

Distant psychotherapy learning Leonardo da Vinci – Septimus Programme

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Summary

The aim of the SEPTIMUS programme (Strengthening European Psychotherapy through Innovative Methods & Unification of Standards) is the verification of possibilities of psychotherapy learning according to EAP standards via the Internet. Research and training centres participating in cooperation with Sheffield University in the SEPTIMUS programme included the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology (Warsaw) and Chair of Psychotherapy of Jagiellonian University (Cracow). A group of individuals in psychotherapy training licensed by Polish Psychiatric Association participated in 30 weeks of SEPTIMUS Internet activities. The participants were expected to read a virtual textbook on the programmes' website, to take part in weekly chat sessions and various discussion forums. The advantages and disadvantages of the programme in the context of e-communication theory were discussed as well as in relation to specifics of psychotherapy learning. An analysis of questionnaire feedback from participants was applied. In the participants' opinions, the SEPTIMUS programme may be considered to be a new experience bringing many interesting aspects into theoretical learning of psychotherapy.

Key words: psychotherapy distant learning, Internet and psychotherapy, e-learning

Through providing fast access to information and contact with individuals in all parts of the world, the Internet is being used increasingly. It creates new diagnostic possibilities in the medical field and enables highly specialized consultations, the monitoring of patients' status, collection of epidemiological data etc. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6].

Amongst others, significantly smaller accessibility of stimuli other than textual is specific for Internet communication. There are different consequences of asynchronous (offline discussion list) or real-time (online chat) communication. For example a correlation in fast typing velocity and domination in discussions online is often observed [7, 8].

In this context, the possibility of Internet psychotherapy is a controversial matter in which its effectiveness is rarely assessed [e.g. 9].

Psychotherapy on websites as well as via e-mail contacts or in form of online discussions all give rise to some deal of controversy [2, 10, 11, 12]. Lack of direct

contact with a patient limits possibility of using nonverbal signals. It makes interactions that require physically influencing the patient impossible, e.g. in cases of suicidal tendencies and facilitates avoiding commitment to therapeutic relation and resistance. Last but not least, there is a possibility of false presentation of incompetent persons as therapists and asking for counselling, thus simulating a need of treatment in purpose other than therapeutic [6, 10]. On the other hand, anonymity of an individual who asks for help on the Internet enables keeping the fact of such a need in private and avoiding consequences of social intolerance (labelling etc.).

Important application of the Internet is “distant learning” (e-learning) [13]. Advantage of this form of teaching is the fast and convenient access to new information for students.

Assessment of such a method of learning in psychotherapy training following EAP standards become the subject of a scientific project SEPTIMUS (*Strengthening European Psychotherapy through Innovative Methods & Unification of Standards*) conducted in 2002-2004 in form of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, supervised by Sheffield University. The research and training centres from eight countries which participated include: Great Britain, Austria, Czech Republic, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Italy and Poland (Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology and Chair of Psychotherapy CM UJ – coordinating the Polish portion of the programme). The main assumption was that in every country listed above 16 individuals would be trained in psychotherapy.

The teaching covered three domains: 1) health and well-being, 2) existential problems, and 3) conflicts in human life.

The first part focused on various definitions of notions of well-being and psychic health and included a review of basic philosophical issues connected to the assessment of those aspects. Those issues were discussed from perspectives considered by SEPTIMUS creators as physicians, psychologists, and economists. A spiritual point of view was also considered as well as interpersonal relations theory, values theory and other theoretical approaches, different from existential. The second unit was devoted to understanding a human from the existential perspective. Basic paradoxes of human nature were discussed: purposefulness of life and death, issues of loss and death, role of emotions in human life; sexuality and gender identity issues, social support importance, the influence of communication on social relations, influence of “transitional” situations and crises on change and maturation processes, relationships and meaning of child, partner relationship and parent roles. The third part involved an introduction to the issues of conflict theory, intrapsychic as well as extrapsychic conflicts, problems of boundaries, causes and consequences of social conflicts and violence, sexual harassment and influence of traumatic experiences on psychic health.

