

# HOW CAN IT REALLY BE EFFECTIVE? EXPERIENCES OF ASYNCHRONOUS AND SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING IN ONLINE COUNSELING GRADUATE PROGRAMS

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## ABSTRACT

*By interviewing eleven graduate students in online counseling programs, this interpretive qualitative study explored students' perceptions and practical experiences of synchronous and asynchronous learning methods. The results suggested that counseling students preferred in-person counseling classes to online courses, found synchronous methods more effective than asynchronous methods, considered asynchronous methods less stressful compared to synchronous methods, and felt that micro-counseling skills and emotional reactions were not fully attainable in their online counseling training programs. Based on these findings, we recommend further systematic investigation of counseling graduate students' diverse experiences and perceptions of synchronous and asynchronous learning methods.*

*Keywords: online counseling program, counseling graduate training, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, counseling supervision, counseling practicum*

## INTRODUCTION

Online learning is considered the fastest-developing learning method for enhancing teaching and learning opportunities, advancing pedagogy, and providing easy access for both learners and instructors (Dennis et al., 2020; Singh & Thurman, 2019; Taplin et al., 2013). Highly advanced technologies and unprecedented uncertainty associated with the Covid-19 pandemic among institutions of higher education institutions have made distance learning pervasive in higher education (Koo, 2021; Koo et al., 2023). Training programs in counseling, counseling psychology, counselor education, school counseling, and counseling student affairs have embraced this current trend by utilizing online learning methods to train future counselors. Although the number of graduate counseling programs has increased, educators and trainees question the quality and outcomes of

online counseling training because such programs depend on sophisticated interpersonal interactions, and counseling practicums are based on in-person training and supervision (Goosse et al., 2023; Ivey & Daniels, 2016; Newman et al., 2023). Online and distance learning have provided many positive opportunities while also posing challenges because many counselor educators prefer the traditional classroom format when providing interpersonal skills and face-to-face training (Koo, 2019). Because counseling instruction is based on an experiential and humanistic framework (Ivey & Daniels, 2016), counselor educators have difficulty shifting to a distanced and online learning format that enables students to demonstrate interpersonal and therapeutic skills. Therefore, faced with the dilemma of how to create an experiential and interpersonal dynamic in an online setting, counselor educators in online programs strive to offer

appropriate tools to maximize positive learning outcomes for students in the online environment.

Although the strengths and positive outcomes of online courses in postsecondary education are well documented (Allen & Seaman, 2015), the effectiveness of online counseling courses is still underexplored. Current literature on online counseling courses primarily focuses on certain areas of counseling training: facilitating counselor-client interactions (Walker & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2009), ethical concerns about online classes (Rousmaniere et al., 2014), skills development (Rousmaniere et al., 2014), and clinical supervision (Rousmaniere & Frederickson, 2013). Online counseling courses that are effective from students' and instructors' perspectives and specific online training tools for counseling programs are still underdeveloped. In addition, studies on online counseling courses heavily investigated instructors' experiences and perspectives—research on learners' perspectives is needed. Moreover, research on online counseling programs focuses on asynchronous learning methods by employing quantitative research methods, except for a few studies using qualitative methods (e.g., Koo, 2019). Therefore, exploring counseling trainees' experiences of online counseling courses and specific learning tools will provide insights for educators, students, and course developers in the field of counseling.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore counseling graduate students' experiences of asynchronous and synchronous learning methods in online professional counseling training programs. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are students' experiences with asynchronous and synchronous learning methods in their graduate counseling courses?
2. How effective are asynchronous and synchronous learning methods in online counseling courses for counseling trainees?
3. What are the strengths and limitations of online graduate counseling courses from students' perspectives?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Allen and Seaman (2015), an online course is one where 80% or more of its

content is delivered online. Data show that 31.6% of undergraduate and graduate students in U.S. higher education institutions took at least one online course since entering college as of fall 2016 (Seaman et al., 2018). That means a 654,947 student increase (8%) in online enrollment between the 2012 and 2016 academic years at public four-year institutions. Such a dramatic increase in online enrollment across diverse disciplines and programs created an urgent call for online teaching tools and methods to enable faculty to deliver knowledge and skills online effectively. With more technologies available in recent decades, educators have begun to utilize different online multimedia techniques (Clark & Mayer, 2011) on various online platforms (e.g., Blackboard, eCollege, D2L, Canvas, BBlearn, and more) to deliver course content and offer interactive learning activities online both synchronously and asynchronously.

