

*Review Article*

## Online Counselor Education: Creative Approaches and Best Practices in Online Learning Environments

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### Abstract

The explosive and steady growth in online learning has created seismic shifts education and in faculty's teaching methods and modalities. As a result of the continual market demand for online educational options, counseling faculty are increasingly expected to create, teach, and manage online courses. In some educational settings, this is done with little or no professional development or institutional and financial support for the teaching faculty members. Designing courses to prepare counselors requires instructors to address various learning styles in the digital environment through the offerings of their learning management system. Assessing students informally and formally can increase understanding, engage digital learners, and prepare counselors for the use of technology in their professional practice. Further, course development requires instructors to discover innovative ways to create a platform for social presence outside of discussion boards. This article offers creative approaches that counselor educators can adopt when designing courses, creating a classroom community, and engaging with students in an online educational environment.

### Key Words

Online education • Best practices • Counselor education • Education

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Continual advancements in technology has had a significant impact on the traditional campus delivery model of education. Universities are increasing online and distance education options for students, thus transforming the ways that educators deliver and students obtain knowledge via a virtual classroom environment. There are currently over six million students taking online courses while online enrollment continues to grow year-to-year at a rapid pace (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Stack, 2015). Counseling and related human service education programs are no exception (Holmes & Reid, 2017). According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), as of this writing there are currently 69 accredited online counseling programs with four additional programs currently in process of CACREP review (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs, [CACREP], 2018).

There are several factors that play a role in the exponential growth behind online learning. Distance education allows for a greater degree of flexibility and affordability for students who might not otherwise be able to attend a traditional campus course. Further, online course delivery is also cost-effective for educational institutions as well. As universities make efforts to become more stakeholder and market-oriented, “institutions with distance offerings remain steadfast in the belief that online education is critical for long term strategy” (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 5). By offering alternatives to campus-based courses, online learning options are an increasingly common modality in university settings while “faculty members who teach in higher education contexts play key roles in successful implementation of online learning” (Baran & Correia, 2014, p. 96).

When examining the current online learning landscape for human services related programs, the online education growth cycle shows no signs of slowing, and as a result, record number of university faculty will increasingly find themselves teaching online courses to meet this demand. A transition from teaching primarily face-to-face courses to online learning, however, is not a seamless task. As educational institutions continue to enhance and adopt new online education offerings in both undergraduate and graduate human services related programs, faculty must “reconsider and reconstruct their conceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about how they teach and how students learn within online environments” (Baran & Correia, 2017, p. 97). The rapid expansion of online education can create multiple challenges for educators due to lack of resources, time, training, and experience. Faculty are faced with learning curves around course content and delivery while simultaneously having to adapt to new technologies (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Reh fuss, Kirk-Jenkins, & Milliken, 2015). New (and sometimes reluctant) online educators and are required to quickly develop skills in the relevant technology as well as adapt pedagogical skills in order to successfully transform traditional campus courses onto a virtual classroom format. Although some studies support that “online education can be an equally effective teaching format when the online course is designed using appropriate pedagogy,” some educators might be still be resistant and question the efficacy of delivering content online (Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, & Thompson, 2012, p. 323). Continuing to improve andragogical skillsets can also be a challenge for educators as the online environment does not often provide timely accurate feedback in the form of face-to-face interactions. Further, there may be varying levels of support and resources available to faculty who are beginning to teach on an online environment, and the learning curve is steep. These factors, in turn, can result in pushback and pedagogical concerns among counselor educators who are tasked with teaching content online.

Despite these challenges, however, the likelihood that educators will receive an online teaching assignment increases dramatically with every passing semester. With that awareness, it is imperative that educators are able

to access information that will help with the transition and successful experience of teaching in a online distance education setting. There are many formal as well as informal resources available to online educators that can serve to enhance online teaching and development of online courses in counselor education. In an effort to engage current and potential online educators in the human services and behavioral sciences field, the following article presents a brief review of best practices along with accessible and creative resources that are available to educators who are looking to successfully engage with students and create a more robust online learning environment.

