' lives, interests, and desire for education they can tailor their pedagogical approach to best meet the needs of learners and design effective curricula.

Limited research exists to assess the effectiveness of online counselor skill development and to inform best practices for online counseling skills development (Barrio Minton, 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Perry, 2017), Further, more research is warranted to examine the efficacy of counseling skills training in an online asynchronous and synchronous format. Future researchers may examine skills development demonstrations,

effective feedback from instructors, and effectively assessing counseling skills development and learning outcomes in an online asynchronous format (Barrio Minton, 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Reicherzer et al., 2012; Snow et al., 2018).

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