### **SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE LEARNING**

There are two major modes of communication in online teaching: asynchronous and synchronous methods. Simply put, synchronous and asynchronous methods differ by the technology utilized and whether learning activities happen in a shared timeframe between students and the instructor (Oztok et al., 2014). Asynchronous learning methods allow instructors and students to engage and interact on their schedules within a certain time window. Asynchronous modalities normally use premade PowerPoint slides and video/audio recordings to teach key concepts that learners can access at any time. Online discussion boards are common in asynchronous learning and offer instructors and learners opportunities to have intellectual exchanges at their convenience. Flexibility has been considered the greatest benefit of asynchronous online classes as no simultaneous interaction in a shared timeframe is required. Asynchronous learning allows learners to digest content and reflect on their learning at their own pace, but students may struggle more without instructors' real-time guidance and feedback (Fiock, 2020).

In contrast, synchronous learning offers an environment where students and instructors interact and communicate from a distance simultaneously. Similar to face-to-face learning, a firm, prescheduled time commitment is required in synchronous

learning. Learners and instructors cannot select times that meet individual needs. Instructors still need to prepare a set agenda, which normally gets delivered through video/audio conferencing and/or live chat. In the synchronous mode of online learning, time-sensitive technological tools, such as telephone calls, chatting, video/audio conferencing, and instant messaging support online learning activities in real time (Harasim, 2012).

While there are pros and cons of both asynchronous and synchronous online learning methods, students seem more likely to benefit from synchronous online learning (Lundberg, 2000; Paterson et al., 2019; Prior et al., 2016; Zhu, 2006). Synchronous communication helps with students' group decision-making and cognitive complexity in online learning (Giesbers et al., 2014). When comparing the learning outcomes of a synchronous online classroom and an asynchronous discussion-based one in research methods online classes, Strang (2012) found that synchronous instruction accounted for 17% of students' grades, a greater portion than asynchronous instruction did, and students in the synchronous online class had higher grades than those in the asynchronous class. Time-sensitive synchronous learning tools such as private messages were believed to be a necessary component in forming a community of inquiry (Oztok et al., 2013). From the instructors' perspective, synchronous learning methods offer more opportunities to know students, understand their attitudes, promote social presence, and meet students' learning needs (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Rienties & Toetenel, 2016). Although synchronous online learning appears to be less flexible than asynchronous methods and needs more effective technical troubleshooting training (Evans et al., 2014), synchronous communication has been considered a great way to overcome the challenges of asynchronous instruction in the online environment.

### **COUNSELING ONLINE PROGRAMS**

Counselor training is designed to teach students specific skills in practicums and internships that cover the essential counseling elements, including attending, empathizing, opening or closing a session, self-disclosure, reframing, and questioning (Koo & Nyunt, 2022; Haney & Leibsohn, 1999). Ivey et al. (1968) proposed using a video method, micro-counseling, to train

counselors in basic skills within a short time-frame, focusing on attending behaviors, reflecting feelings, and summarizing feelings. Counseling training focuses on skills in the critical areas of building counseling empathy and compassion, raising self-awareness and self-reflection, promoting open-mindedness to diverse worldviews and perspectives on clients' diverse backgrounds and experiences, and encouraging flexibility with emotionally and cognitively dysfunctional clients, so that counseling students can become comfortable with ambiguity and silence in working with clients (Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2000). Given the popularity of online learning, computer-based technologies have been used to bring clinical supervision and training online. Rousmaniere et al. (2014) identified three major developments that would make online training possible: video conferencing, cloud-based file sharing, and clinical outcome-tracking software. According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), there are twelve counseling graduate programs (e.g., Clinical Mental Health Counseling, School Counseling, and Counselor Education) that offer online CACREP-accredited degree programs (CACREP, 2019).

With more training online, clinical work conducted online was found to generate outcomes comparable to face-to-face clinic training in traditional settings (Barak & Hen, 2008; Hyler et al., 2005). For example, online supervision offered supervisees easy access to well-qualified, licensed clinical supervisors, especially for non-local students, particularly those living in rural areas or foreign countries (Chapman et al., 2011; Deane et al., 2014). Some supervisees preferred hybrid supervision for easy access (Conn et al., 2009). Online supervision was found to be effective in fostering supervisees' professional identity (Perry, 2012). An important component of counseling training, cultural competencies, has also been successfully delivered online (Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012). Learners appreciated the accessibility and flexibility of online courses and felt comfortable sharing personal experiences, opinions, and reflections in online space compared to face-to-face courses.

