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Language & Online Learning: Inform, Inspire and Engage Virtual Learning Communities

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"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart" Nelson Mandela

Increasingly, counselor education programs have integrated technology into the delivery of instruction for students either through hybrid classes, fully online classes, or fully online programs (Hays, 2008). Concurrently, a growing number of programs seek accreditation from the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and are compelled to offer programs of study congruent with the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) *Code of Ethics*. Following the advent of technologies in the classroom, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES, 1999) offered guidelines to online counselor educators on quality instruction and appropriate use of technology to enhance the knowledge and learning of counselor education students. To be sure, accreditation standards and ethical guidelines play a prominent role in the design of curricular experiences for all students whether they are enrolled in land based programs or distance learning programs. However, while standards and guidelines help drive instructional design, we suggest that *best practices* for creating student engagement in the online learning process must also be considered. As technology has expanded our ability to educate future mental health counselors, our teaching strategies must also evolve to be both innovative and engaging.

Challenges of Online Learning

Based on the amount of time spent in the classroom, distance learning is considered more difficult for both students and instructors (Neswald-Potter, Neuer Colburn & Foster, 2015), and Geri (2012) reported that student engagement and retention is one of the major challenges of online programs. Bawa (2016) found attrition rates of 40%-80% in online classes, higher than

traditional courses by 10% to 20%. However, there is a dearth of literature on pedagogical best practices for engaging counseling students in the online environment, despite the fact that online learning opportunities became widely available nearly 20 years ago (Hickey, 2014). We identified three specific areas of concern from our review of the literature addressing online education: pedagogical limitations of the medium, diversity concerns, and fundamental semantic interpretation of written communication.

Pedagogical Limitations

From a pedagogical perspective, effective online learning remains a developing phenomenon. Many faculty members lack specific training in evidence-based online teaching methods and experience the absence of face-to-face contact with students as alien to their perceived culture of education (Quevedo, Geraldini & Crescitelli, 2006). Thus, they struggle to adapt traditional pedagogical methods to online environments (Vrasidas, 2004). In particular, online faculty members typically serve more as facilitators of learning rather than instructors. Focusing on the process of students' learning is central to online instruction, rather than simply providing transmittal of knowledge from instructor to student (Alexiou-Ray & Bentley, 2016). In order to effectively facilitate the online classroom, faculty members must be highly visible, engaged, and accessible to their students, in contrast to traditional land-based teaching where faculty members may only be available during specific class times and limited office hours. In addition, Alexiou-Ray and Bentley (2016) posited that the greatest challenge of online teaching is creating a sense of community and engagement that belies the distance created by technology. Although there is promising new research detailing students' perspectives in support of building community and engagement online, we still lack solid consensus on the best methods and

theories to effectively transfer and deliver scholarly content derived from traditional classroom environments to the online classroom.

Diversity Concerns

Issues of diversity within online learning communities must also be taken into consideration. Online environments are often perceived as more "neutral" than traditional classrooms, eliminating the assumptions people might make about visual perceptions of race, ethnicity, age, and other cultural markers. Students who have experienced or fear marginalization or discrimination may choose online learning to benefit from the added anonymity the Internet provides. However, assumed neutrality may be lost in translation, as traditional educational methods are conveyed through Western and majority-culture biased technology. Issues of access and comprehension of the technological medium can further inhibit students who may already feel marginalized within an educational system. Additionally, faculty members who lack multicultural competency may find themselves overwhelmed by the demands of both technology and increased diversity in online classes and, if they lack awareness of their students' contextual experience, may further perpetuate conscious or unconscious biases (Bawa, 2016). Disturbingly, Conaway and Bethune (2015) found that faculty showed implicit bias against students based on racially or ethnically identifiable first names, even though the instructors believed themselves to be warm and accepting of stereotypical names.

Semantic Interpretation of Written Communication

Finally, fundamental semantic interpretation of written words can present quite a challenge in asynchronous online classrooms, in which communication occurs solely via text. The potential for different people to attach different meanings to the same words or phrases may stem from generational and/or cultural differences (Ekong, 2006; Sarsar & Harmon, 2017).

