Symposium on online practice in counselling and guidance

Stephen Goss and Tristram Hooley

Abstract

This symposium looks at the impact of the online environment on the practice of guidance, counselling, psychotherapy and related services. Online delivery of careers education and guidance, counselling, psychotherapy and other mental health and social services has been a subject of increasing debate and has regularly featured in the pages of this journal. In 2009, a symposium (Volume 37 (3)) focused on the use of technology in counselling and psychotherapy, and explored the utility of a range of online and telephone technologies. The subsequent six years have seen considerable changes in technologies, their place in society and their role in the practice of guidance and counselling. The current symposium explores these ongoing changes and in places looks forward to ways in which the future development of the disciplines might be influenced by current technological trends.

Working through technology of any kind has long provoked highly polarised reactions in many of the human-oriented professions (Goss & Anthony, 2003, p. 1). Commentators have pointed out that despite the hype associated with new technologies the evidence base for their use in guidance and counselling is sometimes limited (Howieson & Semple, 2013; Richards & Viganó, 2013). However, as this symposium demonstrates, it has been growing for a considerable period, and the use of communication technologies is increasingly becoming part of everyday practice in an ever expanding variety of ways (Anthony, Nagel, & Goss, 2010). Some have raised more fundamental concerns about a perceived loss of the human element and reductive conceptions of what guidance and mental health services do. For example, a Guardian article about career guidance asked 'can online careers advice work … what about the personal touch?' (Tickle, 2011), and a succession of reports have found that even the young, and supposedly digitally native (Prensky, 2001), are still crying out for face-to-face interactions (Association of College, 2014; Evans & Rallings, 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, advocates of technologically mediated provision talk of how online environments empower clients, democratise practice, allow guidance and therapeutic relationships to transcend time and space, and bring distinct advantages not available in face-to-face settings (Anthony et al., 2010; Goss & Anthony, 2003; Hooley, 2012).

Now, however, online provision is blossoming onto the mainstream of practice throughout the helping professions. Some who come across the concept of working at a distance from one's clients still react with the same polarised views of either strong scepticism or evident, perhaps even incautious, enthusiasm (Hennigan & Goss, 2014; Kettunen, Vuorinen, & Sampson, 2013). It is sometimes tempting, even among those who are otherwise thoroughly experienced senior figures, to think that little work on it has been done and that basic questions need to be addressed from scratch. While there are certainly distinct gaps in the research base, this is far from the case. Research into the use of technology in therapy, for example, began in the 1940s (Rogers, 1942), and its practice dates back even further to Freud and others conducting analyses via the technology of

their times – the simple written letter. Use of computer-assisted psychiatry began to be researched in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Bennett, Rappaport, & Skinner, 1978; Cogswell & Estevan, 1965; Weizenbaum, 1966) while the computer industry was still in its relatively early stages. Watts (2002) recounts the development of the use of ICT in guidance through four phases (mainframe, microcomputer, web and digital) starting in the early 1960s.

Discussions about the origin of technology in guidance and counselling highlight the challenge of defining 'technology' (does it, for example, include the therapist's couch and the psychometric instrument) and of conceiving of a guidance and counselling practice that does not make some use of technology. However, it is possible to argue that the development of the Internet, the growth and increasing social importance of the World Wide Web and then the development of increasingly Internet enabled 'phone technologies all provide important moments for activities like guidance and counselling that are based around processes of human communication. As technologies offer enhanced affordances for communication, a question is asked as to whether guidance and counselling wishes to take these up.

The continuous development of new communication technologies is documented in the development of increasingly sophisticated ethical guidance for their use, at least in the field of counselling and psychotherapy (Goss & Anthony, 2012). This has led the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) to issue not one but three editions of their guidelines for online work (Anthony & Goss, 2009; Anthony & Jamieson, 2005; Goss, Anthony, Jamieson, & Palmer, 2001) and yet that organisation has still needed to issue a list of the competencies required to work at a distance from clients (Hill & Roth, 2014). That work was based on reviewing the expanding literature base and the input of an expert reference group (one of whom, Dr Kate Anthony, is represented among the authors in this symposium). It describes a model of the competences that practitioners need to acquire before considering themselves able to operate online, and discusses how they should be applied and the uses to which they can be put.

