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Cybercounseling Online: The Development of a University-Based Training Program for E-mail Counseling

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Cybercounseling Online: The Development of a University-Based Training Program for E-mail Counseling

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ABSTRACT. The development of a university-based cybercounseling certificate program through the continuing education department of a graduate faculty of social work is described. This web-based program consists of two levels: introductory and advanced, and offers experienced face-to-face counselors training in an asynchronous, e-mail form of cybercounseling. Ethical issues such as cross-jurisdictional concerns, client appropriateness, and counselor insurance are discussed. A system developed to provide online e-mail security through web-based access and encryption is highlighted. Several techniques for e-mail counseling such as presence, and spacing and pacing are discussed and illustrated. Demographics of learners and feedback from graduates are presented and lessons learned are discussed.

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The majority of training programs in psychotherapy employ a traditional face-to-face (FTF) method of delivery. Even though web-based education and Internet blended approaches are becoming more popular in human service fields, many educators question whether this type of virtual education is appropriate for the clinical area, which requires development of FTF skills and relationship building. In a national study of social work educators in the United States, Moore (2005) found that faculty perceived FTF education to be more effective than web-based education in all curriculum areas, but particularly for less “content-based” based areas such as practice. These perceptions stand in contrast to much of the research comparing FTF and web-based education that generally reports “no significant difference” (Namsook, Krug, & Zhang, 2007). There is a great need for description and research about the effectiveness of specialized online training directed at developing clinical skills for counseling to be delivered exclusively over the web.

This article describes the development of a university-based cybercounseling certificate program that is situated within a continuing education program in a graduate faculty of social work. Some of the issues, challenges, and accomplishments of the program over three years of operation are explored along with important lessons learned.

The term *cybercounseling* has been used along with others such as online counseling, etherapy, web-based therapy, and Internet therapy to denote some type of technology-enhanced form of counseling or therapy. The cybercounseling program discussed in this article refers specifically to the asynchronous type of counseling that occurs through e-mail. This type of counseling has been identified currently as the most prevalent type of web-based intervention (Chester & Glass, 2006). This article describes the inception and structure of the training program followed by a description of how the training is delivered through PrivacEmail Professional, the software system used to deliver both the training and the cybercounseling. Learner demographics and evaluation data are presented, concluding with a section on lessons learned.

BACKGROUND AND NEED

The delivery of clinical intervention via technology has been occurring for decades. Telephone counseling has been discussed in the

literature for more than 30 years (Mallen, Rochlen, & Day, 2005), and in one sample of 600 doctoral level American Psychological Association members, 98 percent reported delivering some service over the telephone (VandenBos & Williams, 2000). Two of the authors of this article (DM and LM) have been delivering e-mail counseling since 1995 and have written some of the early publications in this area (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998; Collie, Mitchell, & Murphy, 2000; Mitchell & Murphy, 2004).

INCEPTION AND STRUCTURE OF THE CYBERCOUNSELING PROGRAM

The Director of the Continuing Education Program at the graduate faculty of social work became familiar with one of the other two authors who had been a regular guest presenter on cybercounseling at a credit course on IT in social work at the master's level. Impressed by Murphy's and Mitchell's pioneering work with its heavy emphasis on ethics and security, the director invited the two cybercounselors to deliver a cybercounseling certificate program that would be a collaboration of the cybercounselors' company, Worldwide Therapy Online Inc., and the Continuing Education department of the faculty. Continuing education would conduct the advertising, and Therapy Online would look after registration and delivery of content. The two organizations agreed on a cost-sharing format. An FTF workshop called "Cybercounseling: Doing Therapy Online" was delivered at the university each year to introduce the area broadly to learners and to increase registration within the larger certificate program. The director also connected the cybercounselors with groups within the community who were either delivering cybercounseling or who were interested in exploring the possibility. The first cybercounseling certificate program commenced in the fall of 2004.

Continuing education departments cannot depend solely on faculty resources for innovative programming. Indeed, much innovation occurs within the field, and continuing education offers an opportunity to provide field-based innovations to our professional community. Some advantages are that collaboration with field colleagues broadens the offerings, provides increased revenues, and brings additional practice experience and wisdom into the faculty. As an example, Therapy Online is assisting the faculty pro bono in

designing a pilot training program to introduce cybercounseling skills to supervised graduate social work students who are volunteering for an online-posting-based distress center. Disadvantages of this type of partnership include the need for heightened quality assurance reviews of outside programs, concerns about collaboration with “for profit” organizations, and the validity of new approaches.

