THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN COUNSELLING

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The world has now become a global village with the aid of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Olusakin, 2003; Olusakin and Adeoye, 2007; Sussman, 2000).

Technology continues to evolve and has had a seemingly unabated influence on how we learn, communicate, and interact with others both professionally and personally. Today's high technology tools, high speed networks, and fast-paced digital exchanges are more an intricate part of our global society than ever before (Friedman, 2005).

The counselling profession is also trying to keep pace with the dynamic and rapidly changing world. Yet, even though the profession has developed exponentially in recent years, counselors have perhaps underutilized technology as a tool to improve the counselling programs (Baker, 2001). Since Counsellors play an important role in shaping students' ability to learn, communicate, and share information with others, they would be well served to understand how technology can enhance their work.

ICT can significantly affect the work of Counsellors in the areas of information retrieval and dissemination, distance learning, college and career exploration, counselling interventions, networking and support systems, and training and supervision.

There are several aspects of (ICT) available for the Counsellors' use. Some of these include:

1) Telephone counseling which refers to any type of counseliing service performed over the telephone. Dial-up telephone can also be conducted through the computer networks. It ranges from individual to couple or group counseling with a professional therapist. In-person therapists often advise clients to make use of telephone crisis counseling to provide the client with an avenue to obtain support outside of therapy if they cannot be reached in an emergency or at the conclusion of a therapeutic relationship.

2) Internet Counselling/ Cybercounselling/ On-line counseling:

The use of internet for counselling demands access to computers and telecommunication demands access to computers and telecommunication. It could take the form of:

 a) Video counseling/video conferencing;

 b) Electronic Mail (E-mail);

 c) Web pages;

 d) Electronic Newsletters;

 e) Online counselling journals

 a) **Video counselling** is online counselling where the Client and Counsellor use a webcam to communicate. This counselling type comes closest to a face to face counselling experience. Video counselling is the most state of the art online counselling medium available and means you can see and hear your counsellor from the privacy and convenience of your own home or office.

Since it is over the internet, Counsellor and client do not need to be in the same town or even country. This means increased access to a Counsellor. Counsellor and client work together to help the client resolve problems, as they would do with face to face counselling.

Video-conferencing: This is an on-line discussion whereby the counsellor interacts with two or more clients simultaneously at different terminals. The Counsellor announces the contact time in cyberspace to discuss issues. Video conferencing Interactive conferences enable counsellors to meet with parents as well as colleagues without leaving their homes and offices. It is also possible for a counsellor in one location to lead a group of students,

parents, or other professionals in another place as the internet helps them experience a personal connection (McLellan, 1999)

b) Electronic Mail (E-mail) is another internet facility commonly used for counselling by internet. E-mail is becoming a universal means of communication. It is opening communication and providing an expedient and efficient means of posing questions, requesting information, and responding.

Instead of writing letters and waiting for several days to get the reply by post, counsellors can post assignments, announcements, supplemental materials, as well as give feedback to individual's or group. Since it is over the internet, counsellor and client do not need to be in the same town or even country/countinent. This means increased access to a counsellor. Counsellor and client work together to help the client resolve problems, as they would do with face to face counselling.

McLellan (1999) recognized that email could be used to assist students and parents by providing direct channels of communication. For example, a parent might e-mail the counsellor to express concern about his or her son's adjustment and to ask if his behavior is typical of teenagers. The counsellor could respond with a few general comments and describe a parent group where mutual concerns and interests are shared. The exchange of information is typically brief, can save counsellor time, and provide parents with a timely response (Jongekrijg & Russell, 1999; Myrick & Sabella, 1995). In another example, students from one school can exchange notes and messages with students from another school regarding common interests.

C) Web site/pages: Counsellors can also disseminate information to others through Web pages linked to their school's Web site. For instance, a guidance homepage can include links to a school 's mission statement, goals for the year and faculty profiles. A guidance Web site can also include descriptions of special opportunities and activities for students and parents offered through the guidance department such as small group counselling sessions and peer facilitator programs. In addition, a guidance department can create and post a calendar that lists important events and dates such as days for standardized tests and college admission deadlines. An online guidance calendar, with supportive links and

Web pages, also promotes public awareness about the role and functions of a school counsellor. It may contain educational frameworks, one of which could focus on guidance and student development. This particular framework could touch on three strands of development, including career, academic and social/emotional. The curriculum expectations can also be accessed through the Web site. The information on this Web site can assist parents in understanding how student development goals are related to the educational development and academic success of their children.

d) Electronic Newsletters provide tremendous amounts of information to large audiences in a relatively short amount of time with little cost. Electronic newsletters can be viewed through a set of Web pages and/or distributed through list serves that contain a listing of subscriber names and e-mail addresses which feature various topics of interest to students and parents accessed through the 's Web page. Each issue contains sections or linked Web pages that focus on career development, current events, and "hot" sites on the Internet, while also providing an arena for students to share their thoughts and opinions on a particular issue.

