

# UNLOQ

## Expert in Online Professional Guidance

For coaches, therapists, counsellors, HR professionals, mentors, supervisors and all other professional supervisors.

Whitepaper

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This whitepaper is an edited version of chapters from these four books:

Ribbers, A., & Waringa, A. (2015) *E-Coaching: Theory and practice for a new online approach to coaching*. Routledge. London.

Ribbers, A. & Waringa, A. (2012). *E-coaching: Direct aan de slag met het nieuwe coachen* (4<sup>e</sup> druk). Amsterdam: Boom Uitgevers.

Waringa, A., & Ribbers, A. (2018). *E-health: Handboek voor zorg- en hulpverleners*. Amsterdam: Boom Uitgevers.

Waringa, A., Soolingen, van, J. & Ribbers, A. (2020). *Hoofdstuk 7: Counseling, Coaching en Online interventies* in 'De Psychologie van Arbeid en Gezondheid', Bakker, A.B., & Schaufeli, W. (red.). Bohn Stafleu van Loghu. Attention: from 4th edition, June 2020.

### UNLOQ Campus

This Whitepaper refers to the GDPR -proof online platform UNLOQ Campus. Temporarily you can try UNLOQ Campus free of charge: with a Free Expert Online License: <https://unlog.org/campus>

## Summary

*This paper shows you how to get started with online guidance and treatment in a professional way. In chapter one we first dive into the fundamentals of counselling, where we see that a successful counselling program is one in which the client is motivated to learn and is willing to (psychologically) grow. In addition, the client must experience for himself that the trajectory is meaningful and achievable. An empathic counsellor is also needed to shape the process, be consistently present and provide support. If these elements are also included in online counselling, there is a good chance that this modern way will work just as well as the traditional face-to-face variants, or at least be a good addition.*

*In chapter two we show that online guidance is primarily about working remotely, which also makes the way of communicating different. The communication is no longer face-to-face, but via technical tools (medium), so we speak of digital or online communication. Online communication is different from face-to-face communication. This is because the medium used for online communication influences the intensity, frequency and duration of the communication and the working relationship (mutual relationship) between client and supervisor.*

*In chapter three we zoom in on various applications of online guidance. Depending on the chosen medium used to shape digital communication - image calling (video), telephoning, chat or e-mail -, different factors will play a role. These include frequent and short contact moments, social anonymity, asynchronicity in communication and the effect of writing.*

*In chapter four we present the ABC model for online guidance. This model can be used as a tool to convert existing models aimed at face-to-face guidance and/or treatment to an online variant. The powerful elements that make online guidance possible are combined within the various components of the ABC model. Especially the internalisation phase of this model, whereby the client circle and reinforcement circle help to shape the way in which an online counsellor can guide his client remotely.*

*In chapter five we combine the ABC model with our practical UNLOQ methodology for online guidance. Together they offer tools to facilitate the online guidance process and the associated online communication. The UNLOQ method consists of two consecutive processes. The first process comprises three steps in which the online counsellor analyses the client's communication. The second process comprises five steps in which the online counsellor designs his own communication towards the client. If you go through these steps in a structured way, it is easier to communicate successfully in an online process and to build a positive working relationship.*

*In chapter six we conclude this paper with an interview with a practical example from a professional. We have chosen to use the word 'counsellor' to refer to all those professionals that offer guidance in different contexts and with different purposes.*

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*In 6 short chapters in this paper, we show how online working can be used successfully, what is needed and how you can apply it as a professional.*

## 1 Standing on the shoulders of giants

Designing an online trajectory, online method, or online intervention: how do you do it? That is the key question this paper answers. In this chapter we examine what is important when developing a form of online guidance. Would you prefer to get down to the practical implications right away? Then go straight on to chapter 5.

To gain more insight into the important ingredients on which you can build an online counselling approach, we can learn a lot from the research that has been done into psychotherapy. This is a form of treatment for people with psychosocial problems and/or psychiatric disorders. There appear to be more than 500 different forms of psychotherapy (Lilienfeld, 2012) and this raises the question: which form gives the best results? This question has long been the subject of debate. An important perspective followed by many researchers in this field is the approach of the 'generic factors'.

