ARTICLES

What Factors Facilitate Online Counselor Training? Experiences of Campus Alberta Graduate Students

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Abstract

Online learning is here to stay. Many studies have examined factors that facilitate online learning in many disciplines, but few exist on counselor training. This research surveyed online counseling graduate students for factors that they found facilitative. Instructor characteristics such as frequency of participation in discussion forums, constructive and positive feedback to students, and quick return of assignments were found to be most facilitative. Personal characteristics of students such as motive for taking the course, discipline, and time management skills were a close second.

Résumé

La formation en ligne est ici pour rester. De nombreuses études ont examiné les facteurs qui facilitent la formation en ligne dans plusieurs disciplines, mais peu existent en formation de conseillers. Cette recherche a demandé à des étudiants diplômés comme conseillers en ligne de mentionner les facteurs qui leur facilitaient la tâche. Les caractéristiques des instructeurs, telles la fréquence de participation à des forums de discussion, les réactions constructives et positives pour les étudiants et la remise rapide des devoirs ont été considérées comme les plus utiles. Les caractéristiques personnelles des étudiants, telles les motifs de suivre le cours, la discipline et les habiletés de gestion du temps suivaient en deuxième place.

The convenience and flexibility that online learning offers makes it attractive especially to mature students who often have many responsibilities. However, both positive and negative biases exist among people about the efficacy and appropriateness of online learning in various academic and professional levels of training (McCracken, 2002). Some researchers have studied factors that facilitate online learning and retention of students in graduate courses such as an online MBA (Akridge, Demay, Braunlich, Collur, & Sheahan, 2002) and undergraduate online courses (Bullen, 1998; Lynch, 2001). However, few studies have explored factors that facilitate online learning for counseling graduate students.

Counselors are trained to be good observers of behaviors. Some conditions deemed predictive of positive counseling outcomes include counselor genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951). Bordin (1989, 1994) elaborated on this list, noting that it was the quality of the relationship between the counselor and the client that was most crucial in engendering positive outcomes. Relationships grow out of behaviors; and behaviors are better modeled than taught in the abstract. Online students and instructors often communicate through text-based programs, so students cannot always observe the instructor's modeling of these important behaviors. In this program, a variety of formats from Summer Institute (SI) to videotapes were used to ensure students' access to modeling behaviors. Do students see these strategies as important to their learning? What factors do online counseling students perceive as facilitating their learning? This study was carried out in an effort to answer some of these questions using the experiences of Campus Alberta (CAAP) counseling students.

What is Campus Alberta?

Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program (Campus Alberta or CAAP) is a distributed graduate counselor education program leading to a Master of Counseling degree. It is the first distance-based graduate counselor education program in Canada (Jerry, Collins, & Demish, 2003). It uses a blended-delivery model that adheres to an adult mastery learning orientation. Courses are offered through a variety of formats, but mostly online. There are Summer Institutes (SI) where students and instructors meet face to face for one to three weeks and weekend seminars where instructors and students meet for two weekends during practica.

The literature on online learning is replete with references to the need to create learning environments where interaction, collaboration, knowledge building, and critical thinking are core features (Harasim, Hilt, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Riel & Harasim, 1994). Also, dialogue and interactions, both student to student and student to instructor purport to be the benchmark of a good education (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Henri & Kaye, 1993). CAAP encourages these through group assignments and presentations, group skills practice at SI, group reflecting teams at weekend seminars, and peer counseling during practica.

Methods

One of the key functions of a counselor is to help clients reflect on and critically think about their actions, ways of thinking, personal responses, and decisions (Cormier & Nurius, 2003). Because the participants in this study were all counseling graduate students, the design of the study provided opportunities for self-reflection and critical thinking. To ensure

that participants did not just quickly circle a number on the Likert scale and move on, the survey was designed to generate both qualitative and quantitative data. Participants were asked to think carefully about their ratings and support them with reasons and comments in the corresponding qualitative space. This enabled participants to express insights and provide reasons for their ratings.

