

# Using the TEACHING WELL Model for Evaluation of Online Counselor Educators

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## Abstract

As enrollment in online counselor education programs continues to grow, faculty must develop self-awareness regarding their own teaching practices. Research across various disciplines offers a variety of tools and strategies for best practices in online education, including how to effectively engage students and promote student success. The purpose of this article is to offer the TEACHING WELL Model as one practical option for online counselor educators to use as a self-evaluation or peer mentoring tool. The authors hope to offer a robust guide to streamline a process for faculty quality assurance and continued improvement in online counselor education programs.

## Keywords

*self-evaluation; peer-evaluation; online teaching; counselor education*

It would be an understatement to say that the world is shifting from physical to digital. From Blockbuster to Netflix and from taxis to Uber, this shift is impacting most aspects of everyday life. The world of education has had its own significant changes with a substantial increase in distance learning over the past decade and even exponentially in recent years (Seaman et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a critical impact on counseling programs (Snow & Coker, 2020), causing necessity for some programs to make the abrupt switch to an entirely online platform or, at a minimum, offering hybrid options. The change was welcome for some, as distance learning continues to be an appealing opportunity for students seeking to fulfill their academic goals while balancing work, family, and life demands particularly when faced with stressors or other obstacles. In light of the recent pandemic, the familiarity and acceptability of distance education have increased with the onset and usefulness of new technologies (Coker et al., 2021). Described as the "The COVID-19 generation of counseling" (Coker et al., 2021, p. 40), current counseling students are now considering online learning more than ever before. As such, "online education is the true equalizer for nontraditional and traditionally marginalized students" (Buck-

ley & Dixon-Saxon, 2020, p. 74; Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, online learning has reshaped higher education by providing increased flexibility and complete access to engage all students anywhere, anytime.

With the increase in counseling programs, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2022) provides scheduled reviews of counseling programs to ensure quality and consistency of content and curriculum. According to the 2018 Annual Report, there were 405 institutions with CACREP-accredited counseling programs, offering a total of 871 counseling programs with almost 13% being online programs (n = 112) (CACREP, 2018). With so much variety and competition, online counseling programs continue to evolve with more sophisticated teaching pedagogies and platforms (Snow et al., 2018; Snow & Coker, 2020). However, Chen and colleagues (2020) note that "concrete and practical strategies for online clinical training are rarely discussed" (p. 81) which begs the question, what makes a counselor educator effective in an online setting?

Despite their extensive exploration of best practices in teaching, scholars have not yet arrived at a clear and agreed upon consensus or specific expectations for distance education (Snow et al., 2018). While

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Table 1

*The TEACHING WELL Model*

TEACHING WELL	Purpose	Summary	Practical Applications	Self-evaluation/Reflection Question
T	Transfer knowledge and experience.	Use scenarios from past clinical experiences to demonstrate counseling topics.	Provide a case study to conceptualize; analyze counseling video clips; discuss ethical dilemmas.	Have I shared my professional experience? Have I illustrated this content with a real-life application?
E	Encourage students regularly.	Provide encouragement in all forms of communication with students.	Share motivational quotes, identify specific strengths, and highlight areas of improvement.	Do I have a system to connect with each student in my class? Who (a peer, supervisor, etc.) does this well and how do they do it?
A	Attend to unique needs.	Intentionally maximize students' strengths, interests, and abilities.	Notice changes in academic performance and initiate communication to offer support, as needed.	What is my process for tracking student needs? What is my process for assisting a struggling student? What support can I offer/suggest?
C	Customize course content.	Personalize the course beyond the basic shell to demonstrate the practical application and relevance of course content.	Utilize a variety of learning formats (e.g. videos, posts, links, guest speakers) to demonstrate the applicability of course content to real-world scenarios.	Have I utilized a robust variety of resources? What would I like to add next time?
H	Hold high standards.	Articulate clear expectations and detailed feedback regarding academic performance.	Provide detailed instructions/rubrics and examples of distinguished work.	Was my course free of errors and conflicting information? Overall, did my students understand expectations and directions or did they communicate confusion?
I	Initiate communication.	Proactively communicate with students to express genuine concern in them and their success.	Take advantage of opportunities to initiate communication with students through various platforms.	What are my favorite ways to connect with students? What is one additional strategy I can add?
N	Network and connect.	Encourage students to join professional counseling organizations and seek academic and leadership opportunities while in graduate school.	Share information about counseling associations and upcoming conferences; invite students to partner in research and/or for presentations.	Where does this information fit into my course? How else can I build their connection to the counseling profession?
G	Grade and respond promptly.	Promptly grade and provide individualized feedback within or preferably ahead of your program's deadline.	Plan ahead to grade; individualize feedback; point out strengths; offer specific suggestions for improvement.	Do I have enough time set aside for grading? What is my grading turn around time? Do I share feedback to help my students grow and create opportunity for feedback loops?
W	Welcome differences and diversity.	Invite students to share positive, personal, and professional contributions about their own diverse experiences as they relate to the course content.	Acknowledge and celebrate student's unique differences when interacting in the discussion boards or in synchronous meetings; ask open ended questions to generate discussion about diverse experiences; model and encourage multicultural competence.	Do I encourage discussion?  Do I create space for students to share? Do students feel safe sharing with me and their peers? How or where in the course could I facilitate this better?
E	Edit carefully.	Thoroughly review and edit written content before posting, sending, emailing, grading, or communicating with students.	Utilize a professional editing service or editing software for course related materials.	Are my directions clear and cohesive? Do my announcements and emails model professional communication?
L	Learn from feedback and keep improving.	Encourage students to complete end of course surveys/evaluations.	Review student ratings and feedback; Continually seek ongoing and necessary professional development, particularly in any areas needed for growth; Commit to new ways of understanding and applying pedagogical theories and improving online student engagement.	What themes did I see in the end of course evaluations? What do I do well and what can I improve on? Create a goal and steps to meet that goal. Be specific with your timeline and consult with your peers.
L	Launch successful students!	Offer guidance to help students successfully transition from being a graduate student to becoming a counselor!	Recommend university services (e.g. career, writing, alumni); Write letters of recommendation; Post job opportunities; Review resumes for graduating students.	Do I bridge course content to real life application? Do I encourage professional identity development? How? Do I share my own experience with this and offer assistance? Do I connect my students with available sources of support?