### Generic factors

This approach assumes that therapy is mainly effective thanks to factors that recur in almost every form of therapy. These factors are therefore not specific to the therapy but are generic elements. This approach is also known as the "dodo effect" (Wampold, 2015). This is a reference to the dodo from *Alice in Wonderland*. In this scene all the animals have become wet, and everyone must get dry as soon as possible. The dodo turns it into a competition. All the animals are going to make themselves dry in their own way and when everyone is dry the dodo decides that everyone has done well. So, everyone wins and deserves a prize. This approach emphasizes that if therapy contains certain generic factors, it doesn't matter which form you choose, and therefore therapies are interchangeable. The three generic factors are:

- **Motivation and hope:** without the will to learn and (psychologically) grow, therapy will not get off the ground. In addition, the client must have the hope and expectation that change is possible.
- **Therapeutic working relationship:** an empathic therapist is needed who shapes the therapy, is consistently present and provides support throughout the process.
- **Therapeutic ingredients:** It does not matter exactly what the ingredients are and on which part of the client's life they have an effect (working more functionally, improving social relations, more effective emotional regulation), as long as they bring about healthy behaviour and let the client experience that his complaints can be interpreted from a certain framework and that it is possible to work on them.

Research among clients who did or did not recover after therapy shows that the success of therapy mainly depends on the therapeutic relationship and the characteristics of the patient and therapist. A good relationship between therapist and client, a motivated client and an empathic therapist seem to make the difference (Norcross & Wampold, 2011). The exact therapy does not seem to make much difference. Research into coaching and counselling (Anderson et al., 2009; De Sousa, 2014; De Haan, Grant, Burger, & Eriksson, 2016; Moyers & Miller, 2013) also shows that it is the (therapeutic) working relationship in particular that makes the difference in the success of a counselling trajectory.

### Summary

The knowledge and skills built up over decades within the therapy world plus the three generic elements - the motivation and hope of the client, the (therapeutic) work relationship and the therapeutic ingredients of the intervention - make a wonderful basis to build our online counselling trajectories on. In the next chapter we will discuss which issues you need to consider when setting up an online pathway.

## 2 Different forms of online guidance

In the previous chapter we looked at the generic elements which provide direction to shape an online guidance trajectory. It is also important to first zoom in on what we mean by online guidance.

Since the 1980's there has been an important evolution that has influenced the possibilities for counsellors and clients to be in contact with each other: digitalisation. The development of the internet, the ability to store a lot of data (in the "cloud") and the dizzying growth in the number of mobile devices allow people to be in contact with each other anywhere and anytime (Waringa & Ribbers, 2018). It is therefore logical that these developments also have their effect in the world of personal and professional development. Digital devices are increasingly used to replace certain elements in the face-to-face guidance process.

Digitalizing the communication and online support of various coaching activities changes the way in which a coach, counsellor or therapist can design his guidance. This is expressed in the following definition of online guidance:

*"Online guidance is a non-hierarchical development partnership in which the learning and reflection process takes place both analogue and digital and in which there is physical distance in the communication"* (Ribbers & Waringa, 2012).

This definition shows that online guidance is a form of guidance in which part of the guidance is digitalized. As a result, the client and the counsellor no longer need to come together and can communicate remotely.

### Guiding online is communicating online

Because communication takes place online using technical tools, we speak of digital communication or online communication. Online communication is inherently different from face-to-face communication. This has an impact on the experience, intensity, frequency and duration of the communication and the working relationship (mutual relationship) between client and supervisor.

The table below compares the different forms of online coaching on four characteristics compared to face-to-face coaching.

Type	Proximity	Visibility	Method of communication	Time
F2F coaching	Nearby	Yes	Spoken	Synchronous
Video coaching	At a distance	Yes	Spoken	Synchronous
Telephone coaching	At a distance	No	Spoken	Synchronous
Chat coaching	At a distance	No	Written	Synchronous
Mail coaching	At a distance	No	Written	Asynchronous

**Table 1:** Types of e-coaching compared to regular coaching.

- **Visibility:** in a regular face-to-face conversation, the client and supervisor can see, hear, observe and interpret each other's non-verbal behaviour. When the conversation partners cannot see each other, (a large part of) the non-verbal communication is lost.

- **Proximity:** in a regular face-to-face conversation, both conversation partners are in the same room. ICT tools allow for communication to occur remotely. This makes it possible to observe social distance (which is actually physical distance).
- **Form of expression:** communication can be verbal (based on words, e.g. speech or writing) and non-verbal (not based on words, e.g. body language). In face-to-face conversations, largely made up of spoken language, verbal communication is supported by non-verbal communication. In online counselling, the verbal communication can vary from mainly spoken (video calls and telephone) to mainly written (chats, e-mail and apps) with limited non-verbal communication.
- **Time:** when there is little time between a language action of the client and a reaction of the counsellor (or vice versa), we speak of simultaneous communication or synchronicity. This is the case with face-to-face conversations. The more time there is between the language action and the reaction, the more there is an inconsistency in the communication, i.e. asynchronicity. A response to an e-mail, for example, can take a long time.

