

## Teaching Group Counseling in an Online Intensive Format

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### Abstract

Online education continues to grow in popularity each year. Although more counselor education programs offer online coursework, few articles discuss teaching strategies for online group work courses. We proposed, developed, and piloted a model for teaching group work in an online intensive format. In this article, we discuss the structure, components, and rationale of this model as well as the perceived benefits and challenges. We also provide recommendations for those who want to teach group work online.

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As technology advances, online education has become an increasingly popular offering in universities across the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Congruently, counselor education programs have increased the availability of online courses. (Snow et al., 2018). Many counselor educators in the past were hesitant to offer courses online because of a belief that face-to-face (F2F) courses were superior in conveying the complexity of the counseling relationship (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). However, research has demonstrated that online counseling courses can teach clinical skills as effectively as F2F courses (Bender & Dykeman, 2016; Wilke et al., 2016), though some modifications may be necessary (Chen et al., 2020). As the use of online counseling courses continues to increase (Snow et al., 2018), it is necessary to develop online teaching models that appropriately address counselor development (Coker et al., 2021).

The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) deems that foundational group work training is a necessary skill for all counselors who are prepared in a master's degree program (ASGW, 2021). Likewise, the Council for Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) lists group counseling as one of eight core content areas for all counselor education programs (CACREP, 2015).

Additionally, CACREP-accredited programs must ensure that all counselor education students participate as group members in an experiential group for at least 10 hours. As such, it is necessary to ensure that online counselor education programs are sufficiently equipped to provide group counseling courses as well as small group experiences.

Research related to teaching group counseling is sparse (Luke & Goodrich, 2017), and very few articles discuss teaching strategies for online group counseling courses. Chen et al. (2020) found several benefits and challenges of online clinical group training. Some of the challenges included difficulty facilitating relationships between students and instructors, students participating in class from non-confidential locations, and technological issues. The strengths included the ability for supervisors to provide instant feedback during student-led groups and increased accessibility of the course. Wathen et al. (2021) presented an approach for incorporating peer-led process groups as part of an online group counseling course. Although this online approach presented challenges, such as technology disruptions, this model allowed students to receive live supervision of their group counseling skill development.

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Though these recommendations for managing the clinical components of group counseling training are important, more research is needed to expand the knowledge of online teaching models. In an effort to expand the literature we proposed, developed, and piloted a pedagogical model for teaching group counseling online in an intensive format. The purpose of this article is to share our model, discuss the perceived benefits and challenges, and provide recommendations for counselor educators.

### **Background of Course Development**

Like other recent education innovations (Ellis et al., 2020; Scull et al., 2020), this course arose in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for educational strategies that permit social distancing. Prior to the pandemic, we, as co-instructors, planned this course as an in-person intensive workshop. Our lead presenter, who authored one of the most widely used textbooks in group counseling, planned to provide two 8-hour seminars on the process and practice of group counseling at a private non-profit university in the southern United States. The university planned to allow master's students and doctoral students to register for these workshops as courses for credit within their programs of study. To supplement the workshops, these students would complete additional assignments, online discussion boards, and experiential counseling groups. Additionally, the seminars were offered to local mental health professionals as continuing education hours to refresh their knowledge of group counseling processes and practices. To meet the needs of our diverse population, we planned a mixed level workshop.

Early planning for the workshop was underway when the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered academic institutions across the country. When the university announced that in-person learning would be cancelled for the foreseeable future, the plans for this course shifted toward an online course to be delivered via videoconference. Although this shift created several new considerations for the course plan, the modification was necessary to ensure the safe delivery of instruction. Thus, our intensive workshop became an online intensive group counseling course.

### **Pre-semester Planning**

Careful planning and consideration were essential to the successful delivery of this uniquely structured course. Given that students perceive technology-intensive courses as more difficult, online courses should be planned thoughtfully to support student needs (Lee & Nuatomue, 2021). Prior to the semester, we discussed various components of the course such as teaching methods, student materials, course syllabi, and student assignments. The overall schedule structure was designed to take students through each stage of a group.

