Final Report- President’s Teaching and Learning Scholars Grant Program 2013-2015

“Teaching Graduate Students in Social Work in Internet Therapy: Examination of Student Satisfaction, Strengths, Challenges, and Competency”

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Literature Review

Although symptoms of depression and anxiety are prevalent in the population (Kessler et al., 2009) it is often difficult to obtain timely access to treatment for these disorders (Collins, Westra, Dozois, & Burns, 2004). This issue is further exacerbated in rural and remote locations where there is a persistent shortage of mental health professionals, and where there is often limited access to the Internet (Hale, Cotten, Drentea, & Goldner, 2010; MHCC, 2012). Nonetheless, in many settings Internet-delivered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (ICBT) has emerged as a treatment option with considerable evidence supporting its efficacy for the treatment of anxiety and depression (Andrews, Cuijpers, Craske, McEvoy, & Titov, 2010; Spek et al., 2007). ICBT involves the delivery of structured lesson materials presented online on a weekly basis accompanied by activities for clients to complete between lessons.

Despite the research evidence in support of ICBT, practicing social workers and social work students are not receiving training in Internet based forms of clinical intervention (Mishna, Levine, Bogo, & Van Wert, 2012; Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012) and specifically have little experience with the delivery of ICBT. In general, there has been little research focused on how to train students in ICBT (Mishna et al., 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to enhance opportunities for the delivery of clinically-based courses within the U of Regina graduate social work program, and to contribute to the social work literature by developing, piloting, and evaluating a graduate-level clinically supervised ICBT credit course that would allow social work students to experience and administer ICBT. A further goal of this research was to stimulate interest and critical thought about how to best train social workers in ICBT.

Method

Students enrolled in the Masters of Social Work Program at the University of Regina were given the opportunity to register for the course (SW840-001: Internet Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in Practice) during the Spring/Summer 2013 semester. Enrollment was limited to eight students in order to ensure that all students received appropriate clinical supervision.

Within the SW840-001 course, students were typically female \( n = 5 \); 71\%), Caucasian \( n = 6 \); 86\%), and were between 26 and 52 years of age \( M = 35.43 \); \( SD = 8.60 \). In terms of clinical
experience, over half of the students did not have direct clinical experience using CBT, or experience treating depression \((n = 4; 57\%)\).

Students enrolled in the class were offered the opportunity to engage in this research for bonus grades; and all agreed to participate. This course was offered in a modular format that included face-to-face delivery and direct ICBT Program training. Each student was assigned an e-client for an eight week period within the established ICBT Program and they were then provided with direct clinical supervision in working with those clients.

As part of the research study, the student participants each completed two telephone interviews that lasted approximately 40 minutes. The first telephone interview was conducted after completing the four-day in-person training component and the second interview was conducted at course completion. In each interview, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their perceptions of the content and delivery of the ICBT class.

**Data Analysis**

The data from the telephone interviews were transcribed verbatim using NVivo, a qualitative transcription tool. Themes were identified using Thematic Content Analysis, which is a method of identifying and assigning themes to qualitative data according to researcher interpretation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This type of analysis emphasizes the use of thematic codes and identifying the differences and similarities within these codes. The approach to conducting this analysis was guided by the principles identified by Elo and Kyngas (2008) and Braun and Clarke (2006), who described how Thematic Content Analysis is often used in health research. Specifically, an inductive approach to analysis was chosen whereby categories were derived from the data by transforming specific ideas into general concepts. This approach was chosen because of the lack of formal knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation.

**Results**

Students expressed a variety of general comments about the course as a whole, which were mostly positive. Students felt that the smaller class size allowed for a greater opportunity to ask questions, that the class hours allowed students to focus on the course material, and that hosting the class in a computer lab was instrumental in learning the workings of the ICBT site. The most helpful components of the course were identified as group work, in-class website practice, and clinical supervision. To this end, students stated that they gained a comprehensive knowledge of expressing their thoughts in words, an increase in their ability to use CBT
language to guide a client through concepts or exercises, and increased comfort with applied CBT skills (e.g., exposure, relaxation). Students enjoyed the ICBT experience because the messaging format allowed them extra time to consult CBT resources when replying to a client message and students enjoyed the ability to access the ICBT program from a variety of locations.

There was also a variety of critical feedback for the course overall. For example, students were confident about their ability to use CBT in the future but were hesitant to use unsupervised ICBT in the future. Students felt that they would feel better prepared to use ICBT if they had more client experience and received more supervision. Students also expressed that access to client assessment and intake information would have enhanced their experience because they felt that this information would help them to understand their clients better. Students were concerned with the heavy workload required for the class and reported that preparing for the training components of the class required excessive preparation (e.g., over 20 hours). Students felt that the multitude of assignments took up so much time that it hindered their ability to learn clinical CBT skills. As such, students recommended a decrease in the amount of assignments.

**Discussion**

Overall, the results of this research study provide positive support for a clinically-supervised social work graduate-level ICBT course, but also offer a number of suggestions as to how the course could be improved and further developed.

As a profession, social work is focused upon a blending of values and skills in order to assist individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance well-being (CASW, 2014). Within social work practice, collaboration with the client, and respect for the client’s choice drive interventions (CASW, 2014). This value base was reflected in the feedback offered by students whereby they indicated that intake and assessment information would have been helpful to them in working with their assigned e-clients.

As social work has continued to evolve, the profession has begun to embrace a shift from the exclusive delivery of in-person services, to include the provision of services through the use of technology and, more specifically, through the use of the Internet (Mishna, Bogo, et al., 2012; Raemer, 2013). The existing literature is awash with examples of the challenges and risks associated with the use of technology in Social Work practice (Fantus & Mishna, 2013; Finn, 2002; Rafferty & Steyaert, 2009; Raemer, 2013). There is, however, a paucity of research which
focuses on issues related to social justice, which may impact upon use of technology in social work practice and the inevitable creation of a virtual welfare state (Watling, 2012). Social work regulatory bodies across Canada and North America emphasize the critical importance of attention to ethics and risk management related to Internet-based social work practice (Rafferty & Steyaert, 2009; Raemer, 2013; SASW, 2012). Trends within social work education reflect these shifting demands (Mishna, Bogo, et al., 2012; Mishna, Levine, et al., 2012; Okech et al., 2012).

**Outcomes and Dissemination**

Following the initial delivery of this ICBT course for graduate social work students, the course is being offered for a second time during the spring 2015 semester. Registration for the course is now complete, and the course is full, with a wait-list.

One journal article has been submitted for publication to the *Journal of Social Work Education*. This article entitled: “Technology is the classroom: Lessons from teaching Internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy to social work students” is currently being revised based upon feedback from the Journal Editor and reviewers.

**Conclusion**

This study has resulted in the successful delivery of a clinically supervised ICBT course offered to MSW students as an collaborative initiative of The Faculty of Social Work, and the Department of Psychology. Student clinical skill levels, confidence levels, and overall perceptions of ICBT improved through completing the course, and students expressed increased interest in incorporating ICBT, as well as other technologically-based therapeutic options, into their own practice. While students did identify recommendations to improve the course, overall feedback was positive, and supports ongoing development of such courses within university settings, as well as within the context of providing continuing education and clinical training opportunities for social workers currently practicing in the field.

**References**