Along with online counseling courses' benefits, challenges were also noted in effectively providing counseling services online, including

limited ability to capture nonverbal cues between supervisees and supervisors; lack of comfort with technologies; lack of nuanced verbal and nonverbal messages; and limited eye contact communication (Bender & Dykeman, 2016; Coker et al., 2002; Fleenor, 2022; Springer et al., 2021).

### **SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING IN COUNSELING TRAINING**

While challenges of online counseling training seem inevitable, questions arise in terms of which learning methods, synchronous or asynchronous, work better in enhancing outcomes. Synchronous tools seem to be the most popular (Carlisle, et al., 2017). For example, 253 (37.6%) out of 673 counselor education programs self-reported using real-time synchronous tools, such as Skype, Adobe Connect, Blackboard Collaborate, and FaceTime. Rousmaniere and Frederickson (2013) found that live one-way mirror clinical supervision was beneficial and effective for both supervisees and supervisors. Bender and Dykeman (2016) compared master's counseling supervisees' perceptions of fully synchronous cyber-supervision (via Aboode Connect) versus face-to-face clinical supervision. Students reported that online supervision and face-to-face supervision seemed equivalently effective. Similarly, students reported that synchronous online learning via Interactive Television (ITV) provided a similar level of skill development as in traditional settings despite sporadic technological failures (Degiorgio et al., 2011).

Another widely used tool in synchronous online counselor training is real-time live chat where the instructor uses verbal and/or text communication (Osborn, 2009). Live chat has been favored by students due to the timely responses they receive (Broadbent & Lodge, 2021; Jin, 2005; Sampson & Yoshida, 2021). Online live chat makes role play (Liebowitz, 2003; Sun & Li, 2022; Wills & Leigh, 2011) and virtual office hours (Chen et al., 2021; Edwards & Helvie-Mason, 2010; McKeage, 2001) possible, and students perceived live chat to be equally as effective as face-to-face training (Coker et al., 2002; Jerry & Collins, 2005) in creating a strong sense of community (Broadbent & Lodge, 2021; Ling, 2007).

### **ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING IN COUNSELING TRAINING**

Compared to synchronous online counseling training modes, asynchronous tools such as email messages seem less popular. Limited

research has been done on asynchronous learning methods in online counseling, except that several studies looked into the use of email. Graf and Stebnicki (2002) explored the use of weekly email communication between faculty clinical supervisors and supervisees in a master's level rehabilitation counseling practicum. Participants reported the benefit of the email option was that they were able to reflect and act on issues immediately after reading the email. Similarly, email communication in the counseling practicum setting was found beneficial to supervisees' reflections about anxieties and triumphs (Wright & Griffiths, 2010). Since email enables students to use psychological space to respond, it seems to be a viable approach for relatively passive students in group supervision.

Despite the growing number of studies discussed in the above sections that focused on different synchronous and asynchronous tools in online counseling programs, trainees' perspectives about the technology used are under-researched (Carlisle et al., 2017). The current study focused on how different synchronous and asynchronous online learning methods were used in counseling online programs and explored counseling graduate students' experiences of asynchronous and synchronous learning methods in online professional counseling training programs. This study will add to the research on synchronous online learning in counseling training and contribute to the fields of counseling, student affairs, and higher education in general.

### **METHOD**

We employed an interpretive qualitative research method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to understand graduate students' unique experiences in online counseling courses. In particular, we explored their perceptions of the effectiveness of asynchronous and synchronous learning methods in their online learning.

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Eleven graduate students in online counseling graduate programs in the United States were recruited in the 2018 spring semester through purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) based on the main objective of the study and the characteristics of participants. Participants were enrolled in online counseling training graduate degree

programs (e.g., counseling, counseling student affairs, school counseling, counselor education, and counseling psychology) at large research universities located in the Southwestern and Western regions of the United States. Participants need to have taken at least two online courses in counseling programs to be eligible. Demographic information is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1.  
Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Degree	Program
Allison	F	24	M	Counselor Education
Adam	M	23	M	Mental Health
Carter	M	27	D	Counseling Psychology
Cathy	F	29	D	Counselor Education
David	M	33	M	School Counseling
Katherine	F	25	D	Counselor Education
Holly	F	34	M	Student Affairs
Jenny	F	27	D	Counseling Psychology
Johnny	M	28	M	School Counseling
Audrey	F	38	D	Counselor Education
Pam	F	32	M	Student Affairs

