



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Building a Working Alliance Online

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Career development practitioners, counsellors, and counsellor educators know that establishing rapport is essential to working effectively with others. The counselling literature acknowledges the importance of building a solid “working alliance” (e.g., Arthur & Collins, 2005; Flores & Heppner, 2002; McMahon & Patton, 2000). Typically, working alliances are constructed through face-to-face interaction – in counselling sessions, groups, and collegial meetings or conferences. However, technology is impacting the way that we work with each other. It has become increasingly common to connect with colleagues, students, and, in some cases, clients by e-mail and instant messaging chats – perhaps without ever meeting each other face-to-face. As a result, it seems important to explore strategies and techniques for building effective working alliances online.

Learning and Working Online

Many counsellor training programs have online components – some, like the Campus Alberta Master of Counselling program, offer most courses online but include face-to-face practicum supervision and Summer Institutes. In other programs (e.g., Yorkville University’s Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology), students receive local supervision for their practicum placements but complete all of their courses online. The Career Management Professional Program (CMPP) is a professional development program that is offered fully online; it has recently been designated as the first Canadian approved curriculum for the Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF) credential.

Some counsellors work with clients online, without ever meeting them face-to-face (and, often, without even hearing their voices). TherapyOnline, an organization that has been a leader in e-counselling in Canada, is now offering certificate courses in cyber-counselling through the school of Social Work at the University of Toronto. Knowplace, another leading-edge Canadian organization, has partnered with Capilano College to offer a certificate in e-Career Coaching.

Technology has also facilitated project collaboration by “virtual teams” (i.e., individuals connecting via computer or telephone from diverse, often remote, locations). When working from remote locations, however (whether with students, clients, or colleagues), the importance of building a healthy working alliance must not be overlooked. This paper presents some of the challenges of working with others online, and provides success stories, tips, and strategies as “Food for Thought” for you to consider as you reflect on your own online experiences.



Building a Working Alliance Online

Challenges

Counsellors, career practitioners, and educators rely on a variety of verbal and non-verbal messages to help them communicate fully and effectively. While percentages vary according to the research reported, it is generally accepted that verbal communication accounts for as little as seven to ten percent of a message with the remainder coming from such non-verbal cues as tone of voice, facial expressions, posture, physical appearance, and context. The clues typically used to enhance interpersonal communication and establish rapport, however, are largely missing in an online environment, particularly in settings that rely solely on text-based communication (e.g., e-mail, IM chats and discussion forums). Of course, working online does offer the advantages of written communication, in that thoughts can be edited, recorded, and reread in the future. Also, some emerging online technology operates quite similarly to the telephone, allowing individuals to talk to each other with “real” voices in “real” time.

However, individuals communicating in typical online environments do lose access to the rich clues provided by body language, vocal intonations, eye contact and gestures. Contextual clues such as regional accents, geographic location (e.g., recognizing the name of a street or community), ethnicity, and even age are less obvious online. Not surprisingly, many helping professionals and educators are sceptical that an effective working alliance can be achieved in an online environment; others question that counselling or helping skills can be taught without the addition of face-to-face instruction.

Success Stories

Cook and Doyle (2002) compared online counselling to traditional face-to-face therapy. Their results confirmed that it is possible to build an effective working alliance online. Through my own diverse experiences over the past several years (i.e., teaching online within five different educational programs and collaborating on numerous “virtual” teams), I have had opportunities to build strong working relationships with colleagues, clients, and students who I never otherwise would have met.

Based upon solid working alliances, we have been able to teach counselling and career practitioner competencies without a face-to-face component to the training. In our programs, we have found facilitated discussion forums to be the key to success (i.e., students are not left alone to read through course material; rather, their reading is supplemented by instructor-facilitated class discussions where active participation from each student is a required component of the course). Here are some quotes (used with permission) that illustrate what our students have found helpful:

Thank you so much for making this training available by way of the Internet. It presents a golden opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in our field today. Best of all, these



modules provide the chance to meet and learn from fellow professionals across Canada. – S. S., Employment Counsellor from rural Ontario

I was a single mother in the midst of a career transition, so the flexible online format made it possible for me to start mid-year and to work around my job and family. I was also able to “meet” and do projects with students from across the country, giving me a broad perspective of employment facilitation practices. The course material and assignments were practical enough for me to take straight into my first job as a facilitator, so I was well prepared for the transition. – L. E., Kelowna, BC

From the above examples, it is clear that online technology has made professional development accessible to these students. Online technology also makes counselling and career services available to clients who live in rural communities, travel extensively, have physical challenges, or have irregular work schedules that make it difficult to schedule appointments. Technology also facilitates collaboration on professional projects across time zones and great geographical distance.

