A report on the use of online learning for psychotherapy training
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Introduction

This purpose of this report is to give a brief overview of the issues surrounding online training, specifically in the context of psychotherapy training and to reach some conclusions as to how UKCP could draw up guidelines to ensure that an appropriate balance between live and online teaching can be reached for those training OMs who wish to utilise this medium.

Let me put my own position into context. I undertook the online MSc in existential psychotherapy with Emmy Van Deurzen, Digby Tantam and Chris Blackmore at Sheffield University, whose papers are quoted below. I have modelled their systems for my own students so have experience on both sides of the equation, ie being a student and tutor in the online environment. As with any research, my subjectivity will doubtless influence this paper but it is my intention to include arguments on both sides where I have been able to find opposing views. However, the majority of sources that I have found come down firmly in favour of online learning, carefully constructed and handled, in combination (where necessary) with live training.

It should be noted that I am not attempting to create a completely comprehensive literature review as there is enough out there to make this a task that would take years; rather, I have selected ideas that reflect the key themes that are relevant to our subject.

I have decided to use quotes for the most part rather than offering interpretations. This is done deliberately on the basis that most readers of the report will not have in depth knowledge of the field and hopefully, this mode will make it easier to grasp, quickly.

Themes

Inter-personal Relationships

Anecdotally, from discussions with others within UKCP, the primary concern about online training is that it would exclude examination and exploration of personal process. Therefore it seems logical to start with this theme.

Here are some quotes on how an online environment affects the inter-personal relationships between students:

"The value of interaction in online learning lies in its contribution to the participants' (teacher and learner) ability to establish a sense of being in the virtual environment. This is the idea of online presence." (Irwin & Berge, 2011)

"A study of professional training for psychologists found that social ties, formed initially more in the face-to-face groups, lasted more among online students." (Francescato et al, 2007)

"Psychotherapy training by its nature requires learners to examine their own thoughts, feelings, motivations and memories, and particularly so around difficult experiences they may have had. Before SEPTIMUS, it was not clear whether learners would feel able to share such experiences with other learners and tutors whom they had never met in person. Tutors found that in general, learners on the SEPTIMUS programme disclosed more, not less, of their own personal lives and this had to be managed sensitively. So if anything, the online medium was more suitable than the face-to-face medium for this type of learning, and the role of tutor was of even more importance in this course than for other similar online courses." (Blackmore et al, 2006)

"Observations of a large cohort of psychotherapy trainees on a European wide eLearning project have shown that internet-based interrelationships between students on the one hand and between tutors and students on the other hand are quite different to that in face-to-face training situations. It was found that relationships and interactions in some ways were more distant and aloof, since no direct face-to-face contact existed, with all relating being mediated through electronic communication. In other ways this form of communication seemed to facilitate an intimacy and directness not equalled in face-to-face training, which led to some interesting and poignant explorations." (Van Deurzen et al., 2006)

"Certain aspects of e-learning, such as the tendency to facilitate self-disclosure, were found to be very beneficial, particularly in the context of psychotherapy programmes." (Blackmore et al., 2008)

"Anonymity of others to the self (i.e. visual anonymity) leads to heightened self-awareness, and thus to greater adherence to group norms when a social identity is salient." (Joinson, 2001)

> "Students do, however, need to be "psychologically minded",
> i.e. students need to have access to their own motivations, to
> have some ability to think about these in psychological terms
> and to have an awareness of the intrinsic value of self-reflection
> and self-disclosure. Where students have not had such abilities,
> or have had low levels of self-awareness, they have tended to
> find it difficult to engage in genuine self-disclosure and its
> accompanying self-development; students who do have these
> qualities seem to revel in the opportunities for self-development,
> both personally and for the whole learning community."
> (Blackmore et al. 2008)

Comments:

I feel that these quotes speak for themselves, but feel it worth
commenting on the final quote. The group of students studied by this
research were doing an MSc which did not include any qualification to
practice. Presumably becoming "psychologically minded" is a function
of the training as a whole, and perhaps particularly own therapy.
Perhaps this finding would suggest that online training would be best
introduced later into the programme.

