

Dynamics of Online Engagement: Counseling Students' Experiences and Perceptions in Distance Learning

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Abstract

In this article, the authors present counseling students' personal accounts of their experiences in distance education with a focus on online engagement based on an extensive review of the counseling literature. In addition, an evaluation tool was introduced for gathering qualitative and quantitative information regarding patterns of instructor engagement efforts and styles. Facilitating factors for experiential online learning were also identified from the students' perceptions of online learning experience. Finally, the results were used to make specific recommendations for counselor educators to enhance their teaching efficacy and engagement.

Keywords

online engagement; distance learning; counselor education

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a period of widespread changes in lifestyle, largely centered around limiting in-person social interactions in order to minimize risk of contracting and spreading the coronavirus. In this effort, schools across the world transitioned to distanced, online learning modalities, relying on virtual platforms to conduct classroom meetings, have students complete assignments, and foster connection while adhering to social distancing mandates. While online education is still widely used in counseling graduate programs, there has been an ongoing perception that distance education is less effective than traditional in-person education because of the lack of face-to-face interaction; however, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) continues to see a rise in higher education institutions offering online counseling programs. As of February 2022, there are 112 CACREP-accredited online degree programs including 103 master's programs and 9 doctoral programs (CACREP, 2022). Most of the counseling programs had to adopt at least some version of online or hybrid courses even though they are not fully online programs because of

the COVID-19 pandemic. As the number of online programs with CACREP accreditation continues to grow, there is an expanding body of research that dispels the ongoing perception that online counseling programs are less effective than traditional in-person programs.

A major benefit of distance education is that students may gain the same knowledge regardless of where they live while allowing them to work at their own pace. Distance education features a lack of physical gatherings and instead fully relies on virtual platforms to communicate, often using text-based correspondences to deliver curriculum and collaborate on assignments. Such online modalities for teaching and learning clearly creates challenges, as the counseling discipline relies heavily on interpersonal interaction; thus, instructors' engagement is an essential component that can be associated with student outcome, performance, and course satisfaction. Research indicates that a higher degree of instructor engagement positively impacts student learning experience, satisfaction, and retention (Nasir et al., 2020). The recent federal regulation on distance education by the U.S. Department of Education effective July 1st, 2021 de-

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mands the Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI), which requires all faculty to include their specific plans to implement the policy in the syllabus. For example, a 3-credit course should be engaging students in two or more activities each week (at least 50 minutes in total) during the semester regardless of the class format, emphasizing the importance of instructor engagement.

In the literature on distance education, there have been several research studies on faculty experiences of online education (Chen et al, 2020; Holmes, 2019; Meyer, 2015), but only a few studies focused specifically on counseling students' experiences. In order to ensure efficacy in the COVID-19 era, it is crucial for counselor educators to understand and monitor how their students perceive and evaluate the online engagement aspect of distance education.

What Do Students Find Engaging?

A previous study aimed to discover what types of online activities and interactions students find "engaging." Interestingly, the finding indicated that it was not the particular type of activities that was important, but rather utilizing multiple interaction channels made the most significant difference in engagement. Therefore, it is clear that counselor educators need to diversify their approach to online activities and interactions with students to enhance their engagement.

Another study investigating the advantages and disadvantages of online education from counseling students' perspectives summarized unique benefits of distance learning, including continuity of lessons, allowing students to learn at their own pace, overcoming geographical barriers, and economic feasibility, and increased time efficiency (Karagoz, 2021). Critiques of online education presented by this study included inefficient and inactive learning, especially for students lacking self-discipline, as well as limited interaction, one-way communication, inability to socialize with peers, and insufficient program infrastructure.

Evaluation Tools of Instructor Engagement

Counselor educators' efforts to engage students in distance learning can be better measured by using formal evaluations. Evaluating instructor engagement may not only describe the engagement efforts and styles but also identify areas of growth. In addition to some instruments that have been developed and validated to measure instructor engagement from students' perspectives in higher education (Naibert & Barbera, 2022), the field of counseling also has an evaluation tool, the Survey of Online Counselor Instructor Engagement (SOCIE), to assess counseling instructor engagement while explicitly focusing on online education. The SOCIE is a 31-

item survey measuring counseling students' perceptions of their instructor's engagement styles in online education (Nasir et al., 2020). The initial development study conducted an exploratory factor analysis, which rendered two dimensions, organizing and coordinating style ($\alpha = .87$) and active engaging style ($\alpha = .81$), containing 15 and 16 items respectively. Also, a moderate criterion validity was reported ($r = .502$ to $.699$). While its initial sample does not represent diverse cultural groups, counselor educators may consider utilizing this tool to evaluate their own engagement styles from students' perspectives. The SOCIE renders qualitative and quantitative information on patterns of instructor engagement efforts and styles and areas of strengths and weaknesses, which can be incorporated into their online teaching for improvement and advancement.