Conversely, the Career Development Institute (CDI) has avoided viewing online or distance provision of guidance services as a distinct activity, preferring to see it as one amongst a range of professional activities that guidance workers might be involved in. Consequently, there is no mention of online guidance within the CDI's (2014) code of ethics. There are strengths in viewing the online environment as a mode through which existing services are delivered and human interactions happen, rather than as a distinct and strange type of new interaction. However, viewing the online environment as simply another way to have a conversation can diminish some of the challenges and leave practitioners floundering when situations arise which do not have direct parallel in the offline world. The need to re-contextualise existing practice in the online environment, addressing the new affordances offered by new technologies and the new cultures and mores that have emerged, all mean that there are distinct pitfalls for those who approach working online without proper preparation and, particularly, training.

This symposium provides an opportunity to examine the issues connected with online practice through the lenses of both empirical and theoretical enquiries. We use the term 'online practice' in its broadest possible interpretation to explore the idea of how guidance, counselling and practitioners in other mental health services utilise online environments to communicate with clients. Through the exemplars of work reported here, we explore how technology constrains and enables practitioners and clients, and allows the development of new forms of practice.

At a specialist conference in 2013, one of the current authors (Goss, 2013) undertook a small research project to investigate what delegates, all of whom had a particular interest in online

practice, saw as the priorities for research and development of the field. The method, based on a modified form of the Delphi technique for structuring reactions to expert opinion (Gordon, 1994; Linstone & Turoff, 1975), was intended to use the 'informed judgement' (Ziglio, 1996, p. 21) of those present at the conference to create a snapshot of the needs and priorities of professionals involved in online work at that point in time with the highest possible degree of consensus.

The 114 delegates who took part in the study, which included 71 attending remotely over the Internet from several different countries, first created personal lists of the topics in response to the question 'Over the next 5 to 10 years, what do you think are the 3 most important pieces of research that should be done?'. Responses to this question were then grouped into a total of 21 categories through a consensual qualitative analysis carried out by the lead researcher and two assistants who also attended the conference and who are active researchers in the field. This completed phase one of the exercise. In phase two, the categories were returned to participants, in random order and with descriptors to exemplify their intended meaning. Participants were then asked to place these in their own priority order. Their individual priority decisions were then pooled to create a list of research priorities based on the combined opinions of all 114 participants.

The initial list of possible items that participants believed should be investigated was, as expected, diverse. The five highest priority items were, in order, as follows:

(1) Risk management and safety (e.g. crisis management and risks of online work)
(2) Efficacy of face-to-face versus online practice (i.e. how face-to-face practice compares to similar practice online)
(3) Contracting and assessment (e.g. when online practice should and should not be offered)
(4) Confidentiality (e.g. security and privacy management and risks)
(5) Training (e.g. the need for it, its effectiveness and how to develop the skills required for specifically online practice)

Items also listed, but not ranked by the group as a whole as being of the highest level of priority, related to differing client groups, barriers to access and awareness, different technological options and their use in combination (i.e. blended technologies; Anthony & Merz Nagel, 2010, p. 113), the process of the online helping relationship (such as how empathy is received online) and demand (such as who uses online services, funding, etc.).

Perhaps surprisingly, other than a general 'miscellaneous' category, the lowest ranked items were the impact on the profession as a whole and links to allied professions (such as inter-agency communication, linked to data sharing). It should be noted that the ranking of these items is purely relative to the other possibilities generated by the first phase of the exercise: by definition, some participants had considered these items to be their personal top priorities, but that opinion was not, ultimately, shared by the group overall.

It is notable that the top ranked items related to risk and efficacy while the following three all related to elements of online practice that are closely involved with those topics, underlining the priority these matters were accorded by the participants.

The papers collected in this symposium explore the theme of online practice from a range of different perspectives. One of the strengths of this journal is that it addresses both guidance and counselling, and as can be seen, there are a range of issues that crosscut both fields. They describe the way in which new technologies have encouraged the development of new paradigms that shift the way in which time and space constrain and shape guidance and counselling interactions and potentially shift the role of the professional in these relationships.

In a wide ranging paper, Bimrose, Kettunen and Goddard argue that a growing raft of policy and practice offer some important lessons for the utilisation of new technologies in career guidance. They argue that in order to make effective use of new technologies it is important to recognise the context within which this utilisation happens. This is not simply a question of practitioners learning a new technology but rather about putting in place the right framework of policy, management, professional development, instructional design and technologies themselves.

Bright argues that we may need to view the changes offered by new technologies as a far more critical disruption to conventional practice than has often been the case. He argues that calls for the training of practitioners often minimise the level of paradigmatic shift that is needed. Practitioners, policy-makers and clients are likely to have to think in very different ways about both technology and career development as both move forward. Bright argues for the importance of understanding career development, like counselling and psychotherapy and like the Internet itself, as a set of open, complex and chaotic systems. It is only by embracing this complexity and recognising the need to discard or reimagine existing approaches to guidance and counselling that these fields of activities will be able to maintain their relevance.