Also, the potential exists for various people to attach different meanings to the same words or phrases. The explanations for ratings helped in gauging the meaning and interpretation that participants attached to each rated factor. If comments had indicated inappropriate meaning, such responses would have been excluded from the results. This scrutiny was important for the internal validity of the study. It also ensured that everyone was rating the same item. The study included both a self-study and a survey.

Development of the Survey

I kept a reflective journal in which I documented my own student experiences of the CAAP online program and used this data in the development of the survey. Analysis of my journal entries was guided by two questions:

1. What factors, issues, and experiences (personal, situational, and environmental) did I find facilitative during this online counselor training course?
2. Why were those factors facilitative?

The themes that emerged were categorized, coded, and analyzed as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). I sought their validation by using them as the basis for designing a semistructured questionnaire with a Likert scale to survey CAAP students.

Reflective Journal Results

The first set of factors that emerged from the analysis of my reflective self-study were motivation, time management skills and discipline. These were classified as *personal* factors. I worked part time during the course. Sometimes I was tired after work and had no desire to study. However, my reasons for taking the course often motivated me to get the papers out and start working on assignments. Developing good time management skills and discipline enabled me to combine school, work, and family responsibilities successfully. These at times seemed overwhelming.

Computer and technological skills and health and stress management strategies engaged in during the course were the next set of factors that emerged. They were classified as *situational* factors. Technological skills were important to me at the beginning because I did not type. This often made completing assignments and discussion forums seem like Herculean tasks. However, persistence and a supportive family helped as I quickly

learned to use the keyboard. The ensuing stress demanded stress management strategies; these included exercise and off-study days when I relaxed, spent time with my family, and did nothing academic.

Program factors emerged next. These included the style of course delivery where role-plays were used to demonstrate counseling skills, working alliance skills, and how to handle counseling ethical dilemmas at SI. Reflecting teams were used to appraise and provide feedback to students' counseling at weekend seminars during practica; and videotapes modeling working alliance skills were provided for students to use as reference throughout the course. Clarity of expectations involved giving clear instructions about what was expected from students in each assignment. I found that the clearer the instructions, the easier it was to tackle the assignments, so clarity expedited assignments. I enjoyed collaborative learning because it gave me the opportunity to know my peers better as we worked in small groups of two to four to write papers or make presentations. Established relationships were strengthened in subsequent group work and a sense of community engendered. I also learned from the experiences of my peers as these were shared in postings, requests for help with client problems, and responses to those requests. Such sharing of experiences, problems, and solutions to those problems made learning at CAAP not only an instructor-to-students process, but also a student-to-student practical learning experience.

Instructor characteristics embodied how instructors interacted and related to students. I learned more from instructors who logged on regularly, challenged me to think critically and divergently, sometimes played "the devil's advocate" to cause me to consider all angles of the situation, and punctuated comments with humor.

The Survey

The survey was a 10-item qualitative and quantitative Web-based semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix). Questions were grouped into four basic domains: personal factors, situational factors, program delivery factors, and instructor characteristics. Each factor, except instructor characteristics, had an *A* part with a Likert Scale (1-5) and a *B* part with an open space to answer questions and write comments. Students were asked to rate the relative importance of each factor on this scale where 1 indicated that the factor was not at all important, and 5 indicated that it was extremely important to their success at CAAP. An open 11th box was also available for participants to write in, then rate any other factors they had found facilitative that had not been included in the survey. The ratings for each question were tabulated and comments and explanations recorded.

Participants

Participation in the survey was limited to students who had completed at least one year in CAAP. This was to ensure that they had experienced all course formats including online, summer institute, weekend seminars, peer supervision, and practicum. This ensured that ratings were from first-hand knowledge of the program.

Demographic Snapshot of Participants

Twenty-eight students participated in the survey, a response rate of 24.4% of the target population. Of those 28, 21 were from the pilot group of students (60% of the pilot student population). These students had completed more than two years in CAAP, accumulated much experience, and were therefore qualified to comment on the program with accuracy. The remaining seven participants were from the second cohort (9% of the 2nd Cohort population). Of the 28 participants, four (14%) were male and 24 (86%) female. Eight (29%) of the participants were under 30, eight (29%) between 31 and 40, nine (32%) between 41 and 50, and two (7%) over 50. Fourteen participants (50%) were employed full time, nine (32%) part time, four (14%) were full-time students, and one (4%) was self-employed.