## DATA COLLECTION

Data consisted of audio-recorded individual semi-structured interviews that lasted one hour each, the transcripts from these interviews, and field notes on reflections on the interviews. Interviews were conducted in April and May 2018 by the first author. A ten-dollar gift card was given to each participant as compensation. At the beginning of the interviews, participants completed a brief survey on their basic information, including age, gender, marital status, program of study, and number of online counseling courses taken. Table 2 presents the full set of interview questions.

Table 2.  
Interview Questions

1. Please share your overall experiences of online counseling courses.
2. What kinds of asynchronous learning methods did your instructors use, and how effective were those?
3. What kinds of synchronous learning methods did your instructors use, and how effective were those?
4. What would you recommend using to improve asynchronous and synchronous learning methods for online counseling programs? Why?
5. Tell me about your relationship with your clinical supervisor in counseling supervision or practicum courses. Do you believe online meetings with your supervisor are as effective as in-person meetings? Why and why not?
6. Do you have any other thoughts or experiences that you want to share regarding this topic or anything to add in addition to what you are asked today?

## DATA ANALYSIS

Krueger and Casey's (2009) framework of classic qualitative analysis was employed in thematic analysis combined with constant comparison of interview transcriptions and field notes (Koo et al., 2021; Koo & Nyunt, 2022). In the first round of coding, the first author, who conducted all interviews, highlighted keywords and phrases that reflected participants' experiences of synchronous and asynchronous classes. Themes that emerged frequently and consistently were grouped under common categories. Then the first author reviewed all transcriptions searching for answers to this study's research questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the second round of coding, the first and second authors reviewed the transcripts and categories and then developed a set of emerging findings. We constantly compared emerged themes to transcriptions and field notes and refined our initial findings. Through constant discussions of emerged themes and transcriptions, we teased out unique experiences that shaped participants' experiences of online counseling training.

## TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

To strengthen the study's trustworthiness, we first ensured that we accurately represented participants' stories by utilizing member checking

(Merriam, 1998), sharing drafts of our analysis with participants, and asking for feedback on our interpretations. All participants who responded indicated that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Second, data were first coded individually, then emerging themes were discussed by both researchers to reach data triangulation. Third, reflective memoing was used after each interview and throughout data collection and analysis. We invited peer debriefers and three qualitative scholars in the field of education who are experienced with online teaching to review our findings, analysis, and interpretation. Finally, we believe it is important to share our positionality to provide insights into how our backgrounds and experiences may have shaped the research design and data interpretation.

The first author is an assistant professor in education who received two counseling graduate degrees and a student affairs doctoral degree. She has experience providing clinical supervision to her graduate students and teaching graduate counseling classes. As a graduate faculty member, the first author is currently teaching two online graduate courses per semester. The second author is an assistant professor in education. Her main research agenda is online learning among graduate students, and she is currently teaching graduate online courses. Both authors have extensive experience with teaching and developing asynchronous and synchronous online teaching methods and have directly observed the strengths and weaknesses of these learning tools. They also have monitored students' reactions to and reflections on online courses.

## RESULTS

Four key themes were identified regarding graduate students' experiences with online counseling courses and their perceptions of the effectiveness of synchronous and asynchronous methods in online learning: (1) students preferred in-person courses to online courses; (2) perceived synchronous methods were more effective; (3) believed asynchronous methods caused less stress; and (4) believed micro-counseling skills and emotional reactions were not fully attainable online.

### PREFERENCE FOR THE IN-PERSON CLASS OPTION

All eleven participants reported that they preferred in-person courses to online classes. Students

indicated that online classes cannot overcome weaknesses that interfere with counseling training, such as an inability to observe body language and the unique atmosphere of both clients and counselors. Jenny, a 27-year-old counseling psychology doctoral student, said:

If I can choose between in-person and online courses, I would definitely take in-person counseling courses because it's real [...] in terms of quality of interpersonal relationships, clinical supervision, and counseling skills. I think I could feel sophisticated emotional changes of my mock client [...] in person.