Given the newness of the field of online counseling, this training is available only to those who have a strong base of professional qualifications. The program requires membership in an accredited organization or association, with an associated professional code of ethics or code of practice. Through this affiliation there must be a mechanism in place for clients to lodge complaints. Educationally, a graduate degree in the human services field and three years experience in FTF counseling or an equivalent combination of education and experience is required for admission to the program. We set these minimums because we believe that much of online counseling is qualitatively different from FTF work. Online counseling is not simply a set of new techniques; it is a challenging and uniquely different way of working and as such requires that counselors already have experience with ethical decision making, the counseling process, and the range and severity of client experiences.

THE PROGRAM

The program presently consists of two levels of training. Level 1 provides qualified learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to do e-mail-based counseling. Level 2 was created at the behest of learners who had completed the first training level and who were interested in a deeper understanding of the therapeutic aspects of the online work and some ideas about the business and marketing aspects of operating an online practice. Some concepts and features of the training in the brief descriptions that follow will appear familiar to readers (e.g., ethics). Descriptions of the components unique to this training appear in subsequent sections.

Level 1

Level 1 is composed of three modules that focus on building the learning community of students within the program and introduces

them to the cornerstones of cybercounseling: theory, skills, technology, and ethics. The first module in Level 1 is intended to serve as an introduction to the field of cybercounseling and to help learners decide whether to continue with the certificate program. All modules are four weeks in duration. Each week requires between five and seven hours of work on the part of the learner.

Module 1 provides a welcome, personal introductions, and a cybercounseling overview: theory, ethics, skills, and technology; Module 2 presents theoretical issues and beginning practice ideas; and Module 3 offers additional practice, text-enhancing techniques, and personal clinical consultation.

Level 2

Level 2, which also consists of three modules, emphasizes the practical application of cybercounseling skills and techniques for effective intervention. The prerequisite is completion of Level 1. All modules are four weeks in duration, and each week requires between five and seven hours of work on the part of the learner.

Module 1 emphasizes role plays between learners; Module 2 discusses online business, marketing, and related cybercounseling issues; and Module 3 offers advanced clinical consultation and guided self-reflection, including opportunities for learners to review and analyze, in a structured way, their experience, progress, and future in cybercounseling.

A Certified Cybercounselor Certificate is issued to each graduate at the successful completion of each level. The certificate signifies that the learner has successfully completed the tasks that are incorporated into each module within the level. In addition, completion of each level entitles graduates to a discount on the development of a 25-page cybercounseling website, including use of the PrivacEmail system.

Because Therapy Online also delivers online counseling and sells software and services, including the PrivacEmail system, some students go on to become affiliates with Therapy Online or to purchase the software for their own use. Others already have systems in place or are taking the training as employees of other agencies. Recognizing the potential for a conflict of interest here, or indeed even the appearance of such a conflict, we include a number of specific components in the training to address this. These include telling trainees that our objective is not to promote the PrivacEmail

system although we do sell it through another arm of the company; PrivacEmail is used as illustrative because it has the components that we believe are critical to the delivery of ethical online counseling and because the students get firsthand experience using it; PrivacEmail is not the only system out there that delivers encryption and security; students are in no way required to use the system once they've completed their training; and no negative consequences would arise for a student who decided to go with another software approach and wanted to maintain a relationship with Therapy Online (e.g., take Level 2).

ETHICAL ISSUES OF INTEREST

There are many ethical issues unique to the online modality, and the program discusses these in detail, with specific attention paid to those issues raised in the literature (e.g., Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005; Mitchell & Murphy, 2004). Trainees are exposed to ethical issues and considerations throughout the training. The sessions that focus specifically on ethics include assigned readings, discussion and debate, and an online scavenger hunt in which trainees must search the web for online counseling sites and then return to the group with comment on, and critique of, those sites. The scavenger hunt is also used as a way to expose trainees to other options for e-mail encryption.

This section reviews a number of the more frequently asked-about ethical issues in cybercounseling.

Cross-jurisdictional concerns have been an issue in the United States for some time. Many American licensing bodies require counselors to practice only in states where they are licensed (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005). Generally these bodies have decided that cybercounseling occurs in the state where the client resides. From our perspective this belief is debatable. Counseling does not happen in a particular place since cyberspace is not a single place in the legal sense. It could easily be argued that the counseling happens where the counselor resides. Regardless, jurisdiction is a concern in the United States. It also may soon be an issue in Canada, where a number of provinces are in the process of licensing counselors and psychotherapists.

