Three Experiential Learning Activities for the Online Environment

Brian A. Mesimer, Jenny Chien, and Stanley Hoover

Richmont Graduate University

Author Note

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brian A. Mesimer, Richmont Graduate University. 1900 The Exchange Se #100, Atlanta, GA, 30339

Email: bmesimer@richmont.edu
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Abstract

Research indicates that counselor education requires experiential instruction to properly facilitate student engagement (Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2020). Specifically, flipped format classes tend to encourage more student engagement than traditional lecture and online asynchronous courses (Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2020). Such activities should be both varied in nature and include proper exposition and context (Young, 2022). Online programs continue to grow in popularity (Snow et al., 2018). However, transitioning on-ground content online can prove daunting for counselor educators and research on online counselor education teaching strategies is insufficient (Dotson-Blake & Glass, 2016; Hale & Bridges, 2021; Li & Wu, 2021). This paper seeks to bridge this gap by presenting models of effective experiential teaching activities adapted to the online learning environment.

Keywords: online counselor education, experiential learning, flipped learning, discussion boards
Literature Review

It comes as no surprise that the number of online counselor education programs continues to rise, a trend that has been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Snow et al., 2018). Yet research on effective online counselor pedagogy is lacking (Hale & Bridges, 2021; Li & Su, 2021). This creates a pressing research gap for online faculty who wish their pedagogies to be informed by best practices. What can be known about effective online teaching can be divided into three broad categories.

The first category describes information regarding actual best teaching practices. Research indicates that counselor education requires experiential instruction to properly facilitate student engagement and that there are numerous benefits to implementing creative pedagogical strategies (Cawthon et al., 2011; Lawrence et al., 2015; Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2020; Wells & Dickens, 2020). Yet by its very nature, the online environment can restrict certain types of experiential engagement. Methods to manage this gap include strategies such as flipped learning (Brinkman, 2010; Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2020). Flipped learning, described as the use of class time to experientially integrate standard materials consumed outside of class, appears to be the most efficacious in facilitating student engagement when compared with online lecture and asynchronous class formats (Merlin-Knoblich et al., 2022). Yet student preferences also indicate the importance of variety in education, suggesting that pedagogies should not be exclusively experiential or flipped (Young, 2022).

Second, research indicates that counselor educators often have trouble transitioning their on-ground content to an online modality and experience challenges when teaching online generally (Hale & Bridges, 2021; Li & Su, 2021). Specifically, educators who modify their courses and teaching practices for an online context may face many challenges. These include
expectation and support mismatches from stakeholders, a lack of faculty enthusiasm about online teaching, concerns about the authenticity of their teaching and ability to create connection online (Hale & Bridges, 2021). This says nothing about the logistical and technical challenges of online education. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many educators to transition to online teaching (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Fortunately, educators often found solutions to their challenges through an application of intentionality on their part (Hale & Bridges, 2021).

Finally, the research speaks to student experiences of online counselor education, specifically regarding equity. It is known that students may often feel isolated in online classes and programs and that Zoom fatigue is an ever-present challenge (Bennet et al., 2021; Young, 2022; Quezada et al., 2020, as cited in Li & Su, 2021). Yet emerging research also demonstrates the challenges that online education makes towards equity. In a study of K-16 schools, Tate & Warschauer (2022) found that students generally perform poorer in online courses. This trend is amplified when accounting for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Methods do exist to facilitate indigenous perspectives in the classroom environment, such as land-based show and tell exercises (Tessaro & Restoule, 2022). However, it can be inferred that effective and culturally sensitive online engagement in counselor education is a matter of equity.

Therefore, the online counselor educator faces challenges in engaging the online teaching environment in a way that facilitates student engagement and meets equity demands. However, these challenges can be overcome through instructor intentionality (Hale & Bridges, 2021). In what follows, three online teaching interventions are discussed which can facilitate student engagement.
Interventions

The following three interventions are each designed to facilitate student engagement across a variety of curriculum content and can be adapted for use in a variety of CACREP core content courses. Further, they can be utilized in group class discussions, skill acquisition and development, and online discussion boards. The three interventions are entitled “Spot the Ethical Violations,” “Facilitating Engaging Class Discussions,” and the “Buddy Role Play.”

Spot the Ethical Violation

Designed to be used in either the Professional Orientation or Ethics courses, “Spot the Ethical Violations” is an interactive course module designed to help students corporately identify ethical boundary violations in a low stakes and familiar environment. Generally, the intervention involves both a pre-class asynchronous component and a live class discussion component but can be completed entirely live in class should time and technology allow. In the intervention, students will view three approximately five-minute videos taken from YouTube. These videos, curated by the professor, are taken from well-known films or video series, and involve the portrayal of psychotherapeutic services. Each video will depict at least one ethical boundary violation on the part of the practitioner, ideally presented in ascending order in terms of ethical complexity.

