How Teaching Online Impacts Safety and Comfort: Experiences of Students and Instructors in the Context of Learning Counseling Skills Online

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The COVID-19 pandemic led to the necessity for many services to transition from in-person to online, including teaching in higher education and continuing education venues. This shift raised important pedagogical questions that have not yet been explored in the scholarship of teaching and learning literature. This study explored the experiences of students and instructors participating in a synchronous online four-day training workshop on counseling skills relating to supporting individuals who experience life stress and trauma. While many of the findings were consistent with what is already in the e-learning literature, new insights about safety and comfort emerged that have important implications for online delivery when teaching counseling skills and other topics involving potentially complex and emotional content. Recommendations for online teaching and future research are made.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the necessity for higher education and continuing education venues to transition their courses from in-person to online. This shift raised important pedagogical questions that have not yet been explored in the scholarship of teaching and learning literature. In particular, very little has been written about teaching counseling skills online, an area that might require unique considerations given the complexity and emotional content inherent in the psychotherapeutic counseling context. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of students and instructors participating in a synchronous online four-day training workshop on foundational counseling skills relating to supporting individuals who experience life stress and trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Around the globe, online teaching and learning has increased rapidly and continues to grow (Chan, 2021; Haythornthwaite et al., 2016; Panigrahi et al., 2018). As evidenced by the surge in new e-learning journals during the past two decades, there also has been considerable growth in the development of theory, pedagogy, and research about online teaching and learning (Haythornthwaite et al., 2016; Panigrahi et al., 2018). This development in the literature covers a broad range of topics including but not limited to student engagement and virtual learning communities (Chan, 2021; Panigrahi et al., 2018), video-based resourcing, data mining, collaborative learning, learning management systems, learning analytics, and blended or hybrid models (Haythornthwaite et al., 2016).

While traditional learning theory forms the backdrop for much of this e-learning development (Haythornthwaite et al., 2016), authors such as Andrews (2011) and Haythornthwaite et al. (2016) include a more contemporary socio-technical perspective of e-learning, adding a level of social complexity to the discussion. This socio-technical perspective includes but is not limited to a complex interplay of the roles, identity, and technological readiness of the students, the instructors, the educational institutions, and other stakeholders. Not yet discussed in the literature, the teaching of foundational counseling skills might be an excellent example of how incorporating such social complexity contributes to our theoretical understanding of online pedagogy. While the many generic advantages, disadvantages, and strategies

in teaching online that are described in the literature are likely relevant to teaching counseling skills online, there may be different considerations required because of the uniqueness, complexity, and emotional content of the counseling education context. For example, learning counseling skills inherently occurs in a learning environment fraught with sensitive discussions about vulnerable populations and students' personal vulnerabilities and limitations, particularly when students are expected to self-reflect (McGillivray et al., 2015), self-disclose, and demonstrate new social skills in a real context (as opposed to role-plays; Evans, 2011) in front of their instructors and peers. Typically, in these environments, group dynamics, confidentiality, and trust are important for instructors to consider. Renowned authors of teaching counseling skills, such as Corey, et al. (2014) have highlighted the importance of experiential learning in counseling training and student self-disclosure. Perhaps more so than some other disciplines, students' ability to form relationships (such as a client-therapist relationship) and the physical environment are essential factors that contribute to the student meeting the learning outcomes (Evans, 2011). Nuances such as verbal and non-verbal language, facial expressions, seating position, and seating arrangements are also important (Evans, 2011).

Although including volatility and vulnerability in the classroom has been discussed in the teaching and learning literature since the 1990's (e.g., Henry, 1994), the literature has only recently begun to examine the link between complex and emotional course content and safety in the classroom, particularly regarding the dangers in participating in classroom discussions (e.g., Gayle et al., 2013). Holley and Steiner (2005) define safety in the classroom as "protection from psychological or emotional harm" and indicate that safe space does not refer to being "without discomfort, struggle, or pain" (p. 50) or conflict. Since transformative learning requires risk-taking and some discomfort (Gayle et al., 2013; Holley, 2005), it is important for instructors to be aware of what influences students' safety in the learning context. Several authors discuss the importance of safety when teaching counseling skills, particularly in the context when multiple cultural values are at play (Holley, 2005; Pederson & Ivey, 2003) and with regards to potential dual relationships and privacy in the uncomfortable but necessary experiential activities (Anderson & Price, 2001). Further,

students "may often struggle with concerns over their abilities and performance" (Evans, 2011, p. 1) adding to their sense of vulnerability. As such, students must feel safe enough to take risks and should be part of co-creating a safe learning environment with their instructors (Harris, 2015). To investigate whether the context of teaching counseling skills online adds to the literature and theory about online teaching, this qualitative study explored the experiences of students and instructors participating in a synchronous online four-day training workshop on foundational counseling skills relating to supporting individuals who experience life stress and trauma.