Reporting in cases of threat of harm to self or other or in cases of child abuse and neglect is also a concern. Learners are taught to collect adequate information to enable them to report wherever the client may reside. Such information includes name, location, and

telephone number as examples. We take the position that we must adhere to the rules and regulations of our place of residence: Canada. To this end, all clients are required to consent to counseling by reading a consent form online and clicking a box acknowledging this. This has led to peculiar situations where we have contacted authorities in other countries with reports of what Canadian authorities would deem child abuse only to be told that the behavior is perfectly acceptable in the country where the child lives.

This issue of collecting information about clients also relates to knowing the identity of one's client. Our experience is that people are not willing to pay for online counseling in order to pretend that they are someone they are not. That said, clients are required to provide passwords at two levels to enter the system in order to protect their information. The passwords and encryption together provide protection that is equivalent to the protection that their banking information receives online. The passwords and encryption together provide enhanced protection.

More subtly there are situations in which a client might lie about some aspect of their past or personality. In addition, there is no lack of FTF clients who may hide, lie about, or distort some part of their past or personality. One of the more interesting aspects of the online modality is that clients disclose more quickly and more completely online than face to face. The phenomenon of "swift trust" that is developed in online relationships has been noted elsewhere (MacFadden, 2005).

Insurance is a consideration for any professional, and coverage for cybercounseling should be considered specifically. Not all insurers and not all policies cover cybercounseling. Indeed, professionals using e-mail to connect with clients in any way should be speaking to their insurer about their policy.

E-mail security and confidentiality must be assured. Even though the counselor may simply be asking the client via e-mail about changing an appointment, the request reveals the client's involvement in counseling. Should this message be inadvertently sent to the wrong address or the information stolen from the computer or in transit (Mitchell & Murphy, 2004), it seems reasonable to assume that an insurer would ask whether the counselor had malpractice coverage for working online.

Finally, there are a number of issues that we discourage learners from addressing online. These include: serious mental health problems that involve distortions of reality, crisis situations requiring quick responses, and suicidal situations that may require a physical

presence. Our approach has been to encourage clients who are experiencing problems that may require a speedy crisis response to seek FTF counseling. For those clients who begin working online and then experience severe crisis there is material on the website that they can access for assistance. And in extreme cases, clients are encouraged to contact their counselor by phone.

CLINICAL ISSUES OF INTEREST

In many respects, cybercounseling is qualitatively different from FTF work and in our experience, being an outstanding FTF counselor is not enough to ensure competent online clinical work (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998). Building a therapeutic alliance is essential in any helping endeavor. Clients want to be connected and believe that we have their best interests at heart. What is necessary is to find ways to join with clients and to create the substance of a helping relationship.

This essential work is done using our *presence* techniques. Clients do not need another explanation of their behavior, the origins of their problems, and the solutions they ought to pursue. Instead, clients need a therapeutic experience. One of our concerns is that the way some professionals use e-mail does not create such an experience for the client. Although it may provide interesting advice and information, it does not create a “therapeutic space”; that is, a supportive, safe, and empathic relationship in which a client can explore issues, feelings, and alternatives related to their concerns (Corcoran, 1981). The presence techniques (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998) appropriately used, accomplish this.

For example, *emotional bracketing* is a technique that is used with clients to convey nonverbal elements of a therapist’s written communication such as thoughts and feelings of the counselor. In counseling emotional bracketing is used primarily in joining with clients, in conveying warmth, and in tempering and highlighting other elements in the text. It can be used in training as well, as in the following example:

A warm hello to all of you as we approach the finish line of Module 1 [for me it feels like we’ve been in a marathon this past month!] w-h-e-w!!!

All month the work that each of you have done has been exemplary. A pleasure to review. And this session is perhaps the most challenging. I hope for more great work.

So [looking about the class suddenly serious]. Don't let me down now! [eyebrows raised with a playful smile]

Okay, okay. Let's get right to Session 4 [a more business-like tone pervades].

Descriptive immediacy is another technique frequently employed in cybercounseling. This involves the description of the counselor, scene, and setting and is used to intensify the experience of the client and the counselor being in the presence of each other. It is also used in strengthening the connection between client and counselor and to convey importance and depth. It is equally effective in training as the following example illustrates:

I am sitting in my office in the early evening. The weather outside continues to be cold here in Southern Ontario. And, despite spring's alleged arrival, I still have that warm feeling one has inside when it's wintery outdoors. My office is a decent size, and if you were all here with me we would be sitting comfortably on the couches and various overstuffed chairs that abound. My office has the feel of an old library, with books and wood . . . and wood and books. It's a friendly place of learning and sharing and I welcome each of you, grateful for your presence and participation.