Another student wrote:

I really appreciate your prompt, energetic responsiveness in this course. Your presence and attention is really felt in the forums and in timely adjustments... – K. O., Graduate Student, Yorkville University

This quote illustrates some of the non-verbal messages that are communicated online. The student felt valued and “heard” and had picked up on the energy and enthusiasm of the instructor. Building a strong working alliance is as important online as it is face-to-face. The following section provides some tips and strategies that facilitate effective online professional relationships.

Tips and Strategies

Form a picture of your clients. Even without visual cues, it is possible to “paint a picture” of your client (recognizing, of course, that you may get some salient details wrong and have to revise your picture if you ever do have the chance to meet in person!). First, allow yourself to be curious. Ask questions that prompt revelations about location, culture, daily activities, interests and preferences. We typically ask our students to post a welcome message on the course site and describe what they see as they look up from their computers.

Second, be observant. Your online clients will sprinkle clues throughout their posts that give you insights into the context of their lives. Follow-up with empathy and ask to hear more. For example, one of my clients mentioned twin five year old sons that she was raising as a single mother. She could usually only respond to her e-mail after they were in bed at night. Another mentioned that she was an Anglican priest...so Easter was a very busy time for her and we had to stop working together for awhile. Another mentioned that money was tight now that she had given up her



job to care for her baby. Her e-mails were often sent in the middle of the night when she was up nursing her son.

Third, when they may be salient variables, explore ethnicity and race. Although employers in Canada are not supposed to discriminate based on race or religious beliefs, career practitioners know through their clients' stories that prejudice is, in fact, alive and well. Weeks into an online course on the topic of international career management, one student revealed that, as an African-American, she wondered if she would be welcomed into an international workplace. Until then, I had not been aware that she was a member of a visible minority group and that, to her, in the context of where she lived and worked, race had a significant impact on her career choices.

Fourth, there are other more subtle cultural differences, even within the same province. One of my students, from a coastal community, spoke of fishing. For her, this wasn't a leisure activity but a key economic driver of the community. That same week a different student also spoke of fishing...but as a stress reliever at the end of a work day. Same word, but totally different meanings from a career practitioner's perspective.

Fifth, especially in counselling and coaching relationships, it may be worth gently exploring age (which, like ethnicity, may not be immediately obvious online). Age may have a significant impact on career, educational, and lifestyle choices. Age may also impact comfort with emerging technologies.

Sixth, personality style may also be more difficult to identify online than in person. For example, it may be harder to recognize individuals with tendencies toward introversion because some of their posts may appear to be as "chatty" as those from more extraverted clients. The difference would be in the amount of reflection before pushing "send;" this remains invisible to others online except in instant messaging chats.

Finally, with some individuals, geographic location may also be an important consideration. Daily life in an industrial city in China is significantly different than it is for someone living a few blocks from Times Square in New York. I have provided career coaching by e-mail to clients in both of those locations within the past couple of years, and have also taught online students from such diverse locations as the United Arab Emirates and the Canadian Northwest Territories. Context certainly impacts the challenges they face!

Explore language fluency and accommodate diversity. Limited language skills may impact the ability of some individuals to communicate online. Although, in a face-to-face meeting or on a telephone call it is usually quite apparent if your client is a new immigrant, accents are not as obvious in written communication. Watch closely for grammatical inconsistencies that may give you a clue that your client is struggling with English. Short replies to e-mails (or long response delays in IM chats) could both be indicators that your client is carefully scripting his or her words.



Recognize the power of the written word. It is not uncommon for clients to ruminate over words from their coaches or for students to obsess over feedback from an instructor (or vice versa). I recall a counselling client (from a face-to-face session) that reacted strongly when I told her that her words had “impact.” She could not seem to let go of that word...she looked it up in several dictionaries, asked others what it meant to them, and stewed about it for weeks. Imagine, the potential effect of words in a printed text message – typed without careful editing, sent without any thought of how the online contact might interpret them, and without any vocal cues or body language to provide context.

