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Reflection and Readiness: Shared Benefits of Using an Oral Final Evaluation to Assess Counselor Competency

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted educational systems worldwide, shifting everything from pedagogy to learning environments. The emerging needs and complexities presented during this time has challenged long-standing practices, requiring creativity and innovation to adapt in the midst of uncertainty and accelerated change. This has been the reality within graduate counseling programs where coursework and internships were interrupted, and the counseling environment altered. In the face of such changes, the critical assessment and evaluation of preservice counselor competence remains a high priority of counselor educators. This article outlines the piloting of an Oral Final Evaluation (OFE) of postpracticum graduate counseling students as a means of addressing the need to accurately assess counselor competence in the changed landscape of the current pandemic. This article provides a rationale for integrating an OFE and space for reflection on its implementation, along with feedback from participating students, faculty, and site supervisors.

Keywords: counselor competence, COVID-19, professional standards, oral final evaluation

Among the many responsibilities of counselor educators, supporting the development of students' personal and professional growth, along with the ongoing assessment and evaluation of their competencies, remain fundamental components of counselor development. This process has always been marked with complexities, but especially so in light of the current pandemic. This past spring, the impact of COVID-19 became the reality for universities globally, causing educators to quickly navigate adapting programs to a new learning environment amid unprecedented change and uncertainty about the immediate future. As counselor educators, we were also faced with these program adjustments, while maintaining a delicate balance between protecting our students from any unfair disadvantages as a result of the pandemic and simultaneously upholding the rigor and credibility of an accredited counseling program. These decisions were compounded by the significant changes occurring within the counseling profession overall due to the mandated restrictions around physical distancing and quarantine – changes that also impacted internships

and practicums in counseling programs. The challenge faced during this time was, in light of the disruptions caused to students' internship experiences, ensuring that only competent and qualified entry-level practitioners were supported in moving forward in their degree. In pursuit of that goal, the pandemic provided an opportunity to reconsider routine approaches and invited creativity and resourcefulness in integrating new and improved practices. The purpose of this article is to share one particular practice that was piloted in response to the need for adaptations to the assessment of competency in postpracticum students and their readiness for entry-level practice.

Assessing competency of preservice counselors is an essential and fundamental task of graduate programs in counseling. Not only does this speak to the evaluation of academic outcomes, but counseling programs are ethically responsible to ensure that students are "well-prepared to embark on counseling/therapy career paths as caring, confident, and competent professionals" (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association [CCPA], 2020).

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Similar to other helping professions, assessing competencies comes with significant challenges (Peterson, 2004; Roberts et al., 2005). Part of this challenge is the ability to define and obtain consensus on the core competencies of the profession (Hensley et al., 2003; Lichtenberg et al., 2007). Within the field of counseling, there remains divergence in the assumptions and beliefs about what makes counseling effective and, resultantly, what competencies equip a counselor to be proficiently therapeutic with others. After reviewing the literature at the time, Frame and Stevens-Smith (1995) developed nine competencies for clinical practice, which included the ability to accept personal responsibility; willingness to use and accept feedback; ability to be open, flexible, cooperative, and positive; awareness of their impact on others; ability to express emotions effectively and appropriately; and effective use of conflict management skills. Kottler (2018) described these necessary factors for counseling effectiveness as the therapeutic alliance, agreement of goals, reliable and accurate feedback, empathic responding, sensitive questioning, and constructive but sensitive confrontation. Feminist therapists envision counseling as effective through empowerment, egalitarianism, and analysis of power, which requires a strong therapeutic relationship based on equity (Brown, 2018). Rønnestad (2010) considered addressing vulnerability and weakness, while simultaneously recognizing strengths and resources, to be the essential ingredients of optimal counseling. Miller et al. (1997) declared the consistent elements of effective counseling as the extratherapeutic, or client/environment factors, the therapy relationship, techniques that initiate or prepare for some action or change, expectancy, and hope. As these few examples illustrate, there are as many variabilities in the necessary factors for effective counseling as there are scholars writing about them. This makes the task of assessing competencies of counselors challenging as the definition of what makes counseling effective has a strong influence on the assessment of qualities, characteristics, or abilities deemed essential for entry-level practitioners to be therapeutic with others.