One of the most important elements of this course was the use of the learning management system. In the world of online learning, systems such as Blackboard (<https://www.blackboard.com>) and Canvas (<https://www.instructure.com/canvas>) enable instructors to distribute assignments, post course announcements, and enable students to have online discussions about the course material (Schoonenboom, 2014). In the planning stage of this course, significant time was dedicated to setting up the learning management system and organizing the components to create accessible material for students. Students were able to see the schedule, download the syllabus, and ask questions before the semester began.

Unlike a traditional semester-long course, our course was compressed to an intensive schedule with only nine virtual meetings. Although our choice to offer an intensive course arose out of necessity, there are documented advantages to these time-intensive formats. Shortened teaching formats enable instructors to more effectively manage their time (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020). Students in these courses also report increased focus and decreased procrastination (Scott, 2003). Kucsera & Zimmaro (2010) found that instructors in intensive courses received higher course ratings from students and equal ratings on teacher effectiveness as traditional courses.

Though these benefits exist, we also planned to face a few challenges related to an online version of this intensive course. Our first concern was the issue of student absences. Because of the amount of material covered in each class, missing a single meeting

would significantly reduce students' opportunities to master the course material. Although we emphasized the importance of attendance, we recognized that online classes have unavoidable issues such as unexpected technology failures (Chen et al., 2020). We also did not record our sessions in an effort to provide a confidential environment, given that it is not uncommon for students to self-disclose personal connections to mental health concerns during class (Wood et al., 2014).

Second, we were concerned about students' level of class participation in the online environment. Recent research indicated that students who transitioned from in-person learning to online classes during the pandemic participated in class significantly less (Reinholz et al., 2020). This trend is problematic because students improve their mastery of the class material and improve their attitude toward the educational experience when they participate in classroom discussions (Howe et al., 2019). Participation is particularly important in online environment where it is linked to students' perception of achievement and course satisfaction (Drouin, 2008).

To address these issues and provide an opportunity to prepare students, we held a pre-semester meeting prior to the nine classes. An initial live meeting prior to an online course can help students understand their role in the course, provide instructor expectations, and give students an opportunity to connect with their peers (Krieger & Stockton, 2004). Online students also need opportunities to understand the technology requirements of their courses (Lee & Nuatomue, 2021). During our one-hour videoconference, we reviewed the syllabus with the students, explained the course policies, and highlighted the technology requirements.

We outlined several important videoconferencing etiquette policies to further encourage active participation. During the intensive classes, we required students to keep their webcams turned on at all times. Although students prefer to keep their webcams turned off (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021), recent research suggests that students may be more easily distracted when they are not required to turn on their webcams (Maimaiti et al., 2021). We also asked

students to ensure that they were located in a private room during class. Without a confidential environment, we were concerned that students would be reluctant to participate in discussions. This guideline helped us to create some privacy and a sense of confidentiality for our students.

Because our course was scheduled several weeks after the start of the traditional semester, we planned several assignments that students completed electronically prior to the intensive portion of the course. These assignments helped students prepare for the upcoming class discussions. One challenge that we faced during the pre-intensive portion of the course was ensuring that students adequately prepared themselves to participate in the upcoming discussions by completing assigned readings. This challenge is not unique to online courses as students often do not complete assigned readings in higher education (Baba & Affendi, 2020; Goode et al., 2021; Lloyd, 2016). To address this challenge, we added one additional component to our students' classroom participation grade. Prior to each weekend of intensive classes, we asked students to submit at least three questions about the assigned readings from the textbook for each day of virtual class. Students submitted these questions through the learning management system and we reviewed them before each class. We addressed questions during class and invited students to raise any additional questions that we did not address. Overall, we found that this strategy increased participation in classroom discussion and student preparation.

### **Intensive Portion**

During the intensive portion, our class met via videoconference nine times for three and a half hours each session over the course of three weekends. With the length of these meetings in mind, we thought it was important to prepare a diversity of activities and media for each class. Additionally, Huang et al. (2016) suggested that online courses should prepare a variety of materials in a variety of modalities. Thus, we structured our classes to include a combination of brief lectures, videos of group counseling taking place, breakout discussion groups, live demonstrations of techniques, and guest lectures. Switching among various instructional methods permits instructors to engage with students of various

learning styles while keeping the class engaged with the content (Huang et al., 2016). We also ended each class with a segment titled “What are you taking away?” which allowed us to synthesize the learning of our students. Additionally, we provided extensive supplemental materials that students could access through their learning management system. An outline of our topics is included in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Session Schedule & Topics