Facilitating Factors for the Experiential Online Learning

Several factors that facilitate experiential learning in the online format have been identified from previous research on students' perceptions and experiences of online learning. Some factors that stood out in the instructors' characteristics were mostly related to direct interactions with students. Due to the nature of online learning environments (DOE, 2012; Snow et al., 2018), in which students participate in online discussion forums and submit their assignments online, students may heavily rely on feedback and constructive criticism from their instructors to supplement their learning. A lack of direct face-to-face contact with instructors may lead students to depend even more on receiving the instructors' feedback on their assignments, class performance, and discussion participations (Snow et al., 2018). According to a research survey on factors that influence online counselor training (Ekong, 2006), "feedback quality" was rated as extremely important in determining the effectiveness of online training. Students particularly valued "the clarity of feedback," "regularity of feedback," and "frequency of forum participation" of their instructors, suggesting the importance of online instructors' dedicating ample time to providing quality feedback and constructive criticism on students' assignments, discussion, and class performance. Therefore, counselor educators would benefit from developing a systematic strategy to provide feedback with regularity and haste to build rapport with students and enhance their learning process. Students may feel isolated and disconnected when they do not receive responses from instructors in a timely manner (Snow et al., 2018). It would be beneficial for educators to commit to a schedule of participating in discussion forums to post replies to students or to give feedback on students' assignments, which will allow students to know when to expect a response from their instructors. Furthermore,

it may also be important for counselor educators to use feedback as an opportunity to engage in advising their students in other aspects of course requirements.

Some characteristics of students have been identified as accelerating factors in the online learning process. First of all, motivation has been perceived as a strong predictor of success in both traditional and distance learning environments (Sankaran & Bui, 2001). Students who are highly motivated are likely to be successful (Ekong, 2006; Sankaran & Bui, 2001), as motivation is directly and indirectly linked to the ability to persist (Lufi et al., 2003) when facing challenges and struggles. Time management is also an important skill for students to be equipped with to succeed in online learning, as it allows students who have multiple duties to better balance responsibilities at school and work as well as in their personal lives (Ekong, 2006). Not surprisingly, self-discipline has been considered a critical factor in effective online learning and closely related to the implementation of time management skills (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Ekong, 2006; Gorbunovs et al., 2016; Waschull, 2005). Online classes that respect students' autonomy and allow for their own pacing may require a great level of self-discipline (Drange & Roarson, 2015), delegating a majority of the responsibility onto students to develop self-discipline for time management skills and the implementation of their study plans. It was found that students with self-discipline tended to frequently access online learning modules, actively engage in individual and group tasks, and achieve better outcomes (Gorbunovs et al., 2016), highlighting the importance of self-discipline in academic success in online learning.

Conclusion

Although the reliance on virtual platforms in education may continue long after the pandemic ends, more effort needs to be made to improve the dynamics of online engagement in counseling education programs. The authors reviewed the existing literature across counselor education and distance learning disciplines focusing on students' experiences, resulting in a set of recommendations for counselor educators to consider. First, educators should diversify their online interaction channels. Second, educators can use appropriate technology tools to make their online live discussions more frictionless (e.g., PollEverywhere, Quizizz, Google Jamboard) and enhance the mobile accessibility of online platforms (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard Ultra). Third, educators may benefit from recording their lectures, even if it is a synchronous live meeting, for the continuity of the lessons, as many students find it to be helpful to their long-term learning. Fourth, educators should develop a systematic strategy to provide feedback on a regular basis so

that students receive practical support to supplement their formal learning while connecting with their instructors through an additional avenue. Fifth, educators can help students form virtual study and/or accountability groups so that they can help each other in the issues of self-discipline. Providing virtual office hours on a regular basis can also increase online engagement. Lastly, in addition to these strategies, counselor educators are encouraged to use a structured evaluation tool (e.g., SOCIE) to assess their engagement efforts and styles from students' perspectives, which will inform their further practices in distance counselor education.

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