In planning the survey, I had intended to assess the effects of intervening factors such as hours spent in child care, hours of employment, marriage, years elapsed since last in school, and age. However, the relatively small response rate did not allow for meaningful comparisons, so this aspect was abandoned.

Results and Discussion

Survey Results

The survey results deepened and added to the understanding developed through my self-reflective study. The four groups of factors (personal, situational, program factors, and instructor characteristics) that I found facilitative were endorsed by the participants. The only addition in the open 11th textbox was a supportive work environment mentioned by one participant.

Personal factors. The three students' personal factors—motivation, discipline, and time management skills—were all deemed important by respondents. Motivation had the highest rating in this group where 72% of respondents rated it extremely important (Table 1). This finding is similar to other findings that suggest that to be successful, students, whether traditional or distance, must be highly motivated (Sankaran & Bui, 2001; Schuemer, 1993). Lufi, Parish-Plass, and Cohen (2003) believe that the ability to persist is probably the most predictive of success in any field of endeavor because motive drives persistence.

Table 1
Student Response to Learning Factors Survey

Factors	Not Important		Slightly Important		Somewhat Important		Important		Extremely Important	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Motivation							8	28.6	20	71.4
Time Management Skills					5	17.9	4	14.2	19	67.9
Discipline					3	10.7	10	35.7	15	53.6
Computer and Technological Skills	1	3.6	2	7.1	13	46.5	9	32.1	3	10.7
Health and Stress Management	1	3.6			7	2.5.0	11	39.3	9	32.1
Course Delivery Style					5	17.9	12	42.9	11	39.2
Clarity of Expectations					6	21.4	12	42.9	10	35.7
CAAP Formats*			1	3.6	1	3.6	14	50.0	11	39.2
Collaborative Learning			2	7.1	10	35.8	9	32.1	7	25.0
Instructor Characteristic Feedback Quality and Clarity									28	100.0
Forum Participation							3	10.7	25	89.3
Regularity of Feedback							2	7.1	26	92.9

N=28; *Nonresponse f=1, %=3.6.

Some of the answers and comments in the *B* section of motivation were: "Desire to succeed in life"; "Better employment opportunities"; "Competitive spirit and passion for excellence"; and "Desire and pride in a graduate degree." Some students indicated that they had extra motivation to succeed because they had shared with their clients the challenges of combining, work, school, and family and some of the ways they managed this challenge. Some of the clients took a personal interest and kept asking about how they were doing. If they were then to quit CAAP or do poorly, it would destroy their credibility with the clients to whom they had become models of how to persist in the face of challenges.

Overwhelmingly, the reasons for the importance of time management skills were "It engenders balance between work, family and studies," and "It enables more to be accomplished." That 54% of participants viewed discipline as extremely important speaks for this factor. The most frequent comment for discipline was that without it, motivation and time management skills are ineffective. Even the best plans are of no consequence without the discipline to implement them. Some other comments were: "It

goes hand in hand with time management skills," "It is needed for the time management skills to succeed," and "Without discipline, motivation does not go very far." For these respondents their motives for taking the course, their time management skills, and discipline were important for success in online learning at CAAP.

Situational factors. The rating for computer and technological skills showed it not to be that important. The comments indicated that this factor could have been important at the beginning of the course for some people, but its importance diminished quickly as people became familiar with the course and the site. Readily available peer help was also cited as diminishing the impact need for technological expertise. These findings and explanations were similar to those obtained by Lynch (2001) for online undergraduate students enrolled in business administration and computer science. Neither was technological savvyness important for success in online learning for these students.

Health and stress management strategies ratings were somewhat surprising. One would have expected counseling students to deploy for themselves known stress reduction strategies that they recommend to their clients. Comments showed that this factor was rated low because even though students knew health and stress management was important, many did not have the time or energy to incorporate appropriate stress reduction strategies into their extremely busy schedules. Studies (Klein & Boals, 2001; Sheechy & Horan, 2004) show that health and stress management facilitates academic success. However, for participants in this study, not actively managing stress in conventional ways seemed to have had no adverse effects. It could be that the changes in activities such as going from work to family activities and studying provided enough variations and acted as de-stressors.