Another concern is the lack of control counselors have over the process the client engages in once the counselor has sent an e-mail. Clients may read through the material too quickly, failing to engage with the text in a meaningful way. FTF counselors can be taught ways to exert control over the pace of counseling. Similarly, learners are taught the use of spacing and pacing techniques in an online environment that allows the counselor to exercise a higher measure of control over the process.

Sentence construction and spacing, for example, can be modified to alter the reader's pace. A sentence such as, "Okay, so let's stop and review this material" can be changed as illustrated to slow down the process:

Okay.

So.

Let's stop.

And review this material.

The *presence* and the *spacing and pacing* techniques can be used by counselors working from virtually any theoretical perspective. This is

also true of the other practical material that trainees are taught. And although the authors operate from a combined solution-focused and narrative perspective, our trainees come to us working with a range of counseling models and are encouraged to integrate the techniques into the approach with which they are already familiar.

THE DELIVERY SYSTEM: PRIVACEMAIL PROFESSIONAL

PrivacEmail Professional is the name of our integrated software system that incorporates secure e-mail, registration information, and access to the Online Learning Community for the course. This area provides course outlines, calendars, readings, and assignments. PrivacEmail Professional is also used for lectures and communication between instructors, students, and peers.

The Course Process

In order to participate in the courses, learners are provided a secure PrivacEmail e-mail address and password protected access to the Online Learning Community: the course website. To get started, learners are provided a link to an extensive course orientation web page that describes the technology used as well as the online learning process. Technical assistance is available by e-mail and telephone.

When the course begins, instructors use regular e-mail to prompt learners to login to the training site at <https://learning.privacemail.com>. Since learners' accounts are set up in advance, their passwords are provided by Therapy Online. They can, however, change their passwords at any time. Once logged in, learners click on an e-mail link and provide a second password to access their secure PrivacEmail in-box and retrieve their first lecture, which has been sent to all course registrants. Accessing their in-box is, metaphorically, the means to "take their seat" in the virtual classroom. Learners must use the PrivacEmail system and cannot engage in the course through any other e-mail system.

Each week a new lecture is e-mailed to learners. After reading a given lecture, learners access the Online Learning Community website by clicking a link and entering their username and password. The site is loaded with readings and proprietary information for

general study and to complete assignments. It contains the details of assignments for each session of the course as well as calendars with assignment deadlines. Learners then complete the assignments within the deadlines identified and engage and interact with their colleagues as required. All lectures and training conversations take place within the confines of the PrivacEmail secure e-mail system. A sense of “classroom” is created by use of a distribution list within the PrivacEmail system. The instructor sets up the distribution list to include all registrants.

Every lecture is written in conversational style, and descriptive imagery, along with all of the other presence techniques, is modeled to learners, so learners have the experience of sitting in a real classroom. The standard features of e-mail, such as reading, printing, composing, and sending messages are the primary features used by learners. While the PrivacEmail system is capable of much more (e.g., sending encrypted file attachments), simplicity is important in the early stages of training (or cybercounseling for that matter). A single Level 1 course can include anywhere from 6 to 16 learners. The Level 2 cybercounseling courses tend to be smaller and more intimate with as few as 4 learners involved.

System Security

The PrivacEmail Professional system was designed to serve clients online. It was not originally designed for online education. Because of its original clinical application, the system uses several technically distinct approaches to data security. Nevertheless, from a learner or client perspective, the system functions as a seamless integrated unit.

When learners go to <https://learning.privacemail.com>, their browsers automatically engage the secure sockets layer (SSL) 128 bit encryption. In layperson’s terms, this means that every bit of information traversing the Internet between the learner and the server is randomized. This layer of encryption is maintained throughout navigation of all parts of the cybercounseling courses. SSL encryption secures en route data from unauthorized interception.

Data storage security is required for passwords and registration data (such as names, telephone numbers, and so on) as well as the contents of e-mail messages. When engaged in the course, learners are actually accessing three firewall protected servers—two in Ontario (one that runs the software and another for data storage),

and one in British Columbia (for encrypted e-mail). The data stored on the server in Ontario uses three different security methods, depending on the type of data. The data on the e-mail server in British Columbia is stored using 2048-bit encryption. So for example, when learners login to <https://learning.privacemail.com>, they are accessing the data stored on the server in Ontario; when they access their PrivacEmail in-box they are logging in to the secure e-mail server in British Columbia. In addition to SSL encryption, the PrivacEmail system offers users the option of enabling an unparalleled 2048-bit end-to-end encryption. In essence, e-mail messages are double encrypted—they are encrypted on learners' local computers before they are sent and they are also encrypted en route via the SSL protocol.

