

**“I use online so the counsellors can’t hear me crying”:
Creating design solutions for online counselling***

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Bios

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Abstract

This article reviews a project which has produced creative design solutions for the development of online counselling in collaboration with Australia's largest youth telephone counselling service, Kids Helpline (KHL). Our discussion focuses on the shape of interaction design research conducted against the dual background of young people's multiliteracies and professional counselling practice. Existing text-based communication tools already available for Kids Helpline's clients were integrated with graphical image-based tools, while engaging young people in problem solving and empowerment during online counselling sessions. The paper considers the fashioning of a conducive design and interactive communication environment for distressed young people and the independent evaluation of the new site design. Preliminary results are that young people report a greater sense of control and comfort in their net-based interaction with a counsellor.

Introduction

The internet has become a part of the everyday life and literacy of today's young Australians, as they become increasingly reliant upon computer-mediated modes of communication for their social interaction. This rapid growth in Internet use among young people is changing the way in which we conceptualise literacy. 'Electracy', a neologism coined by Greg Ulmer in *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* (2003), describes a new skill set that is emerging alongside oral and print literacies. New forms of 'writing' and 'reading' are taking form in the age of digital communications. Electracy is to digital media what literacy is to print.

The Kids Helpline (KHL) interface design caters for this new generational mix of hybrid, intertextual and graphical communication exchanges through the Web and other forms of digital media. This project's design and programming practice has operated to promote creativity, collaboration, user empowerment, and the cognitive capabilities required to critically read and interpret multimedia forms.

KHL recognised that the development of this kind of service delivery was aligned to young people's interests and strengths. Its online counselling service opened as real-time, text-based 'chat' between an individual counsellor and client in 2000. The immediate advantages of online counselling were identified as freedom from geographical and temporal restrictions (Suler, 1997). Further advantages identified by KHL include accessibility for isolated and housebound teenagers, anonymity and permanent records that provide opportunities for both client and counsellor review and reflection. The digital record also allows for in depth research of the counselling interaction – a feature regarded as important by KHL. The move to online counselling, however, presented new challenges on top of those generically posed by counselling-at-distance. For example, the information gained from voice pitch, tone and pace of speech is absent, making it difficult to express or assess emotions. This loss of emotional and discursive cues was the challenge addressed in the use of images and textures as 'cues' for and to clients' online storytelling.

Delivery of counselling online has provoked considerable debate in the profession. Many retain doubts about online counselling, but the majority acknowledge that it is something that clients increasingly seek along with other fundamental changes in communication and lifestyle. The President of the American Counselling Association, in 1998 (Lee 1998), noted that "to think that clients in the new century would not expect to access Internet counselling services is probably foolish and short sighted on our part".

Reviewing the debate, King and Moreggi (1998) concluded that
there are people in need of mental health services who can not or will not present for traditional therapy, and are using the Internet for interpersonal communications. This population is being served by the growing field of behavioural telehealth; psychologists and other mental health professionals who offer counselling by email and in chat rooms. The question of whether this should be done is now moot, there is no way to regulate the exchange of information on the Internet...As technology advances allow online activity to become even more integrated into daily life, many uses of the Internet that are today controversial, such as online therapy, will seem common place.

Kids Helpline is the only free, anonymous, 24 hour phone counselling service for children and young people in Australia, and is staffed by over 100 paid, well-trained counsellors. KHL receives over one million calls annually, and handles a further 10,000 (the figure is growing rapidly) online counselling sessions. There is evidence that online counselling is attracting new clients, not necessarily moving kids off the phone service, and that young people using online counselling have more serious concerns, stay in a counselling session for significantly longer than on the phone, and report a greater sense

of safety, anonymity, and control or parity in their interaction with a counsellor than on the phone.

KHL client data reveals that young people are five times more likely to seek help for mental health concerns, three times more likely to seek help about suicide and eating behaviour issues, and twice as likely to seek help for self image, sexual orientation and sexual assault online than by telephone (Kids Help Line, 2000; Kids Help Line, 2002). Issues with family, friends and peers, alongside mental health concerns, form the majority of problem types presented by young people in online counselling sessions (Kids Help Line, 2002).

