

Strategizing Counselling to Embrace the Provisions of ICT: A Rethink for Nigerian Academic Counsellors in Meeting the Challenges of an Information Era: Issues for Consideration

S. Y. Tsagem

Department of Educational Foundations
Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto
sheikhtsagem@yahoo.com

M. N. Batagarawa

Department of Education
Umar Musa 'Yar Adua University, Katsina
mnbatarawa@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper introduces what technology and information technology is with a synthesis of its contextual meaning in respect to the present usage. An application of ICT in the field of career information and guidance is also seen with respect to the phases of mainframes, microcomputer and the web. A classification of ICT based guidance resources has been discussed; self and opportunity awareness, decision learning, and transition learning. Highlight of barriers preventing the guidance practitioners from gaining e-Guidance skills has been given as lack of accredited programs that focus on specialized ICT training in guidance, lack of other organized ways of developing the ICT skills (knowledge transfer between the practitioners) etc. Hindrances preventing practitioners adopting ICT and obstacles preventing the institutions to provide training focused on gaining the ICT skills were also highlighted. Suggestions given were like recognition of prior learning for the guidance personnel with ICT expertise and incentives for them to train their peers and stay in the system and acquire new positions.

Introduction

Many observations were what raised the concern of how counsellors should do traditional things in new ways and thus, also call in the need for the clarification of new competencies for doing such new things. Such observations include:

One of the challenges that every guidance system currently faces is how to make the best use of ICT by guidance practitioners, particularly in providing services for their clients. The future holds challenges for guidance practitioners, and some of these can be addressed with the support of ICT. New technologies are a highly important part of every ones continuing professional development. How should we set about updating and improving guidance practitioners' initial training and continuing professional development? In which areas of work is their ICT training most urgent?

– CEDEFOP (2005)

Thus, counseling is defined in the International Encyclopedia of Education as "... the process involving interpersonal relationships between a counselor and one or more clients by methods based on systematic knowledge of the human personality in attempting to improve

the mental health of the latter". Counseling in education may be described as the interaction developing through the relationship between a counselor and a person in a temporary state of indecision, confusion, or distress, which helps that individual to make his/her own decisions and choices, to resolve his/her confusion or cope with his/her distress in a personally realistic and meaningful way, having considerations for his/her emotional and practical needs (Natrajan, Burman, Babulal, 2009).

The activity that takes place during the counseling sessions (face-to face contact programme) or through other electronic media, such as teleconferencing, or computer conferencing is termed as '*academic counseling*'. Academic counselling can be provided on a one-to-one basis also over the telephone over the internet or through letters and even during face-to-face contact with the counselor. Such activity is provided by an '*academic counselor*'; person who has a combined function of tutoring as well as counseling. In general, counseling is person specific, and also related to personal and individual needs. Ultimately we can say that counseling is student-centred, and communication is substantially from the student to the counselor. To be a counselor requires positive human attributes, such as warmth and ability to listen, together with the skills of using these in a variety of media, mainly correspondence, telephone and face-to-face situations.

The term technology nowadays is used in different situations and therefore requires an adequate conceptualization. Firstly, reference is made to information and communication technologies as part of the link between natural and technique science. Also, it designates the analysis of technological processes approaching with it the interpretation of reflection on the technical and thirdly, it is also conceived as a set of technical and / or procedures which objective is the production of objects or the generation of behaviours. The new way in which humanity interprets what it comes to know mainly through ICT, transforms fully the notion of know to consider at present that we are becoming a knowledge society (Castells, 2001).

Guidance services have been going through an era of innovation and rapid change due to the increasing use of ICT in counseling services as well as other parts of individuals' lives. ICT has enabled individuals to access career information and career choices easily and increased learning opportunities for all. Virtual guidance aims at increasing ICT based innovative counseling services and equipping counsellors with the competencies and skills they need to deliver such services. Furthermore, ICT has provided unparalleled access to information and tools for instruction and assessments regardless of time and location of the counsellors/client and has brought important changes in the delivery of counselling services. There is no doubt that the introducing of ICT competencies to the Nigerian guidance practitioners will enable them to deliver their services more effectively.