The PrivacEmail Professional system is a hacker's nightmare. In the unlikely case of a successful break-in, the information that is exposed will be limited and meaningless. To make sense of the information, the hacker would need to break through another locked door, so to speak, and then another, and another. The more sensitive the information, the more vaultlike the doors become.

In the unlikely case of a server failure clients can be contacted either by phone or regular e-mail as both pieces of information are provided by clients during registration. Any e-mails sent by regular e-mail simply refer to the system shutdown and note that they will receive another e-mail when the system is up and running again. So all e-mail between client and counselor is via the trainer/author's servers.

UNIQUE ELEMENTS OF THE TRAINING

The training has a number of unique elements that distinguish it from traditional university-based courses. First, weekly e-lectures, or content with instructions and comments are sent out to learners. It would be simpler, and less intensive for the facilitator, to have learners read material from the Online Learning Community website each week, complete the assignments, and do a quiz at week's end. However, the weekly e-lectures encourage ongoing contact between learners and facilitator, model the skills and techniques necessary for professional e-counseling, deepen their relationship, and add to the sense of community.

Second, facilitators use the cybercounseling techniques developed by the authors (Murphy & Mitchell, 1996 in their delivery of e-lectures

and additional course materials. Presence and pacing techniques, collectively known as SITCOMs (skills in text-based communication) are used as part of the teaching process. This models the use of the techniques for learners and helps to ease them into their use. Equally important, the techniques do in the teaching environment what they do in the counseling setting: establish a connection, deepen the bond between facilitator and learner, allow the facilitator control over the flow of the process, and draw participants into the presence of one another creating a genuine learning experience.

Third, the courses are small. Online courses through Canadian universities regularly have 100 or more students. The cybercounseling courses are kept small so that e-mail may be used for communication within the course rather than a bulletin board or some other solution. The purpose here is to ensure that the process, as much as possible, mirrors what counselors will experience with clients. A class too large would overwhelm even the most diligent student with e-mails. Keeping class sizes small also allows more personal interaction between the facilitator and each learner.

LEARNER DEMOGRAPHICS

This training program is conducted entirely online, and learners come from around the world. Of the 66 learners who have taken these courses to date, 53 (80 percent) have been Canadian, 4 (6 percent) were American, 4 (6 percent) from the United Kingdom, 2 (3 percent) were Australian, 2 (3 percent) were from Singapore, and 1 (1.5 percent) was Malaysian.

Of the various organizations to which learners have been members, 7 belonged to the Canadian Counseling Association, 3 were members of the Ontario Association of Counselors Clinicians Psychotherapists and Psychometrists, and 22 have been members of social work associations. The rest were members of individual associations or organizations in their respective countries.

We also require a graduate degree in a field related to counseling and 3 years of FTF experience or an equivalent combination of education and practice. All learners must also have significant experience with computers, the Internet, and e-mail. Any professional who is planning on doing online work must be able to resolve problems that their clients have with hardware and software as easily as they are

able to assist their FTF clients with the use of the parking garage or bathroom door key. The course website registration page outlines these requirements. In the case of association membership we require a member number to confirm membership. In the case of all other requirements, the learners are trusted to be honest about their experience and qualifications.

Only 9 (14 percent) of the 66 learners hold bachelor's degrees. Each of these has significant FTF experience or other training that allowed them to participate in the course. Of the rest, 6 (9 percent) hold PhDs in fields ranging from counseling to social work to marital and family therapy. The remaining 51 (77 percent) are trained to a master's level. This group of 51 includes 26 (51 percent) MSWs, 3 (6 percent) clinical psychologists, and 14 (28 percent) master's in counseling psychology. The remaining 8 (16 percent) learners were from a host of other individual disciplines (e.g., divinity).

Also of interest to us is the work experience and present employment situation of each learner. The average number of years FTF experience is 12, with a range of 3 to 25 years. The average number of years of experience interacting with clients via e-mail (for whatever reason) is 3 with a range of 0 to 12 years. Twenty learners had no experience interacting with clients via e-mail.

Interestingly, almost exactly half of our learners work as employees in a counseling center or clinic. The other half are in private practice. After completing the training those learners who meet Therapy Online's standards are invited to join Therapy Online as affiliates. The company delivers counseling and also subcontracts with other agencies. Other learners return to their agencies to practice while some add the service to their existing private practices. In these latter situations learners and their agencies may purchase the PrivacEmail system for their cybercounseling work. This is another advantage of using the system for the training: learners who move on to do their own cybercounseling are already intimately familiar with the system when they begin cybercounseling.