### **Quality Matters – The Big Picture**

Online learning can lead students to being frustrated and having negative emotions, especially if courses are poorly designed (Kaufman, 2015). “Professors/instructors should be knowledgeable regarding design characteristics that promote student success and satisfaction including course alignment and integration of content with technology to facilitate engagement” (p.10). Research indicates that “deliberate and focused training of the integration of technology into teaching pedagogy has been shown to be effective in increasing faculty use of technological teaching methods, which in turn, benefit student learning” (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2014, p. 17). Further, for “online teaching to be integrated and embraced by faculty members, higher education institutions should provide various opportunities for faculty to find the support and ongoing help as and when required” (Baran & Correia, 2017, p. 101). “In order to meet the growing demand for quality online education, a course development model that provides a common framework for consistency, design, pedagogy and content can be very effective” (Puzziferro, & Shelton, 2008, p. 119). The Quality Matters program provides online faculty and learning institutions with such a framework ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)).

Quality Matters (QM) is a national research-based program that standardizes online courses via a research-based rubric and inter-institutional peer-review processes ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)). Although this model requires significant resources and effort from an institutional and faculty level, the resulting accreditation QM provides is the gold standard for online education. Course development in the Quality Matters program involves formal workshops which are tailored to help faculty courses become aligned with specific online andragogy standards. For a less formalized approach, or for programs that do not have access to additional online educational resources, the QM Rubric can be “an excellent guide for creating a design standard, or an evaluation system, and can be customized and adapted as needed” (Puzziferro, & Shelton, 2008, p. 125). The QM Rubric focuses specifically on course design as one of the fundamental elements of a quality online course. According to the QM Rubric, there are eight general standards of course quality that are assessed which include: Course Overview, Learning Objectives/Competencies, Assessment and Measurement, Instructional Materials, Course Activities and Learner Interaction, Course Technology, Learner Support, Accessibility and Usability. Each of these eight standards are formally met through the application of 43 specific review standards ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)). Although officially meeting QM standards is a rigorous process, the general framework of the QM Rubric can be informally adapted to serve as a template when faculty are tasked with designing and implementing an online course. The QM Rubric can be a valuable resource in providing educators with an intentional roadmap of online course design fundamentals.

### Appealing to Various Learning Styles

Oftentimes the best practices for offline teaching also translate to the online classroom (D'Agustino, 2012). Appealing to students' learning styles, or the manner in which individuals process information, is an important and inclusive teaching best practice (Gilakjani, 2011). By understanding students' learning styles, teachers can better facilitate classroom instruction in both face to face as well as in online classroom environments.

One way to assess how students process information is through the lens of VAK learning styles. "The VAK learning styles refer to human observation channels: vision, hearing and feeling. It suggests that learners can be divided into one of three preferred learning styles, i.e. Visual, Auditory or Kinesthetic" (Surjono, 2011, p. 2351). Much like the names suggest, Visual learners learn best when seeing information that presented in pictures, tables, charts, and infographics and process information most effectively through reading. Auditory learners prefer to absorb information by listening to lectures, participating in discussions and through spoken word. Further, these students also take in information through pitch, emphasis, and speed as well (Gilakjani, 2011). Kinesthetic learners learn best through active learning, movement, and participating in practical hands-on experiences and demonstrations (Surjono, 2011). Although learners do not have to identify completely with a singular learning style, it is likely that there is typically one or a combination of two primary preferences.

When developing an online course, counselor educators can appeal to different VAK learning preferences through course design, the creation of assignments, and through various class participation options. For example, consider the various ways a PowerPoint presentation can engage the three different VAK learning preferences for online learners. For the visual learner, a PowerPoint can be rich in visual information such as text, graphics, and charts. The notes section can also include additional text and references. By adding an audio component of a voiceover to the PowerPoint, auditory learners can hear the information presented in a lecture format and take the information in at another level. For kinesthetic learners, adding a physical movement/demonstrate the concept component at the end of the presentation can more deeply engage students to apply the lesson and bring it to life.

Assignment options can also be a key way to facilitate various learning styles for the online student. For example, offering a choice between a comprehensive class presentation or formal academic paper might both be sufficient methods by which students can demonstrate competencies. However, by offering a choice of how they can demonstrate these competencies in two equally robust manners, students are given the opportunity to work from their strengths and potentially deepen their learnings.

Some appealing online teaching resources for visual and auditory learners include the use of Screencast-O-Matic which is a software application that allows teachers to easily create a screen based video with audio ([www.screencast-o-matic.com](http://www.screencast-o-matic.com)). This resource provides a unique and effective way to go over the syllabus with online students, for instance. The video will demonstrate the section of the syllabus (or assignment) being explained while a voice over can provide richer auditory content to support the visual text. In essence, different activities and modes of communication appeal in different ways to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. By taking into considerations the strengths of each of these approaches, counselor educators can make minor adjustments that could make a major impact on student engagement and information retention.

