

Creating Meaningful Connections in Online Counselor Education

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Abstract

In this conference summary brief, the author discusses the importance of creating meaningful connections between counselor educators and students in online teaching platforms. The author connects this discussion to ethical standards throughout the conference brief. Finally, the author provides strategies for counselor educators to implement and suggestions to consider using to monitor their effectiveness, model self-care practices, and model boundaries for students. This article is based on a presentation at the Counselor Education Distance Learning Conference hosted by Palo Alto University in February 2022.

Keywords

online education; counselor education; counseling

Online graduate counseling programs have increased over the last decade (Mok, Xiong, Rahman, 2021). COVID-19 caused an abrupt need for brick-and-mortar graduate programs to become online programs (Fatemeh, Otaki, Baqain, et al., 2021). Due to the expedited wave of COVID-19 cases across the world, there was a lack of training in how to make this transition smoothly, which impacted faculty members' ability to consider how to change their approach to connecting with their students in the online space. Some programs have attempted to increase their communication with students through synchronous online teaching (Wu, 2016). Although this format can be a positive experience for students and counselor educators, some faculty members may still struggle with how to translate their in-person connections in an online teaching environment.

Much like the counseling relationship, creating connections and relationships in an online teaching course are important for the success and satisfaction of students and faculty members (Sheperis et al., 2020). This paper briefly discusses the importance of establishing connections in online graduate teaching

relationships and strategies and tools for increasing authentic connections with students. The importance of faculty members modeling self-care and boundaries will also be discussed. This paper will conclude with a discussion on the ethical responsibility counselor educators have in maintaining their own personal and professional growth. The author will also include examples for how counselor educators can model self-care and maintain personal and professional growth.

Importance of Connection

The counseling field is one in which connection is paramount to learning, development, and change (Schwartz, 2019). Counselor educators are called to "aspire to foster meaningful and respectful professional relationships and to maintain appropriate boundaries with supervisees and students in both face-to-face and electronic formats." (ACA, 2014, p.12). Although counselor educators are called to uphold these standards, they are not always given the tools for how to carry out the standards. Additionally, there are power dynamics at play between counselor educators and their students (Schwartz, 2019). Meaningful connections

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between educators and students can help mitigate the power differential that naturally exist in this relationship. Furthermore, creating connections with students can positively impact and increase their engagement in both synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms (Sheperis et al., 2020).

Strategies to Increase Connections. The relationship between counselor educators and students is a parallel process to the relationship students will create with their clients (Kooyman et al., 2010). Counselor educators have the unique opportunity to model healthy relationship building, conflict resolution, and relationship repair directly through the strategies they utilize with their students. Strategies that can help increase the establishment of meaningful connections include personalized introductions (with photos), collaborative development of class agreements (see Figure 1), using check-ins throughout the course term, validating students' experiences, and counselor educator willingness to share their own experiences.

Figure 1. Class Agreement Examples

- Give positive as well as negative feedback (sandwich technique)
- Assume the constructive feedback is coming from a good place
- Disclose first whether what you are stating is something you want feedback on or just using the time/space to vent about an issue
- Confidentiality is important in this space; wear headphones if you are within earshot of people 3+ years of age
- Welcome any and all emotions; acknowledge and encourage those who share
- Acceptance of self-disclosure (whether one shares or does not share)
- Ask for what you need
- Be willing to take risks

Counselor educators can choose what areas of their lives they feel comfortable sharing with their students in their introductions with pictures and/or symbols. Additionally, educators can share other items of importance related to their clinical and professional lives, including populations they are passionate about serving and advocating for. The use of class agreements in a course can demonstrate to students their emotional safety is important to their instructor and that their voice matters. This can be empowering for students who belong to BIPOC populations (Mitchell & Binkley, 2021). Check-ins can be used throughout the course in large and small group format. Depending on the nature of the check-in, some students may feel more comfortable and be more open and honest in small groups, especially at the beginning of courses when relationships

are being built. Students experience a range of emotions and experiences throughout their graduate program (Hudyma, 2019). Their experience in a graduate program can be positively impacted when their professors acknowledge and validate their experiences. Students can also benefit from hearing about their professors professional and clinical experiences.

Modeling Self Care

Various reasons exist to promote the integration of the counseling field can be a highly stressful environment (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Having knowledge about the effects of stress and importance of self-care does not preclude graduate students and counselor educators from experiencing burnout. Morse et al. reported that "21-67% of mental health workers may be experiencing high levels of burnout" (p. 1, 2012). Counselor educators are called to continually monitor their own needs and adjust their self-care practices when necessary. COVID-19, increased personal and professional responsibilities and social justice events may complicate and/or impact counselor educators energy levels and motivation to engage in self-care (Rokach & Boulazreg, 2020). Knowing burnout could be the fate of their students' futures, it could be helpful for counselor educators to use their relationship with their students to discuss and model self-care.

Counselor educators cannot assume all students are aware of and/or engage in self-care. Self-care is a value that not all individuals hold and it's important to acknowledge the privilege that comes with being able to engage in any form of self-care (Mitchell & Binkley, 2021). Students can benefit from seeing and hearing their professor's model examples of what self-care could look like. These examples can include counselor educators appropriately sharing their own personal and professional self-care practices; sharing how they manage stress related to clinical work and sharing their boundaries around communication outside of the course.

Ethical Responsibility

The American Counseling Association ethical guidelines state that counselor educators "aspire to foster meaningful and respectful professional relationships" (p.8, 2014). Additionally, in the professional responsibility section, we are called to monitor our effectiveness and take steps to grow and improve when necessary. Although faculty members are consciously aware of their ethical responsibility, it can be easy to let responsibility take a back seat to increasing personal and professional responsibilities.

Counselor educators can benefit from seeking out peer support, consultation, and peer observation of their courses from colleagues. Additionally, educators

can use mid-term and final evaluations to determine what works well and what can be improved. Educators are often subject to life stress, much like their students, and can receive their own support through personal counseling (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Counselor educators can also use personal counseling to help monitor and evaluate their personal growth.

Conclusion

Online education is increasing rapidly (Snow et al., 2018), and the COVID-19 pandemic has made a lasting impression on teaching (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Although COVID-19 cases are decreasing in some areas, it is possible that programs may choose to keep some online components in their program. The strategies discussed can provide opportunities for increased meaningful and genuine connections and engagement in online relationships.

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