I have not found any papers that specifically refer to students' personal
process, the closest being Joinson, 2001 who mentions an increase in
self-awareness, and Blackmore et al. 2008 who mention being
"psychologically minded" but in my experience this is a very important
factor when considering online training. There are many ways in which
one's personal process can be stirred. For example becoming (more)
aware of a propensity for being competitive, easily distracted, hyper-
vigilant for criticism, perfectionist, "not good enough", or needing to be
heard.

Relationships online are significantly affected by the style of
communication so let's look at that theme next.

Communication style

We have all, I'm sure, had experience of miscommunication in emails
and in the sphere of online training this is no different:

> "Tone of voice, facial expressions, body language are
> dramatically diminished in the online context… that presents
> communication challenges." (quote from Ian McArthur in
> McIntyre (2011 c).

"It is evident that face-to-face communication is not available in online courses and that class "meetings" may either be more flexible or altogether non-existent. These factors combined can give the online student a great sense of freedom; however, with that freedom is a commensurate anxiety that is also brought about by these self-same factors. In this respect, these factors may give the student a sense of isolation and discomfort." (Irwin & Berge, 2011)

"As with class, there may occasionally be misunderstandings, arguments, or even bullying amongst students. Make sure that you have procedures or policies in place for dealing with this, and that students are aware of them at the start of the class. Time is of the essence when resolving such issues, as they can quickly de-motivate students from participating."McIntyre, S. 2011 a

Where self-disclosure is not well attuned to the group, it will be unwelcome and will increase the likelihood of conflict occurring online. If this conflict is based upon miscommunication, as can easily happen online, it may be relatively straightforward to resolve, and this tends to make transformative learning more likely than if no conflict had occurred at all. Where conflict is based on a difference in underlying values, it is much harder to resolve, and indeed the online context may exacerbate this, even to the point of making resolution impossible. Unresolved conflict makes it more likely that a student will be rejected from the group and eventually drop out, and is a real barrier to transformative learning for the whole learning community. There is a clear need for online tutors to know how and when to intervene in conflict when it emerges. (Blackmore et al., 2008)

Comments:

I would imagine that most psychotherapy trainings today encourage communication between students and between students and tutors using email. If so, then style of communication already needs to be managed, so this is just a step further. It is clear that there are significant individual differences on comfort with this medium, just in the same way as some students will always phone with a question, others will email and others will wait until a live course day.

Measuring participation

Another issue to be considered is how to measure a student's participation for online training. Obviously with live training they are

either there, or not, but still the tutor is inherently assessing their level of participation in discussions and activities. The following quotes suggest that giving attention to the experience of the student will help to ensure participation:

> "The key to success in online teaching is not only students' knowledge acquisition but also their construction of a meaningful and rich experience." (De Gagne, J. & Walters, K., 2009)

> "If an online activity is not directly supporting to an assessment task, or the student cannot see any useful purpose, they will usually not participate." (McIntyre, S. 2011 a)

Autonomy

A fundamental outcome of any psychotherapy training will be that the student becomes an autonomous professional. Autonomy therefore is an important aspect to consider when planning any training. Bouchard (2009) explains that online learning means that many different elements are within student's control including initiative, motivation, selecting resources, evaluation, interaction, cost-benefit ratio of learning. Also, I was interested to see the following as a conclusion from a study of the use of online CPD training for medical doctors:

> "These systems help to address the problem of poor skills training and proficiency and may provide a method for physicians to become self-directed lifelong learners" (Issenberg et al, 1999)

The tutor's role

It could be easy to presume that the tutor's role in an online environment is simpler than in a live classroom and indeed there is disagreement on the exact nature of the role:

> "We also argue that the lecturer will continue to play a central role in online education, albeit his or her role will become one of a learning catalyst and knowledge navigator." (Volery, 2001)

> "Online educators must be aware of social presence and fully integrate this concept into their practice. Their visibility in an online class plays a critical role in greater participation, teamwork, respect, and commitment from students." (De Gagne, J. & Walters, K. , 2009)

"...the notion of teacher presence in an online environment is absolutely critical." (Assoc Prof Emma Robertson quoted in McIntyre, 2011 a)

"To truly motivate students in their learning, it is important that in your role as a teacher, you create engaging online learning situations through careful consideration of both social interaction and pedagogical design" (McIntyre, S. 2011 a)

"Students might be wary of making incorrect statements which are then picked up by the tutor and tutor comments might staunch discussion even when this approach might be purely facilitative and raise further questions. Furthermore, tutor involvement may negatively impact on the development of new student conceptions of 'the self-as-learner as an individual in relation to others'." (Daly et al., 2006),

"A powerful feature has been our ability to identify additional educational needs, and quickly add corresponding content online" (Wiecha & Barrie, 2002)

Comments:

This last quote shows the need for tutors to be active in monitoring what is happening in their online environment.

Access

Access to psychotherapy is much under discussion at the moment and it is worth considering the impact that online training may have on improving access. Here are some quotes from the research:

"Students cited "finance", "distance from training centre, lack of practical experience, family commitments" and the "intensity of their working weeks" as having been barriers to taking face-to-face learning courses in the past. e-Learning can overcome barriers to traditional learning in psychotherapy, particularly distance from a training centre, without loss of student satisfaction or student performance." (Blackmore et al., 2008)

"Factors sometimes thought to be obstacles to e-learning, such as information technology skills, were not found to be significant barriers--although they may have affected recruitment." (Blackmore et al., 2008)

"The number of hits, length of access and use of the bulletin board was predicted by age, with older students using WebCT more. These factors were also influenced by ability and achievement orientation." Hoskins et al (2005)

Comments:

The final quote above may seem counter-intuitive as it might be expected that younger students would be more comfortable using technology. I have not found any studies that discuss the financial aspect of access (apart from the brief mention above) but it is obvious that online training reduces costs as no rooms need to be paid for and students do not have travel or accommodation costs.

The other financial implication is that of the use of the computer needed by the student. However, as all UKCP trainings are at masters level and 97% of those with a degree access the internet and 60% of all adults do so daily (Office for National Statistics, 2011), it would seem that this aspect of access is improving all the time. However there will be some people who would find that there is a logistical and/or financial issue but in some cases this will be surmountable by such things as using public libraries.

It may also be that online training is easier for students with families or who have other commitments. It may make things easier for some with disabilities, but likewise it could make training more difficult for others.

Efficacy of training

A study of professional training in psychology which had two groups of students with the only difference being style of delivery (eg they had the same tutor) found that

"Results show that students of both groups increased their academic knowledge and social capital, but Computer Supported Collaborative Learning students acquired more group observation skills." (Mebane et al , 2008)

A study of professional training for psychologists found that "online students were top performers on competence-based tasks." (Francescato et al, 2007)

Here are some other observations on the efficacy of online training:

"Post-course evaluation of collaborative experience showed no significant differences between online and face-to-face seminar

participants in perceived social presence, cooperation and satisfaction with the learning experience." (Francescato et al, 2006)

"computer-supported collaborative learning environments are as efficient as collaborative learning in face-to-face seminars in developing social presence and increasing professional competencies and self-efficacy." (Francescato et al, 2006)

"What I have found in particular about this type of communication is that with the postings and questions and this form of chat it is possible to read and reread what has been written rather than getting lost in the room" (Quote from "Andrea" in Van Deurzen et al., 2006).

"Because of that element where you can sit back and think and then respond to someone, the discussion quality is really high." (Quote from "Student" in McIntyre, 2011 b).