Thus, Watts (2001) as cited in Tsagem and Batagarawa (2012) pointed out that Information and Communication Technologies are transforming career information and guidance services, just as they are transforming service delivery in other sectors (e.g. banking and health services). The evolution of the application of ICT in the field of career information and guidance can be divided into four phases. The first was the *mainframe phase*, from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. A number of computer-aided guidance systems were developed which demonstrated the potential of ICT. But the costs of direct interaction with the computer meant that the only systems which proved widely practicable in cost terms were based on batch processing. The static nature of this process and the feedback delays limited the implementation of such systems. The second was the *microcomputer phase*, from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. The advent of the microcomputer made interactive usage much more economical, and also made it easier to develop and market limited software packages; its attractiveness grew as more powerful versions of the personal computer were developed. The result was a substantial growth in the number of computer-aided guidance systems, and in the

extent of their usage. By the 1990s it was difficult to find a guidance service in any developed country which did not make use of such systems.

The third was the **web phase**, in the late 1990s. The advent of the Internet meant that instead of free-standing systems located in career guidance centres, websites could be developed which individuals could access instantly from a wide variety of sites, including their homes. The ease of developing such websites produced a massive increase in their number; the ease of interconnecting them meant that they no longer needed to be viewed as discrete entities. Rather than perceiving ICT solely as a service from external suppliers, guidance services began to develop their own websites. The fourth is the **digital phase**, which we are now entering. The hitherto separate “analogue streams” of the computer, the television and the telephone are merging into an integrated “digital river” (Cunningham and Fröschl, 1999). Individuals are now able to access the Internet not only through their personal computers but also through their televisions and mobile phones. Greatly enhanced bandwidth will shortly enhance its speed and its capacity for transmitting video and audio as well as text.

Across these four phases, three key trends can be discerned. The first is increased *accessibility*. Whereas initially ICT-based career guidance and information services were available only at a select number of technically-equipped service locations, they are now available not only in most guidance services but also in a vast range of other locations – homes, workplaces, community locations. The second is increased *interactivity*. In the early stages, resources were developed as separate systems, offering only limited interactivity with users. Now, they are highly interactive not only with users but also with each other and across inter-media boundaries. The third is much more diffused *origination*. Whereas the initial computer-aided guidance systems were developed by large organisations with substantial resources at their disposal, anyone can now develop their own website. This has led to much stronger private-sector activity in this area, which in turn has implications for public policy.

Classification of Counselling ICT-Based Resources

ICT-based resources in the field of career information and guidance have been classified by Offer (1997) in relation to the DOTS model developed by Law and Watts (1977): self awareness; opportunity awareness; decision learning; and transition learning.

Resources concerned with *self awareness* are designed to help users to assess themselves and to develop a profile in terms which can be related to learning and work opportunities. These resources range from simple-self assessment questionnaires to psychometric tests; they also include more open-ended “brainstorming” approaches.

Resources concerned with *opportunity awareness* include databases of learning and/or work opportunities, with a menu of search criteria which enable users to find data relevant to their needs. The databases may cover: education/training institutions or courses; occupations, employers, or job vacancies; voluntary-work opportunities; and information on how to become self-employed. Some include relevant labour-market information on supply and demand. There are also some examples of work simulations which enable users to explore particular occupational areas in an experiential way.

Resources concerned with *decision learning* include matching systems which enable users to relate their personal profiles to relevant learning or work opportunities. The outcome is a list of the opportunities which match the profile most closely. Also included here are content-free decision-making resources designed to help users to explore options in a systematic way, balancing the desirability of particular options against the perceived probability of achieving them.

Finally, resources concerned with *transition learning* are concerned with helping users to implement their decisions. These may include support in developing action plans, preparing curricula vitae, completing application forms, and preparing for selection interviews; it may

also include help in securing funding for learning opportunities or for becoming self-employed.

Barriers Preventing the Guidance Practitioners from Gaining e-Guidance Skills

The main conundrum is how to time the introduction of new ICT-based methods so that they coincide with the readiness of young people and adults to receive information, advice and guidance in these new ways. What is clear is that the momentum for change is unstoppable – the public are becoming ever more sophisticated in the way they use ICT in their everyday and working lives; and that career guidance needs a strategy to catch up.

