

A PEER COUNSELLING MODEL FOR COMPUTER-ASSISTED CAREER COUNSELLING

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Abstract

Peer counselling has become a common innovative feature in many school counselling programs. The authors have developed a model which combines peer counselling principles for use with a computer-assisted career counselling program. This student orientated model outlines a two phase training program and provides practical guidelines for implementation using the CHOICES system. The student peer counsellors are trained in communication skills to facilitate self-exploration, values clarification and decision making while operating within their own social network. The practicum sessions provide an opportunity to focus specifically on career counselling issues, to gain experience and familiarity with both the CHOICES system and current literature, and to achieve competency with life/career planning skills. This model is designed to assist the school counsellor in implementing CHOICES into an overall career counselling program.

Résumé

Le counselling par les pairs est devenu un aspect novateur commun à plusieurs programmes de counselling en milieu scolaire. Les auteurs de cet article ont mis au point un modèle qui allie les principes du counselling par les pairs à ceux d'un programme de counselling vocationnel par informatisation. Ce modèle orienté sur l'étudiant décrit un programme de formation en deux phases et fournit les grandes lignes d'implantation à l'aide du système CHOIX. Les étudiants appelés à faire du counselling auprès de leurs pairs suivent un entraînement aux habiletés de communication afin de faciliter l'auto-exploration, la clarification des valeurs et la prise de décision en intervenant auprès de leur propre réseau social. Le praticien leur offre la possibilité de se centrer spécifiquement sur des problèmes de counselling vocationnel, d'acquérir de l'expérience, de se familiariser avec le système CHOIX et avec les écrits courants et de devenir compétents en termes d'habiletés de planification de la vie et de la carrière. Ce modèle vise à aider le conseiller en milieu scolaire à appliquer le système CHOIX dans le contexte élargi d'un programme de counselling vocationnel.

The addition of new technology and computers into the arsenal of the school counsellor has increased the number and type of students that can be reached. The dilemma

that school counsellors face is trying to integrate a computer-assisted career counselling program, such as CHOICES or Student Guidance Information System (S.G.I.S.), with their current counselling activities (Cassie, 1979). Students are also under tremendous pressure because of the economic conditions that prevail in Canada today. The problem which students face is epitomized by Toffler's

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(1980) statement that most of the jobs which exist today did not exist thirty years ago and will not exist by the year 2000. According to Venn (1964) it is not so much a case of a new set of social and economic relationships, but an accelerated rate of change in the employment world. These sudden changes in the world of work have complicated the task of schools and according to Flanagan (1969), schools have not been able to implement effective career education programs as a result. Super (1969), Minor (1970), Harris (1972), Rayman (1978), Turgeon (1979) and others have documented the positive effects that computer technology has on the career counselling process and career education-programs. The result has been the development and implementation of S.G.I.S. and CHOICES computer-assisted career counselling systems. The Ontario Ministry of Education has developed S.G.I.S., an indirect-inquiry system, that assists the student to gain specific information on occupations and training, while CHOICES, developed by Employment and Immigration Canada (1979), is a direct-inquiry system that allows the student to get the same information as an indirect-inquiry system does, but with the additional interaction-conversational quality of the computer. Both these computer-assisted career counselling systems provide current and specific information on today's multitude of occupations.

What this paper postulates is that a peer counselling model can be applied to computer-assisted career counselling specifically with the CHOICES program. Peer counselling has been used successfully with a variety of populations since the late sixties (Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972; Carr, McDowell, & McKee, 1981). This paper, therefore, presents a model of training and implementation of a computer-assisted peer career counselling program using CHOICES.

The Peer Counselling Model

Peer counselling is based on the notion that students generally seek out other students for help when they are experiencing frustrations, concerns, worry or other problems (Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972). Carr and Saunders (1980) describe the peer counsellor as a person who is willing to listen and talk to others about their thoughts and feelings and genuinely cares about others. A peer counsellor uses communication skills (empathy) to facilitate self-exploration, values clarification and decision-making to help others within his/her social network. The training sessions

provide the opportunity for role plays, large group and individual work. The students help each other learn by using the feedback model and sharing in the planning of the sessions. The actual counselling sessions are described by peer counsellors... "as a chance to really talk, to say what is on your mind to a friend that will listen and understand" (Carr, McDowell, & McKee, 1981).

