E-mail in Tertiary Counselling Services: the technology has arrived but have we?

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Abstract

Current use of e-mail in the counselling/advice of tertiary students is discussed. Issues connected with the use of this technology, such as security/confidentiality, effect on counsellors’ work practices, legal issues and the need for protocols for dealing with client issues via e-mail are discussed. Types of e-mail communication, such as whether the client is known or unknown to the counsellor, and whether informational or personal counselling content, are discussed. The opportunity and limitations of electronic communication for counselling services is discussed in the light of plans for increased flexible learning options in tertiary institutions. The importance of being prepared for an increase in electronic communication from students was stressed.

Introduction

The impact of advances in information technology can be seen in diverse situations: government departments, businesses, libraries, universities and health centres, providing benefits through the easy access of information. Interactive video conferencing is removing geographical barriers to services, as exemplified by telemedicine. It is now possible for a patient to be assessed and treated at the local hospital by a doctor at a major hospital. Patients and mental health professionals can see each other on a television screen.

The relaying of pictures and sound can be done via personal computers (Yellowlees and Kavanagh 1994). This system can also be used for educational purposes and has created new options for interactive distance education. The internet is proving very significant for distance education where lecture notes can be put online, library databases can be used for searches and tutorials can be held through computer conferencing (The Sydney Morning Herald, Monday, July 14, 1997) Another example of creative use of WWW for teaching was described by Mark Freeman, Senior Lecturer at UTS (1997). Mark Freeman trialled a web-based teaching programme which involved student conferences, staff-student interaction, questions submitted by students and answered by lecturer, optional quizzes that could be automatically marked and easy and consistent delivery of relevant resources.

E-mail is another product which is evolving with advances in information technology. It is frequently used in university environments and has many advantages in terms of cost, speed and efficiency of communication.

Within universities, counselling services are already receiving some e-mail communications from students. With advances in technology, the increasing computer literacy of new waves of students, and an expected expansion in flexible learning situations, there is likely to be a growing student expectation of counselling services via e-mail. Flexible learning will frequently involve patterns of attendance with extended periods away from the university, (see The Sydney Morning Herald, Monday July 14, 1997) when e-mail might provide a useful means of contacting university staff, including counsellors. We need to discuss the issues, practical, ethical and legal, involved in using this new technology, in advance of the expected increase.

Policy is needed for the appropriate, ethical use of this technology. For example, protocols exist for our face to face assessment and intervention with a suicidal client but what procedures should be applied if a suicidal e-mail communication is received?

With this in mind I recently canvassed opinion through the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA) e-mail list server and surveyed some of the relevant literature as a starting point for this discussion paper.
Uses of e-mail in counselling services as indicated by ANZSSA correspondents on ANZSSA network in april 1997

E-mail seemed to be most frequently used for ‘information giving’ rather than ‘personal problem counselling’. Clients who had difficulty accessing counselling services due to disability, being external students or living far from the university were typical examples of students who might use e-mail to communicate with counsellors.

Discussion of concerns expressed by ANZSSA members

Concerns expressed were grouped into the following areas.

- Security
- Impact on work practices
- Legal Issues

Security

Counsellors were concerned about the potential lack of confidentiality of e-mail communication and the lack of control over how counsellors’ messages could be used and therefore were avoiding communication of information which could be perceived to be confidential.

Fred Orr, Senior Counsellor at UNSW told me that, according to correspondence on a network of Counselling Centre Directors in USA, counsellors won’t even make an appointment for a client via e-mail because of security limitations and fears of litigation.

Some counsellors questioned whether there really was a greater security risk with e-mail compared to letters or telephone calls which can all be intercepted or get into the wrong hands. Perhaps it is the newness of e-mail that is encouraging us to question the constraints on its use while we are less questioning about telephone and letter communication which also deserve consideration. Best practice would probably dictate that we always ask a client’s permission to phone him/her and be very careful about material included in letters considering the potential for intrusive others to read a client’s letter. Where e-mail differs from phone calls and letters is in the potential number of unwanted recipients who could be involved.

Many of the users of e-mail, including counsellors, do not know enough about the technology to assess the security of the communication. Even a good current knowledge of the technology is not enough in itself. As technology is constantly advancing the knowledge we have today may be inadequate for tomorrow. The following discussion on the unreliability of ‘deletion’ to destroy all record of an e-mail message is pertinent to the issue of e-mail users not understanding the technology. List server ACADV Academic Advising Forum March 1996 quotes from an article by David Foster, Associated Press (Austin American Statesman’ 25/9/95) ”Suppose one worker sends an ill-considered e-mail to a colleague at 5p.m. The recipient logs on the next morning, reads the offending mail and immediately deletes it, then phones the sender and makes sure the original is deleted too. Problem solved? Hardly. They’ve forgotten about their diligent computer system manager, who makes backup tapes of everything on the system every night, then stores those tapes for years.”