Another challenge in counselor assessment is managing dual relationships and roles, with faculty supervisors also working with students as instructors and advisors (Lichtenbert et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2005; Turnbull et al., 1998). Faculty are often in the position of determining whether a student has passed or failed a practicum, even though they do not provide the majority of the site supervision of students. Effective and accurate formative and summative feedback requires substantial collaboration between faculty and community sites. This can further complicate the competency assessment process when there is not ample opportunity to consult with or establish relationships that support the collaboration of the university and practicum site supervisors. Moreover, when working within rural settings, student internships are quite geographically spread out, which can also result in additional isolation between the university and the internship setting.

Within the past decade, there has been increased discussion and writing about counselor competence, as the regulation of counseling professionals in Canada and the United States has experienced a major movement forward (Martin et al., 2013; Robinson Kurpius et al., 2015). The growing mental health need in both countries has called for clearer guidelines and standards for the professional competencies required to recognize master's-level practitioners as qualified counselors (Jackson & Scheel, 2013; Martin et al., 2013; Robinson Kurpius et al., 2015). Beginning as early as 2006, research into and development of a nationally validated competency profile for the profession of counseling and psychotherapy was underway in Canada (Martin et al., 2013). This movement occurred much earlier in the United States with the establishment of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in 1981 (CACREP, 2016). These initiatives in both nations have resulted in the adoption of some standards around counselor competence that are shared across jurisdictions in an effort to increase the consistency and ethical practices of counseling professionals and promote a unified counseling profession (CACREP, 2016; Martin et al., 2013). For instance, most states in the United States use the CACREP curriculum as their academic requirements for licensure (CACREP, 2016). In Canada, these movements have led to the adoption of validated counselor competency profiles within the provinces of Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta, which have a shared focus and overview of core professional skills and abilities.

The Federation of Associations of Counselling Therapists British Columbia (FACTBC; 2019) defines competency as the ability to perform a task with a specified level of proficiency, which refers to the ability to apply competencies in an informed manner, anticipate potential outcomes, and respond appropriately. Provincial profiles in Canada consistently provide an overview of the competencies that are considered necessary to practice "safely, effectively and ethically across a variety of practice settings" (College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario [CRPO], 2012). Across the three provincial competence profiles, four common areas are identified as organizing categories for entry-level competence: foundations, relationships, professionalism, and therapeutic process. The CRPO (2012) profile adds a fifth category of professional literature. These areas align with the core concepts and competencies outlined in the accreditation manual for the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's Council on Accreditation of Counsellor Education Programs (CACEP; CCPA, 2002), which guides the curricular programming and decisions of accredited counselor education programs in Canada. The core competencies also closely match the counseling curriculum outlined in CACREP (2016) accreditation standards, which describes the standards for all entry-level and doctoral-level programs in counseling in the United States. The common core areas identified as foundational for entry-level practitioners within the CACREP accreditation standards include professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, counseling and helping relationships, and therapeutic processes across individual and group service delivery models (CACREP, 2016). These provincial and national standards within Canada and the United States provide evidence for consistency in the competencies, and core content areas, necessary in the development of preservice counselors toward readiness for entry-level practice across both countries.

The establishment of clear standards and competencies for counseling professionals has improved the ability of counselor educators to consistently evaluate the readiness of graduates for beginning practice as an ethical and intentional practitioner. Effective assessment of preservice counselors is a fundamental component of counselor education programs, necessary to ensuring that students leave their graduate studies with the competencies required for proficient entry-level practice postgraduation. This is a complex task, however, that requires the integration of students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes within and across domains of competence (Epstein & Hundert, 2002). Additionally, for assessment practices to be considered useful, they need to follow valid and reliable methods that are both feasible and grounded in consensus in the field regarding ways of measuring competence and the elements of competence itself (Bashook, 2005; Epstein & Hundert, 2002; Kaslow et al., 2007; Turnbull et al., 1998). Ideally, assessment is multifaceted and involves various approaches and data points to assess competencies comprehensively, as opposed to a single dimension.