The training of peer counsellors is in two phases (Carr & Saunders, 1980). The first phase consists of (1) teaching communication skills; (2) relating one-to-one and to a group; (3) discussing relevant counselling topics like motivation, family relationships, deviation from the norm, career interest, part time jobs, future planning, and problem solving. The second phase consists of a practica training experience where the participants first practice the skills with each other using personal issues, then with real clients with supervision and feedback. Students are encouraged to give each other feedback both on their skills and on their personal interactions. They are taught to be specific about the other person's behaviour, to describe how the person's behaviour makes them feel and to tell them what these feelings make them want to do. This practice helps the trainees to recognize and demonstrate effective methods of giving and receiving feedback. The practica also provide opportunities for review of skills and seminar discussions on issues of the group's particular concerns.

Evaluations of peer counselling programs have been very positive (Hamburg & Varenhorst, 1972; Carr & Saunders, 1980; Carr, McDowell, & McKee, 1981).

Training Computer-Assisted Peer Counsellors

The structure of the training group should be small, perhaps 5-10 in a group with a trainer or supervisor for each group. In organizing the group, consideration should be given to the participant's school schedule. Meetings after school, during lunch, or through a guidance class are possible options. Another possibility is to meet on a few Saturdays during the first weeks of the school year using a marathon approach. It would be important that students meet regularly to develop consistency and cohesiveness as a group throughout the training period. The trust that develops between the group members facilitate the learning and practicing of communication skills. Hamburg and Varenhorst (1972) suggest that groups later be

assigned to meet with a new group so as to allow them the opportunity to have additional experience meeting and working with new students.

TABLE 1

Computer-Assisted Peer Career Counselling Paradigm

	Components	Number of Sessions
E V A L U A T I O N	Computer Issues	2 sessions
	Practicum	10 sessions
	Life/Career Planning	5 sessions
	Communication Skills	8 sessions
	Computer Experience	2 sessions
	Decision Making	3 sessions
Sessions = 40 minutes to 2 hours		

A. Decision Making Exercise

The training can begin with a simulated decision-making exercise. An important recommendation that Cassie (1979) made in his analysis of CHOICES and S.G.I.S. is that the teaching of decision-making skills to users before they use S.G.I.S. or CHOICES can greatly enhance the effectiveness of computer-assisted career counselling. One effective decision-making exercise is Varenhorst's (1968, 1969) Life Career Game. The game not only serves as an ice breaker, but also introduces students to career counselling problems. Essentially, trainees working in dyads help plan the life of a hypothetical person. Another option for practicing decision-making would be Bantsch and Sandmeyer's (1979) decision-making worksheets. The activity takes the students through the process of making a career decision. This experiential approach assists students in gaining an understanding of the decision-making process. This could then be followed by sharing and discussing the experience with the larger group. McDowell (1981) reports on the benefits of having one trainee role-play a problem while the group of trainees act as counsellors. A five step decision-making model (Carr & Saunders, 1980) is practiced and students experience applying their communication skills to a career related decision. The group of peer counsellor trainees facilitate a fellow group member to work through a decision, such as a time conflict between a part time job and soft ball practices by asking open questions, reflecting feelings, using concreteness and

confrontation. The trainees then debrief their experience of the decision-making process by giving each other feedback on the use of their skills and the decision-making model. As a group the peer counsellor trainees discuss how to facilitate career decisions when helping fellow students.

B. Experiencing Computer-Assisted Career Counselling

The underlying assumption behind this activity is that trainees will be better able to assist their peers with concerns and frustrations by experiencing the career counselling process, with CHOICES, from beginning to end. Trainees are introduced to the computer terminal to reduce any anxiety about computers and to become familiar with the computer system. This initial computer experience should be followed by a complete explanation of the system and the CHOICES three-step counselling process. The CHOICES travel guide should be explained and completed using the handbook as a guide. Once the computer program has been completed, peer counsellor trainees could then review the print-out with the trainer. Understanding this process is important; therefore, thoroughly going through the computer print-out with the peer counsellor trainees is essential.

Finally, the peer counsellor trainees should practice explaining the computer system and the CHOICES travel guide to each other. These role-plays and feedback sessions which follow the peer counselling model (Carr & Saunders, 1980) provide the trainees with necessary confidence to function in the area of computer-assisted career counselling.

C. Communication Skills Training

In teaching the communication skills the first phase of the Carkhuff (1969) helping process can serve as a model of training. The first phase is an inward-exploratory process with the primary skills being empathy, respect, concreteness, self-disclosure, and confrontation. The training model itself could follow the Ivey (1978) micro-counselling single-skills approach. The micro-counselling paradigm consists of the following steps:

1. A five minute audio or videotape interview between a trainee and role-playing client.
2. Reading a manual that describes the skill to be taught.

