



School Counseling | In Print

For School Counselors, Technology Enhances the Human Touch

- By Margo Pierce
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Soft skill tests, college planners, and neuropsych evaluations are some of the traditional tools of the school counseling trade. Because school counselors have multiple goals--supporting and fostering positive personal, social, academic, and career development in students--they need a variety of resources at their disposal.

So you'd think counselors would embrace technological innovation that supports their students' development. But most seem to pass on opportunities to save time and money and to find new ways to reach out to children, parents, and educators by leveraging technology.

According to one academic expert in the counseling field, few K-12 school counselors use technology in their professional lives, despite the numerous digital guidance and counseling resources available. Russell Sabella, a professor of counseling in the graduate program at the College of Education at Florida Gulf Coast University and the academic in question, bases this estimation on years of experience working with school counselors during workshops, as a consultant, and through interaction with users of his resource-rich website SchoolCounselor.com.

Sabella says tech-resistant school counselors in his training classes are often intimidated by technology they do not yet know how to use and worry about losing the human touch that has been the foundation of their work for most of their careers.

"I have encountered that fear that technology is replacing something very precious and valuable, which is personal, human contact," he says.

That is not to say there aren't school counselors who find benefit in using technology in their work. There is evidence that counseling professionals all over the country take advantage of Twitter, Pinterest, blogs, websites, and mobile devices--but perhaps just not enough of them.

"Technology is a good fit for counselors," Sabella says. "Like counselors, who exist to help students meet their potential, technology provides us tools to help people achieve even beyond what it is they would have been able to achieve without technology. Our current generation is the most highly connected generation in the history of recorded time, and oftentimes...our face-to-face time is of a higher quality because of how it is we're able to stay connected when we're not face-to-face."

School counselors who do not get enough support from their administrators to use technological tools

may also fall behind. [Julia V. Taylor](#), dean of student services at Wake Young Women's Leadership Academy in Raleigh, NC, believes that leadership in the field of school counseling is sorely lacking, perpetuating misinformation that keeps school counselors from learning how to use technology effectively.

"Unless leaders are providing the professional development for technology and the opportunity to sit down and play with it and tinker with it and find out what goes well in the classroom, it's not going to happen," Taylor says. "Educators, administrators, and particularly ed reformers spend so much time talking about the disadvantages. I wholeheartedly feel that we *play* in technology, but our students *live* that world and they don't know any other way."

In fact, Taylor believes it so strongly that she says school counselors who do not take the opportunity to learn the new methods and means of communication--from Twitter and Pinterest to mobile devices like the iPad--are doing a disservice to their students. "You might not need to know how to program or code the HTML of a website," she says, "but you need to know where to point students."

The Social Counselor

Taylor wasn't always as tech-savvy as she is today. She says she learned via trial and error that tools like tablets and the internet can be a boon for counselors, provided the counselors focus on what interests them and at a pace they are comfortable with.

Twitter has a lot to offer even beyond extensive networking and ongoing conversations about counseling. Hashtags--clusters of keywords following a # sign--are used by communities on Twitter to follow and engage in dedicated, specific discussions. School counselors in particular can use the hashtag *#scchat* to connect with like-minded people around the country and the world on topics of import, sharing, for instance, links to articles in professional periodicals, instructional videos, vetted websites, and how-to tips.

At a school where she once worked as a counselor, Taylor turned to Twitter when her team was charged with the task of transforming an advanced-placement school fair that typically was not well attended. She learned how to create a virtual fair and a blog site that included short video presentations of teachers explaining their courses, the required materials, and how students could contact them directly with questions. The end result was increased participation by students as well as significant cost and time savings.

"Twitter isn't a place I go to say, 'I walked my dog today.' Twitter is the place I go to for professional learning," Taylor says. "I follow educators. I follow administrators and school counselors. We have a chat once a month where we share resources, articles, iPad apps."

Taylor's goal is to share what she has learned and to learn from others. In addition to her own Twitter account, Taylor maintains a website where she shares a recommended reading list and her favorite school counseling resources. She has also recently started using Pinterest, a site she believes has enormous potential for school counselors.

Pinterest serves as a virtual, visual-centric bulletin board where counselors can "pin" information, typically graphics and links, for others to view. The names of Taylor's boards reflect her approach to reaching other counselors: Her "Run the World (Girls)" board explores gender bias, empowering girls

to achieve their greatest potential, a healthy body image, and more. "School Counseling" offers links to games, projects, art therapy exercises, group counseling resources, and problem-solving tools. "Infographic Geek" lives up to its name, compiling an array of statistic-heavy, colorful posters addressing everything from education (e.g., the number of US colleges by state or the state of global K-12 spending) to when kids leave school (the role of Generation Y women in the workplace and the effect of education on annual income).

Counselors and other students can browse the boards and even "repin" graphics they want to share with their own communities.

Moving to Mobile

Andrea Burston, a counselor at JY Joyner Magnet Elementary in Raleigh, is also a professional development presenter in Wake County (which encompasses Raleigh), teaching her peers about the benefits of technology and helping them navigate cyberspace, even if that means wading in slowly.

"It's a gradual process," Burston says. "You start out with baby steps. I tell counselors, 'Instead of making a website--that's a lot of work--start out with a blog. Blogs are pretty easy --you write about what you're doing. You can post, you can go back and edit, and then you can build from there.'"

One of Burston's favorite tools is the iPad. She and an intern regularly use Google Docs on the tablet to compile data during classroom visits. After meeting individually with each student to do a check-in, Burston makes a survey in a Google Docs spreadsheet with all the questions she still wants to ask. Instead of walking back and forth to the computer in her office, Burston can input answers wherever she goes.

She's such an enthusiast she created her own [wiki site](#) of iPad resources and offers a local professional development class called "How to Use an iPad in Your School Counseling Program."

The benefit of portable technology extends to working with students too. School counselors assist students with a number of academic, social, and life goals. And there's more than one app for that.

The app Middle School Confidential 1: Be Confident in Who You Are is laid out like a graphic novel and follows six friends learning what middle school is all about. The app Hannah Rose Knows encourages kids to improve self-expression, self-confidence, and compassion for others. Still another of Burston's favorites helps kids, especially younger ones, express themselves.

"We have a student who has a sister who's sick with leukemia," Burston says. "She would get on the iPad and use an app called Puppet Pals, where you can write a story, make characters, and move them around. She made a story about her sister. It was very therapeutic for her to tell this story through this app."

In addition to providing a comprehensive list of apps on her wiki site, she collaborates with other school counselors to leverage technology. Later this year she'll participate with Sabella and others in a presentation at the annual [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\) conference](#) called "School Counseling Web 2.0 and Technology Smackdown."

To those who can't attend the physical event, Burston recommends an online forum from the

association called [ASCA Scene](#). More than 19,000 counseling professionals post and respond to questions daily. Queries about technology are a regular occurrence, and there are a number of downloadable files offered by forum participants.

As a former ASCA president, Sabella has direct experience with how the forum helps school counselors access best practices.

"School counselors are having daily discussions and sharing resources without the barriers of space, pace, or time," he says. "School counselors help develop comprehensive school counseling programs designed to help students achieve academically, socially, and in their careers. I see technology as a way for us to achieve and accomplish and succeed."

About the Author

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