
COMBINING E-TUTORING SKILLS WITH ONLINE-COUNSELLING IN MODERN YOUTH WORK

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Introduction

The organisation wienXtra – a young city programme, offers a great variety of programmes in the field of leisure time activities for children, youngsters and families in Vienna. This work is subsidised by the City of Vienna.

One of these programmes is online-counselling for young people. In the year 2001 we started three discussion forums on the internet¹. The first of these offers a general discussion of topics that young people are interested in, another for young musicians searching for a live gig or a new front man and the third forum as a “counsel and help” forum, a moderated discussion forum for all problems young people are confronted with.

This kind of counselling has many advantages: it is relatively easy for young people to get access to a professional counsellor by e-mail or a discussion forum online, and they can get this help in an anonymous environment which makes it easier to talk about personal problems and themes such as relationships, drugs, and psychological topics ranging from depression to suicide.

In the first months of this online youth work, we recognized that youth workers in the field of online-counselling need new qualifications and new skills: skills from the field of e-learning and e-moderating.

nachricht	absenderIn	antworten	letzter eintrag
welche sprache?	Gast	3	29.01.2005 16:29:13
an alle Typen	rat&hilfeTeam	2	29.01.2005 16:18:07
DAS MACHT MIR ANGST!!	Gast	32	29.01.2005 16:15:41
trockener mund	Gast	6	29.01.2005 16:14:55
Ich will nicht essen	Gast	4	29.01.2005 16:13:33
punk oder skin?	Gast	50	29.01.2005 15:55:19
Wie schaut ein Punk aus??	Gast	67	29.01.2005 15:51:41
frauenarzt	Gast	6	29.01.2005 14:46:30

Figure 1. Youth discussion forum “counsel and help” with a range of 20 to 30 postings every day

Qualification of youth workers in online-counselling

At the first conference related to online youth work in September 2002 in Vienna², one of the outcomes was to create a course for youth- and social workers who want to work with their target groups in the World Wide Web. This conference widened the scope from youth work to different kinds of social work such as job coaching and the new field of psychological disturbances like online-addiction. From this point on, it was clear, that the incorporation of e-learning experts in the planning of e-counselling was extremely beneficial.

A survey of youth workers in 2003 highlighted the main topics that should be included in such a course. Based on this survey we created, together with e-learning experts, a blended e-learning course [online.counselling] which started in 2004 featuring seven main topics:

¹ <http://www.wienextra.at/forum/default.asp>

² 27. Sep. 2002: F1 – Conference on Youth Discussion Forums, Email Counselling and Online Communication, Tech Gate Vienna.

- Module 1: Psychology of New Media
- Module 2. Online-Communication (e-mail, discussion forum, chat)
- Module 3: Online-Counselling
- Module 4: Law and Online-Counselling
- Module 5: Technical requirements for Online-Counselling
- Module 6: Management / Resources
- Module 7: Quality Ensurance / Evaluation

The course lasts from April to December and comprises 160 lessons (50 minutes / lesson).

The most important modules, 2 and 3, were planned as a mixture of face-to-face trainings and nine weeks of collaborative online work via a learning management system. This combination ensured that the participants could implement their new knowledge in the field of online communication easily in their daily working routines, and they had the experience of being part of a dynamic online learning community.

During the online sessions the participants had to work for at least five hours per week. Two e-trainers and one specialist in e-mail counselling accompanied this learning process.

Additionally, they had intensive training on writing feedbacks to the other participants, e.g. writing answers to e-mails connected with help and support, how to moderate a discussion forum, and how to manage an information overload.

Combining e-tutoring skills with e-counselling in youth work

The main part of the course [online.counselling] is a module which we took from an e-tutor qualification course. We transferred this module into the context of e-counselling, because one of the learning targets was to develop online-communication skills for people who had a strong experience in face-to-face communication but less experience in communicating with people or groups via e-mail, discussion forums or chat.

Some of the competencies e-counsellors need can be developed directly from e-tutor competencies:

e-tutor	e-counsellor
Competencies in online-communication in a learning environment (synchronous/asynchronous)	➔ Enriched with a psychological view of communication processes
Creating a humanized e-learning environment	➔ Creating a humanized counselling environment/setting
Role of a learning facilitator	➔ Role of an advisor/mentor and counsellor
Knowledge of self-directed learning and collaboration in online-communities	➔ Knowledge of self-directed psychological aspects and peer-to-peer counselling
Professional media literacy skills	
Professional technical skills	

Teaching e-moderating skills to youth workers is one key for successful online counselling. Another is to develop a clear setting for the online-communication and a well structured counselling process.

One of the results from Module 2 “online-communication”, is a structured model for e-counselling based on the Five Steps Model of e-moderating (by Gilly Salmon). We transferred these communication processes into the field of e-counselling:

A guide for e-counselling

Access and motivation - the clients need for problem solving

First of all ensure that you offer e-counselling which is easy to access. Also, make sure that it is easy to get in contact with the counsellors or the advisory board. Highlight the kind of counselling you can offer.

Online socialization - starting communication

In the next step allow the people to establish communication with the counsellor (e.g. by e-mail) or with the online community in a discussion forum (e.g. peer-to-peer counselling).

Information exchange - clarify the topic

Provide a professional counselling process which can be an instructive or constructive way to the next step. Be a motivator for the peers to exchange information amongst themselves.

Knowledge construction - working on problem solving

Working with clients in an online setting means having a special psychological knowledge of the different kinds of therapies and counselling strategies. Be a mentor or a counsellor for the clients and be aware of the limits of online-counselling.

In the context of online-counselling this can be the solution to the problem, or at least the creation of a potential path for the client to follow. Allow the peers in a discussion forum to be constructive in solving a problem together.

Development - integrating solutions or alternative communication channels

Offering possibilities for development in a direction that the client wants to go.

Maybe this can mean the end of the counselling process, or an invitation for the client to get into face-to-face contact with a counsellor or the advisory board.

Especially in cases of heavy psychological problems, this will be an important and meaningful development in the counselling process.

Evaluation and future scope

The evaluation of the course [online.counselling] 2004 has shown that the combination of a blended e-learning method for main parts of this course with the teaching of an online-tutoring module worked well.

In most of the written exams the participants had shown how much the e-learning skills had had a supporting influence on their daily work with the youngsters.

It has also shown that research related to online-counselling is strongly needed and not yet well developed. Questions regarding the possibilities of online youth work and the borders of transferring face-to-face work into the realm of virtual reality are not yet answered.

In an e-counselling environment it can be very helpful to look towards and to follow examples of the well established field of open and distance learning, especially the field of e-learning.

One of the goals in 2005 is to create a platform for online-counsellors in German speaking countries to build up a network of excellence and to provide research in this field.

Online youth work as in the field of online-counselling needs qualifications based on elements of e-moderating, e-tutoring and the knowledge of different forms and tools of online-communication. Combining these elements with classical youth work is a challenge for youth workers nowadays, and it is a great opportunity for young people looking for help and information in the World Wide Web.

wienXtra - a young city programme and its partners, Internet Centre for Education / Netbridge and the City of Vienna (Municipal Department 13 – Regional Youth Department) are deeply interested in and committed to developing this kind of modern youth work.

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