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3. Presentation of video taped examples of experts, (i.e., trainer modelling).
4. Observation by trainees who compare their own work using a self-check list to the manual and taped presentation.
5. Taping of another five minute interview with a role-playing client, which is then reviewed by the trainer. The trainee continues practicing the skill until it is mastered and the next skill is approached using the same procedure.

D. Life/Career Planning Skills Training

The aim of this component is to help peer counsellor trainees have a better understanding of the career planning process, increase their self-awareness, and the need for flexible future plans. Besides exploring how individuals choose a career, trainees would work together on some or all of the following activities, facilitating each other's awareness of future planning:

1. Life Line: Trainees draw a life line divided up into the past and future. The idea is to look at what time remains for them and plan goals for their future.
2. Typical work day of the future: This exercise uses fantasy to help clarify values, life styles, and fulfilling activities.
3. Obituary: Here, trainees write an obituary of themselves. The idea is to reinforce the fact that the trainees have a large part of their lives ahead and still can do whatever they want to do with it.
4. Interest Forced Choice: In this activity trainees must choose among a variety of interests for the purpose of clarifying their interests. Activities are paired and the trainees are asked to choose one from each. Five interest areas are identified in this activity. At the end a matching list is given that will help identify five interest areas.

Temperaments: Trainees complete a chart that assists them to clarify personality characteristics with temperaments. Trainees learn to identify their temperament and the part it plays in a successful career choice. A group discussion following this activity will very effectively increase trainees' awareness of the importance of temperaments in career choice.

6. Understanding Aptitudes: The focus of this exercise is to help the trainees learn about different types of aptitudes. The procedure begins by brainstorming what aptitudes are. The trainee's list is then compared with the definition from the

Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations (CCDO) (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1971). Trainees then list their preferences on a chart with nine different aptitudes. A discussion and comparison of trainee's aptitudes concludes the activity.

7. Occupational Resources: Trainees should be given a review of the career related literature that is relevant to CHOICES, i.e., (CCDO), *Careers Canada*, *CHOICES Travel Map*, and *Student Workbook*, *Careers Canada Booklets*, *Computer-Assisted Peer Counsellor's Training Manual*, and any other career related material that is in the school career resource room.

8. Scavenger Hunt: The objective of this activity is to assist trainees in becoming more knowledgeable of occupations and occupational information. Trainees are paired into dyads and then given questions that ask them to find information in the career materials in Activity 7. Each dyad is shown a different set of questions. A time limit and prize will increase motivation in this activity. These activities would be done sometimes individually, or in dyads or in a group. After the activity the training group should discuss the correct usage of career information.

E. Practica

The goal of the practica component is to give peer counsellor trainees a chance to apply the skills and knowledge that they have gained in the previous components. The practica, supervised by a trainer or school counsellor, would consist of meetings on a regular basis for support and integration of the skills. Carr and Saunders (1980) suggest that the general focus be on skills such as feedback, confrontation, support, and problem solving. In addition, to the communication skills the practica should focus on career program information that would be helpful to the trainees, i.e., work experience, mentorship, and apprenticeship programs. Guest speakers and members of the community could be invited to act as resource persons on various work related experiences for the practica students.

F. Computer Issues

The CHOICES systems is a fairly simple system and the terminal is easy to maintain; however, there are certain tasks that peer counsellor trainees can do to insure smooth

operation. These trouble-shooting tasks include placing computer paper in the terminal; using the abbreviated form; preparing the terminal for operation; and all CHOICES control commands. From time to time the main computer terminal is inoperative and the CHOICES customer service needs to be called for assistance. Until the trainees become experienced this duty should be left to the counsellor or aide in charge.

G. Evaluation

Evaluation of the peer counsellor trainees is one of the most important components of the training program. Trainees should reach a minimum level of competence in the following: (1) empathy; (2) respect; (3) concreteness; (4) self-disclosure; (5) feedback; (6) confrontation; (7) support; (8) decision-making; (9) problem-solving; and (10) an understanding of confidentiality and a code of ethics. If a peer counsellor trainee experiences difficulty, more work on that particular skill would be required until mastery is gained. A trainee could also leave the program if the program could not meet the student's needs or seemed inappropriate for the student. The evaluation method employed should reflect the needs and goals of the school program. Written self-assessment, responses to video taped clients, live and audio taped role-plays or combinations of these would provide valuable evaluation methods.