Since the 2000 launch of online counselling, KHL's web counsellors have responded to about 10,000 young people, despite limited hours and no marketing. Since the launch of our project's first multimedia interface design in 2002, access numbers have grown strongly. In 2004, the site experienced a 35% increase in the number of contacts, a trend that is set to continue.

Interaction Design Framework

Art therapy has been widely used with adolescents. Riley (2001) states that art therapy is effective with adolescents who see it as a non-threatening form of treatment over which they have control. They will often produce material which is too risky to reveal or too embarrassing to relate in other ways. Riley notes that art therapy can be useful in supporting adolescents who are depressed, experiencing abuse, have poor self-esteem, or who have had social or academic setbacks. She states that adolescents are naturally attracted to making symbols and graphic depictions, and therefore can find it easier to communicate in this way rather than verbally.

Applying art therapy research, our project focussed on the need to develop interactive image-based counselling tools that enable young people to combine graphical means of communications with 'chat' text. The development of these graphical online tools is informed by traditional face-to-face counselling activities and include interactive sociograms (relationship mapping), genograms (family mapping) and life events charts (self mapping), bringing one of the fundamental principles of traditional counselling – exploration of relationships – into the graphical online environment.

Researching and developing a set of shared graphical tools that enable young people and counsellors to visualise and map concerns rather than simply type responses provides an important new dimension to the online counselling relationship. The design framework is client-centred, strengths-based, focused on narrative exposition and on jointly-generated solutions.

Before the counselling session proper begins (because of limited hours and longer sessions than by phone, online counselling has typical waiting periods of 20-40 minutes), the young person navigates a self-help rich media activity, modelled on a simple five-step problem-solving process used by KHL counsellors in standard phone mode. This process

identifies the issue and begins to generate a plan of action. Feedback shows that it helps young people focus both on the problem and possible causes and solutions before the counselling session commences. This interactive self-help activity takes into account the principle of Duty of Care by incorporating scales to measure the young person's state before and after completing the activity, and by frequently displaying alternative methods of reaching help, such as the 24-hour telephone number offered at Kids Helpline.

One element that has proved to be particularly successful is based on 'Strength Cards', and invites the young person to identify his or her strengths. This tool was included in response to counsellors' experience that distressed young people have a predominantly negative outlook on their outer environment and perceive themselves as very disempowered.

Once a problem-solving pathway has been navigated, the young person can print out a summary of all they have done and keep it, or they can choose to take it into the counselling session. This allows the counsellor to gain a quick insight into the young person's issues. Counsellors had reported that during a typical hour-long online counselling session the real problem often does not arise until 45 minutes into the session. This interactive problem-solving activity aims to focus both the client and counsellor far earlier.

Another innovation in the Flash-enabled interface design enables a shift of control from counsellor to client. A drawing space or 'whiteboard' and a visual 'toolbox', in addition to the established chat text area, aim to give the young person a sense of 'their space'. In the first iteration of the project's design interface, all visual tools were controlled by the counsellor and 'pushed' through at various times during the session. The current program gives all tools to the client at once. There is more choice in how they wish to communicate. A sliding bar dividing the word-based and the image-based modes of communicating can be dragged up or down the screen to give prominence to either.