The medium used for communication determines the characteristics of the communication. By medium we mean the diverse technology used to make the communication possible:

- Communicating via video connection (e.g. via Zoom/ Teams);
- Communicating over the phone (e.g. via a Mobile phone);
- Communicating via a chat program (e.g. via Whatsapp);
- Communicating via a mail program (e.g. via Gmail).

### Summary

Online guidance is primarily about working remotely, which also makes the way of communicating different. Communication is no longer face-to-face, but via technical tools (the medium), so we speak of digital or online communication. Online communication is different from face-to-face communication. This is because the medium used for online communication influences the intensity, frequency and duration of the communication and the working relationship (mutual relationship) between client and supervisor.

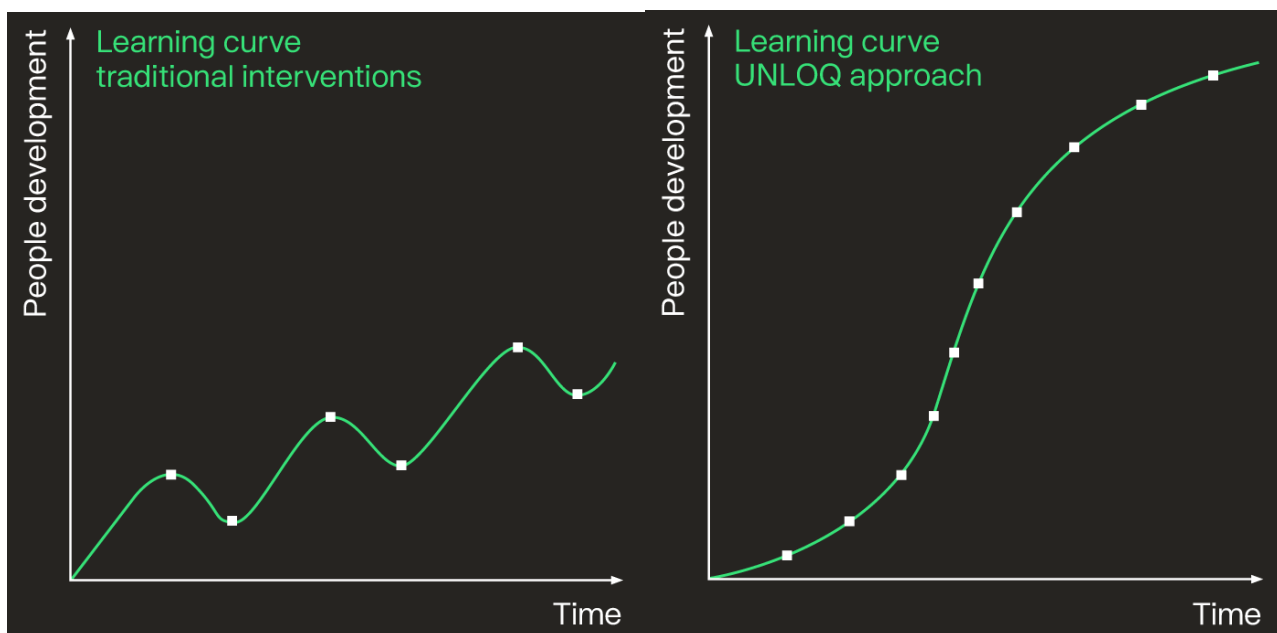
### 3 The power of online guidance

In chapter 1 we listed the three generic elements we should always consider when shaping an online guidance trajectory and in chapter two we showed that the use of a medium (ICT tool) influences communication. In this chapter we show how we can combine these two things.

#### *Small steps and many contact moments*

By digitalizing the communication and combining synchronous and asynchronous communication, it is possible to have more contact moments, for example several times in one week. This creates a continuous guidance dialogue in which the client is continuously invited to reflect and (inter)act. It also makes it easier to try out new behaviour in one's own relevant (work) context, at home or at work. The client is no longer 'let go of' between sessions, but can take small, manageable steps and report back online again and again, receive feedback and reflect with his counsellor. In this way, the counsellor stays closer to the client's development process and can adjust faster if necessary. In this way a steep learning curve is realised with online guidance. This is in line with generic ingredient 2: the consistent presence of a counsellor who provides support throughout the process.

The graph below shows the shape of the learning curve when there are more contact moments:



#### *Distinction between synchronous and asynchronous digital communication*

When digitalizing the communication, the supervisor can use two forms: synchronous and asynchronous communication. Digital synchronous communication can be done via telephone, video calls and chat. Video calling is very similar to face-to-face coaching, except for eye contact (looking at each other is not possible) and body language (only part of the torso and face are visible). In chats, the differences with traditional face-to-face coaching are even greater: although the client and the counsellor are present at the same time and react directly to each other, they cannot see each other and communicate in writing.