Practical Issues

Recruitment of Students: Carr and Saunders (1980) suggest that it is more helpful if students identify themselves either through requests for volunteers or by nominations. Carr, McDowell and McKee (1981) selected students who were viewed by others as helpful. These students indicated their own interest in the peer counselling program and were nominated by peers, teachers, and counsellors. Any nominated students were interviewed to explore their perception of themselves as helpers. The trainees were selected on the basis of how they viewed themselves, their interest in the program, and nomination by others who viewed them as helpful. Many students are interested in counselling and psychology as a possible future career so they could be encouraged to volunteer. It may be possible in a school with a flexible curriculum that a course be organized where students who are enrolled in the course not only participate in the training, but also the on-going computer-assisted peer counselling program.

Time and Organization: The organization of the training program and the time of the program will depend on the needs and the number of counsellors and teachers involved. Students who have successfully completed the training can become teaching assistants and help train others. Carr and Saunders (1980) even suggest that a peer counselling program can be run by students.

Computer Terminal Time: One of the problems with any computer-assisted program is that flexible scheduling for participants is necessary. Peer counsellors for example can assist the counsellor during those times when there is a high volume of students going through the CHOICES program. One approach is for the counsellor to take the large group, then break it down into smaller groups led by the peer counsellors. Another alternative is to have peer counsellors assist their fellow students in the initial explanation and exploration of the CHOICES program leaving any direct counselling to the school counsellor.

Drop-In Centre: To help the computer assisted peer counselling program gain momentum it may be necessary to provide information for all students and staff. Newsletters, announcements and posters are some methods of providing information. Since the main task is to help the on-going career counselling program it is also important to consider ways of accommodating more students. Certain drop-in times could be set aside for this purpose enabling the peer counsellors to increase the number of students receiving assistance.

Administration and Staff Support: No new school program can be effective without having support from the school administration and staff. Not only could an orientation be organized for the CHOICES program, but also for a peer career counselling program. A clear outline of the skill development involved in the peer counselling training and practica phases is necessary. Keeping all staff members informed on the progress of the program will increase understanding and support. Asking for feedback and involving other staff members when possible will create enthusiasm for the peer counselling computer assisted program.

Fitting Peer Counselling into CHOICES' Three-Step Interview Process. The *CHOICES Counsellor's Manual* (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1979) suggests a three-step counselling process: the first step focuses on suitability to CHOICES and client preparation: the second

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step focuses on client goals, completion of the "travel guide" worksheet and introduction to the CHOICES terminal; the third step focuses on discussing the computer print-out and follow-up plans. The most appropriate place that the peer counsellor could fit into this three-step process is in client preparation, introduction to the CHOICES terminal, and just being available while clients are on the terminal. There are many possible approaches for using the peer counsellor with CHOICES, however, it depends on the needs of the school. The possible uses of the peer counsellor are endless.

Miscellaneous Notes: It should be emphasized that the peer counsellors are assisting by expanding services not replacing the school counsellor. Also, ethical issues such as confidentiality should be continually stressed and reviewed.

Conclusion

The ever increasing demand for counselling services has added new responsibilities to the tasks of the school counsellor specifically in the area of career development. Along with this increase in responsibility the issue of accountability has been added. Correspondingly innovative technology has come to assist the school counsellor. The development by Employment and Immigration Canada of CHOICES, an interactive computer-assisted career counselling approach, is one such innovation. To better utilize the CHOICES system school counsellors will have to adopt strategies that help them reach the student population effectively. The Computer-Assisted Peer Career Counselling Model is designed to assist the school counsellor in implementing CHOICES into career counselling. The computer games phenomenon illustrates the ease which students have with computers and to use this interest is only common sense. On the surface this model may seem like a very radical approach. Such issues as confidentiality, liability, operate computer system, and parental response to such an innovation may discourage the potential user of the model. The research cited, however, does not bear these fears out. Certainly the quality of the peer counsellors will reflect the quality of the selection process, training, and supervision, thus the school counsellor needs to pay attention to the quality of program preparation. The computer-assisted peer counselling model can bring the school counsellor into greater contact with a greater variety of students if it is used sensitively and intelligently with the needs of the school population in mind. Obviously more research needs to be conducted and it is hoped that

this paper will encourage further development in peer career counselling.

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