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## Teaching Online Group Counseling Skills in an On-Campus Group Counseling Course

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# Teaching Online Group Counseling Skills in an On-Campus Group Counseling Course

## **Abstract**

Counselors are increasingly incorporating digital modalities into their practices. As such, counseling students must be trained to provide such types of counseling within their degree programs. This article outlines an example curriculum for an on-campus group counseling class wherein students receive training and participate in an online, videoconferencing process group.

## **Author's Notes**

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## **Keywords**

online counseling, technology, group counseling, training

Technology is altering the counseling profession; myriad forms of online counseling exist and the delivery continues to expand (Richards & Vigano, 2013). The American Counseling Association (2014) espouses this paradigm shift as it stated in the Code of Ethics, “Counselors understand that the profession of counseling may no longer be limited to in-person, face-to-face interactions” (p. 17). However, the speed at which the field is evolving is disconcerting as the training required to be an effective online counselor is lacking (Anthony, 2015). The training of counselors to transition face-to-face counseling skills to an online environment has become essential in order to continually promote and maintain efficacious, ethical, and legal practices (Anthony, 2015; Cartreine, Ahern, & Locke, 2010). Because the landscape of service provision has been permanently altered, knowledge and skills regarding online counseling should be intentionally integrated into educational curriculum (Cardenas, Serrano, Flores, De la Rosa, 2008; Mallen, Jenkins, Vogel, & Day, 2011; Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). Currently, little is known about how to train counseling students in the delivery of online counseling (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014), particularly group counseling (Kit, Wong, D’Rozario, & Teo, 2014).

### **Forms of Online Counseling**

The ways in which clients are receiving counseling services through technological means are vast and varied. Service types include chat-based, email, and videoconferencing and can serve as both standalone and supplementary services used in conjunction with face-to-face services (Abbot, Klein, & Ciechomski, 2005; Barak & Grohol, 2011; Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, Shapira, 2008). Thus far, research on the wide variety of types of online counseling is

promising and, overall, validates online counseling as a viable service modality (see Barak et al., 2008 for a full review).

Clients are using different types of online counseling, such as videoconferencing, synchronous chat (e.g., where client and counselor are dialoguing simultaneously), and asynchronous chat (e.g., email or other modalities where client and counselor are not online simultaneously) with mental health professionals as stand-alone services or as supplemental communication to ongoing face-to-face services (Mallen et al., 2005). Clients are now able to obtain services that meet a wide range of needs and presenting issues using different types of online counseling including asynchronous forums/support groups, synchronous groups including videoconference, couples and family counseling, and individual counseling (both text-based and videoconference). Overall, no significant differences exist between distance counseling and traditional face-to-face counseling regardless of the format or delivery type (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Barak et al., 2008; Mallen et al., 2005).

### **Online Group Counseling**

Online support groups serve as the predecessor of online counseling, as Skinner and Zack (2004) noted, “the enduring success of these groups has firmly established the potential of computer-mediated communication to enable the discussion of sensitive personal issues” (p. 435). Online support groups are a type of self-help group that enable people in distress to find others with similar needs and problems, to share feelings and information, provide advice, and develop a support community, but are text-based only and lack a trained counselor facilitator (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006). Online chat forums and support groups allow users to go online whenever they choose to post or read others’ comments offering personal questions, concerns, ideas or support to others about a predetermined topic (i.e., depression, anxiety). Some groups

are therapeutic or supportive in nature, while others are strictly psychoeducational and informational (Stevens & Shulman, 2003). Online groups and forums offer social support, which can be beneficial for those who feel isolated. These forums can also provide new ideas for coping with distress (Mallen et al., 2005). According to Stevens and Shulman (2003) online groups “create a sense of universality that eliminates geographical boundaries, and perhaps gender and culture” (p. 257). Current research on therapeutic outcomes is positive and indicates that online support groups offer emotional relief and support for members (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006; Darcy & Dooley, 2007; Freeman et al., 2008; Haug et al., 2008; Lieberman et al., 2010; Webb et al. 2008; White & Dorman, 2001).