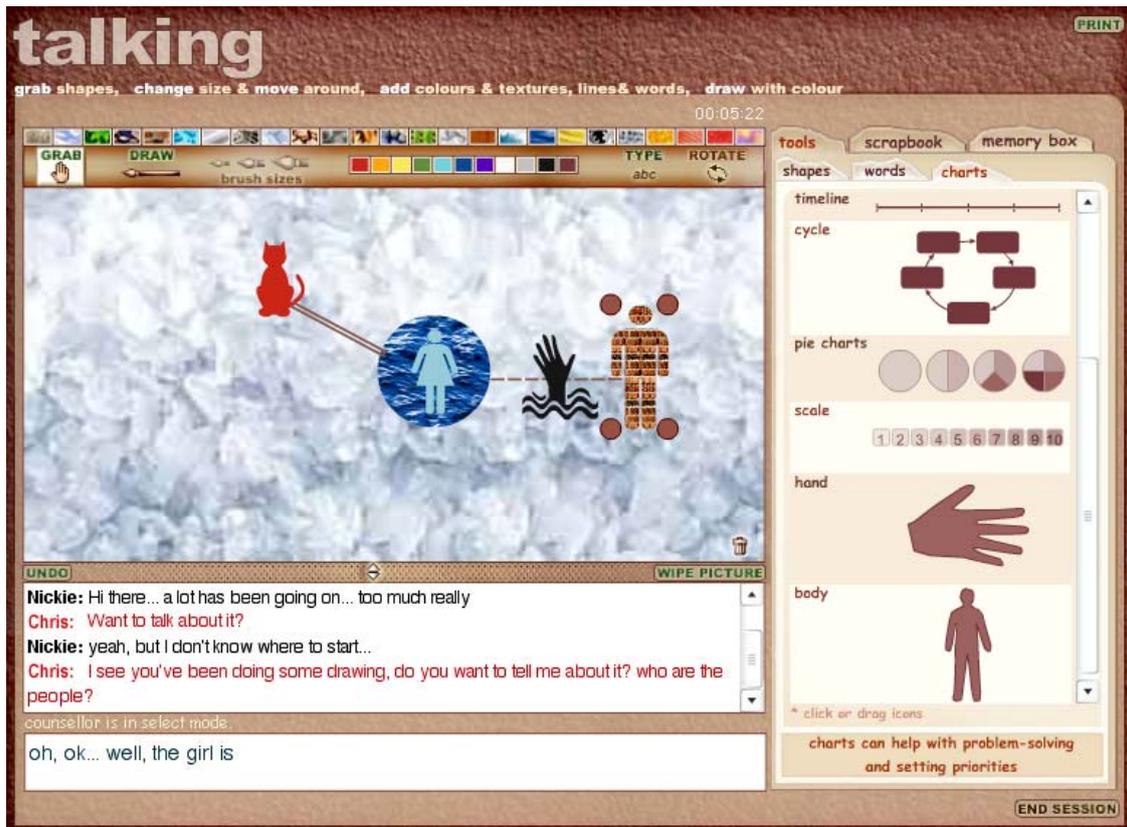


Figure 1. Flash Counselling Interface

The design framework maintains a broad continuity of style across the team's two iterations of the counselling environment. There is a naturalistic/earthy theme, using natural textures in warm brown colours as a backdrop. This created a 'neutral' backdrop for the Textures Tool, with which you can drop textures onto the background and onto individual icons and build visually bold, evocative images. The textures vary strongly in colour, brightness and 'feel', and are designed to interest young people in exploring the toolbox. The evaluation process suggests that these textures are effective in evoking details of the narratives being created by the clients.

All textures were selected through detailed creative sessions with KHL counsellors. Each texture carries with it a layer of a potential emotional meaning. When the texture is chosen by the client and placed inside the boundaries of an icon, there is another level of complexity and depth added to the meaning and interpretation of the resulting image, which provides greater cues for the counsellor to investigate and build upon.

Individual tools: Icon design

The project's interaction design research was driven to create intuitive usability, because clients were likely to be in a state of distress. They must be able to focus on *their* issues rather than the program's design features. The project concluded that icons that *combine* visuals and text are most effective. For example, the Grab tool icon, which performs the

function of selecting, relocating and resizing any item inside the whiteboard, originally consisted of a simple image of an arrow. This was developed in line with conventions followed by most drawing software packages, such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Macromedia Flash and Macromedia Freehand. However, upon trialling it was concluded that the function of the tool was not evident from the image alone. The next version of the programme featured an enlarged and clearer icon complimented by a text label. The latest feedback shows the interface is intuitive and easy to use and there was no need for additional instruction.

Individual tools: Memory box

Evaluation of the first iteration of the project indicated that finding appropriate closure was an issue for client and counsellor alike. The ‘memory box’ is a way to end the online counselling session based on a structured way of saying goodbye in child psychotherapy (Cangelosi, 1997). The client can take something away from the session by which to remember the counsellor and to reflect on what transpired during the counselling session. This approach increases the efficacy of counselling by prolonging the effect of the positive feelings and affirmations developed during the online counselling session and lessens potential feelings of loss as the session closes.