CONTEXT
Applied Metapsychology International (AMI) is an international organization that develops training materials and maintains certification standards for the Applied Metapsychology (AMP) modality (AMI, 2021). Influenced by Carl Rogers (1957) and others, the AMP modality is a person-centered, non-judgemental approach to facilitating the resolution of client concerns regarding a range of life stressors, particularly those related to trauma. Certification in the use of the modality is a lengthy, detailed, and rigorous process that starts with a four-day in-person Traumatic Incident Reduction (TIR) workshop. This standardized workshop covers trauma theory, the rules for facilitating AMP sessions, and two techniques used in the modality. To develop students' skills in facilitating AMP sessions, the TIR workshop includes "communication exercises" where students work in pairs and are guided through a sequence of drills. Consistent with much of the counseling microskills described in the literature (e.g., Ivey, et al., 2018; Rogers, 1957), these drills focus on being present, directing attention on another, responding rather than reacting to others, delivering questions clearly and with intention, acknowledging when a client answers a question, encouraging communication with another, and handling new or unrelated material raised by the client (AMI, 2016). Consistent with Rogers' (1957) seminal work, the skills include minimizing distractions and being predictable, but not interpreting, diagnosing, or advice-giving. Unlike most approaches to teaching active listening skills (e.g., Ivey et al., 2018), the workshop does not cover paraphrasing or reflecting feelings, and summarizing the session is the role of the client, not the counselor. Similar to what Ivey and Daniels (2016) describe, the TIR workshop teaches eye-contact, body posture, attention to vocal tone, use of silence, facial expression, and verbal following (staying on topic). Consistent with Evans' (2011) findings that students' skill development improves more with real sessions rather than role-plays, the TIR workshop includes the students working in pairs and completing four real sessions together, each taking turns being a facilitator and a client using each of the two main AMP techniques taught (approximately .5-1.5 hours each session).

Given AMI's commitment to quality training and being accountable to service users, AMI initiated a process for senior trainers (those who train trainers) to observe and support trainers in their move to an online synchronous format for its TIR workshops during the COVID-19 pandemic. This process included a request for proposals from certified TIR workshop trainers around the globe to test delivering the TIR workshop online using a secure platform. A maximum of six students was allowed for each workshop. Each student signed a contract acknowledging that full engagement and participation was required, and agreeing to be present with video on throughout the training. Some trainers may have indicated that muting when not speaking was expected but this was not included in the written agreement. Ten TIR workshops occurred over a ten-week period beginning May 1, 2020. All workshops used the Zoom platform. All interviews were conducted within a month after the workshop. The authors, two university social work faculty members who have received AMI training but were not involved in AMI's move to online, independently conducted this research study. Both have been university professors for about two decades and also experienced a move to online, teaching undergraduate and graduate social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD
Research Design
Eighteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by the authors for 1 to 1.5 hours online using Zoom. Each interview was recorded, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 313 pages of single-spaced text. The research project was approved by the Research Ethics Boards for Trent University and the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada.

Research Participants
To recruit research participants, AMI provided all trainers and senior trainers with an online link where they could confidentially indicate to the researchers if they were interested in participating in an interview for the purpose of sharing their experiences about the TIR workshop they attended. Trainers were asked by AMI to provide their TIR workshop students with this same link. Forty individuals indicated interest in being interviewed. Eighteen completed an interview. Four were unable to participate because they felt they could not complete the interview in English and 18 either did not respond to attempts to schedule an interview or did not attend their scheduled interview.