some institutions utilize instructional designers to create course content that meets accreditation standards and is consistent across their program (Martin et al., 2019) not all programs have institutional designers. Regardless of design ownership, effective counselor educators must engage students, enhance and illustrate content with practical application, and evaluate student performance in a timely manner (Scholl et al., 2017). The authors developed the TEACHING WELL model as a proactive approach towards this end, as opposed to a reactive approach in which faculty or programs must address lack of learning or student disconnection and dissatisfaction. Being proactive means counselor educators know and understand the unique needs of online learners and prepare course materials and instruction styles with those needs in minds. The TEACHING WELL Model shown in Table 1 reflects pedagogical understandings to highlight best practices associated with student success and outcomes.

More specifically, this model was developed by the authors, who collectively have over 40 years of experience in clinical practice, school counseling, and counselor education. The TEACHING WELL Model was originally introduced in the North Atlantic Region Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (NARACES) Fall 2021 Newsletter as a model for student engagement and has since been presented to distance counselor educators across various settings. The authors now propose this model to be used as a tool for self and peer evaluation of counselor educators in online programs.

### **As a Self-Evaluation Tool**

Counselor educators play a critical role in supporting emerging counselors as they problem solve, master clinical skills, and develop counselor identity. To support these efforts, some counselor education programs require faculty members to receive training on curriculum and internal procedures, such as teaching evaluation measures, as part of their onboarding and orientation processes. At the same time, other programs are less structured with faculty onboarding, training, and may lack a robust teaching evaluation process to measure or assess competency.

Interestingly, teaching competencies have been studied and recently categorized into four broad categories of competencies that emerged from the data (Swank & Houseknecht, 2019). Teaching competencies such as knowledge, skills, professional behaviors, and dispositions were identified as useful to “guide the teaching, development, and evaluation of teaching competencies in counselor education” (p. 173). Swank and Houseknecht (2019) provide recommendations for counselor educators to engage in self-assessment of

their performance across identified teaching competencies. Previously, Swank (2014) also recommended that counselor educators engage in self-supervision to increase their awareness, responsibilities, skill, and professional autonomy. As such, there is scholarly support for counselor educators to become more intentional about their own self-supervision and self-evaluation.

As a self-evaluation tool, the TEACHING WELL Model offers a robust and practical guide for online counselor educators to engage in both self-evaluation and self-supervision by assessing their own performance across teaching competencies. More specifically, a counselor educator can utilize The TEACHING WELL Model as a self-evaluative resource before, during, and after course delivery. Prior to the start of a course, the counselor educator can use this model as a guide or checklist to determine if the design is conducive to best practices. For example, for C, Customize Content, the online educator can ensure a variety of learning formats are utilized to convey information and demonstrate the practicality of content. During the delivery of the online course, the counselor educator can look to the checklist to ensure optimal engagement with students. Finally, upon conclusion of the course, the educator can use this guide to reflect on effective practices in all areas and to establish goals for future teaching opportunities. The reflection questions can be used at any point to ensure an optimal experience for both the educator and the student.