In the CACEP-accredited M.Ed. in Counseling program in Atlantic Canada that was the site for this pilot, the approach to assessment in practicum prior to the COVID-19 pandemic involved a number of activities that promoted a far-reaching exploration of readiness. This process spanned the entire practicum and involved observation and evaluation of the student through viewing video recordings of sessions, site supervisors sitting in on sessions and co-counseling, faculty and site supervisors discussing cases with students, mid-way site visits by faculty supervisors to discuss growth and areas for further development, observing interactions with site and cohort colleagues, examining critical reflective activities assigned for their practicum course, and reviewing case notes and client records. In addition to these activities, which provided information for ongoing formative evaluation of the student, a written summative evaluation at the mid-point and end-point of practicum was completed by the site supervisor. Taken together, these evaluation points allowed the faculty supervisor to determine entry-level competency of the student upon practicum conclusion and provided a breadth of information across the 4-month, 500-hour, practicum upon which to base this decision.

The disruptions caused to our students' practicums amid the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a loss of experience and a lack of appropriate data for faculty and site supervisors to adequately assess and determine entry-level competency. To accurately assess readiness for practice, further information

was needed beyond what would typically be collected in light of shortened practicums and fewer accrued hours of direct and indirect service. This created an opportunity for ingenuity in examining current approaches to assessment and envisioning new possibilities. As a result of this identified need for additional information to support a determination of competence, our counseling program piloted an Oral Final Evaluation [OFE] as a new practice of assessment for our students. This new means of assessment provided a measure of competency that supported decisions around our students' readiness for entry-level practice, despite the unexpected disruptions to practicum.

Although the use of oral assessment is commonly used in educational and health care programs, there is limited literature on using this method of evaluation for competency and clinical practice within counselor education programs (Hammonds & Schwarze, 2019). Among pedagogical techniques, oral assessment provides a valuable and creative opportunity for students to make rich connections and integrate their learning with application. Within the clinical disciplines, oral assessment includes the clinical viva voce, which usually takes place at the conclusion of a work placement (Hammonds & Schwarze, 2019). According to Tekian and Yudowsky (2009), the clinical viva is defined as an oral assessment characterized by the "face to face interaction between an examinee and one or more examiners" (p. 269, as cited in Hammonds & Schwarze, 2019). This process makes use of open-ended and probing questions that highlight the student's ability to critically analyze problems, apply knowledge, and explore values and attitudes that inform clinical practice, along with providing a measurement of competence and proficiency (Levett-Jones et al., 2011). This model of oral assessment provided the framework for the development of our program's OFE.

The OFE was also conceptualized in line with the competency areas identified on the provincial competency profiles (CRPO, 2012; FACTBC, 2019), the standards of CACEP and CACREP accreditation (CACREP, 2016; CCPA, 2002), and some of Kaslow et al.'s (2007) list of guiding principles and recommendations for the assessment of competence. For instance, Kaslow et al. (2007) suggested competencies be conceptualized as generic,

wholistic, and developmental abilities. The OFE was comprised of questions that considered dimensions of wholistic abilities as opposed to discrete dimensions of performance. The questions posed invited students to speak to specific topic areas related to their knowledge, skills, and self-perceptions more broadly to assess for developmentally appropriate competency for a novice counselor. In addition to conceptualizing the competencies through a wholistic lens, specific categories and questions of the OFE coincided with the previously noted CRPO, CACEP, and CACREP guidelines and standards. Through questions related to personal theoretical orientation, skills, and interventions; ethical and legal issues; and critical reflection skills and practices, counseling students were afforded the opportunity to expand on their foundational knowledge and experiential learnings (see Appendix A). For example, all of the previously noted associations indicate that students should show competency in the area of ethical decision-making. For this reason, the OFE prioritized ethics and ethical reasoning as a central area of exploration and discussion. This is also supported through much research that speaks to the necessity of ethical reasoning and commitment to competence in this area (de las Fuentes et al., 2005; Kaslow, 2004; Kaslow et al., 2007). Ethical reasoning was assessed in the OFE through the exploration in relation to knowledge, as well as integration of skill in the application of ethics. Also included were questions inquiring into an ethical commitment to cultural responsiveness and to lifelong learning, to better understand and update knowledge of diversity. Similarly, the guidelines and standards of CRPO, CACEP, and CACREP speak to competencies around critical self-reflection. The OFE considered self-reflection and self-assessment critical components in assessing competence (Kaslow et al., 2007). The OFE questioned students learning in relation to self-reflective practices; their values, attitudes, and biases; self-awareness around their emerging counselor identity; and experiences with countertransference. Through the use of these prompts, students were given the opportunity to discuss their classroom learnings in the context of personal experience and growth.