Explore technical skills and accommodate diversity. Your clients, students, and colleagues will have a range of comfort levels with technology. Some may offer clues that the technology is presenting a challenge for them. Notice whether they seem to grasp instructions quickly or make the same mistakes over and over. Respond with empathy and gently coach them to work with you effectively in your online environment. Consider the extra effort you would expend to help a person with disabilities feel comfortable in your office. When working online, lack of technological skills can be a significant impairment.

Keep technology simple. Related to the issue of technical literacy, is the broad range of technical equipment that may be available to those with whom you are working online. For example, even if you are equipped to use a microphone or webcam in an e-coaching session or team meeting, the individual that you hope to connect with may not be. Some of your contacts will be using dial-up rather than high speed Internet access. I know from personal experience in hotel rooms and Internet cafes around the world that dial-up access and older computers can make it extremely frustrating to open graphic-heavy websites. I would encourage you to make good use of easily accessible technology if you hope to build an effective working alliance online (rather than frustrate your online contacts).

Be flexible and patient. Just as building a working alliance in a face-to-face setting will take more time for some individuals than for others, building a working alliance online may take extra time for some of your contacts. These individuals may find excuses to connect outside of your scheduled e-sessions as they try to get to know you a little better, often by phone (so that they can hear your voice). If they live or work in your community, they may even find an excuse to drop by your office to meet you in person. Generally this need for face-to-face or telephone contact will taper off once rapport is well-established. Remember, patience is a virtue...even in cyberspace!

Help your contacts paint a picture of you. Building an effective working alliance typically involves you sharing a bit about yourself as well. If you are working online as a counsellor, coach, or instructor, this should be done sparingly...after all, you're the professional in the relationship, not the client! However, being somewhat transparent can create enough safety that your online contacts will feel comfortable sharing more about themselves with you. Just as you are forming a picture based on the clues you are able to collect, so are your online contacts. Sprinkle a few clues throughout your posts to help them paint a meaningful picture of you.



Flex your own online style. Be willing to adjust your own preferred style of working online, especially in the beginning, to ensure that a solid working alliance can be established. Once that bond is securely formed, there will be much more room to experiment with new tools and techniques. For example, you might personally prefer not to connect by telephone. However, as previously discussed, others may find that hearing your voice (at least once) really helps them to work more effectively with you. You may enjoy “live” chats, so you keep your Instant Messaging software turned on all day; some of your online contacts, however, may find it intrusive for you to “pop up” on their computer screens without any notice. Scheduling a specific time for a chat (e.g., by e-mailing or posting a request within a discussion forum) can facilitate a better working relationship with individuals who like to plan their days.

Accommodate diverse learning and communication styles. As you begin to understand your e-contacts a bit better, vary your work together to accommodate their personal styles. For example, some individuals work best when they are able to read something and then talk about it. Providing links to relevant websites or e-newsletters might help keep them engaged between sessions and creating opportunities for working in partners or trios to complete specific projects could fulfill their need to talk.

Other people are active learners...they run on the seawall before leaving for work in the morning and hate to be stuck in front of a computer. Consider assignments or projects that involve site visits or hands-on activities to keep them engaged.

Some individuals are techno-phobes – absolutely terrified by technology. Begin with tools that seem more natural to them (e.g., e-mail) and then gradually introduce other technologies such as instant messaging or discussion forums. Remember that unless you are training e-coaches or cyber-counsellors, the goal of working online is rarely to teach technical skills to your clients, students, or colleagues. Meacham (2003) provides tips for using multiple intelligence theory within virtual classrooms. Her work would also be relevant for counsellors, coaches, and others who want to work more effectively online.

Summary

In this brief “Food for Thought” paper, I have presented some examples of building an effective working alliance online and some strategies to facilitate the process. My hope is that you will be inspired to share your e-successes as well, as you continue to integrate online learning, e-coaching, cyber-counselling, and collaborating on “virtual teams” into your everyday work.



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About the Author

Dr. Roberta Neault, CCC, RRP, doesn't consider herself a "techy." However, in recent years, she has co-developed the Career Management Professional Program (which has since become the first fully online GCDF-approved curriculum), taught online in Masters of Counselling programs for both Campus Alberta and Yorkville University, and supported several colleagues and corporate clients to convert face-to-face courses to an online format. Recipient of the 2002 Stu Conger Award for Leadership in Career Counselling and Career Development in Canada, Roberta continues to search for innovative ways to connect with clients, students, and colleagues around the world. She has found working effectively online to be simply one more way to accomplish that.