Further, while online delivery of education expands access to a wider audience, students for whom English is not their primary language can be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to interpreting instructions, demonstrating achieved knowledge, and appropriately receiving and responding to faculty feedback.

In order to overcome obstacles to online learning as described above, counselor education faculty members must look beyond content delivery to the actual *process* of how effective online education takes place. Effective online counselor education requires a new approach that incorporates thoughts, feelings and behaviors for both the instructor and the students to bridge the technological divide (Lehman & Conceição, 2010). Researchers have found that creating a sense of "being together" in the online classroom begins with an awareness and understanding of social presence, and courses should be designed with the student at the center of learning (Pelz, 2004; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). The key to more effective online engagement for faculty and students may lie in the intentional use of language and communication.

Current Description of Online Learning Language

As counselors, our communication is relationship driven, primarily oral, and largely non-verbal. Yet, in asynchronous online classrooms, we must communicate via nothing more than words on a screen. Currently, online classrooms provide a blend of discussion board forums, written assignments, required readings from a textbook or the library, online lectures consisting of visual and audio components, and timed or untimed quizzes. In essence, all of these activities, including instructor feedback, are singular and comprised of words on the computer screen, thereby creating distance between the learner and the instructor. The gap between instructors and students in online classrooms can be bridged when instructors create a sense of presence that

evokes the feeling of "real people" being together creating a learning community (Pelz, 2004, p. 41)

Social constructivists who believe knowledge is created through "negotiation of meaning that emerges through interaction and collaboration of learners, and by learners' active experience of or interaction with the environment" (Ke, 2013, p 14) define *interaction* as a core component in the educational experience. . Counselor educators often ascribe to and utilize constructivist pedagogy which posits that "through conversation, knowledge is created" (Brackett, 2014, p. 39). In traditional land-based classrooms, the interaction between instructor and students then forms the basis for nurturing deep learning. Similarly it becomes incumbent on faculty members to translate their in-person relational styles to the online classroom to achieve the same learning outcomes for online students.

Because instructors and students are social beings, the online classroom must be adapted through language that addresses social presence, instructor presence and cognitive presence (Lehman & Conceição, 2010). A significant pedagogical consideration in fostering student engagement online is through creating a sense of presence wherein students have a sense of "being there" and "being together" in the online environment (Lehman & Conceição, 2010, 315-317). Instructors can increase *social presence* through modeling and encouraging a more personal and emotional connection in online classrooms and as a result students are more comfortable in expressing their thoughts, ideas and feelings and gain a sense of "being together". Likewise *instructor presence* is crucial as the instructor demonstrates openness and genuineness, and also provides formative and constructive feedback in a way that creates an environment in which students believe they are essential and central to the learning community. By encouraging authenticity within the classroom, instructors shape *cognitive presence* as students are able to

create and infer deeper meaning from the course activities through reflection and dialogue. Ke (2013) suggested that in online education, student engagement must be present in three areas: student to content, student to student, student to instructor for the necessary interaction to result in mastery of the course content and deep learning to occur. Ekong (2006) noted that instructor interaction style with online counseling students was the most important factor in fostering success (p.9). Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng (2014) acknowledged this, yet found that student-content interaction impacted learning outcomes more than student-teacher or student-student interactions. Still, Bawa (2016) suggested that when faculty members intentionally create opportunities for classmates to interact with each other in meaningful ways, engagement increases. This lack of consensus in determining the most effective pedagogy for creating presence in online learning further justifies the need for the development of best practices. Regardless, distance learning counselor education faculty must be able to create thriving learning communities without the components of oral and non-verbal communication.

Student Engagement, Presence and Online Learning Communities

In order to develop thriving learning communities online, both faculty members and students must demonstrate engagement and presence, two related, but distinct concepts. *Engagement* is only one aspect of presence: it is the participation of the instructor with learners or learners with other learners as they interact in the online classroom. In contrast, *presence* includes the dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior (Peltz, 2004; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). By utilizing more relational aspects of communication, students perceive peers and faculty as human beings with "all the characteristics thereof including personality, emotion, personal history, and context" (Kehrwald, 2008).