Online asynchronous communication goes a step further and is in many ways different from traditional face-to-face guidance. Client and counsellor communicate via written messages or video and audio recordings. This can be done by e-mail or in an online (learning) platform. Client and counsellor are not present at the same time during the conversation and do not respond directly to each other. This means that they can both follow their own schedule and start the online process as soon as it suits them.

### *Distinction between synchronous and asynchronous digital communication*

The form of online guidance using written digital messages (e-mail messages) has the following three distinguishing features compared to the traditional form of face-to-face guidance (Ribbers & Waringa, 2012).

- **Social anonymity:** given that in face-to-face contact the client and the counsellor can see each other, there is a chance that they exhibit socially desirable behaviour: the client does not fully open or suppresses his emotions (social inhibition). When the client can get started with his development without the physical presence of his counsellor, he is 'socially anonymous' and is less worried about how he comes across. This benefits the counselling process because the client can be more himself (Christopherson, 2007; Croes, 2010). The counsellor is also freer and plays a less socially desirable role. Feeling less inhibited in one's own behaviour online is also known as the 'online disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2016).
- **Asynchronicity:** communication is more asynchronous the more time there is between messages exchanged. Due to asynchronicity, the guidance is independent of time and place, which provides flexibility. It offers the client the possibility to have more control over the trajectory: he can determine the pace and time when he wants to get in touch with the counsellor. This has a positive effect on the client's self-reliance and self-efficacy.
- **Writing:** research into the so-called writing therapy shows that writing helps in structuring thoughts and contributes to cognitive and emotional processing of events. Moreover, writing leads to more self-insight, optimism, a sense of control and self-esteem (Burton & King, 2007; Pennebaker, 1997). Another advantage of writing is that it is written in black and white and can therefore be read back. This helps the client to anchor the insights gained and reduces the chance of relapse into old patterns (Murdoch & Connor-Greene, 2000). This connects to generic ingredient 3: therapeutic ingredients that have a positive effect on the functioning of the client and let the client experience that his issues can be worked on.

All the above factors contribute to the three generic elements (see Chapter 1) that underpin good online guidance. The factors 'motivation and hope' and 'the (therapeutic) working relationship' are strengthened by the continuity in communication and the freedom with which the client is engaged in his development. Finally, writing as a 'therapeutic ingredient' offers various advantages that have a positive influence on the online counselling process. The extent to which these different elements occur depends on the medium used and in which combination they are used. For example, mainly using video calling means that less attention is paid to writing and there is also less flexibility in communication (synchronous). In the case of online guidance via e-mail messages or within an online platform, communication is more flexible (asynchronous) and it is possible to take advantage of social anonymity. There is a lot of value in combining the different forms of communication in a single trajectory.