The programme was designed mostly for students not able to participate personally in psychotherapy training because of various restrictions such as disability, distance from educational institutions, taking care of children etc. and aimed at including in “distant learning” all the elements of professional education of a psychotherapist. Theoretical background of the leading centre (Sheffield University) is in strongest connection with the existential approach.

The aim of the SEPTIMUS programme was both to prepare didactic content placed

on the Net¹ and to assess utility of the didactic process based on systematic reading of the textbook and weekly discussions (chat) led by experienced psychotherapists (tutors). 10 weeks were prescheduled for each of the three units. The tutors were M.Siwiak-Kobayashi, M.D., Ph.D. and W.Simon, M.D., Dr.Sc. from the Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology; and A.Romejko-Borowiec, M.A. and J.A.Sobański, M.D., Dr.Sc. from Chair of Psychotherapy CM UJ. Tutors' responsibility involved stimulating participants to reflect on particular parts of educational material and promote their maximal activity during chat sessions. Content of chatroom sessions was archived and accessible for participants and tutors.

Participation in the programme required a sound knowledge of English and easy access to the Internet, especially in times prescheduled for meeting the tutor (chat session). Because of limited extent of training, in the Polish portion of the research programme the participants were recruited from students taking part in a parallel training in one of the several licensed postgraduate programmes aimed at certification by the Scientific Section of Psychotherapy of the Polish Psychiatric Association.

Activities associated with the SEPTIMUS programme enabled its participants to expand their ability of using the Internet environment: textbook and additional material (Internet library of Sheffield University) through system of "links", participation in chat sessions and contacts through a "discussion forum" (in Polish and in English).

The level of the participant activity was monitored by the use of personal logins and passwords. This provided information on the amount of time spent by everyone on programmes' website; chat meetings, discussion forum etc. (more precisely – how long individual computers were connected to the Internet domain of SEPTIMUS). Numbers of posts read and sent etc., as well as posts, which gained most attention and provoked most comments were also collected. At the end of every week participants answered three control questions (multiple choice), which were automatically assessed by the server. Their evaluation was subsequently returned to participants and tutors.

The Polish participants of the programme – psychologists and medical doctors variously advanced in psychotherapy, living far (more than 100 km) from educational institutions were divided into four, four person groups. Because of the needs of the research programme in 2003–2004, an additional group of seven students was also organised.

From the 23 participants only 16 completed the entire training programme. The high dropout rate (30% of the group) – resignation and discontinuation of participation was justified by an inconvenient time schedule, highly tiring professional obligations or personal problems (that made devoting many hours almost daily to fulfil course requirements impossible), loss of easy access to the Net etc. Six of the seven persons who dropped out continued however "direct" education in a psychotherapy course of the Polish Psychiatric Association.

At the completion of the programme, questionnaire surveys were distributed to determine participants' opinions on usefulness of the proposed way of education in psychotherapy and on its comparison with education during monthly weekend didactic meetings.

The questionnaires (see Appendix) were completed by 18 individuals, including all

¹ www.septimus.info

students who finished the entire programme. The survey consisted of two parts. In the first, education in direct contact with teachers (in terms of general psychotherapy PTP attested course) was compared to e-learning (i.e. SEPTIMUS programme). Second part of the questionnaire regarded assessment of the indirect learning programme limited to gaining theoretical knowledge in three domains listed above. Respondents assessed different aspects of the didactic processes on a scale ranging from 1 (minimum) to 10 (maximum). Resulting information is presented in table 1 and 2.

The majority of participants who were assessed, saw the possibility of gaining

Table 1

Results of comparison of indirect and direct education

Type of learning	M±SD	Me(Q1, Q3)	Min; max
onerousness of learning (time and cost of travelling, internet access, fatigue with activities, disorganization of personal and professional life with time spent on learning etc.)			
Direct	6.7±0.2 ^②	7.5 (6.8)	3-9
Indirect (internet)	4.2±0.2 ^②	4 (3.5)	1-9
usefulness of learning (type of information, ways of communication, contact with teachers)			
Direct	6.0±0.0 ^②	6 (3.25, 10)	7-10
Indirect (internet)	4.8±1.7 ^②	5 (3.25, 6)	2-8
expected adoption of knowledge (according to own activity, interest etc.)			
Direct	8.7±1.0 ^④	9 (8, 9)	7-10
Indirect (internet)	5.1±1.2 ^④	5 (4, 6)	3-7
difficulty of participation in education (general)			
Direct	5.5±0.7	6 (3, 8)	1-9
Indirect (internet)	4.0±0.3	4.5 (3, 6)	1-9
satisfaction with education (general)			
Direct	8.2±0.0 ^②	9 (8, 9)	8-10
Indirect (internet)	5.2±0.3 ^②	5 (4, 7)	1-10