Sipior (1995) pointed out that deleted messages are often archived on tape and stored for years. As part of university e-mail policy it would be useful to know about the storage of deleted messages as this knowledge might constrain users communications.

Encryption of e-mail messages, using software technology which allows users to encode messages so that only the intended recipient can read them, is some safeguard against unauthorised personnel reading the messages, but involves recipients being aware of the sender’s private- key or public-key, depending on the procedure. In most situations system administrators and other authorised personnel can view un-encrypted messages in the course of their work and therefore e-mail is not strictly confidential. However, it is not clear how great a risk this poses to confidentiality. It would
be helpful if organisations had an e-mail policy which specified the conditions under which e-mail correspondence might be viewed by administrators and constraints on their use of this access, such as penalties for unwarranted invasion of privacy. This would enable counsellors to better inform student users of security limitations from within the university, although external intruders such as ‘hackers’ remain a possibility. Other Internet Service Providers such as OzE-mail (OzE-mail’s Acceptable Use Policy) state that they may monitor subscribers’ accounts to determine whether Acceptable Use Policy is being followed. With ISPs being required by Federal Government to develop codes of practice on Internet material (Sydney Morning Herald 16.7.97) monitoring of e-mail is likely to be an issue for all ISPs. Even if we are absolutely clear about the likelihood of university e-mail messages being read we have no control over student subscribers to other ISPs and their privacy arrangements.

Passwords for users are an important security feature to ensure that the person sending the message is the person named on the e-mail address. Again we have no control over the security of sender’s access. It might be fairly easy, for example, for a family member to pose as the student via an e-mail message. Advances in technology which could provide sender authentication would be an important aid to security.

Because of the limitations in confidentiality and the capacity of e-mail messages to be forwarded to unknown recipients, it is advisable that, if a counsellor decides to communicate in this medium, extreme caution is used in making the message as unrevealing of the client’s personal issues as possible and to be aware that the message could be misused.

**Work Practices**

Some counsellors were concerned about the impact of a rise in e-mail communication on work practices. With clients to see, telephone calls to return and the peremptory blast of ‘you have new e-mail’ to attend to counsellors could begin to feel stressed, overloaded and fragmented. Clearly to be workable we would have to have some system whereby e-mail messages did not have to be attended to immediately. In terms of customer satisfaction it would be important that students’ expectations be addressed, that they be made aware that e-mail messages would be responded to as soon as possible but not immediately.

A filtering system for e-mail messages might help in terms of reducing workload. Matthew Webb, academic adviser, at Bowling Green State University (ACADV list server March 1996) discussed the use of an e-mail address in reception. Messages were then forwarded to the relevant person for response.

**Legal Issues**

Counsellors are expected to keep records of their contacts with clients as part of their professional discipline. Where litigation might be involved it would be important to have a full record which would include e-mail communications. As discussed by Barett Information Management Services (1996) e-mail messages are considered documents under the Freedom of Information Act (NSW), Evidence Act (COM) and the revised evidence Act (NSW) and therefore recognised as a legitimate source of evidence. This should lead counsellors to be cautious in their communications if these could possibly be used for litigation purposes.

As counsellors we have a duty of care towards suicidal clients. The protocol for dealing with suicidal communications on the e-mail does not exist. Assuming the sender did not want to be identified, if the counsellor did not make attempts to trace the e-mail sender would this be deemed negligent?

Another problem with e-mail is that the message receiver has no way of verifying if the sender is the person they claim to be, rather than someone using someone else’s e-mail address. Although it might also be difficult to verify the signature on a letter or recognise the voice on a voice-mail message, replying to e-mail has an immediacy which might allow someone falsely claiming to be the holder of the e-mail address to send and receive a message within minutes. For such a person to
attempt to intercept a written reply or a telephone call is a more difficult business. Could a counsellor replying to such an e-mail message be inadvertently breaching confidentiality and risking litigation? Technology which would allow for sender authentication would remove this difficulty.

**Discussion of different types of e-mail use in a counselling service**

**E-mail use where face to face counselling has taken place**

If possible it would be advisable to negotiate with the client how e-mail was to be used. This negotiation would involve what sort of information might be exchanged by e-mail and what sort of messages would be better communicated person to person or by phone or letter. Security limitations would be part of this discussion.

Weisband (1995) has pointed out that users grossly overestimate e-mail privacy. She states that “organizations that fail to articulate an e-mail policy to employees may lead users to believe they can say what they want.” Organizations that stipulate their monitoring practices encourage a more cautious approach in users who send fewer inappropriate messages. Likewise counsellors who warn users of the confidentiality limitations seem likely to discourage inappropriately revealing communications.

Counsellors needs are also part of this negotiation with clients and the counsellor would set up some arrangement which would not be overly stressful for themselves. It would be important for the client to know that messages would not be read or replied to immediately and that in urgent circumstances telephone communication is more appropriate.