Some research has focused on the experience of online groups led by a professional counselor. Overall, these studies show the impact of a distance counselor in a group setting but do not address the situation in which all group members relate electronically. While these studies provide important preliminary information into the efficacy of using technology to mediate group counseling, some methodological drawbacks exist. In one study, group members were present together in the same room and only the group counselor was telecasted into the group session (Greene et al., 2010). In another study, all group participants accessed the internet-based group remotely, however only the group counselor was visible to each participant and the group members did not synchronously interact with other members (King et al., 2009). In the third study, the groups for caregivers of patients with dementia began in a face-to-face format and then transitioned to the videoconferencing format (Marziali, 2006).

Studies that focus on synchronous professionally-led counseling groups also show positive outcomes with several studies that indicate that online counseling outcomes are comparable to face-to-face group outcomes (Greene et al., 2010; King et al., 2009; Marziali,

2006). Positive outcomes included clients' positive perception of the online counseling experience increased due to the convenience of participating from the comfort of their own home as well as nonsignificant differences in client outcomes when compared with face-to-face groups (King et al., 2009). Marziali's (2006) study of adult caregivers of family members with dementia showed encouraging results including positive counseling outcomes as well as positive client satisfaction with the group process and online modality. Group members felt a strong sense of bonding and cohesion with other group members and the leader (Marziali, 2006). However, group members began the group in a face-to-face format before moving to an online environment. While affirmative outcomes existed, Greene et al. (2010) found that the group members reported feeling unconnected to the group leader who used videoconferencing to lead the group remotely.

Research on counseling outcomes continues to proliferate and data shows the overall effectiveness of a wide variety of online counseling modalities (Richards & Vigano, 2013). However, the training of helping professionals, including counselors-in-training, continues to be overlooked (Anthony, 2015). Appropriate training should be provided in order for practitioners to adequately and ethically provide online therapeutic services to clients (Anthony, 2015).

### **Accreditation and Credentialing**

The American Counseling Association ethical codes state that counselors should "understand that the profession of counseling may no longer be limited to in-person, face-to-face interactions" (ACA, 2014, p. 17). The Association for Specialists in Group Work's Best Practices Guidelines mandates group counselor awareness of technological trends in the field (ASGW, 2012). Finally, The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2015) states, "students are to understand the impact of technology on the

counseling profession” (2.F.1.j) as well as “understand the impact of technology on the counseling process” (2.F.5.e). CACREP states that students understand “ethical and culturally relevant strategies for establishing and maintaining in-person and technology-assisted relationships” (2.F.5.d) suggesting that students go beyond understanding a general impact and be apprised of skill development and actual interventions. As the services delivery of online counseling has become prolific, so should the training of counseling professionals (Anthony, 2015). Considering the training standards in masters-level counseling programs, it has become clear that new professionals should be technologically-informed upon graduation.

Providing online counseling training is in a stage of relative infancy and most traditional approaches to online counseling training may benefit from new methods including updates regarding online counseling culture, online human behavior, as well as how counseling theories can be applied and understood in an online environment (Anthony, 2015). A Distance Counseling Credential (DCC) was established by the Center for Credentialing and Education in 2006. This credential “ensures standardization of online and distance counseling practices as well as to assure the public that counselors who use distance technologies adhere to a specialized set of ethical and practice codes” (Trepal et al., 2007, p. 266). The DCC is available to independently licensed professionals and requires a fee paid for independently by the practitioner. At this time, the only way for counseling professionals to receive formalized training in online counseling is to obtain independent licensure and then pay for a separate training course (Trepal et al., 2007). Given the guidelines set forth by relevant accrediting and ethical bodies (e.g., ACA, CACREP, ASGW), the individual credentialing post-licensure is not enough. New graduates of masters-level training programs should encounter training and experiential practice in their programs so that a baseline knowledge of technological counseling

issues are widespread through the profession. In 2010, Cartreine et al., (2010) found no specialty tracks or formal training existed within Counseling or Psychology programs dedicated to the delivery of online counseling. In order to address this gap, formal training methods of counselors-in-training must be better understood.

### **Online Counseling Training in Masters-Level Programs**

Considering the increase of digital counseling service provision and the focus on training from professional accrediting bodies, counselor education programs should focus on modifying curriculum and instruction (Trepal et al., 2007). All counseling students should be exposed to digital counseling in their training programs to introduce the complexities of therapeutic delivery in this environment. Counselors-in-training need to learn how to “transfer professional knowledge and skills previously acquired in a face-to-face way” into a digital setting (Cardenas et al., 2008, p. 472). However, little information currently exists regarding how to train counselors in online therapeutic work (Cartreine et al., 2010; Chester & Glass, 2006; Kit et al., 2014; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014; Trepal et al., 2007).