Participants included 10 students, four trainers, and four senior trainers, representing 10 different TIR workshops (4 workshops hosted in Canada, 3 in the United States, 2 in South Africa, and 1 in Italy). Seventeen participants identified as female and one as male. All participants were over the age of 30 (2 between 30-40, 2 between 40-50, 5 between 50-60, and 9 over 60). The average number of years that the four senior trainers had been training was 22.25 years (range 12-37 years). The average number of years that the four frontline trainers had been offering TIR workshops was 3.13 years (range 0-8 years). Participants came from a range of helping professions: 3 educators, 3 social workers, 2 trauma and/or bereavement counselors, 2 mental health counselors, 3 other types of counselors, and 1 psychologist. Four indicated a profession unrelated to counseling. When asked about their highest level of education received: 1 held a high school diploma, 1 held a college diploma, 3 held an undergraduate university degree, 11 held a master's degree, and 2 had completed a doctorate degree. Except for one student who was taking the TIR workshop for the second time, all students were learning about AMP for the first time. None of the students were known to the authors. In instances when the trainers and senior trainers were known to the authors, the author who knew the participant the least conducted the interview.

Three interview participants reported having no previous online experience and one had only asynchronous experience with pre-recorded sessions. Nine had participated in a range of short synchronous workshops, webinars and meetings online

but only one of these nine had participated in a full-day workshop. Three reported having a significant amount of online learning such as taking an entire course or university program online. Three indicated having significant online teaching experience but only one of these three was a trainer in this study. Relevant to their role in this TIR workshop, none of the senior trainers or trainers had prior experience conducting a full-day training workshop online and three of the 10 students in this study had no experience with synchronous online interactive learning. None of the participants had previously experienced four full days of online training.

Interview Guide
The semi-structured interview guide consisted of four sets of questions that asked participants about their role with AMI and previous online and counseling training, their experience of the online TIR workshop (e.g., learning the trauma theory, communication exercises, practicing two techniques, breaks, their expectations, advantages and disadvantages), their recommendations for AMI regarding protocols for online training, and their demographic profile. Research participants were informed that since this was qualitative research, our focus was on understanding their *experience* in-depth, which included us inquiring about details and asking for examples. Participants were not required to limit their responses to our specific questions but were encouraged to share anything they believed to be relevant. They were informed that they were to consider the interview as *their* time to share *their* views. They were also informed that the questions were not asking about their views of how others may have experienced the training nor for them to generalize to online training in general.

Data Analysis
A research assistant used open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1988) to analyze the data. For open coding, each of the 18 transcripts was reviewed line-by-line and all meaningful excerpts related to the research question were extracted. For axial coding, the 450 excerpts extracted during the open coding were combined and repeatedly grouped and re-grouped until clear themes emerged. This grouping and re-grouping resulted in 70 pages of excerpts single-spaced. The coding process included the research assistant participating in several peer-debriefing meetings with the co-authors to co-construct the interpretation and grouping of the data and engage in a selective coding process to present the results in a meaningful way to stakeholders.

FINDINGS
Many of the study findings were aligned with what is reported elsewhere in the e-learning literature. The training was considered to be professional, well-organized, and challenging. Trainers were considered to be experienced, excellent, and made appropriate adjustments for the online delivery of the workshop (such as more frequent breaks). Although participants reported missing the energy and aura of face-to-face contact, students were perceived to be engaged throughout the training. Trainers reported challenges in delivering hard copy manuals to workshop participants (necessary for the practice activities). Challenges were mostly related to the technology due to lack of experience of the trainers and workshop participants, poor internet connections, a lag in timing between video and sound, gauging when it was appropriate to speak, and fillable forms not being compatible with some

computers. Not having to travel increased flexibility and convenience by increasing accessibility for those living in remote areas or in areas that did not have a trainer. Not having to travel also saved time, saved money, reduced the exhaustion often experienced with an out-of-town in-person workshop, was perceived to be safer for participants living in high crime areas, and increased trainer opportunity to train students from around the world. Not only was the training considered to be a success, but some participants indicated that learning and practicing the skills in the online format was advantageous because currently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, that is the only way they are likely to be delivering the modality with clients.

What stood out in the findings that are new to the literature about online learning, and particularly relevant for the context of teaching counseling skills online, were themes related to safety and comfort. Themes included: building a sense of safety and trust may be more challenging online, increased privacy in breakout rooms contributed to feeling safe, being online felt less emotionally draining and less vulnerable, being online in their own home was more comfortable, and distractions were different online.