### **Providing Feedback and Grading**

There is strong support in the literature suggesting the need for “timely responses from peers and from their instructor” is of “utmost importance” when measuring online students’ satisfaction with online course experiences (Kaufman, 2015; Northrup, 2009, p. 472). While face-to-face courses allow instructors the opportunity to note students’ non-verbal behaviors as visual cues of student engagement and understanding of course material, the online environment places more of an emphasis on written communication. Therefore, timely instructor feedback is crucial. “When students receive feedback promptly, they can either have reassurance that they understand the content sufficiently, or conversely, students can request assistance to guide them in the right direction” (Kranzow, 2013, p. 132).

Clear standards for evaluation are essential in an online course. Students who attend class asynchronously need to be aware of what the instructor expects for the successful completion of assignments. Further, online students may not have an opportunity to discuss the syllabus with the professor at length and may have unresolved issues regarding expectations. Clear, detailed rubrics allow the professor to establish standards for work that are objective and more attainable.

Similarly, instructor feedback is critical for a quality online course. In fact, prompt instructor feedback is reported as the single most important element for students to succeed and benefit from an online class. Research by Kauffman (2015) revealed that of the several variables, (self-motivation, learning styles, instructor knowledge/facilitation, instructor feedback, interaction, and course structure), only instructor feedback and learning style were significant for learning outcomes. Online courses should integrate both formal and informal instructor feedback throughout the duration of the course. Furthermore, “instructors should provide timely feedback and serve as facilitators of discussion and interaction just as they do in traditional courses.” (p.8)

### **Building Communities in an Online Learning Environment**

There are many methods by which instructors can engage, create community, and build social capital between and among online students. Aside from fundamental course design, a key concern in online teaching is how to best engage students and help them experience being part of a learning community. However, it is important to note that an online community is not simply interacting with online course components (Kranzow, 2013). Building an engaged online learning community is largely accomplished through effective communication, the most basic of which includes the opportunity for instructor-student interaction as well as peer-to-peer interaction. “The most ubiquitous principle that underlies discussions of online teaching practices is that quality online courses must incorporate a substantial amount of interaction” (Driscoll et al. 2012, p. 315). Further, best practices in online education include establishment of clear expectations for student communication and encouraging student engagement (Dudding & Drulia, 2013).

Online teaching faculty can facilitate and encourage the building of community by engaging with students via timely, relevant, and frequent human communication in order to cultivate an active-learning environment. Students who engage in frequent communications with instructors may find they in fact may have more direct access and greater sense of attention paid to them as an individual than if in a traditional classroom setting. This type of personalized attention can serve for both proactive as well as remedial purposes. For instance, by enabling statistics on assigned readings and activities, faculty can automatically monitor individual student engagement

and participation. If it is digitally uncovered that a student is not participating or attending to readings on a timely basis, instructors can be proactive in calling a student's attention to this issue. If online grades for a particular assignment indicate that a large portion of the class did not score well, for example, instructors can address this directly with that section of the online class membership and perhaps provide additional remedial support regarding that particular topic. By providing relevant, timely, direct, and frequent feedback in such a fashion, instructors demonstrate how each student's membership and participation in class, although virtual, is still vital and visible.

Educators can provide feedback informally, yet effectively, as well. Online instructors can foster a sense of community between online classmates and the faculty member through greetings and praise, sharing stories, and by initiating discussions where students are encouraged to express their point of view (Plante & Asselin, 2014). Additionally, the use of weekly online journals on Blackboard (or similar online learning management systems) can also be incorporated in order to encourage structured and frequent one-on-one communication with the professor on a consistent basis. Whether journals are graded as individual assignments or as part of the class participation score, they serve as another consistent method to establish personalized student-teacher communication, thereby increasing a student's sense of visibility in an otherwise anonymous online environment.

Teacher initiated communication can occur more formally and intentionally throughout the semester as well. Online instructors who post frequent weekly announcements (such as a Weekly Warm-Up or Weekly Welcome and an End of the Week Wrap-Up) help establish a predictable rhythm of communication that online students can rely on as a source of consistency in terms of reminders and course-related information. Weekly communication touch points also allow for the online learner to be better organized – especially for those students who may struggle with staying on track in an asynchronous online course environment.