Available research suggests counselor educators can include a variety of activities to train students in the online counseling modality. Suggested activities include familiarizing counseling students with the efficacy and uses of online counseling, as well as the relevant ethical codes and legal mandates. Another suggested activity is the use of case studies to train counseling students to relate to clients through chat-only communication (Trepal et al., 2007). In addition research suggests the inclusion of asynchronous chat held via a discussion board forum page (similar to a bulletin board) where students post comments, thoughts, and responses to one another throughout the week in between the face-to-face group meetings (Kit et al., 2014). Finally training course should focus on asynchronous (chat-based) and synchronous

(videoconference) training designed to support the formation of online clinical skills, interventions within a supervised practice (Cardenas et al. 2008).

Students who participated in course that included online counseling training stated that they believed the online counseling modality would be beneficial to a particular type of client, they expressed trouble with the leadership and facilitation aspects (Kit et al. (2014). In addition, students reported that they felt more confident to provide online services after the training as well as more positive regarding the benefits of the digital services for a wide array of clients (Cardenas et al., 2008). This information shows data-driven outcomes highlighting the beneficial impact of intentional training.

While these training suggestions are crucial to our novice understanding of the issue, they are not enough to thoroughly guide counselor education toward best practices and guidelines of teaching online counseling skills. Considerable information is lacking regarding context and skill-based learning opportunities that work to train counseling students in online counseling. In particular, videoconferencing group counseling skills are currently underrepresented in the literature.

### **Videoconferencing Group Counseling**

The limited research focused on online, videoconferencing group counseling shows significant challenges to the creation of a therapeutic environment in this modality (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014, Holmes & Kozlowski, 2015). Research shows several themes regarding group member experiences in online process groups. Themes include a linear discussion (e.g., question and answer), hyper-awareness of the environment, feeling as if the environment was artificial, role confusion within the group, feeling superficially engaged, mistrust toward group members, and feeling disconnected from the group counseling experience (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014).

A quantitative study compared the experiences of master's-level counseling students between two types of groups, face-to-face and videoconferencing (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2015). Results showed that face-to-face participants had significantly higher perceptions that the approach of the group fit their needs; experienced higher trust levels within the group experience; and felt more connected and present within the group experience when compared to the videoconferencing participants (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2015).

Together, these data portray the complexities and inherent challenges that exist within the context of an online, videoconferencing process group. Both qualitative and quantitative data indicate that counseling students experienced complications with the videoconferencing group counseling modality. Perhaps, these findings suggest that counseling students cannot inherently understand how to facilitate videoconferencing groups without intentional, skill-based training.

### **Group Counseling Training**

Pedagogically, counselor education relies heavily on experiential growth groups for teaching group counseling theories and skills (Ohrt et al., 2014). CACREP (2015) requires at least 10 hours of experiential practice in groups as a training standard in all accredited programs. Counselors-in-training profoundly benefit both inter- and intra-personally through the experiential learning components of group work (Ohrt et al., 2014; Steen, Vasserman-Stokes, Vannatta, 2014). Several beneficial growth factors have been shown to be prevalent in students' experiences including the opportunity for self-disclosure, experiencing vicarious modeling, and feeling validation and genuineness from their classmates (Kiweewa, Gilbride, Luke, & Seward, 2013). Students typically experience participation as both a leader and a member in a group counseling experience, allowing them insight into clients' experiences in therapy (Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009) knowledge about group dynamics and process, ability to recognize the

importance of catharsis and insight (Ohrt, Robinson, & Hagedorn, 2013), as well as the opportunity to practice skills and self-reflection (Ieva et al., (2009).