The relationship between instructor and student is of utmost importance. Students often feel uncomfortable when they cannot see the people they are communicating with online, and may feel unable to gauge the feelings and reactions of their classmates and instructors. Ke (2013) noted the importance of creating *quality* interactions within the distance learning environment that promotes deep and meaningful learning approaches for diverse students. Specifically regarding counselor education, Malott, Hall, Sheely-Moore, Krell and Cardaciotto (2014) examined evidenced based practices in higher education teaching and one of the key components noted as vital included creating an effective learning environment. According to Majeski and Stover (2007), *deep learning* is collaborative, integrative (synthesizing ideas and facts), self-reflective, and application-centered. Focusing on an approach that promotes *deep learning,* students will gain a sense of presence and engagement.

Timely and prompt feedback is also necessary for success in online learning communities. The participants in Ekong's (2006) study affirmed that quality, clarity, and speed of feedback (before the next assignment is due) were extremely important (p. 9). Feedback online can be categorized two ways: *acknowledgement* feedback and *information* feedback. Acknowledgement feedback lets the student know that an assignment or question has been received, and an answer is pending. Information feedback tends to be more evaluative: this is direct commentary on an assignment or discussion (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001). Often, as the term wears on and faculty members become busier, feedback can be delayed and thus less effective. Without timely information feedback, students may not have an understanding of the instructor's desired improvements, thereby setting them up to perform poorly on the next assignment. It is important for online faculty members to remember that students do not have the benefit of eye contact or non-verbal gestures to know they have been

heard. Because our students are solely reliant on written communication for connection, consistent and prompt responses decrease the distance that online learners may experience. However, if the feedback we give becomes overly focused on style, grammar, and writing rather than on content, students can become discouraged and feel criticized. Our efforts at clear written feedback may result in students' interpretations that we are being unkind or abrupt. As counselor educators, we know that none of our students enrolled in their program to become writing experts. We are then compelled to find a way to be instructive in our feedback while also supporting student engagement. Supporting our students in keeping their "eyes on the prize" can motivate them to continue and succeed.

Lehman and Conceição (2010) theorized that the online classroom requires educators to recognize the importance of emotional connectedness by being aware of social, psychological, and emotional components involved in the online environment. Other authors have echoed the same sentiment that online teaching requires a new and different approach. As counselor educators, we understand the nature of the helping relationship – again because of the verbal and non-verbal communication available in the counseling setting. So, we need to alter our communication style to become more tutor, supporter, mentor, observer while retaining our evaluator status (Lehman & Conceição, 2010).

Creating relationships and building rapport with students through intentional choices in language can foster connections and promote receptiveness to feedback. It is our contention that through language we can create classrooms that are inspiring and engaging for our students. Through our language with students, we can help create a sense of community which promotes better learning outcomes because students will feel more engaged with instructors and with peers. The ultimate hope is that we are able to help our students engage in critical thinking, civil

discourse, and community based problem-solving. It behooves counselor educators to learn how to create opportunities to utilize thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in online classrooms building a more connected and engaged learning community through language.

Suggestions from the Literature

In the online education platform, written language is the primary form of communication. Ideally, online counselor educators will create the same type of learning communities without the benefit of oral and non-verbal communication. Therefore it is incumbent on instructors to create ways of engaging, inspiring, and informing students through written communication. This may be accomplished in various ways, depending on if the classroom is synchronous or asynchronous, and if the course delivery is fully online or blended.