Building a sense of safety and trust may be more challenging online
Despite not being asked about safety and trust by the interviewers, the word "safe" arose 25 times and "trust" arose 10 times in the study transcripts. As one trainer indicated,

> You have to trust that you're creating that safe space. So, I remind them every time we get, you know, every day, create that safe space in your own space. Just like I would a client, right? … There is an element of trust that, you know, that you *have to have* [emphasis added] in cyberspace…. I think it's about communication, saying "Here's what, you know, we've agreed to. I'm going to trust that's what you're doing, and you can trust that that's what I'm going to do for you." Right? And, and, to me that's an important piece when you're … doing online training.

One aspect that the trainer was referring to in the quote above was with regards to all participants being required to keep their video on. Having their video on was important for the trainer to be able to read how students were grasping the material but was also considered to be one way of building trust among participants, particularly with regards to the confidentiality of sensitive personal material being discussed. On the other hand, being required to keep their video on introduced challenges regarding privacy and potential distractions to the whole group. As one trainer indicated,

> It did happen that one [student] liked to turn their camera off, and so, uh, it was like on and off, and on and off. So, I did have to speak to that person, and, and it was like, "Well, I'm still at home, right? We're in COVID and we're in lockdown still. And so, um, you know, my kids, you know, are here and they're running in and out. I'm sitting here listening to everything." I said, "I need to have your camera on" because, because it's important for [other students] to know that because we have to create that safe space. If we're discussing things in, you know, if I'm sharing, uh, you know, different incidences, or, different examples or things of different various techniques, I have to know it's a safe space, that there's not someone else listening in…. so, I feel safe that *I* [emphasis added] can share it and they also have to feel safe that I'm in a place where *they* [emphasis added] can share.

Also related to confidentiality is the risk that family members within the home may overhear a workshop participant expressing confidential information about themselves or content that may not be appropriate for others in the home to hear. This is especially a concern in instances when students are practicing sessions as a client with their audio and video on and may be saying things about or relevant to family members. Some trainers made suggestions for students about this:

> We also received, from the teacher, some ways of making it even more confidential, even towards our family, little tricks to, you know, make sure that they didn't hear everything that we were saying. That was important because we were being a client as well some part of the – during some part of the training, so, so that was some things that was, um, worrisome, a little bit, for me, before getting into it.

Examples to manage this included,

> We could put a little bit of music outside our door, so when people come closer, that's what they hear, and, and it's harder to make sense of what we were saying. Also, to put, um, uh, a sheet or something underneath the door….And, of course having earphones … that was mandatory when we would do, uh, our real sessions, that we would put earphones so the confidentiality of the other person, would, uh, would be safe, also.

Also relating to challenges of creating safety and trust was that there were fewer opportunities for direct rapport building between the trainer and the student. This made it more difficult for the trainer to know how to appropriately encourage and provide individual feedback tailored to each student's needs and stage of development:

> I didn't have enough sense of that person to, to, know, just to know where to push and, um, so I offered observations, I think they were taken in, um, I think th-that brings up a different experience as a teacher or trainer in this case [online], um, knowing, having a better sense of the people because there's more interaction [in-person], you know, just in being in the same room, just in a quick conversation. Um, so I think that that made a difference.

Increased privacy in breakout rooms contributed to feeling safe

The privacy offered by breakout rooms contributed positively to participants' experiences of safety.

> So, it's like, it's just when you're in an intimate space and you're doing this type of learning – you need to know you, you're safe. So, that's what I love about the breakout rooms. Right? You're safe in there, there isn't anyone, the only person that can come in and out is, is [the trainer].

Not only did the breakout rooms provide more privacy for practicing the counseling skills, but they were also useful for private informal chatting among workshop attendees:

> My [practice] partner and I, … we could go have a conversation in the breakout room if we wanted to: "Hey, meet you in the breakout room, okay?" (laugh) And we could if we wanted to have a side conversation in the breakout room…. when other people were on a break … and then that way we wouldn't see the other six people wandering into and out of the conference room they were in [as would be the case

in-person]. So [name of partner] and I could have a private conversation. I liked that very much.