The picture that emerges is one of a group of well-educated and highly trained professionals. These are experienced, capable individuals who know their profession, the ethics of counseling, and the skills and techniques that contribute to client change. Despite this, the online text-based modality is a challenging one for even these individuals. As evidenced by the evaluative data in the following section, doing online therapy is a qualitatively different experience

for both counselor and client. A solid educational background and significant FTF experience is a prerequisite for cybercounseling training, not a replacement.

EVALUATION SURVEY RESULTS

Following completion of the cybercounseling training, learners are asked to complete an evaluation form. This form was revised in 2005 and as a result this section will review only the results of this revised evaluation. In addition, trainings were ongoing at the time of publication, and so some data was not yet available for inclusion. Finally, all learners are asked for permission to use their results for purposes such as this article. Some declined, and so their responses are not included. Thus, content of 25 of the 66 individual feedback forms makes up the data here reviewed.

The form itself is a qualitative survey consisting of 22 questions. The survey is split into four sections: (1) questions about the instructors, (2) questions about the PrivacEmail technology, (3) questions about the content and process of the course, and (4) a narrative section that asks about goals and allows learners to write anything additional they choose to about their experience.

Instructor Questions

The course is conducted on the premise that the process should reflect the content. That is, the instructors use techniques and approaches drawn from the actual online counseling methods to join with learners, create an atmosphere of trust, and engage both intellectually and emotionally within the virtual classroom. When asked about teaching styles, learners comment that our instructors “walk the walk,” “set the tone,” and “display the techniques as well as teaching them.”

Another consequence of this approach is that learners experience the instructors as real people. Learners in turn become more real themselves. That is, their own personalities and unique approaches show through in the text. Rather than their work being a repetition of the facilitator’s work, it becomes their own. They use words such as *warm*, *compassionate*, *supportive*, and *humane*. They also tell us that it is “easy to take risks” because of our approach. By this

learners mean that they feel safe in trying out the techniques and using novel approaches confident that they will be supported and encouraged rather than criticized in their efforts by the instructors.

When the authors initially proposed the idea of doing online therapy they were met with significant resistance from virtually all members of the counseling community to whom they reported their new ideas and approaches. Many of the comments pointed to the coldness of the modality, the absence of tone and nonverbal communication in the text-based medium and the lack of anything “personal” in the experience. Such comments and the concerns underlying them informed our training approach and led to a training experience that is both intellectually stimulating and highly experiential.

Technology Questions

There are two components to the online training experience. First is the PrivacEmail system that is in essence a secure encrypted e-mail system. The second is the Online Learning Community, a website that learners gain access to when they begin their training. The site contains all of the information about each session, including links to relevant articles, technical FAQs, and a calendar with due dates for assignments.

As discussed earlier, Therapy Online uses its PrivacEmail system for both counseling and training. However, the system is designed to be used for counseling. As such, there is a trade off between providing learners with experience using the system prior to working with it as counselors and using a system with them that does not have the robust teaching features that another system tailored for online learning would have. The decision was made to weigh the former consideration more heavily.

Learners were asked directly if they felt that the system would be a good one to use for counseling clients. All concurred although one felt that a minimum level of computer expertise was necessary to navigate the system, and we agree. The majority (66 percent) also felt that it was a great system for use in the training, although the authors suspect that part of this is due to the low student-facilitator ratio. The volume of e-mails would be overwhelming with 20 learners or more.

The Online Learning Community website was seen as a very valuable adjunct to the weekly lectures and the ongoing input from the facilitator and other learners. Specific elements that learners

identified as being helpful were the layout broken down session by session, including links to articles that were required reading, and having a calendar with specific assignment deadlines.

Not all comments have been wholly positive. We regularly revise and rewrite the content when learners identify complicated or confusing elements of the site. In addition, a number of learners in each course always suggest that we have an hours estimate for each session, which is difficult given learners progress at different rates.

Course Content and Process Questions

Learners are asked a variety of questions about the content and process of the course. Two questions ask about the time commitment and the workload. Fifty-seven percent felt that the course load was just right, 14 percent felt it was too heavy, 7 percent found it too light, and 21 percent felt that it varied from week to week.

We estimate for students that they will average 5 to 7 hours of work a week. Seventy-one percent felt this was accurate. However, 19 percent spent anywhere from 10 to 15 hours a week working on the course. The remaining 10 percent said that they were able to get away with 3 or 4 hours a week.