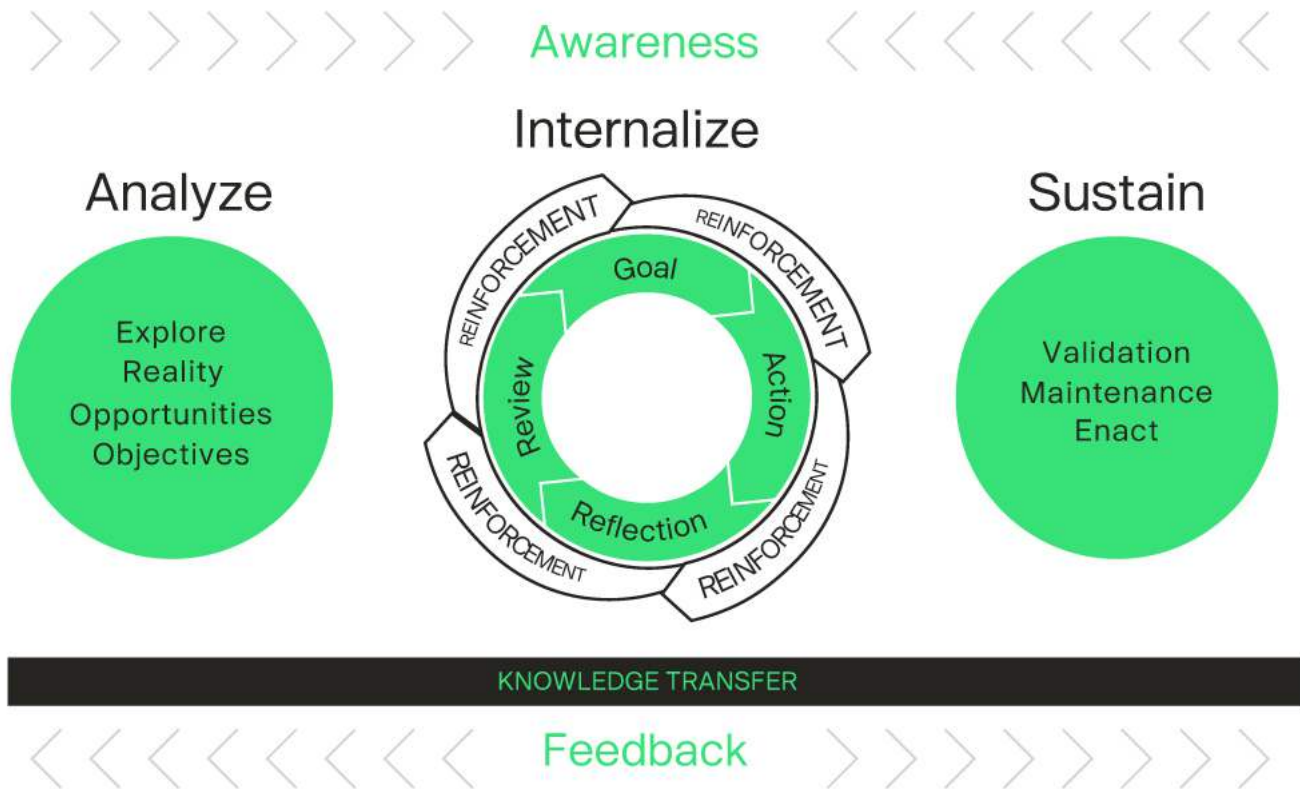
### **Summary**

Depending on the chosen medium of digital communication - image calling (video), telephoning, chat or e-mail - there will be a powerful interplay of factors. These include frequent and short contact moments, social anonymity, asynchronicity in communication and the effect of writing. These powerful factors each contribute in their own way to the realisation of one or more of the generic pillars that make online guidance successful. The skills of the counsellor as well the client's preferences will determine which medium is used at any particular moment.



## 4 ABC model for online guidance

The Accelerated Behavioral Change Model model (ABC model) is a process model that gives direction and structure to online guidance engagements (Ribbers & Waringa, 2012). This model is not a new guidance or treatment model but can be used as a template to support existing models. The ABC model helps to convert models that focus on face-to-face guidance and/or treatment into an online variant.



The model has three main phases:

### Analyze

The aims of this first phase are to chart the client's current situation, to determine how the client views this situation, to get insight into the possibilities the situation offers and to define and establish the desired situation (to establish the client's personal development goals). This phase is mainly linear by nature. Based on the following four steps, the developmental question is analysed:

- Explore: this is the exploratory phase - What do I want to achieve?
- Reality: How do I really stand in relation to what I want to achieve?
- Opportunities: What possibilities do I have to achieve the desired situation?
- Objectives: formulation of clear and achievable objectives.

### Internalize

In the internalisation phase, strategies and approaches are rolled out to achieve the objectives from the previous phase one by one in practice. This is done based on exercises and behavioural experiments. This phase consists of two process circles:

- **Client circle:** this involves practicing and acquiring certain concrete behaviours and/or skills that are necessary to achieve the desired goals. The circle consists of four steps: goal, action, reflection, review. These steps are completed circularly and are repeated if needed until the client has experienced real change and has internalized it. This phase is iterative in character: a result is achieved by repeating a process. The other characteristics of this phase are short process steps, frequent contact moments with the supervisor, regular reflection, daily practice, and many moments of feedback.
- **Reinforcement circle:** by performing an exercise in practice (behavioural experiment) the client gets a reaction from the environment. If the new behaviour is received positively, there is positive reinforcement of the learned behaviour. If the client experiments with new behaviour and does not receive a positive response, this may indicate that there is still room for improvement and if this is not done, there will be negative reinforcement. To prevent negative reinforcement, it is important during the first step of this phase (goal) to properly map out which (positive) situation is desired and which behaviour could create that situation. By means of short reactions and feedback using positive feedback, compliments and encouragement, the supervisor can stimulate the client to actually carry out behavioural experiments and to learn from the experiences. By showing recognition, affirmation, involvement and appreciation, there will be positive reinforcement, so that what has been learned is really internalized.

This internalisation phase, the second phase of the model, fits especially well with the possibilities of online guidance as described in previous chapters. The client can start to work in a focused way and practice new behaviours directly under intense and skilled guidance. The client makes small steps and more often and experiences successes that contribute to the actual development and internalization of the new behaviour. The successful experience is confirmed both by the environment and the counsellor.