Also related to privacy, the chat feature in the breakout rooms was considered to be a more immediate, unintrusive, and private way for trainers to provide feedback, more so than if training had been provided in person:

> I believe that the feedback is, is different in person … it was interesting to do it in the Zoom because she could message us while we were being a facilitator. And so, if she felt like we needed to strengthen our acknowledgements, or be more present, or look at the camera, … she could give us real time suggestions so that we can implement, and then she could say, "Okay, well that was better, or that, you know, that needed some, some work." Um, whereas I feel like in person, the feedback might have interrupted a session. Um, (pause) I feel like that's an interesting difference between being online and being in person, … through Zoom you're able to do a private message to one person as opposed to everybody in like a room… There's the noise aspect as well, you know, if we would have been [practicing] in the same room, then everybody can kind of hear each other and what you're sharing is maybe a little different as well.

Being online felt less emotionally draining and less vulnerable

Participants recognized that learning counseling skills can be emotionally draining regardless of venue: "People are taking in a lot, and people are starting to make connections, and so I think emotionally it could be draining in any setting." Being required to carry out real sessions was one aspect in this training that contributed to these emotional challenges for students:

> It was emotionally challenging, you know, especially the, the one-on-one work, and I thought that was excellent, I, I thought that was obviously one of the most valuable aspects of the training is actually learning about the technique, and then actually having to do it, as terrifying as that was. Right? I think we were all like, "Oh, what?! Oh my God!" You know? I just, "What? I have to do it?!"

Some felt that this kind of training is more draining to learn online compared to in person because of the students' ability to see and scrutinize their own facial expressions, which are considered to be important in a therapeutic relationship:

> It's actually cognitively very demanding to be watching yourself while you're trying to engage in something else, because you're analyzing everything about your face, and how you look, and your movements, and how you come across. And so, um, it's quite distracting and cognitively demanding and therefore would lead to Zoom fatigue.

To address the issue of watching themselves, one participant found the trainer's recommendation to use the "Hide Self View" feature helpful:

> It went *so well* [emphasis added] because, also, um, the, with Zoom, we can hide ourself, from seeing ourselves, and that's one thing that the teacher asked us to do, it, it was to hide ourself, because we had the tendency to look at ourself instead of the other person. So, by doing that, the only thing I see on the screen is the person, full screen. So, I really feel that I look, I'm looking into, you know, their eyes, so that's something that helped, and she asked us to be very

close also to the screen, so we *really* [emphasis added] felt connected, uh, because of that. So, it went, I would say, just as good as in person.

Also related to personal physical awareness in the online context, one participant shared that they may be more comfortable and less self-conscious about their own body in the online format because others only see them from the shoulders up:

It's just a guess, that [the communication exercises] could have been a little more comfortable [online compared to in person]: you wouldn't see the rest of the body, and you don't, you know, you're not conscious of everything else. It was just to be present, face-to-face.

Also, what may be better in the online context is related to the risks associated with the students being triggered by the physicality of being face-to-face. As one participant indicated in the context of practice drills,

It was *very, very* [emphasis added] different. I mean, the first time I, um, did a face-to-face [in person], you know, just being present, the other person just like, wept the whole time. And there's something very visceral about being close to someone in the same space, and I think there's more vulnerability [in person] and it opens up, you know, that level of connection.… [Online] there are visuals that we're not in the same space and there's a kind of safety…. But in a face-to-face, I mean that person may have been getting triggered to, you know, the proximity of another person or … possibility of being in physical contact. [Online] this is removed from that…. It may be very subtle but to me, it's, you know, an adaptation [of] a way to connect and it's, it's not vulnerable…. [In-person] I'm really exposed.

Similarly, another participant referred to being online as "protection" when practicing sessions with each other:

Being face-to-face with someone, I think, … can be much more uncomfortable *and challenging* [emphasis added] when you're, when you're like, not online. Online, you know, you, I don't know, there's that protection of the screen between you, I think. Um, that's just my perception, and, like I said only because I've done it before, live, and it's (pause) super challenging to be quiet and look at someone and not say anything. *Very challenging* [emphasis added], um, in person. So, still challenging online but it wasn't, it wasn't what I remembered, um, having done before…. I think you can still read faces and you can still see, you know, body positions and that, but there's just, you just don't feel the other person's energy … It, it just makes it less, uh, intense, I think…. There's that protection.