Also consistent with Kaslow et al.'s (2007) guidelines, the OFE integrated both formative and

summative feedback. Formative feedback was provided through immediate comments from faculty and site supervisors during the OFE and, after the conclusion of the evaluation, summative feedback was provided through a write-up based on students' responses and performance. Both forms of feedback were intentionally balanced, focusing on both strengths and areas for further growth. Specific recommendations for follow-up were provided, along with further readings and development based on identified areas of further growth opportunities. Another leading guideline in the formulation of the OFE was the importance of collaboration and creating coherence and continuity in evaluating competency (Kaslow et al., 2007). For the purposes of this evaluation, inclusion of site supervisors in the process was integral, allowing the perspective of the site to be central to the oral evaluation process and feedback. A third member of the evaluation committee was an additional faculty member who was not part of the student's practicum experience or supervision. This allowed for a more objective third party to comment on the student's competencies based on their performance and responses to the OFE.

Method

The data collected for this study were primarily obtained for program evaluation purposes in the examination of the OFE as a pilot initiative. This article gives a summary of the feedback provided by students and site supervisors who participated in the first OFE of competency for M.Ed. in Counseling practicum students. These students were enrolled in a full-time, 14-month nationally accredited (CACEP) Canadian counseling graduate program, whose practicum was interrupted due to COVID-19. A total of 20 graduate counseling students participated in this OFE, which was scheduled for the week following the conclusion of their practicum. The OFE committee was made up of the student's site supervisor, faculty supervisor, and a third faculty member of the M.Ed. in Counseling program. In advance, students were provided with a list of 11 questions that pertained to the areas of therapeutic process, ethics and professionalism, and reflective practices (see Appendix A). Included in these categories were questions exploring personal theoretical orientation, intentional application of skills and

strategies, awareness of competence and limits, lifelong learning and professional development, ethical standards and principles, application of ethical principles through decision-making processes, implications of practice for diverse populations, cultural responsiveness, informed consent and confidentiality, self-awareness, and personal limitations. Final assessments were scheduled for an hour, with 45 to 50 minutes for student responses and 10 to 15 minutes for discussion between the evaluation committee to collectively determine student readiness for entry-level practice, based on the aforementioned practicum activities and the responses and demonstration of knowledge application during the OFE. Students were provided with a summative feedback sheet at the conclusion of the evaluation identifying key strengths, successes, as well as areas for future growth, professional development, and ongoing exploration.

Following the conclusion of the OFE, an anonymous survey was sent to all students and site supervisors who participated. Of the 40 surveys sent out, 30% responded, with 12 surveys being returned, 6 from students, and 6 from site supervisors. The surveys provided useful information about the perceived value of the assessment process, strengths of the organization of the OFE, and opportunities to offer feedback for how the assessment could be improved for future delivery. The surveys involved both Likert scale responses and open-ended qualitative questions for more general feedback and suggestions. The responses on the surveys were examined for frequency distributions and central tendencies. Responses between site supervisors and students were also considered for cross tabulations to explore differences in frequency distributions and central tendencies across the two sources of feedback. The qualitative feedback was analyzed for trends within site supervisor and student surveys as well as across both sources of program evaluative feedback. Key quotes of participants in the OFE are included to better capture the experiences of the students and site supervisors.