Another recurrent theme in the literature is the “effectiveness of using collaborative activities, group discussions, and other forms of student-student interaction” (Dixson, 2012, p. 2). Online peer-to-peer interactions help establish relationships, encourage engagement, and can help increase understanding of course content in the learning community. Beyond discussion boards, there are various ways for students to connect and collaborate in online environments. Technology solutions such as Zoom ([www.zoom.us](http://www.zoom.us)), Cisco Jabber ([www.cisco.com](http://www.cisco.com)), and GroupMe ([www.groupme.com](http://www.groupme.com)) all offer online students flexible means by which to communicate remotely and engage more easily with one another for collaboration on assignments, establishment of study groups, as well as for group projects.

A consistent wave of new and creative apps, software, platforms, and technological advances serve as vehicles in fostering conversations and connection between and among students, while also enhancing course learning objectives and strengthening relationships in the online environment. Further, faculty can implement creative and engaging design features and assignments in online courses that help foster community and invite collaboration. For instance, to better recognize fellow students in the online community, faculty can curate uploaded individual students' photographs or avatars and design a virtual group class portrait using design software such as Piktochart ([www.piktochart.com](http://www.piktochart.com)). Another optional assignment “introduce yourself to the class” assignment could be to invite students to create a personal meme ([www.memegenerator.net](http://www.memegenerator.net)), gif ([www.giphy.com](http://www.giphy.com)) or personalized bitmoji ([www.bitmoji.com](http://www.bitmoji.com)). These creative introductory assignments allow



students to express themselves, connect with classmates, and set the stage for a semester of increased communication and collaboration while simultaneously helping build a more engaged online community of learners.

### **Being Culturally Responsive**

When designing and teaching an online course, it is important to consider and support all learners regardless of their backgrounds. Increased sensitivity to cultural differences on the part of the counselor educator can aid in building bridges between online content and diverse learners (Rogers, Graham, & Mayes, 2007). Thus, online educators should incorporate “best practices in the design of culturally and linguistically responsive online courses that support culturally and linguistically diverse” students (Woodley, Hernandez, Parra, & Negash 2017, p. 470).

Culturally responsive online instructors use cultural knowledge and responsive teaching to validate student experiences. Educators can create opportunities for students to feel empowered by building on pre-existing knowledge through activities designed to enhance their online learning experience. Examples may include assessing level of comfort using the online learning platform and its various components (e.g., discussion board, blogs, email, video posts) (2017). The use of a syllabus readiness quiz can aid in assessing students’ understanding of the course requirements from their reading of the syllabus. Another way to enhance culturally responsive teaching is by providing students multiple ways of addressing content (blogs, video, discussion boards, email), as well as through the incorporation of collaborative group work. Furthermore, the use of synchronous online meetings allows for students to check-in with their instructor and/or group members and classmates. These instructional tools are designed to build on pre-existing knowledge to meet the needs of culturally diverse students by allowing them to plan ahead, facilitate class interactions, and further knowledge. “As educators and instructors of culturally and linguistically diverse students it is our responsibility to meet the needs of our students by using the best possible methods in curriculum and course design” (Woodley, et al., 2017, p. 477).

### **Areas for Further Development and Consideration**

The nature of technology necessitates frequent changes, developments, and upgrades. Online education is no exception. The breakneck speed with which technology evolves requires educators to continue to be current in their online teaching practice, oftentimes with little or no administrative guidance. Nevertheless, distance education shows no signs slowing, and the resulting increase in student enrollment in online graduate programs, coupled with a diverse, technological savvy millennial generation of learners, will only strengthen the likelihood that most faculty will eventually be involved in teaching online courses in some capacity. “Support and professional development programs, therefore, are critical for helping faculty...within their disciplines” (Baran & Correia, 2017, p. 96).

Whether or not teaching in an online educational format is something that educators can agree on philosophically, most can concede that online education is not a passing trend, and that this teaching modality is here to stay. Further, for an increasing number of students, it will become their preferred learning format. The bigger consideration for human services related educators might well be how to stay abreast of the best online

pedagogical practices and how to create meaningful, culturally sensitive, and robust online learning experiences that most effectively transfer knowledge historically passed down in campus and face-to-face settings.



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