It describes educational initiatives, including grant invitations, learning activities, special programs, and ideas for parents, and news about recent events in education. It provides current information relevant to counselling including grant opportunities, professional resources, conferences, and news regarding state and national counselling-related events.

e) Online Counselling Journals:

Online counselling journals are another example of how new technology is affecting the dissemination of information. Counsellors from all over the world can tap into current research and new techniques that are presented in journals on the Internet. This contains articles on aspects of practice, theory, research, and professionalism related to the use of technology in Counsellor training and counselling interventions.

A major advantage of an electronic journal or newsletter over other types is that the full range of available Web resources can be linked to other resources. In addition, animated graphics, audio, and video can be incorporated. The information can be downloaded, saved to a disk, e-mailed to colleagues, or printed for use.

The Potential of Counselling Technology

Van Horn & Myrick (2001) suggested that the work of Counsellors' in the areas of distance learning, college and career searching, counselling interventions, training and supervision, networking and support systems, and information retrieval and dissemination is affected by technology. For example, by creating multimedia presentations that can be distributed over the Internet, counsellors can increase the speed by which information is communicated to large quantities of people. Sabella and Booker (2003) wrote about how to use technology to promote a guidance and counselling program among stakeholders. The authors suggested that using technology may have many potential advantages, such as the ability for information to be instantaneously updated and received by all stakeholders in a cost effective manner, enhanced collaboration capabilities, and the ability to present visually appealing, informative, and creative presentations.

Sabella (2003) provided a useful categorization scheme which can help to conceptualize the wide ranging potentials of technology in helping Counsellors in particular. Technology can help Counsellors in one or more of four areas:

1. *Information/Resource*: In the form of words, graphics, video, and even three-dimension virtual environments, the Web remains a dynamic and rapidly growing library of information and knowledge.

2. *Communication/Collaboration*: Chat rooms, bulletin boards, virtual classroom environments, video conferencing, online conferences, electronic meeting services, e-mail – the web is now a place where people connect, exchange information, and make shared decisions.

3. *Interactive/Productivity tools*: The maturing of software and web-based programming has launched a new level of available tools off the shelves and on the Net. These technology tools can help counsellors build and create many things ranging from a personalized business card to a set of personalized website links. Interactive tools help counsellors to process data and transform information.

4. *Delivery of services*: Controversial, yet growing in popularity is how counsellors use the web to meet with clients and deliver counselling services in an online or "virtual" environment.

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How Are Counsellors Actually Using Technology?

A review of the relevant literature does include some examples of how Counsellors are using technology. For example, counsellors who have used computers to assist them in their work have done so in areas such as computer-assisted live supervision (Froehle, 1984; Neukrug, 1991); discussions of counselling issues with other counsellors (Rust, 1995); supervision (Myrick & Sabella, 1995); advocacy (Stone & Turba, 1999); counsellor training (Cairo & Kanner, 1984); counselling program promotion (Sabella & Booker, 2003); as part of counsellor interventions with children (D'Andrea, 1995; Glover, 1995; Shulman, Sweeney, & Gerler, 1995) and counselling simulations (Sharf & Lucas, 1993). Probably the most extensive use of computers in counselling so far has been in the area of career development and guidance (e.g., Bobek, Robbins, Gore, Harris-Bowlsbey, Lapan, Dahir, & Jensen, 2005; Chapman & Katz, 1983; Friery & Nelson, 2004; Haring-Hidore, 1984; Harris, 1972; Katz & Shatkin, 1983; Kivlighan, Johnston, Hogan, & Mauer, 1994; Pyle, 1984).

Why is Technology Important for Counsellors?