One contributing factor that helped to alleviate some vulnerability was developing a connection with another student:

We had the same partner all week. And so, we developed this connection…. I think that was *very* [emphasis added] important, and I remember thinking, after the first day, "I wonder if tomorrow I'll be again with this person so we can build." And of course, now that I see everything that we did together, it was very important, because I was the client at that point and telling her, like, you know, being so vulnerable with *real events* [emphasis added] in my life. And, for her as well. So, um, I think that's something that's *very, very* [emphasis added] important.

It may be easier in-person than online for trainers to address student discomfort, and so adjustments need to be made online to be able to provide sufficient student support. One participant indicated that the trainers' manual advises trainers: "At the beginning of the workshop inform participants if they have experienced discomfort during any activity, they may discontinue the activity in question immediately and they may need to consult with you in order to resolve the issue." In reference to this quote, one trainer indicated,

That's really easy when it's face-to-face [but online] that needs … [to happen] through chat … and breakout rooms…. You don't want to leave a student, um, who maybe just opened up a lot of difficult things and her fellow colleague [in the breakout room], you know they're new to it, so you have to attend to them.

Being online in their own home was more comfortable

Students and trainers described feeling more comfortable in their own home. For example, they reported being more comfortable being able to eat their own food, with quotes such as "For people who aren't comfortable with eating food like takeout kind of foods, they're *very* [emphasis added] comfortable. They feel better eating their own food" and "I was able to prepare, uh, tea, and I was drinking my tea the whole time. So, for me, that was important." Participants also indicated that pacing themselves during the workshop was easier in their home environment: "There's a certain amount of pacing that's easily – more easily done, um, in your own home court; um, taking notes or knowing where I put things, and stuff like that, is easier." Also, being in one's own private environment, with their own computer, allowed participants to sit more comfortably and adjust the volume to their comfort level: "If I'm a little hard of hearing, I can turn up the speakers so I can hear, okay? And not disturb anybody else. And, uh, so I think that there's great advantages to it, in that respect."

Some participants reported having less worry about family obligations when they were able to stay home. For example, it was easier to check on children, do chores during breaks, and complete local commitments after-hours because of the reduction in commute time: "I knew that [my child] was here at home, that she was doing something else, that she was upstairs with the dad. I wasn't worried about, Is she eating? What's she going to eat?" Similarly, family emergencies could be dealt with while continuing with the workshop and were not as likely to require absences due to the training being too far from home:

At one point, one of the women, who, she got a message saying, um, uh, that her husband had been mugged, uh, right then…. And he had everything stolen. So, we just stopped, and, um, we, we said, "Okay, we'll just take a ten-minute break, ten, 15-minute break. Um, and then we'll come back, and we'll see how she's doing." And then we did that. We took a break. We came back and [we focused on theory rather than the practice session work]. She said she felt that went *really well* [emphasis added] because she felt like she could calm down just listening to [the trainer] talk…. She had a little cry, and she took a few minutes, and, yeah, we didn't lose any time….We were able to move through it quite well and [the trainer] was very accommodating of her, um, and said to her that she could take time, as much as she needed to deal with the situation.

Some participants expressed that being online at home was more comfortable for people who were less social and/or more introverted. As one student indicated,

> I actually think in this format it was easier for me … and I felt more comfortable asking questions…. In a bigger group or in person, you know, I might not have asked as many questions or I might not have interacted as much. I actually think, personally, that I interacted *more* [emphasis added], um, online than I might have in person.

And another student indicated,

> I'm a real introvert so (pause) in, in one way, this, uh, learning online has some real pluses for me because when I'm in a big group, I'm kind of over-stimulated to begin with, and there's a lot of distraction, um, and I may be a little bit more anxious than I would be, um, than I was just sitting in my own space and, you know, there being quiet around me and stuff.

One exception to the benefits of being in one's own home is that sometimes students' "comfort" was distracting to the trainer and possibly to other participants:

> People were in their home setting, so some people were yawning after awhile. Some people were sprawled out almost like they were watching TV on a sofa. Um, and (sigh) um instead of being engaged – I mean some people were there – one pair was in the same house – right? – in the same large room, and they were like *having these side conversations (chuckling slightly)* and, you know, laughing.