Learners are asked what they hoped to learn but did not. Two-thirds replied that their "expectations had been met." Of those that identified material they wished had been covered, one in Level 1 identified "setting up a cybercounseling practice" as an unmet need. This is dealt with more in Level 2. Another wanted to have more personal clinical feedback and earlier in the process.

This issue of personal feedback also arose in responses to our questions about improving the course. There are at least one or two learners every course who identify a need for earlier direct one-to-one feedback from the facilitators. We have responded to this in the spring 2007 courses by integrating an individualized segment into the second session of the training. Following the second session, the facilitator provides feedback via e-mail to each learner on their initial use of the text-based techniques. On the positive side, this responds to an issue identified by a handful of learners over the years. It remains to be seen if personal clinical feedback at a time when learners are only just getting their feet wet will produce the benefits intended.

Another challenge handed down from past learners concerns partner work. Partnered up into cybercounselor and cyberclient dyads

for role-playing, learners have wonderful opportunities to practice the online counseling techniques, receive feedback, and engage in a dialogue that allows them to teach and learn from one another. It also reduces the burden on the facilitator. He or she can observe and comment as appropriate, which is far less demanding than providing each learner with continuous personal feedback.

Understandably, learners identify the dyad work as some of the most valuable they experience during the course; that is, if they have a partner who sticks to the schedule, sends their messages, replies when they are supposed to, and generally holds up their end of the bargain. As positive as learners generally are about the dyad work, the handful of learners who add comments to our question about improving the process always mention the frustration of late and irresponsible partners.

One final element worth noting is the reading assignments. Learners were asked for their opinions, and all thought that they were an outstanding addition. About 25 percent of learners ask for additional readings. Our solution has been to include readings as optional assignments so as to keep to the five to seven hour weekly commitment. The one additional recommendation that has been made is for case studies. Some have been added to the Learning Community, although permission for real cases is often difficult to secure given what cybercounseling clients feel is the “public” nature of a website.

Narrative Section

Contributions in this section from learners range from a few brief words to many pages. This material is of course rich and varied. For the purposes of this paper, only themes that were evident in a majority of responses will be reported.

A good portion of the course focuses on the text-based skills and techniques necessary to turn a simple e-mail into a therapeutic experience for the client. The first theme that found majority support was the feeling that cybercounseling could indeed work when done well. One learner said “not only was I amazed at what I was able to bring forth in terms of enhanced counseling but I was blown away by what the rest of the class was able to accomplish (WOW).” Another wrote that “one of the most important things I have learned is how to adapt my words to the client in text which can be read and re-read easier by

the client than the client having to 'remember' what was said in session." A third wrote: "when I look back at my counseling career I wonder if the more V-o-l-a-t-i-l-e clients would have done better with the Cooling influence of e-mail exchanges."

A second theme that emerged was the importance of reviewing the ethical and legal issues associated with online work. Too many professionals imagine that a small expansion of their ethics will accommodate what for them is a small change of including cyber-counseling in their repertoire. One learner shared that "like many others, I have been enlivened to ethical and legal issues. And here in particular I might want supervision." Another wrote, "there are still many questions that require further clarification such as confidentiality, legal aspects, acceptance by the mainstream counseling community, immediacy of response, enhancement of the human aspect and others."

What brought all of these comments together was not simply their breadth; it was the depth of thinking and reflection that this new approach evoked for them. The fact that cybercounseling can work, can be therapeutic, and can engage others in a process of change is evident from the training. Consequently, the learners themselves were left not to wonder "if," but rather, "what now?"

LESSONS LEARNED

Since these cybercounseling courses began changes have been made to the process and the content of the courses based on learner feedback.

Process Developments

A number of the sessions are quite complex with a variety of parts to the week's process. In these cases an assignment summary, simply a numbered list of required tasks for the week, was always included at the end of the e-lecture. This turned out to be a component that was much appreciated by learners and so in present versions of the course an assignment summary is included at the end of every e-lecture.

As noted in the evaluation section, learners consistently rate the dyad work one of the best parts of the course. This, however, can be a negative experience for some learners when their partners are late with their assignment. We have attempted to deal with this by

asking learners to be honest about their assignment completion style (e.g., always-ahead-of-the-game or classic procrastinator) and then matching learners. This has proved successful.

Also noted in the evaluation section is the meaningfulness, for learners, of personal clinical feedback. For the first time this semester we are providing feedback early in the course on learners' use of the presence techniques before they have developed any expertise in the techniques or approaches. It remains to be seen the degree to which this is perceived as a positive addition.