The counsellor can compose a message to the client at anytime during the session and send these messages either one by one, or all at once, to the client. The messages can contain anything from quotes from the transcript, to affirming words, as well as images, which can be selected from a gallery accessible by counsellor. (Online counsellors maintain a list of appropriate phrases, images and affirmations in their repertoire of text/image). The counsellor may focus on parts of the transcript in which the young person has come up with a possible plan of action, or where he or she showed significant improvement in perspective and outlook. These options make the memory box a powerful tool in promoting by reflecting back client expressions of well-being and empowerment.

When the session is over, the young person may look over the messages, or ‘memories’, which are stored separately from all the tools on their screen. Memories can be printed and kept as a reminder of the session’s achievements.



Practice-based research method

While each production researcher fulfilled a specific pragmatic role, project management was based around a weekly production meeting. There, the gestating project underwent analysis and re-evaluation against stated research guidelines. Each team member would be invited to contribute their perspectives to the shape that the project was taking. For example, during the initial evaluation of a particular design idea, programmers could engage from three different perspectives: as programmers offering a technical feasibility report, as designers, potentially influencing designs solutions based on previous exposure to interactive digital environments, and also as users, being the first to playtest the idea.

The KidsHelpline counsellors and, through them, their clients, had an active role in researching and developing the online counselling tools. A group of counsellors - ten on average - made a commitment to meet with the research team every fortnight for the period of several months during the concept development stage. Entitled 'counsellor creative sessions', the three-hour-long meetings were aimed at collecting data about KHL's existing online counselling tools that had been developed in Stage One of the project.

The outcome of these meetings often took shape with drawings on butcher paper, or lists of concepts, such as emoticons or ideas for textures. These were then digitised and documented, followed by the internal process of selection and production ready for testing. The final designs reflected the counsellors' input regarding appropriateness of the

tools to the counselling process. One example is the journey of the 'bomb' icon from the initial drawing by a counsellor as an item that allowed stronger expressions of negative feelings, through to it being included as part of the final selection of emoticons.

Counsellor creative sessions allowed the research team access to information that could not be accessed by other means, for example, through the published KHL infosheets. Counsellors' first-hand experiences helped paint a rich portrait of KHL's clients and their unique ways of expressing emotion in an online environment. The research team responded by reflecting these ways through different levels of design, ranging from the warm brown naturalistic colour palette to promote a peaceful and calm environment, through to the specific configurations of tools on screen such as in Simple Drawing, where main features include a large blank canvas and basic drawing tools, all of which aim to reduce on-screen clutter.

In all, four iterations of the Flash chat interface were built and tested. Prototype One demonstrated the original concept of combining the whiteboard and the chat interfaces; it was used to pitch the idea to KHL counsellors. Prototype Two introduced a number of simple tools and proposed the original configuration of tools on screen; this was used in project's first trial with counsellors and young people. Prototype Three focused on refining of the core functionality of the interface and also on fine-tuning the visual design; this was tested internally and findings showed that the interface lacked clear navigability. Based on this a decision was made to reduce the overall complexity of the interface and add a layer of strong action-based cues. This resulted in Prototype Four, which incorporated a different method of labelling tools and using clearer icons representing tool functions.

Independent evaluation

This project is distinctive in its integration of innovative creative content development and systematic psychological evaluation methodologies. The research takes an interdisciplinary approach, which draws on expertise from psychology, psychiatry, media and communications, interaction design and information technology. The project's first iteration has been in use since 2002 and has been the platform on which real growth of KHL's online service has occurred.

The method for prototype development and production of the second upgrade of the interface has been an iterative cycle of scripting, counsellor and client feedback, feasibility assessments, design, programming, alpha and beta testing, and revision. Counsellors have been involved in discussions of navigation flowcharts, interactivity, storyboards and scripts, and 'playtesting' early versions of the prototype. Feedback has had a significant impact on the development of the prototype.