Some students also stated that the quality of group supervision and mock group counseling sessions was poor online and that this impacted their preference for in-person counseling courses. Cathy, a 29-year-old doctoral student in an online counselor education program, said:

I think in [...] theories of counseling classes it would not matter whether it's offered face-to-face or online, but for supervision purposes and for group counseling practice [...] online courses would not work well. I had a chance to facilitate the mock group counseling session, and I noticed that two of my peers did not pay attention. [...] Also [...] online group counseling facilitation was very hard. It's not an effective way to help group members to engage actively.

### SYNCHRONOUS METHODS WORK BETTER THAN ASYNCHRONOUS TOOLS

Most participants believed that synchronous learning methods such as video conferencing, virtual office hours, and individual supervision sessions via live video meeting tools (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) were more effective than asynchronous methods such as online discussions on Blackboard or Canvas, exchanging Q&As on supervision, and analyzing counseling transcripts. Audrey, a 38-year-old doctoral student in a counselor education program, shared her experiences:

We use Zoom as the main synchronous teaching and learning method. I love Zoom meetings. I am not sure if this is because I am an old, untraditional graduate student

who is not technologically savvy, but learning through materials and content via Blackboard posting is not effective to me. I get easily distracted and lose my focus. [...] When my instructors demonstrated some counseling skills, such as nonverbal body language, active listening with active reactions, and immediacy, those became a lot clearer when I learned from them directly via Zoom, not class postings on Blackboard.

Holly, a 34-year-old student in a master's in student affairs program reported how she learned and understood facilitating and helping skills via synchronous sessions:

Counseling student affairs programs require a lot of interpersonal skills and helping skills. I am taking a class called 'Facilitating Students' learning,' in which I am taught how to facilitate group meetings, discussions, and conversations. [...] The first two modules were asynchronous classes for which I reviewed materials, PPTs, and some videos to learn about facilitating skills. [...] in the fifth module I started to facilitate group discussions while the professor provided feedback. [...] I would not get this facilitation practice and learn as successfully through an asynchronous method. [...] I strongly believe that synchronous classes are much more effective and work better than asynchronous classes [...].

In addition to taking classes to learn counseling, helping, and facilitating skills, students in counseling programs are required to receive practical supervision of their counseling practice. Our participants indicated that supervision via a synchronous method is more effective than asynchronous supervision, such as posting answers to supervisors' questions and submitting reflective journals. Adam, a 23-year-old student in a master's program in mental health, shared his online supervision experiences:

Synchronous meetings with my supervisors were quite effective as I was able to show them my recorded mock

counseling sessions and they watched my demonstrations and provided feedback instantly at the live session. Also [...] I could share my concerns and reactions about my own counseling skills while supervisors responded and engaged with my counseling skills at the same time. I don't think that an asynchronous method of supervision would work because you don't hear from your supervisors directly.

#### **ASYNCHRONOUS METHODS CAUSE LESS STRESS**

While most participants preferred synchronous learning methods for their counseling classes and supervision, they also reported experiencing less stress and pressure when engaging with asynchronous classes. Students indicated that they did not need to worry about mistakes or misunderstandings that could occur during synchronous counseling classes, such as not fully understanding the interpersonal skills or explanations of instructors and supervisors. Due to the limited effectiveness of communication and technological difficulties in online classes, students encountered difficulties in understanding the meaning of counseling skills and instructors' intentions in synchronous classes. However, students can always revisit and correct their reflections, reactions, and class activities in asynchronous classes, which causes less stress. Jenny, a 27-year-old doctoral student in a counseling psychology program, shared her experiences:

While I prefer synchronous classes and active engagement with instructors and students via live Zoom classes, I also fear synchronous live classes because I know that I could mess up my counseling demonstrations and I could mess up active listening activities. Sometimes, it is not easy for me to answer questions right after viewing peers' mock counseling videos; I am not quite sure what to provide to peers as a peer reviewer. On the other hand [...] I have no pressure in asynchronous sessions because I can always revisit and revise my performance.

Katherine, a 25-year-old doctoral student in counselor education, also shared:

The asynchronous learning method is easier and is accessible all the time,

which makes me feel less nervous. I can simply come back, reread, and delete or revise my answers, but this does not work in synchronous classes. I sometimes get distracted and miss some important skill practice moments in synchronous classes, which makes me more nervous about doing better for my next turn. So, I think that both methods have strengths and weaknesses, but I feel a lot more relaxed and less stressed when I work on asynchronous classes.