Content Developments

Internal reviews of counseling work done by the authors and affiliate counselors working with Therapy Online regularly leads to additions in content. Examples of this are new pacing and presence techniques. Changes in law, regulation, and the like also lead to revisions in content. For example, if and when the term *psychotherapist* is regulated in Ontario the ethics component of the training will be revised to reflect this change.

We also respond to learner feedback in reviewing content changes. Graduates from Level 2 have recently suggested that more be included in Level 2 about business and integrating cybercounseling into private practice. We are reviewing this idea and may integrate a more in-depth business focus into the module that covers marketing.

Finally, there has been much discussion of adding a Level 3 course. Graduates report that they would like clinical consultations once they have begun doing cybercounseling for real. Practical considerations for integrating a third level into the training are ongoing and we anticipate that select graduates will be offered clinical consultations beginning in the fall of 2008.

OTHER TRAINING PROGRAMS

It is difficult to know the number of other cybercounseling training resources available on the Internet. As a point of comparison, two UK-based training programs (www.onlinecounsellors.co.uk and www.onlinetrainingforcounsellors.co.uk "Onlinetraining") offer similar training. Both programs are offered completely online. All information was obtained from the respective websites on August 1, 2007.

www.onlinecounsellors.co.uk stipulates eligibility requirements which include a recognized counseling or cybercounseling qualification, adherence to a code of ethics, membership in a professional body, and supervised, postqualification experience. This one-level, six-module program has no start date and learners can enroll anytime. The cost is approximately \$1,215 USD and learners who complete the program receive a certificate from onlinecounsellors.co.uk that acknowledges this professional development and a verification logo for their websites. The training uses a discussion board and forum extensively with threads in areas such as technical, network, and course issues. There appears to be less emphasis on role-playing than other programs and on opportunity to explore both e-mail and IRC chat approaches to cybercounseling. The website identifies one person as the provider and emphasizes the use of the BACP (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy) Code of Ethics.

www.onlinetrainingforcounsellors.co.uk offers another UK-based training program for online counseling involving several professionals called the Counselling Online Ltd Directorate. Although no specific experience requirement is cited, applicants need to have a recognized counseling or psychotherapy qualification at the diploma level or equivalent. The program offers two levels—basic and advanced. The cost is approximately \$848 USD for the basic and \$970 USD for the advanced. A General Certificate in Online Counselling Skills is awarded to those who successfully complete required work submitted to a tutor as part of a learning portfolio. Much of the training in this eight-week general level program is group-based with a heavy emphasis on role-playing. Both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to training are employed, and each learner is assigned a tutor. In the advanced program there is an emphasis on the development of a personal practice model for online counseling and an opportunity to experience online supervision.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

One direction we are taking is in conducting outcome evaluations of our work with e-clients to better inform both our practice and our training. In addition to providing training, Worldwide Therapy Online Inc. also provides subcontracted e-counseling, in collaboration with its trained affiliate counsellors, to agencies looking to

provide such services to their clients. Initial evaluations of these clients' experiences, using simple online questionnaires modeled on agency paper and pencil questionnaires has been very positive.

Much of the research literature has also been finding a variety of positive outcomes related to cybercounseling, but this research is still very preliminary (Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005). For instance, there is minimal knowledge about the differences among the various cybercounseling technologies (e.g., e-mail, videoconferencing, chat) regarding quality of care.

While text-based asynchronous cybercounseling is the focus of our training program, the potential does exist to move into other forms of cybercounseling. However, the availability and simplicity of e-mail, along with the distinct advantages and challenges of text-based work, will form the main focus of our work for many years to come.

Questions arise about the possibility of doing video-conferencing style cybercounseling. We might assume that because client and counselor can see each other there should be virtually no difference between the work one would do in this format and the work one does face to face. However, it may be premature to draw such conclusions. It is likely that subtle but important distinctions exist and that training may be beneficial.

The cybercounseling courses discussed previously form the basis of what is required to do ethical, clinically impactful text-based online counseling. Professionals without training are not delivering the best that they can. It has been our experience in training and in doing cybercounseling since 1995 that specific techniques are required to create a therapeutic space, join with clients, and create change in a text modality that lacks nonverbal communication and tone of voice. In summary, the training discussed here is designed to prepare qualified professionals to do counseling that performs in the same way that all good counseling does: it engenders change.

*The terms PrivacEmail, PrivacEmail Professional, Descriptive Immediacy, Emotional Bracketing, Presence Techniques, SITCOMS, are Trademark terms belonging to Worldwide Therapy Online Inc.

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