### Sustain

Finally, a sustain phase (phase three) follows in which the client validates what has been developed and draws up a maintenance plan for his newly learned behaviour. This is the phase in which the sustainability of what has been learned from the online trajectory is safeguarded.

This phase consists of three steps:

- **Validation:** determining the extent to which what the client wanted to achieve and make his own has actually happened. Have the objectives been achieved?
- **Maintenance:** defining strategies and planning how to hold on to what the client has learned.
- **Enact:** continuing with what the client has learned, now without support.

Finally, the AIS model has three process elements that are to a greater or lesser extent continuously present during an online trajectory:

- **Awareness:** the client gets better aware of his own behaviour and of the environment in which the behaviour manifests itself,
- **Feedback:** continuous online feedback on communication and behaviour steers the development process,
- **Knowledge transfer:** the counsellor can make background information (psycho-education) available to the client, by means of articles and videos.

### Summary

The ABC model for online guidance is a tool to convert existing models that focus on face-to-face guidance and/or treatment to an online variant. The powerful elements that make online guidance possible are merged within the various components of the ABC model. Especially the internalisation phase of this model - with client circle and reinforcement circle - help to shape the way in which an online counsellor can guide his client remotely. The model also gives structure and direction to the dialogue that is characterized by frequent contact.

## 5 UNLOQ method for online guidance

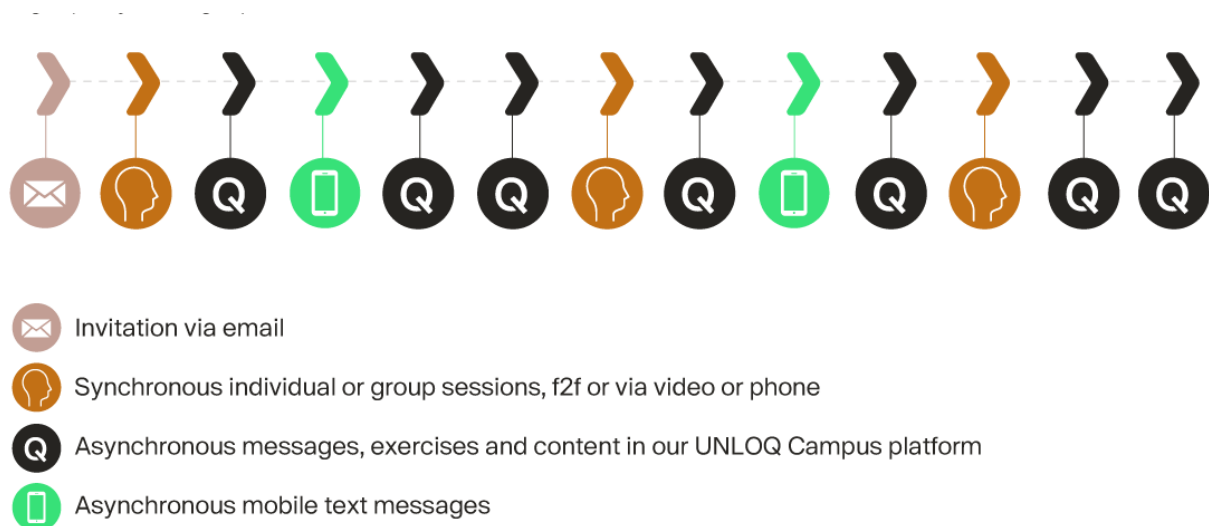
In the previous chapter we introduced the ABC model for online guidance. This model allows for the use and application of different methods and techniques. The big challenge for a professional practitioner or practitioner is to grow the skills they need to apply this model within their online guidance practice. After all, online counselling and treatment of clients has a different dynamic and a different form of communication (see also chapters 2 and 3). This includes questions such as 'how do you build a constructive relationship with a client online?' and 'How do you maintain a development-oriented and/or supportive online dialogue?'. To answer these questions, we have developed the UNLOQ method in line with the ABC model.

The use of the UNLOQ method is aimed at the online asynchronous and written communication elements within online guidance. If there is a blended approach, the method is very useful and mainly relevant for designing and shaping the asynchronous elements in the communication. We assume that the synchronous elements in online communication are taken care of through face-to-face exchanges.

### Blended guidance

We speak of blended counselling when face-to-face counselling is combined with online conversations. It is our experience that once clients get used to online counselling, the number of face-to-face appointments is reduced. A recent development is that clients no longer necessarily want to visit each other face-to-face, but that we also carry out face-to-face meetings digitally via image calling.

