

Creating Connection with Online Learners

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Abstract

Many counselor education programs are now offered online due to convenience and accessibility. The pandemic has forced educators to learn how to connect with students on an online platform genuinely. Some online college students report feeling disconnected, lonely, and isolated. However, online educators can reach these students through creative mediums, which helps them feel more engaged and increases their learning experience. This conference proceeding will discuss the importance of connection for students, how to creatively promote communication and connection with students, technology platforms, and ways to safeguard ethics during supervision, training, and teaching.

Keywords

distance learning; connection; communication; online learners

Because of internet access and the pandemic, distance learning has become the popular delivery method for learning across the nation (Martin et al., 2020). Several counselor educator programs offer their curriculum entirely online. While this platform makes it convenient and accessible, many students lose the sense of community. They long for the personal connection that face-to-face courses provide. Online instructors should strive to be educated and competent to meet their students' needs. Online teaching requires unique skills and competencies, such as communicating effectively, managing technology, accessing content, and providing immediate feedback (Alvarez et al., 2009; Roddy et al., 2017). The responsibility falls on online educators to assist the students in feeling connected to the learning process to improve their learning experience.

A Brief History

Some sources indicate that distance learning began as far back as 1728 when shorthand teacher Caleb Phillips bought an ad in the Boston Gazette that said several lessons would be sent to students weekly, and those students would be just as well instructed as those who live locally (Sleator, 2010). Correspondence courses had issues due to the postal service. They finally be-

came a reality when improvements were made to the postal service in the nineteenth century (Sleator, 2010). Certificates were able to be granted through the mail. For example, in 1852, secretary students could mail in their work and receive a certificate upon completing the course (Gerson, 2020). Other correspondence courses were developed for different careers. For example, in 1890, a correspondence course was created on mine safety (Gerson, 2020). The correspondence courses grew significantly. By 1923, the program had 2.5 million students (Gerson, 2020). Educators figured out a way to communicate with their students. Live radio shows became the medium for educators to speak to their students at home, even though the communication may have only been one way (Sleator, 2010).

By 1934, televised courses were broadcasted, and several colleges came on board (Sleator, 2010). Educators were still struggling to find the best ways to reach their students. In the 1960s, the Carnegie Foundation conducted a study to determine the best ways to reach distance students (Sleator, 2010). Educators turned to technology for help. In 1969, open universities utilized radio and television technologies to educate students (Sleator, 2010). Students benefitted from educators using technology. In the United States in the 1980s, sat-

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elite television was used to deliver live and recorded course material. Students were able to call their instructors in real-time (Sleator, 2010). Students were able to ask questions and get immediate responses from their instructors. In 1993, the first internet-based higher education institution was opened due to the World Wide Web (Sleator, 2010). Other platforms were developed for online learning. Blackboard and e-learning were created for colleges and high school students (Gerson, 2020). Furthermore, recently, online learning has exploded because of the pandemic in 2020.

Connection is Important

Dr. Brené Brown spoke about how “connection is the energy created between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (Brown, 2015, p. 182). Relationships are the most critical factor in learning and counseling effectively. Connection is crucial in creating an effective experience (Hale & Bridges, 2020). Relationships help students feel like they matter, are cared about, and are important. “A good relationship is the basis of counseling and education” (Hall et al., 2010, p. 48). Meaningful relationships should be built between instructors and students. Meaningful relationships can be achieved through supportive interactions such as teaching, mentoring, researching, and supervision (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Counselor educators should get creative in ways to reach their students. Some examples of how to connect with students include addressing students by name, using positive affirmation, and giving encouraging responses (Malott et al., 2014). It is important to pronounce students’ names correctly. Other suggestions are sending emails before class begins, incorporating creative icebreakers, optional zoom meetings, breakout rooms, hands-on activities, video segments, encouraging students to generate groups using text or social media, small group projects, and being available via online office hours. Students enjoy getting to know their professors and building relationships with them and their peers through optional zoom meetings.

Creating Connection through Communication

Counselor educators can create connections through communication. Counselor educators should create an open-door policy for communication (Sherperis et al., 2020). The open-door policy might look like online office hours, zoom meetings, and encouraging students to ask questions when distance learning. Communication is important to promote learning in counselor education courses, especially being clear and using language intentionally (Limperos et al., 2015; Malott et al., 2014). When communicating with students, educators need to be intentional with their verbal and nonverbal interac-

tions. Counselor educators must be mindful of using language that effectively conveys thoughts, feelings, and nonverbal behaviors online (Trepal et al., 2007). Another aspect of communication is giving constructive feedback. Consistent, timely, and detailed feedback is a successful teaching practice and is especially needed in the online learning environment (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Garratt-Reed et al., 2016; Malott et al., 2014).