Results

Examination of frequency distributions across surveys revealed a consistently positive experience with the OFE. This finding was consistent across student and site supervisor ratings (Table 1), with

over 92% of cumulative ratings identifying a perceived value in the experience. Table 2 shows the difference in feedback between site supervisor and student groups. As summarized in Table 2, all of the site supervisors and 83% of students agreed it was a valuable experience, with all site supervisors indicating a preference for the OFE format compared to the typical process of providing a final written evaluation. One hundred percent of the site supervisors agreed or strongly agreed that the format of the OFE allowed for increased opportunities to openly share about the student's performance and their assessment of student readiness for entry-level practice. Of the students who found the process valuable, all concurred that it was a useful opportunity for reflection and demonstrating the integration of learning.

In considering the cross tabulations in the data between the responses by students and site supervisors, there were consistencies in the central tendencies of both groups pertaining to seeing the value in the assessment process and a desire or willingness to participate again (Table 2). All participating site supervisors who completed the survey indicated they would participate in a similar oral assessment in the future. Eighty-three percent of students identified this to be a useful activity that should be continued for future cohorts.

Students and site supervisors were also asked to share any additional feedback about the assessment. The qualitative data obtained through the open-ended questions on the surveys revealed differential trends between site supervisors and student feedback. The two main trends that were identified across site supervisor surveys were: (a) the OFE offered an opportunity for collaboration and connection between the university and practicum sites that was novel to the OFE approach as compared to the traditional written evaluation, and (b) the OFE was preferable to a written final evaluation report. The two trends that emerged from the student feedback were: (a) the OFE provided an important opportunity for reflection and consolidation of learning at the conclusion of practicum, and (b) the OFE provided a platform to practice demonstrating integration of knowledge and skill in preparation for job interviews postgraduation.

Opportunity for Collaboration – Site Supervisors

Four of the site supervisors remarked the OFE created a valued opportunity for connection between the site and the university. One site supervisor commented on the experience of disconnect at times between the two and the opportunity provided by the OFE for an enhanced partnership between the student, university, and site. Another comment illustrated the positive experience of the more personal nature of the OFE, where the format permitted a flow of experiences and ideas between the student and both supervisors in real time, which I believe allowed the student to be more personal and candid with their own self-assessment, in addition to the supervisors being able to ask additional questions that were individualized to the student.

Effective Approach to Assessing Competence – Site Supervisors

Comments provided by site supervisors also highlighted how this design provided a new but effective way of assessing competence. One site supervisor shared the OFE was a "great way to gauge student learning, growth, and reflection of their experience working as a counselor." Based on the rankings provided by site supervisors, and their qualitative remarks, the site supervisors that pro-

Table 1

Perceived Value of OFE Overall

Item	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Neutral
The OFE was valuable process	N = 11; 92%	N = 1; 8%	N = 0; 0%
I see value in integrating the OFE into the program in the future	N =11; 92%	N = 0; 0%	N = 1; 8%

Table 2

Perceived Value of OFE Between Participant Groups

Item	Agree/Strongly Agree	Agree/Strongly Agree
The OFE was a valuable process	N = 5; 83%	N = 6; 100%
I see value in integrating the OFE into the program in the future	N = 5; 83%	N = 6; 100%

vided feedback found this a worthy, effective, and positive approach to evaluating and assessing entry-level competency. Two site supervisors specifically remarked on a preference for the OFE over the written evaluation moving forward. They felt this was a more relational approach and allowed for a deeper discussion than a written evaluation permits.

Reflection and Integration of Learning – Students

As evidenced earlier, most students who completed the survey found this a valuable learning experience. They also provided some helpful feedback related to what exactly made the process useful. Students shared comments that described the benefits in terms of consolidation of what had occurred and preparation for what was to come. One student shared that "preparing for this helped me integrate my learning and allowed me to reflect on all that I got to experience during practicum." Similarly, another student shared that the OFE helped to pull together the learning in their practicum. They stated that "this process allowed me to process a deeper reflection of my practicum experience and tie all the pieces together in a way that the written reflection would not have."

Postgraduation Job Search Preparation – Students

Students also remarked on the pragmatic usefulness of the OFE as a logical opportunity to prepare for postgraduation job interviews. One student remarked:

I valued this experience in part because it felt a bit like a job interview and highlighted some of the differences I felt between describing my theoretical orientation in pre-practicum versus this interview, post-practicum. It helped me to recognize parts of my orientation I can discuss without

notes, and parts that I may need to revisit, read about, or get additional training in.