To make this possible, we use our own online platform ([www.unloq.org/campus](http://www.unloq.org/campus)) and other online communication tools such as ZOOM and TEAMS. See the figure below for how this can look like:



Of course, it is also perfectly possible to create a similar figure using other communication tools, treatment platforms and apps.

The UNLOQ method gives hands and feet to online guidance and it consists of two consecutive processes covering a total of eight steps (Ribbers & Waringa, 2012). The first process is analysing, comprising three actions necessary to analyze the client's communication. The second, responding, includes five actions that shape the online counsellor's communication. Some of the steps can also be used in forms of face-to-face or verbal online communication within an online trajectory. The last three steps are specifically aimed at online communication based on written texts, i.e. via e-mail, chat and text messages. See the figure below for the complete method

# UNLOQ Methodology

## Conscious approach of language and relation

Process 1 - Reading Communication from the client	
Step 1	Deciding to (re)act
Step 2	Formulating the acknowledgement/compliment
Step 3	Conducting thorough linguistic analysis

Process 2 - Writing Communication from the coach	
Step 4	Determine the core content (ABC model)
Step 5	Decide which medium to use
Step 6	Formulate the core content (language strategies)
Step 7	Structure the message
Step 8	Check the message (grice)

### Process 1: Analyze client communications

The first part of the process consists of three steps in which you analyse the client's communication. We assume that the first request is received via e-mail or another message form (platform).

#### *Decision to (re)take action*

In principle, communication starts with the client's request for help. In this initial phase it can be an exploratory question, prior to a possible treatment. It can also be an intake, which can take place face to face or online. It is important that you take your time.

We do not recommend viewing a message from the client quickly and reacting to it immediately if you are busy with other activities. We often see that online counselling is seen as something you do in between activities. However, it is advisable to schedule standard reading and writing time in your diary.

### *Formulation of an acknowledgement/compliment*

After you have decided to get started with the message, it is important not to analyse a message directly. Once you've analysed it, it's hard to find the distance you need to make a first positive impression. This means that you go through the message without analytical glasses and determine for yourself what you notice in a positive sense. This positive first impression is necessary to give content to one of the most important ingredients of your reaction to the client's message: giving a compliment or another form of recognition. What do you think the client has done in a positive way? What is remarkable about his commitment or the result he achieved?

You now formulate a compliment and/or acknowledgement that you will actually use later on in step 7. The positive affirmation of the client in the form of compliments connects to three important psychological basic needs - autonomy, competence, and connectedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000) - and connects to the three generic elements mentioned in chapter 1 that make counselling programmes successful.

### *Carrying out an accurate language analysis*

If there is a written message, the text is all you have at your disposal. The main question for the analysis is: what does my client want to achieve by sending me this message? If you can find the answer to that question, you can then take action to support the client in achieving his goal. Listening in online counselling requires an accurate text analysis for each message (Tannen, Schiffrin, & Hamilton, 2001). This is not a problem if a client has submitted a request form with a questionnaire or other information mapping out the purpose of the interaction with you. However, if there is only written communication without a clear indication or anamnesis, then as a counsellor you will have to carry out an accurate language analysis based on the written message (Tannen, Schiffrin, & Hamilton, 2001).

If the analysis is not carried out correctly, an adequate response is virtually impossible and as the you can easily be misinterpreted. In a face-to-face conversation, this risk is of course also present, but when things go wrong, this can be corrected much more quickly. You do not have that luxury in a written form of online guidance because of the asynchronicity of the communication. To analyse a message in a structured way and per sentence, you split it up into so-called speech acts (Searle, 1976). Speech acts are expressions which we use in written and spoken language to express an intention, a need, or a goal. All (written) text can be divided into speech acts. By analysing a message using language acts, you can look at the content of the message in a more objective way.

Searle distinguishes five categories of language acts (Searle, 1999):

- **Assertives:** the client provides information about his perception of and perspective on the situation,
- **Directives:** the client tries to influence your behaviour,
- **Expressive:** the client expresses his feelings,
- **Commissions:** the client makes promises or commitments,
- **Declarations:** the client makes activating statements.

By linking each sentence in a message from the client to one of the above speech acts, you systematically map out the client's intentions or needs.

### *Examples*

A message with several directives means that the client needs something from you and therefore tries to influence you. For example, he asks you a question, requests information or asks you to change your approach. In a message with a number of directives, it is important to investigate whether and how you can respond to the client's needs.

A client who uses a lot of assertives tries to make clear what his reality looks like according to his point of view. In this the counsellor will discover convictions, statements and conclusions. When using assertives that contain, for example, assumptions or beliefs, it is a challenge for the caregiver to 'give them back' to the client and examine them together.