Anthony picks up the theme of the implications of new technologies for professionals and discusses the challenges of transferring existing skills to the online environment. She also highlights the need to keep abreast of technological changes to understand the environment that clients inhabit. She argues that, given the speed at which technology evolves, ensuring that counsellors are able to keep up with these changes and consider their implications for practice is a key challenge for continuing professional development within the field.

Kettunen, Sampson and Vuorinen explore the implications of such challenges with particular reference to careers practitioner's engagement with social media. They argue that social technologies offer practitioners opportunities to develop practice. This is not a simple process of transferring on-site approaches to practice online but about generating innovative practice in ways that make use of the affordances of social technologies.

Richards and Simpson examine how the use of Internet-based tools can support existing face-to-face counselling relationships. They argue that strategic use of these kinds of blended interactions can enhance the quality and quantity of traditional face-to-face psychotherapy.

Several of the papers in this symposium address the possibility of providing effective guidance and counselling through specific media or in specific ways. Some options have, in the past, been thought challenging for interactions like guidance and counselling especially if they are text based or short term. Gilat and Reshef examine the perceived helpfulness of emotional first aid delivered via email. They note that many clients who are using this medium have a preference for written communication and like the accessibility that is offered by email. Gilat and Reshef report that most clients in their study found these interactions to be helpful in providing emotional support, enhancing cognitive change and suggesting practical ways of coping. Blake Buffini and Gordon then look at one-to-one support via synchronous instant messaging through perceived quality of working alliance. Their results suggest that working alliance is closely related to reported satisfaction, as it is in offline settings, but that both indicators were slightly less positive than for offline settings.

Rodda, Lubman, Cheetham, Dowling and Jackson discuss single-session online counselling approaches noting that there is limited information about how such short-term interactions function. Their investigation reveals that in these one-off interactions clients spend a great deal of time telling their story with less time spent exploring opportunities, readiness or self-efficacy related

to change or relevant options and strategies. Understanding the patterns of such online interactions is important in informing the development of practice in this mode.

Nieuwboer, Fukkink and Hermanns also look at a single-session intervention, this time with parents. They argue that single-session interventions can be impactful – in this case leading to a significant increase in the self-confidence of parents.

If short online interventions such as those described by Rodda et al. and Nieuwboer et al. offer challenges for guidance and counselling practice in terms of forging effective working alliances, those unfamiliar with the work may find it even more challenging to conceive providing help through text messages. However, Haxell recounts the experience of Youthline in New Zealand where, as elsewhere in the world, young people increasingly seek help using their mobile phones through the medium of text. The article attends to the tight constraints that texting imposes but argues that even within these constraints it is possible to provide meaningful emotional support.

The Internet opens up additional opportunities for people to receive support in ways that do not include conventional guidance and counselling professionals. Lekka, Efstathiou and Kalantzi examine an online peer support intervention delivered at the University of Athens and also return to the vital theme of preparation specifically for the distinctive nature of online work. They argue that the value of such peer-to-peer online interactions is enhanced through the training of the participants in basic counselling skills.

This symposium demonstrates the importance of new technologies to guidance and counselling. It also illuminates a number of different pathways into the future. We have sought here only to provide a selection of examples of current work. The future will, it seems likely, contain even more ways in which people can connect, communicate and relate. As noted elsewhere, whenever and however that happens, it seems likely that those channels may also hold potential for helping relationships to be formed by the people who use them (Goss, 2014), whenever appropriate including professional or paraprofessional help.

Technologies are not inevitable and neither are their implications for practice. Rather, they must be chosen with care, forethought and proper preparation. Technologies are socially produced offering sites for contestation, interpretation and innovation. As the articles presented here show, guidance and counselling have not been slow to engage with new technologies, even where recognition of the possibilities they offer and the capacity of practitioners to make full use of these opportunities has sometimes lagged somewhat behind the actual evidence available (Hennigan & Goss, 2014). Furthermore, it is likely that the changes that we have observed in these fields in the six years since the last symposium has taken place will continue to gather pace as we move further into the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgement

Stephen Goss would like to thank Jo Ames and Jeanette Hennigan, candidates on the Metanoia Institute, Doctorate in Psychotherapy by Professional Studies, for their assistance in analysing the data recorded during the Delphi exercise noted above.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Anthony, K. E., & Goss, S. P. (2009). *Guidelines for online counselling and psychotherapy, including guidelines for online supervision* (3rd ed.). Lutterworth: BACP.