Another student shared a similar positive outcome of their participation in the OFE as it helped them to "prepare to integrate and demonstrate this learning in post-graduation job applications. It was also good practice for how parts of an interview might go, post-graduation."

Aside from the trends noted earlier, students also valued the practice of faculty supervisors compiling feedback post-OFE to support their ongoing growth and development. Students highlighted the value they saw in receiving supportive and constructive feedback at the conclusion of the assessment, with tangible recommendations for continued growth and learning postpracticum. Additional student feedback highlighted the possibility of the OFE as a closure ritual for students transitioning from practicum into the rest of their coursework and graduation:

A practicum is a very special step in the journey towards becoming a counselor. It is a transition from the academia into the existence. It would therefore seem anticlimactic and disingenuous to end a practicum without giving the practicing counselor space to honour and validate their journey. In other words, a final oral assessment would not only honour the curricular elements, but it would also honour the personal experience.

Feedback provided by both students and site supervisors also highlighted some further considerations in the design of this practice. Both groups offered ideas for additional questions worth considering in future oral assessments. Some areas noted as potential inclusions were the use of case studies, specific changes or growth that occurred as the result of practicum experiences, and a greater focus on self-care. Another important area identified by a

few students related to time and preparation, identifying the importance of the placement of the OFE where the students have ample time to engage in the self-reflection and planning necessary to demonstrate the integration and awareness being requested of them. In consideration of this feedback and future OFEs, the ideal time may be spaced a week after practicum has ended when students have had a few days of focused attention to the preparation of the OFE but are not yet transitioning to their next courses.

Discussion

As evidenced in the experiences of site supervisors and students highlighted earlier, the integration of the OFE was well-received and deemed valuable and effective in the assessment of student competence for entry-level practice. There were also some unanticipated new possibilities that this format of final evaluation brought forward. One exciting possibility was the potential to improve connection and collaboration between the faculty and site supervisors. Ensuring positive, strong, and collaborative relationships are established and nurtured with practicum sites is a priority for graduate counseling programs in securing positive learning environments that promote students' experiential success. Integrating the OFE practice provides the platform for faculty and site supervisors to connect with students face-to-face, be it virtually or in-person, at the end of their practicum and discuss their journey. This high level of engagement with students allowed faculty and site supervisors an opportunity for collaboration and evaluation of competence that had previously been unavailable through only using written feedback from the site supervisors. It also provided the platform for faculty and site supervisors to discuss each student in detail and integrate the OFE into the evaluation of the student's practicum experience. Upon reflection of both the written feedback format and the OFE, all participants agreed that the OFE, in conjunction with the written feedback, was preferable and advantageous in determining students' competence for entry-level practice.

Another unanticipated benefit of this practice was the experience of students feeling their practicum was honored and celebrated through mutual exploration and conversation, which allowed the validation and acknowledgement of their personal

and professional growth. The transition from practicum to remaining courses can be difficult, with students still processing the events of practicum. Placing the OFE at the end of practicum provided an important pause and time of reflection that may support the ease of this transition into the remainder of their program postpracticum. As a faculty supervisor, the OFE also provided an opportunity to reflect on gaps that emerged across participating students and provided important insights into areas not being adequately covered in the curriculum of the program, as well as areas needing improved development and support across the cohorts.

The experience of the OFE, as shared through student and supervisor surveys, moved beyond a method to assess competence and provided an opportunity for multifaceted reflection across both student and programming levels. This supports the assertion by Kaslow et al. (2007) that assessment of competence "fosters learning, evaluates progress, assists in determining the effectiveness of the curriculum and training programs, advances the field, and protects the public" (p. 442). Through this pedagogical technique, the OFE provided our students a creative and valuable opportunity to integrate their learning and make rich connections through application. This is supported by the research of Hammonds and Schwarze (2019), which identified that oral assessment approaches provide the integration of cognitive and didactic information to clinical application. Through the emphasis on reflective thinking and application, along with feedback on experiential learnings, students are better prepared to work with clients more effectively than through didactic styles alone (Grant, 2006). The integration of the OFE in our program also promoted an assessment approach that was multitrait, multimethod, and multimodal (Kaslow et al., 2007), as it brought forward a format that offered another way to measure competence beyond typical assessment practices, as well as brought multiple sources of data from a myriad of perspectives and environments. The feedback obtained from oral assessments, in particular the OFE, allows for evidence of overall competence, along with a greater depth and breadth of student skills (Hammonds & Schwarze, 2019).