M - mean, SD - standard deviation, Me - median, Q1 - lower quartile, Q3 - upper quartile
differences statistically significant: p < 0.002^①, p < 0.0002^{②③④}

knowledge via the Internet as less fatiguing than direct learning, that required many hours spent on travelling, hotel expenses etc. (difference of means 4.2 vs. 6.7 on the ten grade scale is statistically significant). However, four individuals (circa 22% of respondents) considered theoretical learning via the Internet to be more fatiguing than direct learning. At the same time all respondents considered indirect education as less useful than the more direct one (that was also reflected in significant difference of means).

Similarly, according to the examined participants, the extent of knowledge adoption

Assessment of indirect education in SEPTIMUS programme

Table 2

Type of learning	M±SD	Me(Q1, Q3)	Min; max
onerousness of learning (time, attention, programme requirements, fatigue, life disorganisation, Internet-based)			
onerousness of learning	5.1±2.6	5 (3, 6.75)	1-10
usefulness of the programme (value of information, way of communication, training of didactic skills, English language)			
usefulness of learning	6.4±1.3	6 (5, 7)	4-9
difficulty level connected with the use of particular elements of the SEPTIMUS programme:			
website (textbook)	2.9±2.1 ⊙	2 (2, 3.75)	1-8
Polish chat	3.3±2.2 ⊙	3 (2, 3.75)	1-9
discussion forum, international chat	5.8±3.0 ⊙⊙	5 (4, 6.75)	1-10
assessment of substantial value of didactic material			
Unit 1	5.9±2.0	6.5 (5, 7.75)	2-8
Unit 2	6.9±1.5	7 (6, 8)	4-10
Unit 3	7.1±2.0	7 (6, 8)	2-10
learning difficulty			
concern for with help (helpfulness)	7.0±1.9	6.5 (5, 8)	4-10
general assessment of SEPTIMUS programme	6.1±1.4	6 (5, 7)	4-8
possibility of replacement of lectures with Net activities	1.9±1.5	1.5 (1, 2)	1-6
possibility of learning intervening etc. via the Internet	1.9±1.1	1 (1, 2.75)	1-4
proportion of benefits and efforts connected to it	5.8±2.3	5 (5, 7.75)	1-9

M – mean, SD – standard deviation, Me – median, Q1 – lower quartile, Q3 – upper quartile
differences statistically significant: p<0.002 ⊙, p<0.01 ⊙

(as respondents prognosed) gained through e-environment was almost always (except for two equal grades) lower than that prognosed for traditional education.

General estimation of satisfaction with education in the form of a system facilitating direct contact with teachers was higher (mean 8.2 is significantly higher to mean satisfaction with education in the SEPTIMUS programme: 5.2) – still one person, in contrast, was more satisfied with indirect education and two participants equally estimated a level of satisfaction with both forms of learning.

As table 2 shows, participants' opinions on onerousness of the programme were very different (from very much to very little), but the mean assessment of its usefulness was a bit higher than its onerousness. Using a course website that functioned as an e-textbook, did not cause many problems and neither did chat sessions in Polish.

The use of the discussion forum proved most difficult for the participants - that might be related to rare and reluctant participation in forum both in English and in Polish (generally opinions on that issue were more differentiated than those regarding assessment of the website and the chat).

Participants highly estimated didactic value of the programme content, especially of the third unit, but those rates were also very different. All tutors were assessed as helpful in didactic programme implementation. Similarly, usefulness of the content

and way of learning was relatively high (mean 6.1) however general rate – taking into consideration not only type of information but also the way of communication and contact with teachers – was much lower (mean 4.8, see table 1).