Benefit to Creating Connection

Communication, connection, and technology improve active engagement in an online program. Online programs provide autonomy, flexibility, and convenience. Smith et al. (2015) found that levels of learning between online and on-campus students were essentially the same, while most students preferred the online modality. Students indicated that synchronous classes positively impacted their sense of engagement and learning. Students feel more connected to faculty and peers, enabling them to practice the relational elements essential to becoming skilled counselors (Sherperis et al., 2020). Each student is unique and should be provided with different ways of learning. Combining online, asynchronous, and synchronous modalities tap into various learning styles, creating a learning experience that promotes success (Harris, 2018).

When students experience a lack of interaction, they become detached lonely and eventually may drop courses (Ozaydin et al., 2018). Increasing student engagement in online courses may improve student outcomes. The more students can interact with peers and faculty in and out of class; the more fulfilling their experience is with online education (Sherperis et al., 2020). Students appreciate professors reaching out to them through discussion posts, phone calls, and emails. Developing warm, supportive relationships can significantly impact students’ learning experiences. Counselor educators should strive to demonstrate the characteristics of an effective counselor, which include empathy, congruence, warmth, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957).

Types of Technology

There are two significant modalities of technology, including synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous modalities allow for live interactions that may require attendance at scheduled meetings or lectures. Synchronous communications are the nearest comparison to in-person interactions (Fox, 2021). Synchronous technologies include live video lectures, audio conferences, or video conferencing. Unlike synchronous methods, asynchronous modalities allow participants to interact without aligning schedules. Asynchronous learning allows students to access resources, ask questions, and apply their skills at a time that is

convenient for them. Asynchronous technologies include email, collaborative documents, online learning platforms, discussion boards, and messaging platforms. Each learning platform has its advantages, and students find it beneficial to incorporate both synchronous and asynchronous technologies (Fabríz et al., 2021).

Embracing Technology

Communication technologies allow online educators to connect and collaborate with students worldwide (McGilvery, 2013). Online learning is currently thriving. The rapid development of computer and Internet technologies has dramatically changed the ways of teaching and learning, supporting the growth of online education (Su et al., 2005). Great strides have been made which allow educators to communicate with their students in several different ways. The evolution of communication technology allows online educators and learners to participate in exciting curricula that are meaningful and purposeful for today's online learners (Chen, 2011). As they continuously self-reflect and collaborate, counselor educators, strive to improve their teaching methods. With enrollment numbers continually increasing, quality online education is vital to each student's success (Su et al., 2005). Students use technology to communicate. Therefore, they are more likely and comfortable to participate in a technology-driven environment (Smith, 2011). When students are actively engaged, their learning increases and their experience is more fulfilling. Interaction using communication technologies is vital to a quality online education because it allows teachers to promote active online learners, and that engagement translates to better learning outcomes and greater satisfaction with online learning, both for students and educators (McGilvery, 2013).

Ethics and Distance Learning

Ethical codes need to be considered and implemented when counselor educators teach their online courses. Professional relationships and boundaries must be maintained with students. The introduction section of Supervision, Training, and Teaching of The American Counseling Association's (2014) Code of Ethics explained that "Counselor supervisors, trainers, and educators aspire to foster meaningful and respectful professional relationships and maintain appropriate boundaries with supervisees and students in both face-to-face and electronic formats" (Section F). Counselor educators must constantly model professional behavior for students. The American Counseling Association's (2014) Code of Ethics detailed guidelines for counselor educators, stating, "Whether in traditional, hybrid, or online formats, counselor educators conduct

counselor education and training programs ethically and serve as role models for professional behavior" (F.7.a.). Students look to their counselor educators as mentors in how to conduct themselves.

Additional mentoring and professional development courses may need to be highly considered to assist counselor educators in their technological competency. Regarding counselor educator competence, the American Counseling Association's (2014) Code of Ethics stated, "When using technology to deliver instruction, counselor educators develop competence in the use of the technology" (F.7.b.). Some counselor educators lack training and education in their use of technology. Students could suffer from the incompetency of their instructors. Therefore, counselor educators are ethically responsible for obtaining more training in this area to increase their skills and confidence to benefit students.

Conclusion

Because distance learning is the future of education, educators must learn to reach students more effectively. When students feel a sense of community in their online program, they learn better and are more successful. Counselor educators can meet their students' needs in creative, innovative ways. However, they may need to think outside the box and be open to trying new techniques and strategies. Professors can be proactive in their communication, managing technology, accessing content, and providing immediate feedback (Alvarez et al., 2009; Roddy et al., 2017). Students will significantly benefit when professors take the time and intentionally develop good relationships with them. Dr. James Comer spoke about the connection between learning and relationships (Comer, 2005). For students to significantly learn, they must have a relationship with the one who is teaching them.

Recommendations

The number of online counselor education programs continues to grow. Research studies that survey online counselor education students on ways counselor educators can better connect and communicate are recommended. Research exploring creative and successful ways to connect with students is essential. Identifying effective ways to communicate with students may lead to better student outcomes. More research is needed for counselor educators to incorporate best teaching practices into their online platforms.

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