Specifically addressing doctoral-level counselor educators (but not addressing online environments), Mallot et al. (2014) presented a review of evidence-based teaching literature around developing effective learning environments, structuring intentional learning experiences, and assessing teaching effectiveness. They stressed the importance of instructor characteristics such as humor, creativity, warmth, and enthusiasm and immediacy. The immediacy of the instructor demonstrates to the student the willingness to be engaged and fully presence through self-disclosure in meaningful communication. Some of their suggestions (p. 300) are transferrable into online classrooms, including sending a welcoming email before the term begins, using inclusive pronouns (e.g., "our class"), using students' names, rewarding constructive participation with affirming comments (e.g., "excellent question"), and responding supportively to comments that are off-target (e.g., "not quite, let's keep thinking about this"). Murdock and Williams (2011) stressed the importance of developing assignments in online classrooms that promote collaboration among students and faculty, incorporate reflective writing,

and encourage active learning. They further suggested that online learning is enhanced when instructors provide opportunities for students to share personal stories related to course content, promote self-responsibility for learning, communicate high expectations, and create an environment in which constructive feedback is welcomed and solicited (p.312). Sarsar and Harmon (2017) further suggested intentional focus on the use of specific words to which students respond positively (e.g., excellent, wonderful, great, beautiful, perfect).

Online discussion forums have been the focus of a number of studies. Barnett-Queen, Blair, and Merrick (2005) investigated student perspectives of online discussions, and reported that learning was enhanced when student interaction and participation were required, when the main students were forced to think deeply about a topic and prepare an initial post, and when the discussion topic supplemented another related assignment. By contrast, Du, Zhang, Olinzock &Adams (2008) found that students were most influenced by the manner of response, the size of the class, and the topic of discussion. Results from the Clark, D'Angelo and Menekse (2009) study suggested that engaging students in the exploration of a diverse set of preset discussion seed comments (from students' previous posts) coupled with a conflict schema (promoting participation) approach led to the highest gains in learning. Outside of discussion board forums themselves, scholars have suggested using fonts and graphics to show emphasis (Sarsar & Harmon, 2017; Shonfeld, 2005), incorporating instructional videos (Barnette-Queen et al., 2005; Brecht, 2012; Hayes, 2008), sharing personal experiences with students (Mallot et al., 2014; Murdoch & Williams, 2011), designing student-led discussions (Barnette-Queen et al., 2005; Murdoch & Williams, 2011; Pelz, 2004), and ensuring an overall focus on promoting student-student interaction (Ekong, 2006; Ke, 2013; Pelz, 2004; Shonfeld, 2005).

Language Can Inspire

We assert that intentionally using more supportive and less prescriptive language improves emotional connection and overall student engagement and enhances presence in the classroom. In our own work instructing students in a variety of online settings, we have found several strategies to be especially useful for counselors and counselor educators in training. One foundational premise is that counselor educators approach the task of improving online instruction with thoughtful intentionality (Neswald-Potter et al., 2015). Congruent with the suggestions of previous researchers (Barnette-Queen et al., 2005; Brecht, 2012; Hayes, 2008) adding video to the classroom has piqued the interest of many students. Videos can be made and re-used between courses and terms for purposes of providing a welcome and orientation to the class, clarifying instructions for key assignments, and providing weekly announcements. Short, customized videos can also be developed to offer generalized feedback to class about their overall performance.

Adding "relationship language" to our copy/paste feedback has helped soften the message our students receive, which in turn supports better instructor-student relationships. For example, replacing "*Please follow APA (2010) instructions for formatting your running head,*" with "*Student, I really appreciate you implementing APA style. I know it's challenging to learn. Your running head needs just a bit of tweaking. I've posted some resources to help you: Please see the APA example in doc sharing in the classroom. Or, see pages 41-51 in the APA 6th edition manual for further details. Please let me know if you have questions*" invites the student to improve their work without feeling berated or criticized. Additionally, we have found success by borrowing some feedback strategies from the world of business, where research demonstrates that a focus on positive feedback results in significantly higher performance (Porath, 2016). Positive feedback can be implemented in the follow ways: (1) the use of the "Feedback

sandwich," in which constructive feedback is 'sandwiched' in between two affirmations; (2) focusing on the content of the work avoiding value judgments ; (3) being very specific about what needs to change; (4) being sure to comment on things that are actually changeable; and (6) assuming the positive intention of the person to whom you are giving feedback (avoiding negative character judgments that may arise easily in an online environment).