As a condition of employment, faculty must undergo periodic performance evaluations which provide insight into the effectiveness of the instructor and the experience of the students. The purpose of this process is to evaluate individual performance, however, in smaller programs with fewer faculty, the individual evaluation could reflect program quality. As such, the TEACHING WELL Model could be used to help collect supporting evidence regarding the faculty's performance and quality of service. The TEACHING WELL mnemonic encompasses best practices for personal relationship building and student engagement, such as timely feedback, availability, presence, and communication (Martin et al., 2018; Richardson, et al., 2016). For example, E represents, Encourages student regularly, and includes practical suggestions such as providing motivational quotes and identifying student strengths via video announcements, regular email communication, and in assignment feedback. While not a comprehensive list of strategies to encourage students, this model provides faculty with practical approaches to consider and reflective questions to assess their own performance for this task.

The effectiveness of a counseling program relies on the competence and proficiency of its implementers. Overall, the TEACHING WELL Model can be used as

a self-evaluation tool for new and experienced faculty to understand their own baseline performance. In large programs with many diverse faculty members and needs, this tool could be especially helpful for program directors who may be flooded with faculty evaluation and performance metrics. The data collected from this model could be useful to target and provide professional development and trainings to faculty to improve pedagogy. Further, THE TEACHING WELL Model might be used as a preliminary evaluation to identify faculty who are struggling with the demands and rigor of online teaching. It is imperative that online counselor educators identifying areas of strength and opportunities for growth specifically related to their overall effectiveness in the teaching and learning process. The TEACHING WELL Model assists faculty in the important process to “understand the needs of the online student population and commit to systematic ways of developing the adult learner while acknowledging and employing the individual student’s experiences as assets to the developmental process” (Buckley & Dixon-Saxon, 2020, p. 74). When faculty employ this tool as a self-evaluation process, professional standards of quality and student engagement become practical and manageable. The utilization of this model could potentially prompt faculty to become even more intentional about ongoing self-evaluation and improvement in online pedagogy.

### **As a Peer Mentoring Tool**

In addition to being utilized as a self-evaluation tool, the TEACHING WELL Model can also be utilized as a peer mentoring tool. Overall, the number and size of counseling programs is increasing. According to the 2018 CACREP Annual Report, 2,817 full-time faculty members worked in CACREP programs during that year whereas 2,539 full-time faculty members worked in CACREP programs during 2017, representing an almost 11% increase in one year. Additionally, CACREP (n.d.) recently adopted guidelines during COVID-19 to help programs make the abrupt pivot from traditional learning to digital delivery. Standard 1.BB states that programs should “provide evidence that all core and noncore faculty have relevant preparation in relation to digital delivery of courses they teach” (CACREP Standards for Digital Delivery Update Report, n.d.). As program directors adjust to the changing landscape, they must maintain quality performance and improvement of their faculty. Peer evaluations have become more prevalent in higher education and are often included in annual reviews for promotion and tenure (Gaskamp et al., 2017). The TEACHING WELL Model could be utilized as one such objective measure, or peer mentoring tool, by which faculty can proactively assess their strengths, weaknesses, and identify areas of needed growth.

For example, faculty can use the TEACHING WELL

model as a guide or checklist when providing feedback to one another. The mnemonic provides various key points to consider, suggestions for application, and reflective questions that will generate collaborative dialogue among faculty peers. Peers can use The TEACHING WELL Model as a guide by discussing each letter of the mnemonic and sharing experiences, learned best practices, and identifying potential areas for improvement or other suggestions. For example, the W in the TEACHING WELL mnemonic represents welcome differences and diversity. In the spirit of desiring an improved educational experience for online counseling students, new and seasoned faculty can discuss this point, and offer practical and valid suggestions to maintain inclusivity in the online learning environment. Having a peer mentoring tool and process in place can help ensure that biases are removed, pejorative feelings, and best practices for a safe learning environment are in place.

Another facet of using a peer mentoring tool is that a dean or non-counselor administrator may lack the training and supervision experience needed to contribute to a faculty evaluation in the way that a counseling colleague can. The TEACHING WELL Model captures the specialized training and specific demands of online counselor educators and without knowledge of those metrics, non-counselor administrators or deans seldom have the ability to provide specific and practical feedback regarding counselor educators’ performance. The TEACHING WELL Model provides specific indicators and competencies to serve as data points for an ongoing peer discussions to guide him or her in directions of needed improvements.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the utilization of the TEACHING WELL Model is a highly applicable, timely, and relevant tool that online counseling programs and faculty can utilize as part of their self-evaluation and peer-mentoring expectations for online counseling faculty. Effective counselor educators strive to provide dynamic curricula, transparent instruction, clear communication, and available tools and resources for students to succeed. While it might be tempting to think these are immeasurable heuristics, the TEACHING WELL Model enables counselor educators to objectively evaluate quality across a robust set of guidelines in a systematic way. The TEACHING WELL Model provides opportunity for rapid and explicit feedback as both a self-evaluation and peer mentoring tool. This contributes to a standard of instruction, quality assurance, and a training ground for competent and confident counselors.

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