In opinion of all respondents, Internet-based distant learning cannot replace education based on direct contact with teachers, especially when learning of establishing contact, understanding patients' statements and intervening are considered. Nonetheless, majority of students participating in the SEPTIMUS programme estimated that benefits gained from it outweighed the difficulties associated with participation.

No one took part in all of the 30 meetings in the Internet (chat), most participants were absent at some sessions but some were found to miss as many as 10, justifying it for instance with other important activities in the time pre-scheduled for those meetings. The excuses of absences, which seemed dominant often included technical problems e.g. Internet connection failure, chat server collapse, computer malfunction etc.

As results from participants informal dialogue with tutors, various formal aspects of the programme evoked different claims e.g. formulation of multiple choice questions. Protests were also evoked by the organisers' expectation that the tutors should prepare lists of present participants, calculate the rate of correct answers and number of posts on discussion forum etc., especially when improper assessment of answers by automated software occurred.

Discussion

In response to tutors questions regarding reasons for resignation, absences or almost passive participation in activities, technical problems with the Internet connections and difficulties with fitting everyday life activities to prescheduled (constant) timing of chat sessions, were most frequently indicated.

Difficulties independent from the participants, with logging to programme website were often reported to cause significant delays in beginning the sessions, time-consuming greetings and farewells, problems caused by temporary losses of connection etc.

Except from the technical problems listed above, Internet-based learning created various difficulties, probably specific to that way of communication. Those included shortening of interpersonal relations distance and high level of informality [7, 8, 14] causing enhancement of social aspects at the cost of professional ones. Frequently, during weekly discussions the focus on task-orientation was decreasing and problems with fulfilling the course requirements evolved. The way discussions were conveyed was also highly dependent on the technical aspect of connection and such traits of participants as ability to formulate statements while fast typing [cf. 8]. Perhaps this was the reason of the frequent appearance of parallel topics or unexpected disappearances of some important ones – that happened for example while addressing an answer to a question another student sent his/her answer in the interim or asked an additional question. It resulted sometimes in chaotic discussion and participants' frustration.

Main topics of discussions involved clinical implications of theoretical material, planned for chat in a particular week. To a large extent, these were based on experiences from therapies led by participants and tutors in their practices (full anonymity

of patients was a rule).

Some difficulties for tutors were caused by inability to control the activities of participants – it was never known e.g. if a participant who was not sending any comment in some time is still present at his/her computer, lost connection, only watches the discussion, or stopped writing due to problems with following the discussion etc. Phenomena observed are of course typical for discussions via the Internet [7, 8], but the unexpected problem for organisers and tutors that appeared was mostly passive participation of Polish groups in discussion forums proposed by SEPTIMUS. Instead of expected activity of minimum 3 posts or comments per week for 30 weeks (total 90 of statements), the most active Polish participants sent circa 10 posts. Data from the SEPTIMUS website show that this behaviour was very distant from that of participants from other countries.

Polish students most frequently justified their infrequent use of that option due to a lack of time. Such an explanation seems to be not very credible due to around the clock accessibility of the discussion forum from any computer with the Net. It seems that more probable reason was a limitation in English fluency, although this still cannot explain the infrequent use of a Polish discussion forum. According to participants the most important cause was apprehension of very limited benefits resulting from that form of communication in comparison to the amount of time spent at the computer or on obtaining Net connection. The efforts of tutors and administrative pressure (due to organisers' requirements) resulted in a temporary and small rise of participants' activity in both forums.

As mentioned at commenting survey results, participants differently assessed professional value of particular units of the SEPTIMUS programme, but independently of that assessment, the way it was presented was, in respondents' opinions, user-friendly and attractive. Constantly amended internet website of SEPTIMUS programme was designed and presented in an interesting way, facilitating "navigation" and information memorising.

The use of materials specially prepared for the programme did not cause problems for participants, but often there were obstacles related to lack of access to supplementary web sites, as inactive links or required payment for access to some additional information.