Counseling students benefit from having the opportunity to practice skills in a real-life context (Shumaker, Ortiz, & Brenninkmeyer, 2011) and data has shown an increase in personal confidence and competence to set personal goals (Young, Reysen, Eskridge, & Ohrt, 2013). Counseling is a nuanced, complex human interaction and students gain understanding and self-confidence through experiential opportunities (Ohrt et al., 2014; Shumaker et al., 2011; Steen et al., 2014). Supervision and journaling through the experiential components are critical to the growth experiences (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Steen et al., 2014). A combination of didactic, observation, experiential and supervision strategies are most effective in a group counseling training course (Riva & Korinek, 2004; Ohrt et al., 2013). As such, this amalgamation was used to incorporate online group counseling into the semester curriculum discussed in this article.

Kit et al., (2014) state that group counselor educators are called to consider the most effective teaching methods in both face-to-face and online formats. In fact, because of the complexity of group counseling, it has been suggested that teaching the two modalities (e.g., face-to-face and online) should be separated into two separate courses (Kit et al., 2014) so that students can master face-to-face counseling skills prior to translating them to a digital environment. However, due to resources and other institutional challenges, additional courses specifically designed to address online counseling issues often cannot be added to existing curriculums.

## **Group Counseling Course Example**

### **Classroom Context**

Students are required to be both a group counseling participant and a group counseling leader for ten weeks throughout the semester as required by the Counseling for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education programs (2015). The exact structure of how this is set up may differ between institution and can be determined by the instructor. The following guidelines are to assist instructors to add an additional online component to a traditional face-to-face environment. However, the guidelines can be amended to meet hybrid or completely online courses.

For the proposed course, students participate in a weekly, three-hour class format. The first several weeks of the semester are didactic instruction focused on group stages, therapeutic group factors, and leadership skills. Throughout the last ten weeks of the semester students are split into two equal groups and are required to participate in 50-minute process groups led by co-leaders from the other group. The leaders are required to submit group plans to the instructor several days before the class meeting. All groups are monitored through live supervision by the instructor and feedback for the leaders is process afterward.

### **Student Training of Online Group Counseling**

The online group counseling training requires scheduled time both inside and outside of the classroom yet can be inserted into a pre-designed group counseling course. Each component will be described in full below. Flexibility of the instructor is required to amend and adjust the described training schedule to his or her own needs. Much of the course development will be determined by course length, student enrollment, and instructor choice.

## **Beginning of the Course**

As with any other course, expectations should be outlined and defined within the syllabus. The additional online group components take place outside of the classroom environment and the expectation of participation in these groups should be thoroughly explained to students in the beginning of the semester. Students should be clustered together in groups of no more than 6 students. Online context has inherent challenges wherein more than 6 members may not allow for appropriate group cohesion (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014). However, some flexibility exists so that instructors can accommodate the total number of students enrolled in the course. A range of 4-7 students would be considered appropriate and manageable for the experience. In this context, the members will also take turns leading their online groups once throughout the semester. Therefore, the number of students that comprise each group should be equal to the amount of weeks that online group runs, in order to allow each student to lead once (e.g., 6 students in the group equals 6 weekly meetings).

In the beginning of class, it is important to discuss the need for access to a computer with videoconferencing capabilities. This way, students have several weeks to brainstorm how they might gain access to the necessary equipment if needed. At this time assistive technology must be acquired for students with disabilities in order to provide equal access to the experience. Universities may have technology offices where students can borrow laptops for extended periods of time. The instructor should be flexible and supportive of students who need to gain access to a computer or tablet prior to the online group expectation.

Once it begins, the course runs as a traditional, face-to-face group counseling course with students participating in group participation and leadership activities. In week 8, the online group training is conducted within the classroom. After the training, the students are required to

run the online groups each week at a selected time (See Appendix A for an example of course timeline development).

### **Specialize In-Class Online Group Training**

During the eighth week of class, the instructor will train students in the facilitation of online group counseling. The timing of this training is intentional, as prior to having the experience of leading face-to-face groups for several weeks, students will have little to contribute to the discussion and will have not gained personal knowledge of group interactions, challenges of leadership, and group dynamics. The training is built around a discussion facilitated by the course instructor.

#### **Part 1: Overview of Group Work**

The instructor begins with a review of the curative factors of group counseling including cohesion, universality, altruism and catharsis. The instructor also reviews the concepts of interpersonal and intrapersonal process, trust, safety, stages of group development and the importance to group counseling. Finally, the course instructor conducts a conversation with students about their experiences with these concepts in the face-to-face group counseling format that they are currently experiencing within the course. Confidentiality is discussed and students are reminded of their ethical requirements and obligations. Given that the online experiential component takes place within a Group Counseling course, much of the background information will already have been covered throughout the course.