Thanks to the work of national accreditation bodies and regulatory colleges, the counseling profession in both Canada and the United States has

gained consistency, and the recognition of master's-level clinicians as competent practitioners has improved the service availability for clients. Counselor education programs have benefited substantially by these movements that have supported curricular development, course objectives, and program delivery as graduate training has been able to better represent the established competencies and standards of the profession. However, appropriate measures for consistently evaluating these competencies in a manner that supports only those practitioners ready for entry-level practice in the field are granted graduate counseling degrees, remains challenging in general. These common competency assessment challenges were amplified by the current pandemic, when evaluative opportunities were lost or altered significantly as a result of the need to adapt to a remote provision of services.

Despite the disruptions to educational programs, opportunities have emerged to evaluate and reenvision counselor educator practices and assessment methods. Through necessity, as well as creativity and flexibility, our M.Ed. Counseling program has discovered that we can seize this opportunity and reimagine our educational processes to benefit all stakeholders. This resulted in the addition of an OFE as a practice for assessing our students' competence as they finished up their 2020 practicums. Based on the initial feedback and results of the participants' surveys, this assessment initiative was positively received and seen as beneficial. Hammonds and Schwarze (2019) supports this feedback by identifying that the benefits of an oral assessment include meaningful opportunities for students to prepare for future practice, direct feedback from instructors, and improved retention of materials learned. This approach to competence evaluation has positive implications for both the student and supervisors involved.

Based on the initial feedback and positive response to this program assessment initiative, the OFE will continue to be implemented as a part of the evaluative framework for the forthcoming M.Ed. in Counseling cohorts. Moving forward, the ongoing usefulness of the OFE will require continued evaluation and feedback from students, faculty, and site supervisors. As the current pandemic has highlighted, our counseling educational programs must continually evaluate the effectiveness of our practices and, when necessary, adapt the process to reflect current knowledge and consensus on counselor competency, as well as valid and reliable assessment methods.

Limitations

The data contained in this article were collected as part of a pilot program, exploring the usefulness of an OFE in the assessment of competence of preservice and postpracticum counselors. The data collected was for program evaluation purposes. The primary limitation of this study is the limited sample size. With only 12 surveys overall, and 6 surveys from each participant group, there is not adequate data to conduct any statistical analysis to determine the strength and significance of relationship between experience with the OFE and its benefits. Additionally, the OFE and resulting feedback occurred amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who participated in the OFE were part-way through their practicum and were impacted both practically as well as emotionally by this experience. This may have impacted the data that was collected by students and their site supervisors. Moreover, it is common for individuals who are either highly satisfied or highly unsatisfied to be most motivated to complete program evaluation surveys. As such, the data collected may have missed some of the more neutral or intermediate experiences of participants. Finally, the experience in the OFE was inevitably impacted by the OFE examiners, namely the faculty who led and facilitated the OFE, as well as the site supervisor and third faculty member who participated. The OFEs that were conducted for this program evaluation were facilitated by two different faculty who may or may not have influenced, in potentially positive or negative ways, the experience of individual students. As the OFE continues to be taken up in the counseling program that was the site for this research, further data in subsequent uses and beyond the pandemic will be necessary to obtain a more thorough examination of the usefulness of this competency assessment approach as well as the experiences of students and site supervisors participating in it.

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Appendix A: Oral Final Evaluation – Questionnaire

Below are the questions that will be posed during your Final Assessment meeting. It is a 45–60-minute dialogue between yourself, your site supervisor(s), your faculty practicum instructor, and a second core counseling faculty practicum instructor. The purpose is to allow you, as a practicum student, to clearly articulate an understanding and integration of core learning and competencies from the program so far and your practicum experiences. While members of the Final Assessment committee may ask you to elaborate or clarify your responses, you will not be asked any questions beyond what is provided in this document.

