

Running head: COUNSELLOR REFLECTION STUDY

Master of Counselling Project Letter of Intent:

Reflective Practice and Process in Distance Education

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October 12, 2003

Submitted to: Dr. Paul Jerry

This letter of intent proposes a study to explore the reflective processes and practices of students enrolled in a graduate distance education program in counselling. Rationale and implications of the study provide a basis for its need. Research literature calls for continued study in distance education delivery and the development of suitable constructs and models.

## Overview

### *Problem Statement*

An understanding of how students in a distance education program conceptualize reflection, how they enact reflective processes, and how these conceptualizations and processes facilitate counsellor identity development and an orientation to counselling summarizes the problem. A summary of research questions appears in Appendix A.

### *Rationale*

Counsellor ability to reflect on client and peer interactions and on personal development is a key competency (Pedersen, 2000). This competency contributes to how counsellors practice in the field and how they continue developing as a professional (Dempsey, Halton, & Murphy, 2001; Schön 1982, 1987). As counsellors develop awareness of their personhood and their “counsellor identity” (Marshall & Andersen, 1995), they often also gain increased understanding of the “value of their self-development as instruments in the counselling process” and this is an important area for further study (Rak, MacCluskie, Toman, Patterson, & Culotta, 2003). “Open-ended investigations” about how this process unfolds for counsellors requires further analysis (Marshall & Andersen, 1995). Development of personhood occurs both amidst a myriad of experiences, words, symbols, relationships, memories, and feelings across the lifespan

(Mahoney, 1994; Schön 1982; Sela-Smith, 2002) and against a backdrop of cultural and social forces (Mezirow, 1996).

Contemporary education programs geared to adult learners (Mezirow, 1985a, 1985b, 1996) that incorporate both asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) will continue to evolve within a cultural context defined in large part by technology. As this occurs so too must research about the impact of CMC on instruction and learning processes, self-identity development, and cognitive processes such as reflection (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000). In fact, studies often conclude that more research in the area of on-line learners' lived experiences of this emerging learning environment and the personal meaning learners assign these experiences is needed (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1995; Andrusyszyn, Yankou, Lethbridge, Weston, & Ostbye, 2002; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Davie, n.d.; Fahy, 2001). More specifically, a better understanding of how dialogic and transformative learning contributes to self-knowledge and reflection (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997; Mezirow, 1985a, 1990, 1997) within a CMC environment may lessen the conceptual gap about how students develop a counsellor identity and personal orientation to counselling. Chen (2001) reports the need for qualitative research to further assess synchronous learner interactions in relation to both learner characteristics and learning environments.

### *Implications*

Students of distance education programs, instructors, and those involved in curriculum design will benefit from the exploration of student interactions and learning patterns, an assessment of student reflective processes, and the role of technology in counsellor identity development. Enhancements to existing distance education programs

may result that promote both “student exploration and refinement of personal beliefs” and “self-awareness in counsellor theory formation” (Wong-Wylie, 2003, p. 135).

Open discussions about reflective processes may further foster an environment where students share personal learning and growth techniques. Study participants may adopt new reflective practices, revise previous ones, and become more confident in questioning how reflective process and practice fosters ongoing personal and professional growth and self-definition (Dempsey, Halton, & Murphy, 2001; Liimatainen, L., Poskiparta, M., Karhila, P., & Sjögren, A., 2001). Students’ abilities to incorporate new information into existing schema, to reflect on personal values, beliefs, and experiences, and to problem solve translates to their work with clients (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Pedersen, 2000). “Naming (Nystrand, 1977) and valuing the process are the first steps” (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 113) followed by ongoing invitations for “critical social consciousness to examine one’s personal theory of counselling” (Wong-Wylie, 2003, p. 134).

The analysis of this study’s outcomes in relation to reflective learning theory, transformative learning theory, adult education models, and developmental models may generate provisional models and theories for future research. Identification and development of theoretical constructs and models for distance education is timely (Chen, 2001).

### Method

This qualitative study embarks on an exploration of graduate students’ perceptions, conceptualizations, and experiences related to their personal process of reflection and counsellor practice. Overall research design and methodology is a combination of heuristic, naturalistic, and grounded theory approaches to exploratory,

descriptive research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Douglas & Moustakas, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guba, 1978; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The primary researcher, also a student in the same distance education program as the participants, acts as a co-researcher, collaborator, and interpreter in the interactive research process. A comparison of data analysis software (Barry, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schwandt, 1994) led to the selection of ATLAS/ti 5.0 (2002) as an appropriate fit for the research questions, data collection procedures, and analysis techniques (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992) of this study.

### *Participants*

Purposive sample selection (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) is appropriate. Students enrolled in the same distance graduate program in counselling will be requested to participate. All participants will be students of the Campus Alberta Graduate Program in Counselling. Participants may be in different years of the program that is delivered in two and three year formats. Participants will be treated in accordance with the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board ethical guidelines (Athabasca, 2003).

### *Design*

Participants respond to a general announcement posted in the program's main Web Site for program students and will be paid for their participation. Prior to participant involvement, participants will be requested to complete a *Written Informed Consent Form* (Appendix B) and a *Demographic Sheet* (Appendix C) and mail these completed forms to the researcher. Self-addressed stamped envelopes and blank forms will be

mailed to all participants in advance of the study. Participants login to a discussion forum by entering a user name and password (both the user name and password are the same for the primary researcher and participants) to ensure confidentiality. Initial questions (Appendix D) will be posted by the primary researcher to generate discussion in the asynchronous discussion forum. The discussion forum will be run for 14 consecutive days and participants will be requested to post daily. Following the two-week discussion forum, verification of findings will be made between the researcher and participants individually in live (synchronous) private chat rooms available through the program's web site. The primary researcher will maintain a daily journal (Appendix E).