#### **Part 2: Online Environment**

Next, the instructor introduces the idea of an online environment in counseling. To do this, the instructor can show an example videos of online conference calls or groups. A visual aid helps to bring the general concepts, challenges, and benefits to students' attention in a

concrete way. Students generate a list of ideas regarding their perceptions of benefits and challenges of utilizing online counseling. The instructor may also choose to allow students a brief opportunity to interact in class utilizing technology. In pairs, students log into an online environment and conduct a brief, five-minute conversation through a synchronous chat function (e.g., Google Chat). After an experience of trying to interact in an online environment, students discuss the how this format may impact group facilitation including: therapeutic factors, interpersonal process, intrapersonal process, trust, safety, and stages of development.

A review of the findings from current literature on this topic should be included, in addition to discussion-based learning. Kozlowski and Holmes (2014) found specific challenges to leading online groups including: 1) members experiencing a linear process in which members waited to be called on by the leader in order to participate and significant lag time resulting in awkward interactions; 2) role confusion in which members felt like students in a classroom and waited for their turn to answer a question; 3) role confusion in which leaders lost their sense of counselor and became teachers, feeling responsible for making members participate and answer; 4) a hyperawareness of the environment and mistrust of other members; and 5) a disconnection between members and the group process which led to the experience of artificial and superficial interactions. By highlighting the challenges to online group counseling, students can be aware of the adversities they may experience as an online group leader and member. Group leaders are more likely to be intentional about planning groups and using a variety of skills after becoming aware of the inherent challenges in connection.

### Part 3: Overcoming Limitations and Facilitation Skills

After reviewing the face-to-face group counseling process and how the online environment inhibits the process, the instructor trains students to overcome the limitations.

Group leaders should consider how their current training may or may not apply in an online environment. Facilitators should approach group counseling with new skills when entering an environment filled with a myriad of technology issues such as lag times, frequent disconnection, and a void of nonverbal communication. The authors' suggestions below have resulted from three years of experiences facilitating student online groups. These recommendations are beneficial to the training in online group counseling, as they provide concrete examples and suggestions for students to implement when they lead the group process.

Prior to the start of the group, members should be informed about choosing an appropriate, confidential space for their group meeting. They should select a private, quiet room that is free from distractions such as televisions, pets, and other members of their family and also should be instructed to wear headphones to minimize noise and keep group conversation muted to potential external listeners. At this time, the students are told to eliminate other distractions on their computers and commit to staying only in the group platform during the time of the meeting. The opportunity to engage in other behaviors (e.g., email, web browsing, homework) is ever-present and students should be compelled to resist in order to practice remaining present in group sessions. In addition, members should push the computer several feet away in order to not appear as large, in turn, eliminating the perceived need to "fix" their appearance in the videoconferencing window that shows their reflection. Anecdotal evidence of prior group member experiences describes the reflection as distracting, therefore members should try to minimize distractions in order to pay attention to the group process as it is occurring.

One of the most important components of a counselor's first meeting with a client in any setting is the informed consent as it provides the client important information about the process and what they can expect from the counseling relationship and overall experience. In online

group counseling, this discussion is crucial (Trepal et al., 2007). Informing group members about the challenges to online counseling not only educates clients, but also normalizes some of the problems that may arise in the online group environment. Leaders of online groups should intensely focus the first session discussion on confidentiality and safety in the online group environment. Members should explore concerns such as screen shots, privacy, lack of nonverbal communication, time delays, technological concerns, and plans for reconnecting should the digital connection dissolve. The group should be encouraged to revisit these topics if they are notice that the group is not engaging in the process.

Once the informed consent is thoroughly covered, leaders should allow time for member introductions. In an online group format, the introduction phase may necessitate more time than in a face-to-face context. This extra time allows for familiarity with each other and the environment. When facilitating rapport between members, group leaders should consider utilizing the uniqueness of the online environment as opposed to trying to simply recreate face-to-face group counseling in different format. Leaders should consider how members could utilize their space and computers in creative ways. For example, members can find objects in their home to share with members that represent their identity, pictures from their computers or home, or a favorite song from their playlist. In later sessions, group leaders can also consider how to incorporate technology through the use of shared Web 2.0 spaces.