### **MICRO-COUNSELING SKILLS AND EMOTIONS ARE NOT FULLY ATTAINABLE ONLINE**

Micro-counseling skills are required counseling techniques to provide timely and relevant counseling services to clients/students. However, participants reported that there is no mastery of micro-counseling skills in online classes because some can be learned only through physical one-on-one meetings with supervisors. According to our participants, nonverbal body language, transference, sophisticated emotional cues, and creating a subtle atmosphere in counseling settings are delicate skills that can only be learned via in-person interactions. Johnny, a 28-year-old master's student in a school counseling program, shared some limitations of online learning:

You need real people, real voices, real attitudes, real gestures, and real body language to fully learn and master the necessary micro-counseling skills. It is only possible when you and your client are in [...] the same physical room. How can you fully understand your clients' or your supervisors' subtle changes of emotions and behaviors via Zoom? Your clients can easily hide their real emotions and attitudes, which will affect your learning as a counselor.

Students also indicated that learning and observing micro-counseling skills from instructors and supervisors are limited online. Katherine added:

There certainly are some blind spots that a counseling camera would never capture, and emotional changes are not quite detectable unless you are really, really sensitive. No—maybe even if you

are extremely sensitive—you would not be able to capture very sophisticated emotional cues, which will impact the attainment of micro-counseling skills.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study explored current counseling graduate students' perspectives and experiences with online asynchronous and synchronous learning methods in their counseling training courses. Consistent with previous research (Giesbers et al., 2014; Zhu, 2006), participants in our study preferred learning and practicing counseling skills via in-person sessions over online training. This is not surprising due to students' need for a sense of close relationship with their supervisor in the process of counseling training. Although students recognize the unique strength of online courses, such as flexibility of space and time, they still prefer in-person courses because they believe interpersonal relationships, rapport, observations of therapeutic relationships, and reading nonverbal body language are core aspects of counseling training that can only be effectively delivered in person. Given the increasing popularity of online training, further exploration is needed to discern whether and how asynchronous and synchronous learning methods could be utilized in online counseling training to capture what current online courses are missing. To support online counseling training designing efforts, it is important to examine what pros and cons students see in current asynchronous and synchronous learning methods.

In general, participants found synchronous online supervision and peer mentoring more effective and beneficial than asynchronous supervision. Although cyber-supervision could be successful and effective via both synchronous and asynchronous modalities (Chapman et al., 2011), synchronous online methods seem more powerful (Carlisle, et al., 2017) and are preferred by most students (Degiorgio et al., 2011). Synchronous methods mimic what a traditional face-to-face classroom can offer as they allow supervisors to offer immediate directions and cues. Interestingly, quite a few students in our study appreciated the asynchronous learning method as it caused them less stress thanks to the lagged feedback from supervisors. Due to the unique nature of counseling training, with high expectations of interpersonal skills, the pseudo-face-to-face, synchronous, learning method seems



more intimidating to students who are still working on such skills and who feel they need more time for practice to adjust and improve. In this case, the asynchronous format allows them to build confidence over time and polish their counseling skills throughout the training program. Online counseling session developers may find ways to embed asynchronous methods in teaching to take advantage of the unique value of asynchronous methods.

Micro-counseling is a video method used in training counselors in basic skills within a short timeframe (Ivey et al., 1968). The interview responses in this study revealed that micro-counseling skills and emotional reactions are not fully attainable in online counseling sessions. Past research suggested that emotions and relationship building are important in successful online learning in a similar way as in face-to-face learning (Giovannelli, 2003; Marchand & Gutierrez, 2012). Emotional reactions are especially important to three focuses of micro-counseling: attending to behaviors, reflecting feelings, and summarizing feelings. For example, students need to effectively engage in emotional reactions and build relationships in the counselor-client interaction so they can use appropriate eye contact, postural position, movements, and gestures to communicate attentiveness. In the current online era where eye contact, postural position, and movement become less visible behind computer screens, it is much more effective for both students and supervisors to mimic traditional communication in the face-to-face setting and achieve attentiveness. Reflecting and summarizing feelings hold an even higher expectation for counseling trainee students as they have to learn how to discriminate cues, show empathic understanding, sense the feelings expressed by the client, and meaningfully integrate the information, all through the internet in online sessions. The urgent call for more effective micro-counseling and the emotional components in this study suggest missing components in current online counseling training programs that online counseling designers should incorporate into future programs.

