

## ***Gray Matter***

***(not even the page is black and white!)***

A section of short Special Features and Commentary

### **Meet Our Students Face-to-Face?**

***Abstract:*** *Many rehabilitation educators are just beginning to consider the opportunities and challenges that a distance education curriculum presents. The authors share some of their observations and concerns about the potential changes, especially in the interactive relationship between teachers and their students, that distance education introduces.*

In November of 1998, the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) sponsored a conference on distance learning, which we were privileged to attend. As with most effective learning experiences, we left with many questions answered and many new questions posed. The most intriguing question raised at the conference contributes the title to this piece: Do we need to meet our students face-to-face and, if so, why? Conference participants generally agreed that knowledge development can occur effectively without face-to-face contact. The development of rehabilitation counseling clinical skills through distance education seemed a less likely prospect.

#### ***Distance Learning***

Distance learning is an increasingly more-utilized approach in higher education and should become more common in light of advances in communication technology (McNamara, Nemeck, & Farkas, 1995). The basic definition of distance learning is "a process that occurs when learners are located in one place (or places), their peers or other instructional resources are located in another, and their instructor(s) yet in another location" (McLaren, 1995, p. 262). Rehabilitation counselor educators are delivering instruction via distance education for the same reasons as other educators: it allows us to cover large geographic distances, reach isolated students, resolve scheduling

conflicts, distribute scarce and unique instructional resources, and teach students with disabilities who may find it difficult to attend traditional classes (McLaren, 1995). Distance education can be delivered using a variety of technologies for instruction in a range of content areas (McLaren, 1995; Noon, 1992). Technologies and instructional activities in distance education include those we use in traditional education within the classroom, such as printed materials and lecture. Distance education also adds specific media for transmitting information, including Internet postings, listservs, and video or telephone conferencing. The decision to select any given technology for distance education depends on such factors as economic and technological resources as well as educational philosophy, student characteristics, instructor preference and ability, and course content (Gibson, 1998; O'Brien & Schiro-Geist, 1995).

Some models of distance education provide face-to-face interaction between students and teacher as a supplement to instruction that occurs at a distance. Our program at Boston University, for example, requires our distance education students to spend a pre-specified amount of time at the BU campus. Other programs send the instructor to the student(s), which is a model we use for agency trainings.

### ***The Challenges of Distance Education***

Initially, students see the freedom of the distance learning program as an advantage. Once enrolled, however, they may feel alone and overwhelmed by balancing work, school, and home life (McNamara et al., 1995). As a result, we worry sometimes about being “out of sight, out of mind.” We know that developing a “community of learners” (Gibson, 1998) provides support that can turn these stressors into learning opportunities. Distance educators emphasize the importance of establishing peer support networks and a mentoring process to promote student success (Granger & Benke, 1998), although the methods used may differ from those we use in the classroom.

Accommodations for some students with disabilities may be provided best by distance education methods. On the other hand, distance education technologies may create new barriers for some students. These include technology problems, such as adapting graphical interfaces to text only formats, which can be a problem for some people with visual impairments. We also must consider resource barriers, such as a student’s ability to access the equipment needed for a course, whether that is computer equipment or a site that can receive a video transmission.

Adopting a distance learning model changes the role and activities of the instructor, which can be stressful. It may take some creativity, for example, to translate such familiar activities as the in-class triad role-play (counselor-client-observer) into an interactive distance learning exercise. We might be capable of making such modifications, but designing and implementing significant changes in a curriculum can be time-consuming.

***Face-to-Face Instructor-Student Interactions: Are They Helpful or Essential?***

Direct face-to-face contact in the classroom allows students and instructors to get acquainted informally during the “milling about” periods before and after class and during breaks. We need to examine our use of these informal interactions to determine their value. There may be other avenues for facilitating informal interaction over long distances, and we will need to experiment with different methods to determine relative effectiveness.

We often observe how students spend their time during breaks: whether they run to the phone, go outside to smoke, chat with others, go off by themselves, and return from breaks on time. We find ourselves generating hypotheses from these observations in an effort to predict how our students will spend their time while studying at home or while at the internship site. In some instances, we have provided students with additional feedback and support based on our hypotheses, and it seems as if this approach may have prevented difficulties from developing or opportunities from being lost. For example, a student who spends all breaks alone might be encouraged to network more, might prompt the instructor to spend a little extra time connecting with that person, or might raise concerns for the faculty advisor to ask about when meeting with the internship supervisor.

Observation of in-class behaviors tells us how students engage in learning. For example, we might wander around the room as we lecture, observing if and how they take notes. We certainly watch for the natural occurrence of behaviors relevant to our profession, such as the basic counseling skills of attending, observing, and listening to others in class. Other observations are facilitated by face-to-face contact. For example, physical cues such as dress, posture, and body language may be observed easily over two-way video. Many cues, however, are observed more easily in face-to-face interaction: grooming (one conference participant mentioned our sense of smell as important!), eye contact, and a handshake. We suspect that all counselor educators use these types of observations to form hypotheses about students’ interpersonal skills and learning styles. It would be interesting to sort out how much we rely on these observations, and how we might obtain this information through other avenues.

The possibility of physical contact, such as a handshake, is another obvious difference between face-to-face interaction and distance education. It is not clear whether we can substitute “reach out and touch someone” over the phone or computer for the opportunity to hold a hand or put an arm over someone’s shoulder. We need to debate the value of such contact. Perhaps, as some colleagues might suggest, we should be avoiding any or all physical contact with our students altogether, in which case the distance might be an advantage.

Our experience with distance education (and with our physically distant friends and family) tells us that close and enduring connections can be made over large distances. However, we also know that these relationships are enhanced when we reunite. Some people insist that face-to-face contact helps build a foundation for a

intense attachment to e-mail pals. We wonder if an in-person experience develops more of a connection to “real” people. We should carefully study the extent to which the various communication technologies promote connection or produce isolation.

We sometimes doubt the effectiveness of prepackaged instruction required for distance education, in contrast to our usual methods of face-to-face lecture, impromptu discussion, spontaneous explanation, and the ease of demonstrating counseling techniques. We like the notion of sitting side-by-side with students to figure out problems—after all, we started out as counselors ourselves. We like to think that the personal contact with us helps our students. This does not mean we cannot do counselor education at a distance, but it raises questions about what we prefer and about how hard such distance education might be to deliver effectively.

### **Conclusion**

The benefits of distance education from the student perspective are obvious: reduced costs of travel, lodging, and food; less time away from work and home/family/friends (time that we, too, find increasingly precious); reduced scheduling conflicts around childcare and pet care, and around work. We need to look at the extent to which we add to the student’s burden by requiring him or her to come to class. We should discuss how to conclude whether the burdens will be outweighed by the advantages.

After all this thought, we have come to a simple conclusion—we need to think more and talk more about this issue! We know that we prefer to meet our students face-to-face. We know that we can be effective in teaching counseling skills face-to-face. We also are mostly satisfied with our ability to evaluate students’ counseling skills when we see them face-to-face. We can readily identify the value of even brief and/or sporadic face-to-face contact, but do we need to see our students face-to-face? Maybe, maybe not! We don’t know. We do know that we are interested in continuing the dialogue on this question.

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