Counseling skills can be transferred to the online group environment in an intentional way. Leaders can begin to learn to utilize the uniqueness of the online environment in order to facilitate the use of their previously learned counseling skills. One helpful technique is to normalize the awkward silence that frequently occurs due to the Internet connection lag time. For example, leaders may address the notion of lag time at the beginning of each group and make

members aware that this may take place. The leader can also structure how he or she will handle any disconnections that happen so that members know what to expect from the group process should a member drop out or get interrupted through disconnection. Also, leaders should be intentional and alert members when they are applying silence in the group. For example, leaders should deliberately ask a member or all members to take time to process their thoughts and feelings about an issue after it is presented in the group. This separates therapeutic silence from inadvertent lag time.

Secondly, the group should discuss how the lack of nonverbal communication might impact the group experience. Members should be encouraged to express themselves verbally and to speak out when they are feeling disconnected. Members may consider implementing visual signals for types of communication, such as when they would like to share. Leaders should both give more verbal encouragers as encourage members to do the same. Trepal et al., (2007) discuss an array of options that counselors have when responding to clients in an online counseling modality. Counselors can address the issue of missing or subtle nonverbal communication and ask members to address this in a verbal fashion throughout the group process by talking out loud and asking questions. Counselors should feel compelled to address any missing or confusing information through narrative discussion, allowing for genuine dialogue regarding the client's feelings and experiences.

Group leaders need to address the role confusion that occurs when leading online groups (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2014). Members in online groups tend to take on the role of a student and struggle to understand their role as a therapeutic group member. For example, members have been found to wait to be called on, as if in class, and not respond to other members' self-disclosure in a spontaneous, genuine way. In addition, leaders should not take on a teacher-like

role and call on members in a linear fashion. Leaders should allow group members to take responsibility for sharing and working within the group, as well as facilitate genuine connection and spontaneous interaction. To overcome this role confusion, leaders should encourage crosstalk among members. For example, when members speak directly to the leader, the leader should instead ask the member to speak to the other group members. Another example is to actively ask for feedback and to model providing feedback. Online group leaders should be aware that they may employ similar skills as they might in a face-to-face group, however they must be more vocal and transparent about what they are doing in an online group in order to structure cross-talk and interactions between group members as these may happen less naturally in an online group.

Group leaders should work to enthusiastically link members with similar experiences and stories and address here-and-now moments within the group setting. Drawing members out and verbally reaching through the digital divide to encourage participation is a useful skill. Due to the linear feel of the group process, leaders should be assertive in asking clients how they feel and their reactions to what is being shared, so as to engage members more completely. Finally, online group leaders are cautioned to not fall into a narrow skill set that encourages linear interactions. The online environment lends itself to a directive leadership style and an overuse of closed-ended questions. Overuse of these skills leads to members becoming stuck in the student role and leaders becoming teachers.

#### Part 4: Logistics

The final step in the training includes students meeting in their previously assigned groups and working out logistical issues. Students present with a wide variety of technological know-how and comfort levels, so having them work in groups to support one another in

practicing with the assigned online environment is useful. Examples of videoconferencing environments that can be used include university learning management systems such as Blackboard or Canvas or supported videoconference software such as Zoom or GoToMeeting which are HIPAA compliant. Students may need to obtain log-on information and download software to computers. This process may take several hours, depending on the level of technological understanding. Instructors should be prepared to aid students should they become frustrated, as well as compel other students to support classmates that need additional assistance. Finally, a review of HIPAA regulations concerning distance counseling practices should be discussed.

The groups of students will find an agreeable time for all members to meet simultaneously for one hour outside of class time. Once days and times are agreed upon, students exchange contact information including cell phone numbers and email. Finally, the leadership schedule will be set up so that each member knows the week in which he or she is leading the group. The leader is responsible for designing and implementing a group plan for the week they lead their online group.