#### **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

We discuss four major interconnected limitations in this study. First, although we included participants'

demographic information (gender, age, major, and region of the institutions), participants' backgrounds (e.g., previous counseling experiences and therapeutic approaches) were left out. While we assume that students' experiences with online counseling classes were homogeneous, there might be differences across gender, ethnicity, marital status, degree level, and different graduate programs that merit further investigation. For example, different training programs with different curriculums and supervision requirements may bring different practicum experiences. Therefore, for future research, we recommend exploring students' experiences of online counseling classes in terms of learners' different characteristics to see how students' different backgrounds and demographic information may be related to their diverse experiences of online learning environments. Second, the generalizability of the findings of this study is limited because of the small sample size. Although it is appropriate to use small samples in qualitative studies, a larger number of participants will help gather more diversity for richer information. In addition, we explored both master's and doctoral students as one group, and we analyzed students from different counseling programs (e.g., counseling psychology, school counseling, counseling student affairs, mental health counseling, and counselor education) as one set of counseling graduate students. Since different counseling programs have different training programs, practicum experiences, curriculums, and supervision requirements (CACREP, 2019), grouping our participants from different counseling programs under one umbrella is a limitation of our study. Thus, we recommend exploring students' experiences of synchronous and asynchronous learning methods within the same counseling program so that comparisons can be more consistent.

In addition, given that students' background, circumstances, and accessibility to online learning tools are varied (e.g., students with disabilities, students from low-income family with limited internet access or learning tools) and we did not investigate the impact of learners' diverse circumstances considering the social justice perspectives, which is regarded as a significant component of counseling programs (Koo & Jiang, 2022), the scope of the study is limited. Therefore, we recommend exploring social justice and diversity-equity-inclusion perspectives of effectiveness of online learning programs in the field of counseling and general

education in higher education settings to support diverse populations.

Another call for future research is to explore changes in students' experiences of online classes by employing a longitudinal research design. Because we only collected data at one time point, our ability to apply our findings to learners' different stages of learning is limited. Since learning is a process of changing, improving, and developing (Koo et al., 2024), and because online teaching technology is rapidly evolving (Koo, 2019) in the field of education, it is important to capture learners' various stages of learning and development and to analyze how evolution in online learning technology impacts students' online experiences. Thus, we recommend exploring students' experiences using a multi-wave longitudinal design.

#### **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study suggest implications for educators and practitioners. First, as most counseling students believe that synchronous learning methods are more effective than asynchronous sessions for counseling practicums and supervision, it is important for course developers to adapt diverse and accessible synchronous teaching tools to reduce the weaknesses of online sessions. In particular, as educators and learners experienced Covid-19 and its impact on limited in-person class offerings, more advanced and adaptable synchronous teaching/learning tools are inevitably needed to accommodate extenuating circumstances and maximize the effectiveness of online counseling sessions and supervision.

Second, as our findings report limited resources of online supervision for counseling students, counseling program coordinators must secure accessible clinical supervisors who can provide in-person supervision to those students who prefer in-person supervision so that students can choose between these two options.

Third, our participants reported that genuine conversations and authentic emotional connections are important in counseling sessions, practicum classes, and supervision sessions, while they also indicated that asynchronous tools are limited in

their ability to offer these emotional connections and human relationships, a finding which aligns with other literature (Koo et al., 2024), therefore it is necessary to develop synchronous learning methods that deliver genuine emotions, cultural sensitivity (Koo & Nyunt, 2020), and therapeutic relationships more effectively.

#### **CONCLUSION**

As online learning technologies continue to be a major issue in higher education, programs that heavily depend on interpersonal skills (e.g., counseling, medical school, nursing, and speech therapy) make efforts to adapt the most appropriate online learning methods and technologies to accommodate both learners and instructors. As there are growing numbers of students in online counseling training programs, both synchronous and asynchronous learning tools have evolved to meet trainers' and trainees' needs, but the literature still reports the limitations of online courses in teaching counseling skills. Our study adds to the body of literature on synchronous and asynchronous learning methods for online counseling graduate programs, which need more attention for both research and practice. As our findings suggest, it is necessary to explore counseling trainees' experiences of and needs for learning technology in their online training programs so that educators and practitioners can understand students' specific needs and course developers and online technology experts can develop specialized synchronous class tools to accommodate online counseling graduate students. We hope that resources for online learning will continue to improve.

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