Personalization is critical to developing relationships with online students. Using the student's name when providing feedback is one way to personalize, but faculty should also consider several individual emails throughout the term to invite the student to provide feedback about the course from their perspective, to check in with them about any questions they might have, or to provide individualized formative feedback. We have also found that a short phone call can go a long way in terms of developing positive rapport. As in the use of video, when students can hear our voices and tone of voice, they feel a type of connection that is not possible via words on a screen, regardless of how they are printed, bolded, highlighted, or otherwise emphasized. Communicating with students individually also gives us the opportunity to identify and cross any cultural gaps that might be in the way of deep, meaningful learning.

Our idea for *best practice* is to create a dynamic atmosphere recognizing the importance of presence and engagement, and its importance in creating a vibrant learning community where students are at the center. One way to accomplish this *best practice* is intentionally using language that is supportive, more personalized and thoughtfully delivered. By recognizing that our students are social and emotional beings, we also recognize that our online communication can positively (or negatively) influence our relationship and in turn impact student learning. Our idea for intentionally using supportive language is outlined below:

Language Can Inspire

L	**L**earning communities CAN be built with non-verbal communication!
A	**A**dd emoticons, graphics, and videos where possible
N	**N**o one wants to feel they're just a number.
G	**G**enuineness is appreciated. Be real.
U	**U**tilize 'relationship language' in discussion posts and grading feedback
A	**A**PA style matters, but is not the most important thing to our students
G	**G**ive the benefit of the doubt the first time (but still document for future)
E	**E**mails to individual students foster learner-instructor connection
C	**C**ultural differences are worth finding, discussing, and addressing
A	**A**sk students for their feedback about the course
N	**N**ame your students when posting to them and delivering feedback.
I	**I**nviting and warm language works better than giving orders
N	**N**ote 2 positive things for each negative thing you point out on a paper
S	**S**how students exactly what you mean. Provide examples; be specific
P	**P**hone calls help students feel like they matter and are connected to you.
I	**I**ntentionality makes a difference
R	**R**elationship, relationship, relationship
E	**E**valuate students through the lens of your role as mentor and supporter

Our initial premise of intentionally using supportive language as a way to inform, inspire and engage students is enhanced by creating presence in the online classroom. Social presence is being recognized as a key element in diminishing feelings of isolation which is a leading cause of online learner dissatisfaction. Online instructors must overcome the separation that occurs among and between learners, and separation from the instructor. The importance of emotions is also being recognized as a critical element with particular regard to feedback. Emotional cues and context are missing from the online classroom and instructor must make a concerted effort to consider how emotions may impact the learning process. Our perceptions of the world are influenced by our emotions and therefore students' perception of the online world is also impacted by the process of receiving and responding to feedback, making meaning of feedback and finally being able to organize such feedback (Lehman & Conceição, 2010). As noted earlier, there are many recommendations for how to create effective learning communities in

pedagogical literature but little with specific interventions for the online environment. Drawing from our own counseling tenets, we believe that our relationship and communication with students in the online environment can be improved to recognize the importance of inspiring and engaging students.

Conclusion

Maximizing the effectiveness of our pedagogy in online classrooms will help improve overall learning, retention of students, and growth of online programs. Doing so will also provide for *high quality* education being available for more and more students. Appropriate, warm and inviting language can engage and diffuse multicultural issues for students who might otherwise not have access to master's and doctoral level training. The modeling this provides for students may also result in their improved ability to develop relationships with their own clients and students.

Technology-assisted teaching/learning has been around for a long time, and trends show that more and more full counselor education programs will be offered in online formats. While many researchers have investigated various aspects of student engagement in online formats, we still lack consensus for best practices in the counselor education online classroom. We suggest improved training for faculty who will provide online instruction (Ekong, 2006; Murdock & Williams, 2011) utilizing existing suggestions from the literature and strategies known to be effective, as well as future research investigating the development of best practices for online master's and doctoral programs in counseling and counselor education and supervision.

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