### **Weekly Online Groups**

After the training week, the groups will facilitate their online groups for the next several weeks. The number of weeks are determined by the number of participating group members. The members meet on the identified digital platform at the agreed upon time. There is one leader per week and each student leads one time during the online group process. This allows for the students to have the experience of being both a leader and a member of the online group, which mirrors accreditation standards (CACREP, 2015). Group leaders are required to develop a plan for the group in which they lead, and are expected to be creative in their use of online materials

to engage group members (See Appendix B for example outline). Leaders are instructed to communicate their group plans to the instructor every week to allow for constructive feedback and instruction. Some topics that have been used in past groups include control issues, confidence, or other professional concerns. Groups meet in a videoconference format once a week for 50 minutes. At this point in the semester, students are aware of the nature of a process group and have a context for the expectation for participation and group development.

Since online groups are conducted outside of class time, in order to monitor participation in each group session, instructors may require group members to post to a private, graded, reflection after each session. An alternative to monitor student participation is to require a reflective survey asking members to rate their participation level, sense of belonging, group working alliance, or other constructs after each group. Students can also connect on a digital discussion board about their group experience or submit reflective journals. Depending on the digital platform, videotaping may be possible for review by instructor and student. Grading may be implemented on group leadership skills depending on instructor decision.

### **Supervision**

Supervision is ongoing throughout the course. In the face-to-face context of the course, students are required to submit brief reflection after the sessions in which they lead and all sessions are viewed by the instructor. Students can also be required to submit a reflection after the online group session in which they lead. Thus, all students are completing reflection assignments in both types of leadership opportunities. Instructors should be prepared to respond thoughtfully to these reflections in a timely manner in order to both support the students' development and expand further reflection. During weekly class meetings, the group leaders meet with the instructor to receive supervision and feedback regarding their leadership skills and

development as a counselor. These meetings should also include the online group leaders in order to help them to reflect on and integrate their new learning as group counselors in different environments. Within the context of the feedback sessions, members of the groups should give feedback to the leaders regarding their leadership style, skills, and attempted interventions. Videotaping of the online groups may be possible depending on the capabilities of the digital platform. The instructor may wish to view these tapes with the student leaders for an additional layer of supervision.

Finally, the instructor will lead a class debriefing and reflection the last week of the semester. The discussion should center on comparing both the online and face-to-face leadership experiences. Examples of discussion questions include: 1) What surprised them throughout this experience? 2) What were the differences between the two modalities? 3) What were the difficulties of each? 4) How did they personally progress as leader? 5) How does one type of leadership inform the other? 6) What are the differences in the stages of group development, specifically safety and trust? 7) What did they notice about the curative factors of group in each environment? This debriefing allows for thorough discussion of the experience and cements the student learning process. Students are able to hear the experiences of the other members and become aware of a variety of perspectives.

### **Discussion**

The provision of online counseling continues to increase (Richards & Vigano, 2013). As such, the training of counselors regarding online counseling delivery methods, skills, therapeutic interventions, ethical concerns, and efficacy information should also expand. Cartreine et al. (2012) state that given the overall consumer acceptance of online counseling, new practitioners should be trained in service provision. As discussed, intentional training of online counseling

skills is becoming increasingly imperative (Anthony, 2015; Cartreine et al., 2010; Kit et al., 2014; Mallen et al., 2005). Given the guidelines set forth by relevant accrediting and ethical bodies (e.g., ACA, CACREP, ASGW), the individual credentialing post-licensure option is not sufficient.

Experiential learning is the cornerstone of counselor training, particularly when it comes to group counseling (CACREP, 2015). The goal of this course design is to familiarize and train students in online group counseling within the context of an on-campus course. This course design allows for the development of both face-to-face and online clinical skills and provides the opportunity for supervised practice and feedback. In the current design, students receive intentional training on the background and context of online counseling, skill-based interventions, and supervision regarding their experiential practice of leadership. Ohrt, Ener, Porter, and Young (2014) found that experiential group participation was crucial to counselor trainee learning. This type of experiential participation in an online format provides conduit for students to learn first-hand about online counseling process and practice. Counselor educators can use this course outline as a general guide should they desire to include online training within group counseling courses.

The suggested format would also be amendable to group counseling courses taught in a distance or hybrid format. The infrastructure of the course context would lend itself well to the inclusion of videoconferencing groups that students are both leaders and members of throughout the semester. Even if the students travel to campus for face-to-face intensive group work, an online, videoconferencing experience would enhance the overall semester engagement and supplement learning.