| Meeting | Topic  |
|---------|--|
| Class 1 | Introduction to Group Work<br>The Group Counselor as a Person                              |
| Class 2 | Ethical & Legal Issues in Group Counseling   |
| Class 3 | Forming a Group  |
| Class 4 | Theories and Techniques of Group Counseling  |
| Class 5 | Initial Stage of Group   |
| Class 6 | Transition Stage of Group  |
| Class 7 | Challenges of Dealing with Difficult Behaviors in Groups<br>Addressing Diversity in Groups |
| Class 8 | Working Stage of Group   |
| Class 9 | Final Stage of Group   |

Although we delivered this portion of the course through videoconferences, we wanted to create an environment that resembled a live classroom. We asked students to keep their webcams turned on throughout each session. Seeing their personal reactions not only helped emulate a live classroom, it also allowed us to see each student’s nonverbal communications. We also asked students to refrain from using the chat box feature in our videoconference software. Although this decision appeared to help us mirror a live classroom environment, it is important to note that chat boxes can increase student participation in online courses, and students often prefer to communicate with their online instructors in this manner (Vu & Fadde, 2013). Others who plan to follow our model for their online group counseling courses should consider using this feature.

**Lectures**

Typically, our class began with a brief lecture from our co-leaders lasting no longer than 30 minutes. When online instructors ask students to watch lengthy Zoom lectures without a break, students tend to become fatigued and lose concentration (Maimatiti, et al., 2021). By limiting ourselves to a briefer instructional period, we were able to focus

these lectures on the most salient points within each topic without losing the attention of our audience. This strategy also ensured that we reserved enough time for our other planned activities. We designed these lectures to complement and highlight material from the required textbook.

**Video Demonstrations**

One of the key elements of our class was the video demonstrations, a commonly recommended teaching tool for online counseling courses (Cicco, 2011; Glassmeyer et al., 2011; Trepal et al., 2007). Our intention was to provide students with a realistic and practical presentation of the group process. We encouraged students to pay careful attention to the group leaders in each video and how the group members responded to their interventions. We also asked students to write down any questions that they had about particular interventions that the group leaders used. We followed each video viewing with a Q&A session in which students could ask these questions and comment on their observation of the groups.

For video demonstrations, we selected three video series to demonstrate the group process. Each of these video series were composed of a different set of group members, with the same co-leaders facilitating these various groups. These three videos showed a diverse range of group members with various member characteristics, personalities, issues, and styles. The first video series was comprised of two hours of footage showing an actual group as they moved through each stage of the group process. The second video series focused on challenges that group leaders often face. The members in this group demonstrated several difficult member behaviors such as conflict between members, defensiveness, resistance, and distrust among members. Additionally, this series demonstrated effective strategies for managing diversity issues in groups. The third video series demonstrated techniques used in 11 different counseling theories. Each video in this series focused on a few techniques of each theory and showed how they could be applied to group counseling.

### ***Breakout Discussion Groups***

Another essential component of the intensive portion of our course was the breakout discussion groups. Through the use of our videoconferencing software, we were able to separate our large digital classroom into several small discussion rooms consisting of three or four students. Breakout rooms in synchronous online classes help instructors break up lectures with engaging activities that can decrease student boredom (Chandler, 2016). Students also feel more comfortable speaking with their peers and sharing their experiences in small groups rather than participating in the larger classroom discussion. These groups also gave students the opportunity to form personal connections with their peers, a difficulty in an online setting (Arslan, 2021).

We created a structure for our breakout groups to maximize the potential for student learning. Typically, we began by either asking students a process question to discuss in their groups, or we asked them to look for particular techniques or interventions in one of the videos. For example, we would show students a video of a group in the initial stage of group and ask them to discuss how the leaders helped group members establish trust. After our prompt, we gave group members 15-20 minutes of discussion time before calling everyone back together. We then asked each group to identify a spokesperson to share the groups' discussion with the class. As mirrored in previous research (Chandler, 2016), this strategy increased student engagement and created a more robust discussions within the larger group.