Typical for the Net [1] possibility to communicate with others in distant places was an advantage of SEPTIMUS that should be strongly underlined, e.g. one of the Polish participants took part in chat sessions during his stay in Africa. More importantly those advantages did not prevent numerous absences during chat sessions. As mentioned above – from the authors' knowledge – no single student took part in all 30 chat sessions. It may suggest limitation of the assumption, that indirect learning facilitates participation in education.

Participation in the SEPTIMUS programme financed by a European Union grant obviously did not require any payment from students, contrary to direct education in courses attested by the Polish Psychiatric Association. It is not possible to rule out, that the lower estimation of indirect learning and significant number of person resigning was caused by a lack of motivation connected to financial involvement.

Another advantage of the programme was its international range enabling exchange

of clinical remarks and confrontation of different cultural contexts. It is a pity then, that those potentials were not fully used because of reasons the authors are not able to explain.

Nonetheless, an undoubted value of participation in such a programme seems to be competency in Internet contacts gained by some participants, which was expressed by a wish to continue such relationships after SEPTIMUS termination.

Conclusions

1. "Indirect" (Internet applying) education in psychotherapy appears to be less useful than "direct" learning (reading, and especially taking part in lectures and seminars providing personal contact with teachers).
2. The biggest advantage of the SEPTIMUS programme was the edition of the Internet "textbook", despite the fact that it includes only a narrow scope of theoretical knowledge necessary for a future psychotherapist, and despite that searching for such data appeared to be sometimes more time-consuming than use of books and journals.
3. Internet discussions (chat and forum) were considered by participants as forms of limited usefulness in the didactic process, and necessity of requirement of pre-scheduling collective time of discussion (chat) made participation more difficult, similar to e.g. time schedule of lectures or seminars.
4. Intensity and task-orientation of Internet chat sessions appeared to be lower than similar discussions during seminars and the possibility to learn functioning in interpersonal relations much smaller as compared to direct meetings.
5. Experiences gained during the SEPTIMUS programme stand for necessity of education in psychotherapy in form of direct meetings of participants with psychotherapy educators. Internet based indirect learning may be however an excellent supplement to theory learning.

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Appendix – Questionnaire for participants

I. COMPARISON OF „DIRECT” LEARNING ON WEEKEND MEETINGS WITH LEARNING VIA THE INTERNET

put an estimate on scale from 1 to 10:

1. onerousness with direct learning (time and cost of travelling to meetings 1-2x per month, fatigue with activities, disorganisation of professional and personal life etc.)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

onerousness with indirect learning (time spent at the computer – reading, chat, accessing the Net, disorganisation of life, fatigue etc.)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

2. usefulness of direct learning (type of information, way of communication, contact with teachers etc.)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

usefulness of indirect learning (via the Internet) – as above

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

3. extent of prognosed adoption of knowledge from direct learning (e.g. due to own activity, interests etc.)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

extent of prognosed adoption of knowledge from indirect learning (as above)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

4. generally: extent of difficulties with attending direct learning

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

generally: extent of difficulties with attending indirect learning

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

5. generally: extent of satisfaction with direct learning

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

generally: extent of satisfaction with indirect learning

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

II „SEPTIMUS” PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT

1. onerousness of learning (time spent at the computer – reading, chatting, access to the Net, disorganisation of life, fatigue etc.)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

2. onerousness of learning (information value, way of communication, training in the Internet use, reading literature in English etc.)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

3. difficulty extent of using Internet website (acknowledgement with content)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

4. difficulty extent of using discussions (chat)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

5. difficulty extent of using other forms (discussion forum, international chat etc.)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

6. assessment of substantial value – content of unit 1

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

7. assessment of substantial value – content of unit 2

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

8. assessment of substantial value – content of unit 3

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low
9. assessment of tutor's help (usefulness)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

10. general assessment of SEPTIMUS programme usefulness (content and way of learning)

extremely high 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 extremely low

11. education via the Internet may replace learning on lectures and seminars

yes 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 not

12. In my opinion it is possible to learn establishing contact, understanding statements, intervening via the Internet (e.g. chat)

yes 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 not

13. the relation between benefits and effort related to participation in the programme, I assess as:

more
 benefit 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
 effort
 than