A research team in the Psychiatry Department at the University of Queensland, led by Robert King and Matthew Bambling, have been researching the effectiveness of the web-based tools from Stage One of the project. An initial user evaluation of the Stage Two developments was conducted by Bambling in April 2005 and focussed on the navigability

and interactive potential of the site. The target group was twenty five young people aged between 14 to 16 years, forty percent of whom were female and sixty percent were male. The cohort was students of a middle income state high school on the outskirts of Brisbane, These students were not current clients of Kids Helpline. After simulated counselling sessions using the tools and navigating the screens, user evaluation data was collected from qualitative feedback to answers from questions to each individual student. As with earlier iterative cycles of design, this preliminary user evaluation data was then used as a basis for refining the graphical screen software before the team progresses to a full randomized controlled trial with KHL clients.

Feedback from participants confirmed information from design consultations with Kids Helpline counsellors. The functionality built in to the software, particularly the textures available on the whiteboard, was shown to be effective in assisting clients to express their feelings nonverbally. This is a key feature of this framework which is designed to assist young people comfortable with multiliteracies. Evaluation results are informing KHL's planning about further roll-out of online services

National and international context

In 2003, the Department of Health released Urbis Keys Young's National Review of Tele Counselling and Web Counselling Services. The review aimed to 'take stock of the expanding and dynamic sector' (2003: 3) and to describe the use, management and role of web and telephone counselling services. The report responded to the recognition that the rapid expansion of these services created a wide variety of service delivery and client and counsellor education issues.

Online counselling (synchronous and asynchronous communication online or through email between a counsellor and a user) is a small and innovative offering in Australia with nationally just over a dozen not-for-profit agencies providing services, mostly directed at youth. The advantages are the potential for geographical reach, accessibility, and early responsiveness. Many agencies reported that they are increasingly responding to a core group of individuals with ongoing mental health needs and loneliness. For Lifeline, less than 25% of callers were first-time callers, and across all of the agencies that were surveyed nearly 40% of callers had rung 20 times or more. Similar levels of repeat calling is registered in KHL surveys as well.

Urbis showed that phone and online counselling services are used frequently, both by the community and by healthcare agencies, and that they play a major role in managing vulnerable individuals with mental health problems.

Co-director of the Centre for Psychotherapy Research in Stuttgart, Germany, Hans Kordy, leads projects on the treatment of eating disorders via the use of online psychotherapy and conducts research in a wide variety of cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, process-experiential, interpersonal, family, group and narrative therapies. At a Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR) meeting in Brisbane, September, 2004, Dr Kordy argued that one of the most significant outcomes of the use

of online counselling is that it allows for early intervention in a client's issues. This need for early responsiveness shaped the design framework for the problem-solving component of the KHL interface.

Given the development of communication technology, consumer empowerment, and the infrastructure, workforce, and capacity in the web and telephone counselling sector, there is an expanding role for these services in delivering flexible, evidence-based, cost-effective help to the community.

Researchers at the Centre for Applied Psychological Research at the University of South Australia report one of the most effective differences between online and other forms of counselling is the opportunity to promote an on-going processing on the part of the client of what transpired in the session. John Court (2004: 4) notes that 'experience has shown that this substantially speeds up the efficacy of the counselling process'. Court also emphasises client reporting that the most satisfying mode for online counselling is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), both of which are enhanced by clients 'writing' their responses and their narratives (either in text or images) to the online counsellors.

Conclusion

In May 2002, the first iteration of the project team's rich media web counselling interface was launched by Kids Helpline patron, past Governor-General Sir William Deane. This was regarded as a major consolidation of the position of web counselling within its suite of services. This consolidation was based on the growth of understanding by counsellors that new models for producing therapeutic change, models appropriate to the medium of the Internet, needed to be developed as the organization responded to the needs of an emerging generation increasingly seeking social interaction online.

Advantages of the new modality include convenience, cost effectiveness, self-determination for clients, the reduction of inhibitors which may increase the likelihood of disclosure, the levelling of the power balance between client and service provider, the exciting new practice interventions such as art therapy, and the provision of a service to people who reportedly would not seek counselling otherwise.

The collaboration between Kids Helpline, the Queensland University of Technology design and programming team and the evaluation team from the University of Queensland is providing a model for rigorously evaluated, industry-relevant applied creative research that recognises the emerging needs of a new generation seeking help for mental health issues from internet-based therapy.

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