Anthony, K. E., & Jamieson, A. (2005). *Guidelines for online counselling and psychotherapy including guidelines for online supervision* (2nd ed.). Rugby: BACP.

Anthony, K. E., & Merz Nagel, D. (2010). *Therapy online: A practical guide*. London: Sage.

Anthony, K. E., Nagel, D. M., & Goss, S. P. (Eds.). (2010). *The use of technology in mental health: Applications, ethics and practice*. New York, NY: CC Thomas.

Association of Colleges. (2014). *Careers guidance guaranteed*. London: FreshMinds.

Bennett, A. M., Rappaport, W. H., & Skinner, F. L. (1978). *Telehealth handbook: A guide to telecommunications technology for rural health care*. Hyattsville, MD: US Department of Health Education and Welfare, Public Health Services Research, NCHSR Publications and Information.

Career Development Institute. (2014). *Code of ethics*. Stourbridge: Author.

Cogswell, J. F., & Estavan, D. P. (1965). *Explorations in computer-assisted counseling*. Santa Monica, CA: System Development.

Evans, J., & Rallings, J. (2013). *Helping the inbetweeners: Ensuring careers advice improves the options for all young people*. Ilford: Barnardo's.

Gordon, T. J. (1994). *The Delphi method*. Washington, DC: American Council for the United Nations University.

Goss, S. P. (2013). *Attending to the sad, the mad, the bad and the glad in shaping the future of online counselling and psychotherapy*. Bristol: Online Counselling and Therapy in Action Conference.

Goss, S. P. (2014). *The history and future of ethical practice of counselling and psychotherapy using the internet*. Vienna: Osterriche Arbeitsgemeinschaft fur Systemische Therapie und Systemische Studien.

Goss, S. P., & Anthony, K. E. (Eds.). (2003). *Technology in counselling and psychotherapy: A practitioners' guide.* London: Palgrave.

Goss, S. P., & Anthony, K. E. (2012). *The evolution of guidelines for online counselling and psychotherapy – The development of ethical practice*. In B. Popoola & O. Adebowale (Eds.), Online guidance and counselling: Towards effectively applying technology (pp. 104–125). New York, NY: IGI Global.

Goss, S. P., Anthony, K. E., Jamieson, A., & Palmer, S. (2001). *Guidelines for online counselling and psychotherapy* (1st ed.). Rugby, ND: BACP.

Hennigan, J., & Goss, S. (2014). UK Secondary School Therapists' online communication with pupils and their future intentions. *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*, 5(1), 8–9.

Hill, A., & Roth, A. (2014). *The competences required to deliver psychological therapies 'at a distance'*. Lutterworth: BACP.

Hooley, T. (2012). How the internet changed career: Framing the relationship between career development and online technologies. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC)*, 29, 3–11.

Howieson, C., & Semple, S. (2013). *What's the evidence? Comparing the impact of career websites and other career support*. Edinburgh: UNISON.

Kettunen, J., Vuorinen, R., & Sampson, Jr., J. P. (2013). Career practitioners' conceptions of social media in career services. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 41, 302–317. doi:10.1080/03069885.2013.781572

Linstone, H. A. & Turoff, M. (Eds.). (1975). *The Delphi method: Techniques and applications*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Prensky, M. (2001). *Digital natives, digital immigrants part 1. On The Horizon – The Strategic Planning Resource for Education Professionals*, 9(5), 1–6.

Richards, D., & Viganó, N. (2013). Online counseling: A narrative and critical review of the literature. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69, 994–1011. doi:10.1002/jclp.21974

Rogers, C. R. (1942). The use of electronically recorded interviews in improving psychotherapeutic techniques. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 12, 429–434. doi:10.1111/j.1939-0025.1942.tb05930.x

Tickle, L. (2011, October 21). Can online careers advice work? The Guardian. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/money/2011/oct/21/can-online-careers-advice-work

Watts, A. G. (2002). The role of information and communication technologies in integrated career information and guidance systems: A policy perspective. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 2, 139–155. doi:10.1023/A:1020669832743

Weizenbaum, J. (1966). ELIZA – A computer program for the study of natural language communication between man and machine. *Proceedings of conference of Association for Computer Machinery*, New York, NY.

Ziglio, E. (1996). The Delphi method and its contribution to decision-making. In M. Adler & E. Ziglio (Eds.), *Gazing into the oracle: The Delphi and its application to social policy and public health* (pp. 3–33). London: Jessica Kingsley.