Counsellors have to meet increasing workloads with either the same or reduced resources - that is, having to "do more with less." Thus, the common cry among counsellors is "How can I provide quality services and programs (i.e., continue to be effective) for my clients in a more efficient manner?" The appropriate use of technology is one viable solution for dealing with this problem. The necessity for a comprehensive and integrated approach to counselling, including accountability, has become increasingly important, especially as fewer counsellors are working with increasing numbers of clients in all sectors. Without help, counsellors may feel overwhelmed as a result of the sheer quantity of information they need to manage. Consequently, effectiveness and motivation may decline. Technology tools have the potential to make some aspects of the counsellor's role more efficient, accurate, and automated (Tyler & Sabella, 2004). This is especially true in dealing with very high numbers of clients per counsellor.

To implement effective counselling programs, the recommended minimum student-to-counsellor ratio is 250:1. Technology has the potential to help counsellors manage large

caseloads more efficiently while working on reducing the student-to-counsellor ratios to more reasonable levels.

Technological competency has also become an ethical issue, one that strikes at the core of competency and student safety. Professional counsellors are trying through personal initiative to maintain professional competence including technological literacy and to keep abreast of professional information. Professional and personal growth are ongoing throughout the counsellor's career. It is also important that Professional counsellors collaborate with parents and educators to promote awareness of high-technology dangers among students and cultivate personal safety and security skills related to technology usage. In the US for example, Professional counsellors maintain a basic level of technological literacy which, coupled with expertise in human development, allows them to provide educators and parents with guidelines for the appropriate use of technology by students. (ASCA, 2006)

Counsellors should be familiar with the same technological resources to which their students often have access. This enables counsellors to communicate with students and parents on such issues as college and career exploration. Over the past decade, many computer-assisted career guidance systems have been developed and shown to be effective in promoting career development and exploration. Children are surrounded by technology today, and technology is a more integral part of their daily lives than it is for most adults. Avoiding or ignoring technology in counselling profession will continually diminish the counsellors' abilities to work in a timely and effective manner. Eventually, the "low-technology" counsellor will face ethical issues, such as functioning within the boundaries of individual professional competence. Counsellors who decide to ignore information technology such as the Internet will essentially be working with students and parents who will perceive them to live in a world that no longer exists.

Overall, one would be hard-pressed to find any aspect of our modern lives that is not being affected by the rapidly expanding enterprise of computer-related technology (CRT). Lindsay (1988) wrote, "Computer technology has revolutionized many aspects of our society and is without a doubt the most significant innovation of the century." It is, therefore, inevitable that computer technology is changing the counselling profession as

well. As Sampson, Kolodinsky, and Greeno (1997) point out, "During the past 30(now 45) years, computer applications have become an increasingly common resource used in the delivery of counselling services". The future holds only more changes and developments that promise to create new opportunities (and challenges) for how we work, live, and play. Whether we like it or not, information technologies are now essential tools for manipulating ideas and images and for communicating effectively with others - all central components of a counsellor's job (Sabella, 1998).

How counsellors use technology across the school levels.

Owen and Weikel (1999) found that counsellors working in secondary schools used computers more frequently than counsellors working in elementary schools. The limited research on this subject does not provide enough knowledge to understand why and how the differences exist among the different levels of counselling practice. There is need for assessment of what factors influence high school counsellors to use technology more than elementary school counsellors. It would also be interesting to determine if differences in technology use among younger and older counsellors actually exist, or if this common belief is a myth. Since technology use has boomed over the past couple of decades, it is possible that younger counsellors feel more comfortable navigating the Internet or using the computer than do older counsellors. It would also be interesting to examine if the availability and/or use of technology increases the effectiveness of counsellors.

Counsellors working in private schools that have high socioeconomic status may benefit from using technology because many students and parents have access to technology in their homes. In this situation, counsellors, students, and parents have similar levels of access to technology. On the other hand, counsellors, students, and parents in schools that have lower socioeconomic levels might not have the same level of access to technology. In this case, students and parents might benefit from their counsellors' understanding and use of technology because they do not have access to technology themselves. Their counsellor could locate documents and important forms, career options, and serve as a liaison between students and the Internet.

Conclusion: Acquiring and becoming proficient in using technology tools comes at a price in the form of both financial and human resources. As Sabella (2003) points out, "for better or worse, computers are changing the ways in which we conduct our work, interact, and especially make decisions". Yet, the significant demands of the counsellor's job and the fact that we now live in a high-technology world makes using technology imperative. The counselling professionals must continue to understand how particular technology may be best suited for effectively fulfilling their unique duties within the high-pressured and high-stakes world of education.

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