- ✓ Lack of accredited programs that focus on specialized ICT training in guidance.
- ✓ Lack of other organized ways of developing the ICT skills (knowledge transfer between the practitioners).
- ✓ Traditional professional and occupational standards that do not include ICT as a mandatory skill for guidance practitioners.
- ✓ Centralized framework for staff assessment in education (self-assessment tools bear no formal recognition).
- ✓ Very permissive legal framework where there is no compulsory training in ICT. There are no quality standards for using ICT in counselling.
- ✓ In most cases even the lack of equipment (printers, Internet connection or easy access to computer).

Hindrances Preventing Practitioners Adopting ICT

- Overloading with tools being unnecessary for accreditation.
- Assessing the skills that are only partially needed in counselling.
- No perspective of having the self-assessment resolution and the portfolio recognized by local / central authorities when the holder aims a job/ sector transfer.

- Lack of basic skills in handling the ICT equipment and no immediate training available.
- Inexistence of a link between the counsellor and the client, there is no portal enabling the client to contact a counsellor for an interview, (self) assessment.

Obstacles Preventing the Institutions to Provide Training Focused On Gaining the ICT Skills

In order to prepare students for the challenges they will face in future life, teachers and students should be able to use ICT in their teaching and learning activities, which may facilitate the development of new skills and high order thinking (Spencer, 1999). Thus the following were identified as barriers preventing institutions from providing training focused on ICT Skills:

- Insufficient trained personnel.
- Policy framework and perspectives.
- Capability on location (space design, cost of new equipment, etc.).
- The necessity to accreditate the program at the National Centre for Adult Vocational Training.

Suggestions

The role of ICT in guidance can be seen in three ways: as a *tool*, as an *alternative*, or as an *agent of change* (Watts, 1986). Policy-makers have often tended to view it in the first two guises: either as a supplement to existing services or a potential substitute for such services. But the wider emergence of websites and help-lines as forms of technically mediated service delivery means that the potential of ICT as an agent of change – paralleling the transformations in many other service sectors – is now far greater than before. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- ❖ Recognition of prior learning for the guidance personnel with ICT expertise and incentives for them to train their peers and stay in the system and acquire new positions.

- ❖ Lobby by professional associations, united by what they do and not by their background.
- ❖ Empowering and encouraging the communities to fund-raise and bring together creative energies, giving them a sense of pride and ownership over the results of such kind at the local level.
- ❖ Running a national training program in using ICT as a medium for practitioners supported from the budget.

References

- Castells, M. (2001). *La era de la Información (The Information Era)*. Madrid : Alianza.
- CEDEFOP (2005). ICT Skills for Guidance Counsellors Final Dissemination Conference. Author.
- Cunningham, P. & Fröschl, F. (1999). *Electronic Business Revolution*. Springer: Berlin.
- Law, B. & Watts, A. G. (1977). *Schools, Careers and Community*. Church Information Office, London.
- Natrajan, B., Burman, S., Babulal, S. O. (2009). *Learner Preference for Modes of Counseling - A Study*. IGNOU: National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education, India.
- Offer, M. (1997). *A Review of the Use of Computer-Assisted Guidance and the Internet in Europe*. National Centre for Guidance in Education, Dublin.
- Projects and Products Portal for Leonardo da Vinci (2009): *Developing and Delivering Innovative ICT Vocational Guidance Services-Virtual Guidance*. Retrieved from <http://www.adam-europe.eu/adam/project/view.htm?prj=7338>
- Tsagem, S. Y. & Batagarawa, M. N. (2012). *Issues in the Viability of Information and Communication Technology Based Guidance and Counselling Services*. A Paper Presented AT the 1st Annual Conference of the Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
- Watts, A.G. (1986). The role of the computer in careers guidance. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 9 (2), 145-158.
- Watts, A.G. (2001). *The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in an Integrated Career Information and Guidance System*. A Paper Prepared For an OECD Review of Policies for Information, Guidance and Counselling Services Commissioned Jointly by The European Commission and The OECD.