Program factors. These factors included style and format of course delivery and collaborative learning. Collaborative learning involved students working together in small groups on papers, projects, or presentations. Such activities helped engender a sense of community among students.

Course delivery style (online, SI, weekend seminars) were rated as extremely important by only 11% of participants. The comments were that variations in course delivery style offered a change in pace and form; chat room conferences and videotape demonstrations all broke online monotony and reduced boredom. Face-to-face formats at SI and weekend seminars offered opportunities to hear a human voice and strengthen friendships with peers, but these changes did not really facilitate learning to any large extent. Other studies (Akridge et al., 2002) found delivery style variation in an online MBA program also helped maintain students' interest, facilitated learning, and reduced boredom and attrition rates.

Clarity of expectations was rated extremely important by only 36% of participants. This was surprising in the light of the comments, most of which indicated that assignments and forum postings were expedited when expectations were clear. One possible explanation for the low rating could be that after two years of forum participation and assignments, most students knew what the expectations were as these had remained mostly unchanged from forum to forum and with assignments. Lynch (2001) found that undergraduate online students performed better when instructors' expectations were clear.

CAAP formats (online, bio pages, triad exercise, and role-plays at SI, face-to-face) were rated extremely important by 39%. Some reasons given for the rating were that bio pages and the style of online postings aided in creating mental personas of other students even before the first meeting: "The online prepared you for the face-to-face meeting"; "The first face-to-face meeting was filled with anticipation of attaching a voice and face to a name." Such feelings helped create collaborative relationships and a sense of community and facilitated learning. Consistent with this view are the findings of Akridge et al. (2002) that having one week face to face, bio pages, and assigning students to study groups for an MBA online program promoted a sense of community, greatly enhanced motivation, reduced attrition rates, and facilitated success.

Collaborative learning (group projects, peer supervision, reflective teams) received mixed ratings. Other studies on social and peer interactions, especially for adult students, have also been inconclusive. O'Toole, Spinelli, and Wetzel (2000) found that students rated collaborative learning as important, whereas Chartrand (1990), and Kasworm and Pike (1994) found it not facilitative. Other studies have shown collaborative learning and peer interaction to be facilitative, but only to young students (Astin, 1993; Cleveland-Innes, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Lundberg (2003) explained these contradictions by suggesting that peer interactions have both academic and nonacademic components. Adult learners may not participate in nonacademic peer interactions as they may already have other social support. However, when academically linked peer support was evaluated, learning was enhanced in all cases (Tinto, 1998).

Many students indicated that their reason for the low rating stemmed from some negative experiences with group projects where some group members did not participate fully. It was suggested that a mechanism be established to allow marks to be awarded to participants in group projects according to the extent of their participation and contribution to the project. However, with peer supervision, students almost unanimously suggested that it be made available throughout the entire CAAP course. So despite the low ratings, students felt that their learning was enhanced by program factors, and where problems existed, remedies were suggested.

Instructor characteristics. All participants wrote in and rated "Feedback quality" and "Clarity of feedback" on assignments and forum postings as extremely important. The "Frequency of forum participation" was rated by 89% as extremely important. "Regularity of feedback" on performances and constructive criticisms on assignments and discussion forums were rated as extremely important by 93%.

Another instructor characteristic believed to be helpful was returning an assignment before the next was due. Some comments that followed these characteristics were: "It shows respect and caring for students," "It allows students to familiarize themselves with the instructor's style," and "Good feedback enables students to learn from their mistakes."

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that the most important factors that facilitated online learning for CAAP students resided with instructors. The rating of these factors at 100%, 93%, and 89% for feedback quality and clarity, feedback regularity, and frequency of forum participation respectively highlight the importance and high value that students attached to the perception of availability, caring, and enthusiasm of their instructors.

The rating of program factors as second last was interesting. One would have expected program factors and technological skills to receive higher ratings in an online course. However, the explanation that even the technological unsavvy quickly learned how to navigate the site shows how quickly technological challenges can be overcome with perseverance. When there is a strong motivation to succeed, people will find a way to overcome any impediments that try to block their way.