Personal Theoretical Orientation, Skills, & Interventions

1. Describe your personal theoretical orientation to counseling, including your philosophy around what brings individuals to seek counseling and what makes counseling effective. Please include one example of the application of your personal theoretical orientation into practice that draws from your practicum experience.
2. Which theoretical orientations do you integrate into your practice and what are the key interventions and skills you feel most competent drawing into your current counseling work?
3. Based on your personal theoretical orientation and skills developed so far, what areas do you feel most competent to provide in your counseling work? In what areas do you feel less competency?
4. What plans do you have for maintaining or upgrading your competence post-graduation?

Counseling Ethics and Legal Issues

5. What documents on professional ethics and conduct inform your practice? What specific standards of practice and legislation/legal statutes applied to your practice in your practicum site?
6. List and describe the six fundamental ethical principles of the Canadian Counseling & Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) Code of Ethics. How do these specifically apply to your counseling practice? How do these principles apply to working with diverse populations?
7. Provide an example of an ethical dilemma, ideally an actual example you encountered in your practicum, and how you would apply an ethical decision-making process to resolving the ethical dilemma.
8. What does it mean to provide informed consent and what areas are part of this process? What duty to report and duty to warn apply to your practice as a counselor?

Critical Reflection Skills and Practices

9. The journey toward becoming a competent and confident counselor can be difficult and emotionally laden as you must engage in critical reflection to better understand yourself and how to be therapeutic with others. Describe what you have learned about yourself through self-reflection in the program and in practicum and how this applies to your growing ability to be therapeutic with others.
10. What are some areas of countertransference that have come up through your classroom and practicum experiences so far? How have you navigated this countertransference when it has come up?
11. How do your personal limitations, interests, attitudes, values, and/or biases affect the type of counseling services you provide? How do you address these with clients? Are there any specific client characteristics/attributes for whom you may not feel able to provide counseling for?

Appendix B: Oral Final Evaluation – Student Feedback Form

You are receiving this survey because you recently participated in an oral Final Assessment as an M.Ed. in Counseling intern. We would appreciate your honest feedback about your experience in this process as we consider the usefulness of this practice with future counseling cohorts.

	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Disagree
The oral final assessment was a useful opportunity for me to reflect and communicate an integration of learning.					
The questions asked in the final assessment were relevant and appropriate for a final evaluation of my competencies					
I found the atmosphere created in the final assessment was comfortable and encouraging.					
The length of the final assessment was appropriate in allowing me ample time to respond to each question.					
I see value in integrating the oral final assessment as a regular practice at the conclusion of practicum.					

Are there any additional questions you feel should be included in the Oral Final Assessment?
   1.
   2.
   3.

Please provide us with any additional feedback or concerns you have about the Oral Final Assessment: (feel free to add additional pages if needed)
_____
_____
_____

Appendix C: Oral Final Evaluation – Site Supervisor Feedback Form

You are receiving this survey because you recently participated in an oral Final Assessment for an M.Ed. in Counseling intern. We would appreciate your honest feedback about your experience as a shareholder in this process as we consider the usefulness of this practice with future counseling cohorts.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The oral final assessment was a valuable process.					
I prefer the format of the oral final assessment to the written final assessment (which mirrors the mid-practicum assessment)					
The questions asked in the final assessment were relevant and appropriate for an evaluation of the intern's competencies					
I felt this format gave me an opportunity to openly share my feedback and my opinions and experiences were valued.					
The length of the final assessment was appropriate for the questions posed.					
I see value in integrating the oral final assessment as a regular practice at the conclusion of practicum.					
I would agree to participate in an oral final assessment again in the future.					

Are there any additional questions you feel should be included in the Oral Final Assessment?
   1.
   2.
   3.

Please provide us with any additional feedback or concerns you have about the Oral Final Assessment: (feel free to add additional pages if needed)
_____
_____
_____