**Counselling by e-mail**

Might there be some situations where counselling as opposed to information giving could take place by e-mail? The following vignette illustrates such a possibility.

Ex-client, John, has gone overseas as an exchange student. During his time overseas a crisis occurs. In considerable distress he sends his former counsellor a detailed e-mail communication. If the student was unable or unwilling to seek out local support, would the counsellor be justified in providing a supportive role via e-mail?

In my view it would be important to alert the student to the confidentiality limitations of e-mail, but if the student was agreeable to taking that risk, perhaps even with a faxed signature, this form of counselling might be an option. Technological advances may allow for the use of digital signatures in the near future. It would also be important for the student to know that messages could not be answered immediately and for the counsellor to have control over the scheduling of this work, which deserves as much time and thought as any counselling session.

It seems to me that e-mail counselling is no substitute for face to face counselling, where the communication is immediate, where verbal and non-verbal aspects can be used and where an hour is available to thoroughly explore an issue. However, the changing face of tertiary education and specifically the increase in flexible learning situations, poses counselling services the challenge of providing information and counselling to distantly located students. One can envisage certain situations, similar to the case described in the preceding paragraph, where e-mail counselling might be feasible. Future technical advances might also diminish current confidentiality/security issues.

Interactive videoconferencing would provide a closer resemblance to face to face counselling as visual and auditory interpersonal cues are available for client and counsellor, however security considerations in terms of storage would also be important.

**Use of e-mail to access information from counselling service**

If we chose to expand our use of e-mail so that, for example part timers could e-mail the counselling service for information on university rules or procedures this would present a number of problems. Firstly, the student’s message would often have too little information in it to answer.
adequately. As we know from telephone counselling, the simplest requests often need careful questioning. The sender no longer being immediately available, no satisfactory answer could be given without time lags between messages sent and received. This would be very time consuming for the counsellor. Don Woolston, Assistant Dean from the University of Wisconsin conveyed a similar point to the ACADV list server regarding e-mail in March 1996: “It is not convenient and it does not save time......I get e-mails from students who want to know whether to drop a class...I get e-mails from students that have hit the wall and need some serious help. In many cases you have to respond sensitively, but with enough encouragement that you can convince them that it is worth the while to come in and discuss things in person.” He did however feel that students did appreciate this form of communication and that it did encourage timid students to come in personally. Secondly it is very easy for the student to slide into the more personal areas where confidentiality and security are again issues. One counsellor mentioned that lecturers had had to advise students to stop including personal information in their e-mail messages about academic matters because of security issues.

If an organisation had a central e-mail address from which messages would be transferred to appropriate personnel, it would be possible to send a standard message about security and warning of a delay in answering messages. Because of the time consuming nature of inquiring into and responding to the particulars of a student’s situation it might be better to respond with general rules but invite students to phone or come in person to discuss their particular circumstances. E-mail communication from students would also be an opportunity to cross refer students to relevant web sites which would have information pertinent to their queries.

Since many universities have several sources of information for students it might be preferable for a counselling service to contribute, along with other information providing agencies, towards the development of high quality information for students on university web sites. This would certainly relieve counselling staff of a time consuming task.

**Student initiated messages sent direct to counsellors where no prior contact has occurred.**

We are already receiving student initiated e-mail messages. In view of e-mail’s shortcomings regarding security it would be advisable for counsellors to preface any response with a warning as to confidentiality/security limitations. Users should be aware of whether computers have passwords, that messages can go astray and systems can break down. In some cases it may be advisable for clients to read and sign a document acknowledging their awareness of such limitations and perhaps an agreement that the counsellor is not liable if messages get lost or read by the wrong person. Susan Smith, ACADV list server March 1996 suggested that a signed waiver could be faxed to the counsellor giving the counsellor permission to give information by e-mail might be useful. This would ensure at least that students had given some thought to security/confidentiality issues. Such a waiver might be particularly pertinent if the counsellor chose to engage in more than brief non-personal informational communication.

In conclusion, my own research and feedback from colleagues led to the following suggestions:

- A message warning students about the security limitations of e-mail communication, could be sent with any response to student e-mail communication.
- University e-mail policy specifying monitoring practices and limiting circumstances under which monitoring can take place, to clarify the degree of privacy of e-mail from an authorised monitoring perspective and to safeguard users from unnecessary invasion of privacy.
- It is important to make e-mail communication as secure and confidential as possible, which would involve care in the wording of messages ensuring that they are not unnecessarily revealing, to safeguard against the unfortunate case where the message might be read by someone other than the intended recipient. Counsellors should maximise the security of their own computer via password access to their e-mail package.
E-mail communications should be treated as any other written communication in terms of record keeping and it should be born in mind that e-mail communications are considered documents under various legal acts.

We need to establish protocols for dealing with the various situations which might present via the e-mail.

It is important that we set up a way of using e-mail in a counselling service which is of overall benefit to the students and which is not too costly to the counsellors in terms of our stress and work satisfaction.

References
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