### ***Live Demonstrations***

Group counseling courses tend to fixate more on knowledge acquisition than skill development (Vannatta & Steen, 2019) even though experts generally agree that experiential learning is necessary to train group leaders (Corey et al., 2019; Markus & King, 2003). In addition, role playing has been shown to be an effective way to teach counseling students basic attending skills (Paladino et al., 2011). To develop group counseling skills, we asked students to participate in live demonstrations throughout the course. These demonstrations illustrated the more nuanced and difficult group counseling techniques. For example, we demonstrated techniques for

addressing reluctant group members. Students alternated their role plays with some students acting as reluctant group members while others acted as the group leader.

Although these demonstrations provided students with valuable experiential learning opportunities, it is important to recognize the inherent risk of role playing. Even though roles may be fictitious, it is quite possible participants can experience authentic emotions, which can be intense at times (Osborn et al., 2017). Therefore, it was important for us to inform students about the potential risk of volunteering, and it was essential that we reminded students to keep any personal information shared by volunteers confidential. Although we did not provide full group demonstrations, we often role-played specific scenarios to demonstrate techniques.

### ***Guest Lectures***

Throughout the intensive portion of the class, we hosted several guest speakers. Each guest was an expert on a particular aspect of group counseling, and they were asked to provide a short lecture followed by a Q&A session. One of these guests was a group leader from one of the video series that we showed in class. During the lecture, this guest gave students the opportunity to ask questions about specific techniques used in the video as well as the leader's personal reaction to the group members and their work. These guest lectures provided students with an expert's view of the group process and deepened their understanding of the lessons.

### ***What are You Taking Away?***

After presenting students with a variety of lectures, demonstrations, and discussion, we wanted to provide students with a way to synthesize all of the learning that occurred over the three-and-a-half-hour session. We ended each session by asking students to identify what they were taking away from their time in class. We invited students to share their personal learnings along with the parts of the sessions that were most surprising and most rewarding. Not only did this strategy assist students with their processing of the material, it also gave students an opportunity to provide feedback about the course directly to the co-leaders. These closing discussions helped us understand the components of the course that were

working and allowed us to adjust those aspects that could be more effectively implemented.

### **Post-Intensive Portion**

At the conclusion of the nine intensive meetings, we required students to complete several assignments throughout the remainder of the semester. Students took objective quizzes based on the material from the text, and they wrote reflection papers about their experiences in the class. Students could benefit from other resources, book chapters, and articles that we provided on the learning management system.

Although we did not use PowerPoint presentation as part of our lectures, we provided students with slide summaries for each chapter of their textbook. Additionally, we put students into small groups and asked them to create a presentation on a particular theory of group counseling. Students were able to submit a recorded presentation or they could attend one additional meeting via videoconference for a live presentation. The final assignment of the semester was a comprehensive multiple choice final exam to help students prepare for degree comprehensive exams, certification exams, and licensing exams.

### ***Experiential Group***

In addition to those assignments, we asked students to participate in an experiential group. These groups can offer participants an opportunity to observe more experienced group leaders, to experience group dynamics firsthand, and to achieve personal growth (Ohr et al., 2014). Additionally, CACREP requires students of accredited programs to participate as a group member in a small experiential group for at least 10 clock hours during their master's programs (CACREP, 2015). To meet this standard in an online format, we asked students to meet with a group of six of their peers for 10 weekly hour-long meetings led by a doctoral student via videoconferencing. We thought it was important to conduct the group after the intensive portion so that the students could recognize each aspect of the group process during their own groups.

Although we recruited a doctoral student to be the group leader, this leader did not report the specific material or contribution of group members. Rather, the leader only reported attendance and willingness of members to participate. The leader was

responsible for all aspects of the group facilitation including setting group goals, establishing guidelines, and creating session activities. Given that online experiential groups can pose unique challenges for group leaders (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014), the group leader made special arrangements and considerations to deliver the best possible experience for our students. Our group leader shared these comments on the experiential group:

My efforts were aimed at creating a climate where students could experience meaningful connections with one another in a virtual platform. Initial session discussions centered on how the members and facilitator could create a safe and confidential environment. Our group established guidelines such as being the only member in the room, having video turned on throughout the sessions, and not being distracted with other activities during group time. Throughout the life of the group, I was intentional in asking open-ended questions and making reflections to create a nonjudgmental climate that would promote personally meaningful work. Members at times worked in dyads and triads for a brief time, which strengthened the connections among the members, especially during the early stages of the group. Members were expected to write in a journal as a way for tracking their experience in the group and how they were putting into practice what they were learning into daily life. Even with the virtual format, members of this group consistently engaged with one another in honest and caring ways.