"... it enabled them to go a little further, a little deeper into the course content, and in that way it was a very useful learning strategy..." (Quote from "Dr Gay McDonald" in McIntyre, 2011 b).

"Learners developed more extensive reflective accounts than they had done previously when reflecting in traditional classroom environments. They reflected further, spent longer reflecting, self   -managed their reflective significant learning achievements through reflection." (Morgan et al 2006)

Problems

As with any mode of training there are problems that need to be addressed by any training. Muilenberg & Berge (2005) found that the top eight problems as reported by students were

1. Social interactions
2. Administrative/instructor issues
3. Time and support for studies
4. Learner motivation
5. Technical problems
6. Cost and access to the Internet
7. Technical skills
8. Academic skills

Point one has been addressed above, and of course, no one is suggesting online training as the only medium for the training of psychotherapists, so in this context this problem will be less. Point 2 is something that tutors will need to consider as is the second half of point 3. The first half of point 3, point 4 and point 8 would apply also to live training. Point 5, 6 & 7 are issues for some but will, presumably, continue to improve over time and will definitely have improved since the writing of this paper in 2005.

Anxiety and fear appear to be key issues for some students when looking at online training (Sendall et al, 2009). It is my experience as a tutor that some students are either afraid of saying the wrong thing, or of being judged. However, this also applies in a live environment although perhaps to different students!

Here is another potential cause of anxiety:

> "A few of the qualities of asynchronous communication--the time lag between interactions, the frequent lack of clear norms of communication and the absence of visual/auditory conversation cues—created anxiety for many students. Learners remark that the time lag inhibited spontaneity and made it difficult to sustain focus because learners are often distracted by activities in between interactions. Ambiguous conventions of dialogue created confusion about taking turns as would normally occur in face-to-face conversation" (Irwin & Berge, 2011)

Expectation

As I have read article after article it has become clearer and clearer that there need to be certain expectations defined for any training OM who wishes to use online training. Obviously these are up for debate, but I offer these as a starting point:

- That programmes are set from solid principles, eg five stage model of e-moderation (Salmon, 2003) or Blackmore's etutor collaborative learning process (Blackmore et al, 2006) or Scenario-based learning (Blackiston, 2010)
- That consideration should be given to the appropriate blend of live training along with a combination of synchronous and/or asynchronous discussion
- That significant attention should be given to the issue of confidentiality given that self-disclosure is likely to increase and this information is stored electronically

- That tutor roles should be well defined and include specific roles of moderation and support for students who struggle for any reason (personal process, technology….)
- That course designers and tutors should have studied the design and delivery of online courses, formally or informally but to a sufficient degree to inform their practice.

Conclusions

To start, here are a couple of quotes which sum up the issue quite nicely:

> "A common criticism of Web-enhanced course design is that online components are bells and whistles tacked onto traditional courses, which are costly to add and only minimally enhance the course content. This criticism may well have merit when online delivery focuses solely on providing course content, but fails to create a learning environment that supports the growth of a community of learners and shared knowledge. If courses are nothing more than content, then all students would need is their textbook. Faculty members, however, view the learning community as essential for cognitive growth and the development of critical thinking skills. Similarly, online educators recognize the importance of creating a learning environment that fosters interaction, dialogue, and mentoring in an effort to produce similar learning outcomes as traditional face-to-face courses." (Stewart, C. et al, 2009)

> "Electronic elements of training are a good complement to face-to-face training and will achieve some aspects of learning that face-to-face training alone would not achieve. This leads to the conclusion that blended learning in psychotherapy could be most effective and appropriate." (Van Deurzen et al., 2006)

I feel that the above discussion demonstrates that there are more advantages to students, than disadvantages in the introduction of online learning to complement live training although this process is not problem free.

I conclude therefore that UKCP could create guidelines based on a maximum percentage of "classroom hours" being conducted in this way (for example 33%) but that the process of decision and application would need to be justified by the training OM and procedures for confidentiality, tutor roles and support to be created.

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