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Atlas/ti software will generate data for analysis of key themes and relationships among themes. Constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the data will invoke an analysis to examine individual units of information and facilitate the formation of a descriptive model. To ensure the reliability of the data recordings, verbatim transcripts, researcher journal notes, raw data including notes made on transcript printouts will be maintained throughout the study comprising a type of "audit trail" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Credibility will be ensured in two ways. Analyses will proceed directly from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and a research supervisor well-versed and experienced in understanding the content and context of participant responses will be selected. Appendix F provides a summary of how the equivalents of validity and reliability will be established (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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## Appendix A

### Research Questions

#### REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROCESS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

1. What does 'reflection' mean to individual graduate students?
2. What learning processes do students use based on their personal meaning of 'reflection'?
3. What is the role of distance education in the development of a personal meaning of 'reflection' and the personal experimentation of this meaning?
4. How do personal meanings of reflection, personal learning processes, and computer-mediated communication contribute to the development of a personal orientation to counselling?
5. How is the practice of counselling influenced by students' learning experiences in a distance education program?
6. Additional research questions may be generated following participant involvement in the study.

Appendix B

*Written Informed Consent Form*

Research Study Title:

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROCESS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Researcher:

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Research Purpose:

*The purpose of this research is to explore how graduate students in a distance education counselling program conceptualize reflection, how they enact reflective processes, and how these conceptualizations and processes facilitate counsellor identity development and an orientation to counselling.*

When participating, you will be asked to discuss your views, experiences, ideas, beliefs, values, and meanings about reflective processes and practices as a student and as a counsellor. As well, you will be asked to share your personal learning and growth experiences, ideas, and techniques. All of this discussion will take place in a confidential on-line discussion forum where the primary researcher, you, and other co-researchers participating in this study login to a secure discussion forum with a user name and password.

As a co-researcher, you are being asked to be involved in the following ways:

1. To complete a demographic sheet.
2. To post daily to a confidential discussion forum over a two-week (14 consecutive days) period.
3. To join the researcher in a private chat room once at the end of the two-week study for verification of personal themes and ideas.

Your involvement as a co-researcher in this study is voluntary and this means that you:

- May verify your transcriptions and representations of your experiences at least once to ensure their accuracy.
- May opt out of answering any question(s) at any point in time.
- Can withdraw from the study at any time either before or after consent of

participation. The information that you have shared with me prior to your withdrawal will be used only with your permission. If you decline this permission, I will destroy all written materials of conversations and destroy all verbatim transcripts.

I may use anonymous excerpts when presenting the research. Accounts in the study will not include your name; rather, you will be identified by a fictitious name, which will be assigned at my discretion. The information that you share will be used for research and educational purposes only and may be presented at professional conferences and through published works.

As a co-researcher of this study, you will have a chance to ask any questions concerning this study. These questions will be answered to your satisfaction prior to beginning and throughout your involvement in the study.

There are no known risks to individuals participating in this study and it will not affect your standing as a counselling student.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ certify that I have read (or have been read)  
(print name)  
and fully understand the above consent form. I agree to participate in this research and have a copy of this form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Co-researcher's signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher's signature)

Appendix C

*Demographic Sheet*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROCESS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Participant Code \_\_\_\_\_

**General Information:**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

First Language: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Languages Spoken: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Place of Residence: \_\_\_\_\_

Educational Background: \_\_\_\_\_

Month/Year Started in the Campus Alberta Graduate Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Specialization Area (e.g., counselling, school, career, art therapy):

Appendix D

Initial Questions to Generate On-line Discussion

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROCESS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

1. What does *reflection* mean to you?
2. What comes to mind when you think about *reflection*?
3. What gets you reflecting?
4. How do you reflect?
5. How does reflection help you? If at all.
6. How does counsellor training and education facilitate reflection?
7. What are some personal examples of reflection?
8. How does computer-mediated learning facilitate reflection for you? If at all.



Appendix E

Primary Researcher Reflexive Daily Journal

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROCESS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

<b>Date:</b>	Emerging Themes, Patterns, Words, Phrases	Points for Clarification, Info Seeking	Ideas for Posts, Questions for Next Day's Discussion	Researcher's Feelings, Attitude, Thoughts
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Entry #:				
Total Entries =				

Adapted from: Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Appendix F

Establishing Study Credibility

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROCESS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Criterion	Term	Method
Truth value	Internal Validity or Credibility	Prolonged engagement Persistent observation Referential adequacy Peer debriefing Member checks Use of referential material Reflexive journal
Applicability	External Validity or Transferability	Thick description and use of quotes Purposive sampling Reflexive journal Use of data analysis software Cross-checking data
Consistency	Reliability or Dependability	Dependability audit Reflexive journal Use of data analysis software
Neutrality	Objectivity or Confirmability	Confirmability audit Reflexive journal Explication of theoretical constructs Selection and use of data analysis software

Adapted from Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993 and Lincoln & Guba, 1985.