Students with disabilities represent a great number of higher education students, both in on-campus and distance learning programs (Stewart, Choi, & Mallery, 2010). Assistive Technology has created myriad ways in which students with disabilities have more consistent access to educational opportunities (Black, 2004). However, instructors should not overlook the need to be intentional and thoughtful when including new technology requirements in their classrooms (Black, 2004). Instructors should be knowledgeable about the various types of disabilities (e.g., visual, cognitive, physical, or auditory) and work with students and disability offices ahead of the course to ensure equal accessibility for all students. For example, the chat-based function in a videoconference session may be used in a formal capacity or students may use specialty software, such as dictation or text-to-speech, during the group (Klemes, Epstein, Zuker, Grinberg, & Ilovitch, 2006).

These considerations are particularly important as one of the touted benefits of online counseling is that services can reach traditionally underserved clientele (e.g., people with disabilities, people who are geographically isolated; Skinner & Latchford, 2006). Counseling students may benefit from accessibility conversations related to online counseling in order to prepare them for consistent service delivery including accommodations for clients with disabilities.

### **Future Directions**

Further understanding of the ways in which we develop the knowledge and skill of online service provision in for counselors-in-training must be better understood. One suggestion for future research is the focus on how basic counseling skills can be delivered more effectively in an online environment (Trepal et al., 2007). Information regarding the types of skills that are effective in creating positive client outcomes should be gleaned so that it can be implemented in

training programs. Additionally, future research should focus on the efficacy of training programs for counselors-in-training regarding online counseling skills as the way in which students learn online counseling skills is currently not well understood (Cartreine et al., 2010). Finally, counselor educators would greatly benefit from implementation suggestions for coursework and training, especially those that are based on data and learning outcomes. The more information that the field of counselor education can obtain regarding best practices for educating counselors-in-training, the more explicitly the profession will be able to work legitimately in the new, digital landscape of counseling.

### **Conclusion**

The call for counseling training programs to begin integrating online counseling knowledge and skills is clearly described (Anthony, 2015; Kit et al., 2014). Kit et al., (2014) state, “group counselor educators have to consider the most effective training methods for teaching novice group counselors... in both face-to-face and online group counseling” (p. 317). Master’s-level counseling training programs provide the foundation of life-long counselor development. It is crucial that counselor educators become aware of and engaged in the future direction of the field and work to incorporate training procedures and experiential opportunities that will benefit students and future clients alike.

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Appendix A  
Suggested Syllabus Schedule (based on 14 weeks of class meetings)

Week of Semester	In Class Activity	Out of Class Activity
1	Go over syllabus and expectations	
2	Lecture and discussion – group stages, leadership skills, therapeutic factors	
3	Face-to-Face group 1 and supervision of leaders	
4	Face-to-Face group 2 and supervision of leaders	
5	Face-to-Face group 3 and supervision of leaders	
6	Face-to-Face group 4 and supervision of leaders	
7	Face-to-Face group 5 and supervision of leaders	
8	Online group training	Online group 1 – leader reflection due
9	Face-to-Face group 6 and supervision of leaders	Online group 2 – leader reflection due
10	Face-to-Face group 7 and supervision of leaders	Online group 3 – leader reflection due
11	Face-to-Face group 8 and supervision of leaders	Online group 4 – leader reflection due
12	Face-to-Face group 9 and supervision of leaders	Online group 5 – leader reflection due
13	Face-to-Face group 10 and supervision of leaders	Online group 6 – leader reflection due
14	Final discussion of Online group experience	

## Appendix B Sample Group Plan Outline

### Purpose:

What is the focus/topic/ reason for the group? What are you hoping to explore with the group members?

### Opener (5-10 minutes):

How will you get the group warmed up? This can be a round, an exercise or a short activity that should allow *all members* to check-in with the group and begin to engage in the group process.

### Main Activity (30-40 minutes, including processing):

What is your main group work activity?

### Processing Questions:

How will you process your activity or topic with the group? What will you ask? How will you engage the group after the main activity?

### Closing (5-10 minutes):

How will you close the group? What do you hope the group takes away from this week? A round or check-in where everyone speaks/reflections is usually appropriate here.