Chapter 48

Is It Real or Not?
Experiences of Synchronous Learning and Training for Counseling Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Counseling graduate trainings, in-person discussions, one-on-one supervision, group supervision, and in-person mentoring are key components of clinical trainings. Thus, developing and delivering diverse counseling trainings by utilizing effective synchronous learning cannot be emphasized more in the field of counseling training. The purpose of this chapter is to explore effective, efficient, and achievable synchronous learning methods by analyzing current counseling graduate trainees' practical experiences on synchronous learning. The chapter will discuss diverse synchronous learning tools that counseling graduate programs offer and the effectiveness of these methods as well as the directions and implications for researchers, educators, and counseling practitioners in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

With the impact of distance learning and highly equipped technologies in higher education, online learning has become one of the most frequently discussed topics in the field of higher education (Young, 2011). Online learning has been considered as a vehicle for enhancing pedagogy, and improving opportunities for students to access education with lower costs (Taplin, Kerr, & Brown, 2013). Along with this educational trend in higher education, graduate training programs for counseling (e.g., counseling, counselor education, counseling psychology, and student affairs) utilize online learning tools to educate and train future counselors. However, counselor educators have been questioning whether students can develop micro-counseling skills and interpersonal skills (Ivey & Daniels, 2016) through online training and whether online delivery methods are appropriate.

Although the advantages and positive impact of online courses in higher education are well documented: student retention rate, student enrollment, diverse pool of student population, and degree completion rates (Allen & Seaman, 2013), the effectiveness and implementation of online courses in the counseling field is still underdeveloped. Online counselor training programs have been examined by counselor educators, and researchers in the past. However, existing literature primarily focuses on specific areas of trainings such as ethical issues of online counseling programs (Abbass et al., 2011; Rousmaniere et al., 2014), clinical supervision issues (Abbass et al., 2011; Rousmaniere et al., 2014; Rousmaniere & Frederickson, 2013), facilitating interactions (Walker & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2009), and counseling skills development (Ilieva & Erguner-Tekinalp, 2012; Nelson, 2014). Therefore, relatively little is known about the students' and trainees' perspectives on effectiveness of online counseling courses and online training tools. In addition, studies of online counseling courses focus on asynchronous tools using quantitative research methods except for a limited number of mixed method studies (Nelson, 2013).

This gap suggests that exploring counseling students' and counseling trainees' perspectives and experiences of online counseling courses and synchronous learning tools and effectiveness of this learning method will be beneficial to understand special learning methods in this specific field and to develop more effective and accessible training programs for future counselors. The purpose of this chapter is to explore effective, efficient, and achievable synchronous learning methods by analyzing current counseling graduate trainees' practical experiences on their online courses and synchronous learning methods using a qualitative inquiry. This chapter will also discuss future research recommendations and practical implications for both trainees and trainers as well as counseling program developers.

BACKGROUND

Online Learning

According to Allen and Seaman's (2015) definition, online education is defined by the percentage online courses compared to in-person courses. For example, if 80% or more of course content and interactive activities are offered online, the course is considered an online course. There are multiple online course platforms such as Blackboard, eCollege, D2L (formerly Desire 2 Learn), Canvas, and BBlearn. Each platform provides different methods of content delivery, discussion board, and assignment submission tools. As educational technologies including the internet have dramatically evolved, educators have developed different types of online courses (Clark & Mayer, 2011). According to Allen and Seaman's (2015) report, more than 34% of all undergraduate and graduate students in U.S. higher education institutions have taken at least one online course since they entered college. Public four year institutions reported a seven percent increase in online enrollment, and private four year institutions experienced growth rates for online enrollment by 13 percent during the 2016-2017 academic year (Hall, 2017). Due to the increase in online courses and programs across diverse disciplines in higher education institutions, educators have developed various tools and learning methods to deliver knowledge and skills effectively.

Technological Teaching Tools for Online Courses

Two major online learning technological tools to facilitate diverse online courses are asynchronous method and synchronous method. According to Oztok and colleagues (2013), asynchronous learning methods

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