The recommended videos sequence begins with a short video sketch depicting a counselor drinking alcohol and gossiping about the client’s friends and implicating the ACA Code of Ethics regarding impairment (ACA, 2014, C.2.g.; Viva La Dirt League, 2021). Next a clip from the movie 50/50 (Levine, 2011) is played where the therapist falls in love with a client and breaks confidentiality with the client’s family (ACA, 2014, A.5.a., B.1.c.). Finally, a clip from Good Will Hunting (Van Zant, 1997) is played in which the counselor conducts therapy in
an unsecure location while exhibiting unhealthy fusing behaviors with the client (ACA, 2014, A.5.a., A.6.c., e.). Of course, the instructor may find other videos more instructive and should include those as needed. Often videos with some element of humor can help facilitate class discussion.

Finally, the instructor leads the class in a discussion of each of the videos, attempting to elicit from the class their perspectives on what ACA Code of Ethics (2014) violations have occurred. Often, this leads to an opportunity to expose and educate students on the nuances of the ACA code of which they may have been unaware prior. For example, in Good Will Hunting (1997), the counselor conducts a session in a public park. The class is then encouraged to discuss the ethical merits of such activity and whether it violates the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). Ultimately, it is thought that this intervention provides a fun, low-stakes, and interactive platform which will allow for engagement around the ethics codes characterized more by curiosity than by anxiety and fear.

**Facilitating Engaging Class Discussions**

Asynchronous class discussions are an important part of most online courses. According to Lee & Rucker (2022), online discussions have the potential to increase student engagement in online learning. They provide opportunities for critical thinking and application of course material, but also foster social connections among students. The nature of asynchronous communication also enables instructors to better assess student performance and provide more substantive feedback. Despite these benefits, not all students find online discussions worthwhile (Balakrishnan & Gan, 2016; Gasmi, 2022). For online discussions to be effective, therefore, students must be motivated to meaningfully interact with one another. Creating discussions that
tap into students' natural curiosity and professional interests is an important part of online course design (Wang, 2019).

In a counseling theories course, for example, an instructor might create a series of asynchronous group discussions in response to video demonstrations of actual counseling sessions. After watching the entire session, students might be asked to respond to one of the following prompts:

- What are your overall reactions to the counselor’s work with this client? Specifically, what were you thinking and feeling as you watched? What moments of the session stood out to you and why?

- Connect something you observed in the video with a theoretical concept you read about in Chapter 2 of our textbook. How effectively did the demonstration illustrate the concept? Be sure to consider the evaluation of this theoretical approach.

- What was a new idea you had as you watched the video? If you had the chance to meet with the counselor, what questions would you ask them about the session? What might you have done differently if you were the counselor? Provide a rationale based on this theory or another theory that resonates with you.

These questions intend to make active engagement more desirable by linking the discussion to a video of a counseling demonstration that addresses social and cultural concerns, something that should be both compelling and relevant to counseling students. In addition to letting students select which prompt to respond to, the discussion prompts are clear but flexible enough to allow students to focus on the material most salient to them. They require both higher- and lower-order thinking as well as attention to affect. Students are also invited to synthesize
their observations and reflections from this learning activity with other course materials and resources.

**Buddy Role Play**

Role plays are a popular method to develop competency in skill-based majors. Many online programs are offered in skill-focused majors such as fine arts, culinary arts, medical training, and dental hygiene. The success of skill development in online programs is impacted by role play and focused clinical application (Freidman, 2016). Specifically, interprofessional education (IPE) and identified patient models are successfully used in medicine, pharmacy, psychology, social work and law (McKinney et al., 2022). Within the counseling field, both skill modeling and role-playing dyads have been demonstrated as helpful modalities to develop competency, clinical skill, and therapeutic alliance (Kuhne et al., 2022; Murdoch et al., 2012).

To this end, the clinical team at Richmont Graduate University developed a capstone assignment in the clinical sequence, the *Buddy Role Play*. Students in Pre-Practicum are paired with a current Internship 2 student “Buddy” to complete a full practice intake session including full informed consent. During the practice session, the Internship 2 student will role play a client (changing sufficient identifying details), while the Pre-Practicum student completes the informed consent process and a full clinical interview.

There are three graded components used. These include:

- First, students complete a written intake report. Students write up a completed intake report aimed at appropriate assessment, diagnosis, and treatment planning. Students are evaluated on their ability to complete an assessment, formulate a thorough case conceptualization, select an appropriate provisional diagnosis, and develop a comprehensive treatment plan.
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● Secondly, students capture a video tape of the mock session in a HIPAA compliant platform. Within that system, they label their micro-counseling skills, identify strengths and weaknesses, and ask questions. This is shared with the faculty member for review.

● Third, students write a reflection paper on this experience. They debrief with their “Buddy” to address differential diagnoses, strength and weakness, areas of transference and countertransference, and the students’ overall feelings of self-efficacy and confidence.

Together, these three components help students develop essential counselor skills with a peer and to reflect on their experience and development as they prepare to enter the clinical sequence.
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