Distractions were different online

Also related to comfort level was the perception that there were fewer "distractions" online: "I felt like I felt way *more* [emphasis added] distracted in the classroom than on the Zoom sessions." Some of this was attributable to only being able to see others from the shoulder up or being required to keep their eyes on the screen: "[Being online] helped me to focus because you are really free of distractions. You are there. You are ready to practice. You are ready to experience and, uh, you are in your own place. Nothing new there." Some were making the comparison of learning online with the context of in-person training where paired group work can be distracting when there are many people in one room:

> Having more people in the [physical] room is distracting. There's more stimulus, right? There's ten additional people trying to learn how to hold space, how to create presence. Like it's not, it's actually not super *easy* [emphasis added] to do that and to have ten people distracting you while you're trying to learn how to do that is not efficient actually.

More specifically, students being paired in breakout rooms created a space with fewer distractions:

> It was very different. Um, (pause) (sigh) but, somehow, to me, it just felt (pause) that it was better. I mean, I enjoyed the breakout rooms. You weren't distracted by what everybody else was doing. It was just the two of you in the breakout rooms, focused on each other, and focused on the task at hand, whereas in the physical, um, classes, you're listening to other people laughing, and you're like, "Oh my gosh, you're not supposed to be laughing." And, and so, you're distracted and, and all this. So, I enjoyed the breakout rooms, I thought the breakaway rooms worked pretty well, for those. Yep.

On the other hand, a similar number of comments indicated that the online format can be more distracting than in person. For example, someone not paying attention is more noticeable when their face is up close right in front of you on the screens:

> If you're with a group of people [in-person], you're not all staring in each other's eyes all the time. You're, you know, moving around and stuff like this. [Online] you can see if they're, if they're, doing something else, you know, it's really visible if they're not paying attention.

Additionally, as one participant indicated, their children in the background might have been a distraction to others: "There was one point where … I have [children], and they were having a little issue with each other, and they were a little loud about it. Um, and I think it impacted the other people in the class."

Also related to distractions, some found that not having to engage with others during break time resulted in less of a distraction and more of a real break:

> In your breaks when you're having the physical [in-person] lessons, you're then interacting with a whole bunch of people as well. So, you're learning, and then straight away you're interacting with somebody else, uh, whether it be around the coffee table, and that takes a lot of energy. And it, it's quite a distraction. Whereas, here, … they were "me" breaks. I didn't talk to anybody. I got my coffee. I went to the loo. I came back. And it was, it was almost like it was a great time to sort of, connect the dots. …. At the end of the whole training, I didn't feel fatigued at all. I actually felt more, uh, uh, like more, energized than when I had done the physical [in-person] training.

DISCUSSION
Recommendations

Andrews (2011) questions whether it is time for us to create a new theory of learning, given the new perspectives that are emerging as a result of the shift to online delivery. With e-learning, "the means by which the learning takes place changes the position of the learner in relation to the content/existing knowledge" (Andrews, 2011, p. 117). Andrews posits that learning is socially situated and e-communities differ from in-person and real-world communities. Building on Andrews's (2011) views, Haythornthwaite et al. (2016) also include a social perspective in their overview of e-learning. Yet to date, discussions of this social perspective toward e-learning do not include the concept of student or instructor safety and comfort. Given our findings and given the findings by Holley and Steiner's (2005) about how the degree of safety in in-person social work classrooms influences what and how students learn, we suggest that safety and comfort be incorporated in any new model of learning in general, and particularly in the e-learning context.

Authors such as Barrett (2010) and Gayle et al. (2013) indicate that eliminating all risk and creating a fully safe environment not only is impossible but not advisable given the importance of risk-taking in learning. Aligned with this viewpoint, nowhere in our findings did participants suggest the need to eliminate or reduce risk. In fact, participating in real communication exercises and real sessions was reported as leading to increased feelings of vulnerability while also being considered to be the most valuable part of the learning. What the findings do provide, however, are

insights about safety and comfort for instructors to consider and incorporate into online learning.

Regarding the increased concern about confidentiality when students have their video off, instructors could engage students in discussion about the pros and cons of videos on and off and be clear about the decrease in sense of safety if participants cannot tell who and how many people are behind the video. To address the concern that having videos on can add distractions because of children or others in the background, expectations about this could be made clear at the start of the course. As suggested in the findings, to minimize the student being heard by others in their own home, they could put on music or white noise outside their door, use headphones, be sure to shut their door, and put a blanket or something else under the door that might help to muffle sound.