### **Feedback on the Course**

Much of the feedback that we received from students in this course was positive. Students expressed their appreciation for the use of the video series and the opportunity to discuss material with their peers in the breakout rooms. Although most students would have preferred to take this course in-person, many commented that this model was a good alternative given the challenges of the pandemic. Two students provided us with specific comments about their experience in the course. The first student shared these comments:

Participating in online intensive courses during the pandemic was definitely a different experience than I was expecting. Sometimes, even the most interesting conversations can become difficult to concentrate on, as distractions are even more frequent. However, that did not change the fact that there was valuable information to be learned. The presenters and their guest speakers each offered a variety of skills and techniques. While no one person might incorporate all aspects of each technique, the diversity of each allows any one student to form a basis for their own counseling style. Connections with fellow students can still be made. While we are not in person, we could still share our ideas and learn more about each other and the field of counseling. Even though my training has come in a less than conventional form, I do not feel any less prepared to enter this amazing field.

The second student added:

Each class provided crucial knowledge while creating a surgical-like protocol for implementable counseling practice. The intensive format offered tremendous alignment not only with my preferred learning style, but also my lifestyle. Even amidst the complex demands of my life, the intensive classes were refreshing and life-giving. Participating in an experiential group was enlightening, and entering into the client space with humility and vulnerability has substantively helped me.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Format**

There were several strengths to the structure of an intensive online group counseling course. Our format allowed for us to continue to deliver a high-quality course through the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we could not meet face-to-face, we were able to meet our students safely through videoconferencing software. Additionally, the online format allowed for us to reach a wider audience. Rather than teaching only students and professionals who resided near the university, we were able to reach participants across the country. Further, the intensive format permitted us to fit an entire semester of material in a short time period. This structure allowed students to take our

course without disrupting their regularly scheduled courses.

Simultaneously, there were limitations to our intensive model. First, we needed to compress our teaching schedule to fit the intensive calendar appropriately. The schedule allowed us to plan nine meetings, each lasting three and a half hours. Because of the limited number of face-to-face contact hours, we had to add several online assignments to meet our required hours. Additionally, we had to be selective about the material that we covered in class. Although we covered a wide range of material for this course, there were times where we were not able to provide our preferred level of depth on each topic. Another limitation of this model is the significant technological support required. Although our lead presenter had extensive teaching experience and group leadership experience, technological support was necessary to convert the course to an online format. To overcome this challenge, we employed a co-teaching model. The co-presenter assisted the lead presenter with the learning management system and the videoconferencing software. Furthermore, both presenters contributed to class lectures and shared their professional experiences. However, it is important to recognize that co-teaching may not be viable for some counselor educators.

### **Recommendations for Counselor Educators**

We suggest several recommendations for other counselor educators who may want to teach group counseling online in an intensive format. First, any intensive online course should be carefully planned. Online classes require different instructional approaches than traditional classes (Haddock et al., 2020), which may compel some instructors to vary their typical teaching style. We believe that the significant planning phase helped our course run smoothly. Second, this course should be designed to include several media and teaching modalities. Given that students often report reduced concentration in online classes (Ober et al., 2021; Shim & Lee, 2020), we believe that switching modalities can help avoid monotony. Lastly, we recommend ample use of breakout groups during videoconference classes as a way to increase connectedness among students. Previous research suggests that the increased attrition rates in online programs may be related to a lack of

connection in the online classroom (Lu, 2017), and creating a strong community in online classes can increase student retention (Kebble, 2017). Breakout rooms can foster a learning community among online students and provide them with social connections.

### Conclusion

Online courses will continue to proliferate in counselor education programs across the United States. Currently, there are 102 CACREP-accredited entry-level programs and 11 CACREP-accredited doctoral programs that are delivered online, and more

online programs become accredited each year (CACREP, 2022). As such, counselor educators must be prepared to offer online versions of their courses. Although there are many ways to provide online counselor education courses, we hope that this model can be helpful for other instructors who are developing online group counseling courses. By continuing to develop creative ways to deliver high-quality teaching, counselor educators can ensure that future counselors are adequately prepared in the future.

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