Finally, the results of this study also seem to indicate that CAAP students successfully learned the appropriate behavioral skills that engender therapeutic success even with relatively short exposures to instructors' modeling. So online learning with short face-to-face exposure would seem to be effective in training counseling students.

A further study to examine instructors' perceptions would help confirm these findings.

Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Knowing that instructors' interaction style with online students is the most important factor in fostering success for online counseling students should result in better training for online instructors. Also, the finding that students' motivation, discipline, and time management skills do affect their online learning success could result in admission criteria that target these qualities in prospective students. There may also be a myth that technological savvyness is needed for success in online learning. This study has shown this not to be true. So people who have been hesitant in

pursuing their dreams of further studies through online learning because they think they are not technologically savvy should reconsider their position in the light of the findings of this study.

The number of participants in this study was small. So to generalize the findings with greater confidence, a larger-scale study needs to be undertaken to see if these results hold. The size of this study did not allow the investigation of possible intervening variables such as the hours of employment, hours spent on family responsibilities, sex, age, and years away from school before starting the course, which might have been revealing. This could be a target for future research.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix
Research Instrument 2: Learning Factors Questionnaire

This is an anonymous questionnaire. Please do not write your name on it. Also your student tracking identification and any other electronic identifying information will be stripped from it before being forwarded to me.

Please rate the factors listed below on a scale of 1 to 5 by clicking on the appropriate number. Then answer the questions that follow each factor as fully, yet as succinctly as possible. The space will expand as needed to accommodate all the writing.

With instructor characteristics, you are not provided with factors. Please write in the instructor characteristics that impacted your learning and then rate them. "Other factors" gives you the opportunity to write in and rate other factors that impacted your learning but which were not included in the 10 listed in the survey. Please write in and rate as many as possible. Thank you.

The meaning of the rating scale is as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
not at all important		somewhat important		extremely important

MOTIVATION

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. Why did you give motivation this rating? What motivated you to enroll in CAAP? Do you think that motive played a role in your success? How?

_____
_____
_____
_____

TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. Why did you give time management skills this rating? Do you think your time management skills have been crucial to your success at CAAP? How?

_____
_____
_____
_____

DISCIPLINE

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. Why did you give discipline this rating? What role did it play in facilitating your success in CAAP?

_____
_____
_____
_____

COMPUTER AND TECHNOLOGICAL SKILLS

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. Do you think your technological knowledge or lack of it had an impact on your success? Please explain as fully as possible.

_____
_____
_____
_____

STRESS AND HEALTH MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. What health and stress management techniques did you engage in during the course? How do you think they contributed to your success?

_____
_____
_____
_____

STYLE OF COURSE DELIVERY

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. How did the style of course delivery in CAAP facilitate learning? What aspects? Please explain as fully as possible.

_____
_____
_____
_____

CLARITY OF EXPECTATIONS

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. To what extent did you find the clarity of expectations for assignments and forum facilitative to your learning? What aspects were most important? Please explain

_____
_____
_____
_____

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING (peer supervision, small groups, group projects, etc.)

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. How would you rate the impact of peer collaborative engagements on your learning? What aspects stand out particularly for you?

_____
_____
_____
_____

CAAP FORMATS

A.   1   2   3   4   5

B. CAAP operates in many formats; the on-line, video and face-to-face (summer
    institute, & weekend seminars). How did the combination of the formats
    facilitate your learning? Please explain.

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

INSTRUCTOR CHARACTERISTICS

What instructor characteristics did you find facilitative to your learning?
Please list the characteristics, rate them and explain why you gave each that
rating. Please name and rate as many as possible.

    Characteristic   Rating

    _____   _____
    _____   _____
    _____   _____
    _____   _____
    _____   _____

OTHER FACTORS

What other factors not listed did you find facilitating to your learning?
Please list, rate, and explain as many as you can think of. Thank you.

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

Please click on SUBMIT upon completion of the questionnaire.
Thank You.
Janey Ekong   Dr. Paul Jerry
Principal Investigator   Supervisor