Participants reported that direct rapport-building between trainer and students was less likely online than in person to naturally occur. Participants felt that without this rapport, gauging how to provide individualized feedback and providing student support could be more challenging. To address this challenge, the trainer may consider online methods of building rapport, such as time with students in smaller groups in breakout rooms during or outside class time, as well as more frequent use of private chat messages between the instructor and student.

Similarly, to encourage students to build rapport with each other, the instructor could adjust the platform settings to allow private messages between them during times when the instructor wants to allow students to communicate with each other. For example, private message exchange could be encouraged before class starts, during breaks and for a period of time after class. Additionally, the privacy offered by breakout rooms could be maximized by increasing their use and providing students with opportunities to meet with each other for casual conversation and networking. Again, this could be arranged intentionally during class time as well as offered before and after class, and during breaks.

It is also important to note that just by being at home may increase students' and instructors' comfort level. This relates to having access to one's own things including food and creating one's own personalized environment. This also relates to students (and instructors) who may feel less comfortable in in-person social settings and hence may be more likely to interact and ask questions in the online format. However, ground rules should be set by the instructor to ensure that students do not become so comfortable (such as lying down) that it negatively impacts their learning and the level of distraction for others who can see them.

The findings show that the online format can lead to fewer distractions than learning in-person, particularly in contexts where students are to focus and practice intense counseling skills. For example, there are fewer distractions when students only see others' faces without seeing the rest of the body, and when they cannot see others coming and going because of the privacy that the breakout rooms offer. The point about breaks when teaching online being "me" breaks instead of times when students feel that they have to engage with other students is an important consideration for reducing the emotional exhaustion that can occur with content such as counseling skills and trauma. Instructors could encourage these "me" breaks even in in-person classroom settings. We also reiterate what is already in the literature about the importance of frequent breaks, possibly including exercise, deep breathing techniques, and activities that reduce eye and facial-strain. Another option to reduce eye-strain and exhaustion is to use blue light blocking glasses.

The findings also show that some activities requiring close face-to-face contact may feel safer online than in person. For students new to learning counseling skills, the online delivery format might be a gentler way to ease into developing their skills. This suggests that even with the in-person delivery format, the instructor might consider providing students with an option of initially practicing the skills online until they are more comfortable with doing the activity in-person.

Regarding comfort and technology, Ramachandran (2021) recommends that online users reduce the size of the video window on their screen to shrink face size, use an external keyboard to create distance between them and the screen, use an external camera, and periodically turn their video off and turn their body away from the screen. In addition, Ramachandran, as well as our study participants, recommend using the "Hide Self View" feature.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A strength of this study was the amount of data (313 pages) and level of depth we obtained by encouraging participants to share anything they felt was relevant to their experience, and by including prompts and requests for examples to obtain depth. Including the viewpoints of students as well as trainers and senior trainers enhances the breadth of the findings as we could report on the experiences from the student, the instructor, and the observer's (senior trainers') perspective. Also, credibility was increased by using a team approach in the data analysis phase including frequent peer-debriefing sessions to explore the meaning of the findings and to ensure the accuracy of the results presented. The fact that we did not ask about safety and comfort but these themes emerged on their own across multiple participants strengthens the point that these are factors that impact online teaching and learning. Further, these findings introduce new considerations not yet addressed in the online literature.

Other limitations of the study were that it was conducted in the context of a four-day workshop, rather than a full 8-12 week post-secondary education course, and only included 18 participants (all over the age of 30 and 14 over the age of 50). Although some of the findings, such as the comfort of being close to home for family and other commitments, may be more relevant in the context of out-of-town workshops, the points about feeling vulnerable and concerns about safety are not limited to this context. Many post-secondary education students also travel quite a distance for their classes. Although the age of the participants is higher than what is typical in post-secondary education, we suggest that the findings would likely apply to a younger participant pool as well. Further research should be conducted with a younger population and in post-secondary settings.

With only 10 students and 8 trainers the findings cannot be generalized but since the intent of qualitative research is not to generalize but to provide depth and insight, this small sample size does not minimize the points about how the online delivery format impacted safety and comfort. The examples provided suggest that there are sufficient issues relating to safety and comfort in the online delivery format to warrant further exploration. In particular, the impact that privacy, confidentiality, group dynamics, student vulnerability, and triggers have on student learn-

ing should be further studied and should be incorporated into learning theory as online delivery of education continues to evolve.

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