In a business-like and impersonal message, there are few expressives to be found. However, a multitude of expressives gives a message a great emotional charge. It is wise to always pay attention to and acknowledge expressives. You can do this by explicitly naming them and asking for more depth or indicating what you are doing with them. The fact that you pay attention to them shows that you have noticed the expressives. This makes the client feel seen and heard.

You may also be able to find out what language actions are used in a message from your own initial response to it. For example, if you, as a care provider, notice that you are slipping into the helpline, and you find yourself wanting to support the client with explanations, advice or solutions, there are probably many directives and expressives in the message. It is up to you to consciously decide what you want to respond to.

## Process 2: formulation of own communication by supervisor

In the analysis phase, you chose a moment to start working with the client's message, formulated a compliment or gave recognition in some other way and subjected the message to a language analysis. In the second phase, you shape your response to the client's message: this is the online facilitator's most difficult task. What are you going to respond to? To which needs will you respond? What will be the core of your response? This (re)action phase comprises the following 4 to 8 steps of the UNLOQ method:

### *Determining the core message*

In the UNLOQ method, the needs of the client are paramount. As a counsellor, you make sure that the client stays on the path that has been mapped out. This path, or in other words the treatment plan, can be designed using the AIS model as discussed in chapter 4. Depending on the phase in the trajectory, the needs of the client and the request for help or care, you can now determine the preliminary core message of your response. What do you want to convey to your client? Would you like to ask further questions, bring the client into action, have him complete a certain exercise or assignment? In this phase, think about what the purpose of your reaction will be.

Note: it is not the intention to formulate your core message in full already, because you will first have to determine how you are going to convey the core message. How you do that is up to you in the next step.

### *Determination of the medium*

In this step you choose the most suitable medium. For example, do you send a text message, write an e-mail or call the client? Or is it perhaps wiser to schedule a face-to-face conversation or an appointment via videoconference? In chapter 2 we showed that the medium used to communicate with the client can determine the message and has limitations regarding the types of support you can offer with it.

Once you have determined the core message of your response in the previous step, you can now determine which medium you will use to communicate this message to your client. Depending on the client's message, you can decide which medium you will use for each response. Some examples:

Would you like to give the client the opportunity to converse for a moment in order to gain an accelerated insight into the situation or to take a few small steps? Then you can suggest chatting, calling, skyping or scheduling a face-to-face appointment.

Does your client mainly need a little encouragement or an incentive to take action? Then you can choose to send a text message or a short message via a chat app.

If you want the client to work on the theme independently, then deploy a specific app or send an online module that he can go through.

If you have a more extensive message and would like to combine it with an exercise, psycho-education or a video, you can choose to create an email message.

Once you have decided to express your reaction in a short text or chat message or to go ahead with a video call, you can go back to step five to continue to formulate your message. After that you can close this step-by-step plan. If you decide that the situation calls for a written response that cannot be conveyed in a short text message or chat, then you can continue with the next steps.

### *Formulating the core message*

In this step you will further formulate your response to your client. The formulation of your message determines the success of the process. In the course of the counselling process you will build a therapeutic working relationship with the client. The formulation of your message can strengthen or disrupt this working relationship. It is therefore essential that you choose the right tone for your messages. What the right tone is, is largely determined by the social distance that exists between you and the client. How connected are you with him? That is different for each contact. When making your choice, always keep the basic need for connection in mind. The closer you are to the client, the more directly you can formulate your message. Every client asks for an appropriate connection, everyone is different. When using your language, connect to the world of your client. If the relationship has started only recently, the distance between you and the client will be greater than at the end of the process. At the beginning it is therefore important that you dress up the text a little more with extra positive relational means. The use of so-called language strategies can help you with this.

### *Politeness theory and online communication*

Language strategies are central to the UNLOQ method and are part of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1997). Politeness theory provides insight into the way in which people take each other into account with their language use. This is not only about how you show respect and give the other person space (politeness), but also about how you make it clear that you find each other nice and sympathetic. The starting point here is that all parties strive for an equal relationship and try to prevent loss of face for either of them through how they communicate. The three groups of language strategies relevant to online counselling are (Brown & Levinson, 1997; Huls, 2001):

- **Refrain from replying (action):** in this case you don't respond or don't respond to all themes within a message. That might be a bit uncomfortable in face-to-face situations, but with online guidance it is a real possibility. In practice it turns out that it is not necessary to react to everything. Especially when, for example, the client writes long messages with few relevant digressions. The trick then is not to touch on certain things, to park them temporarily or not to get involved in discussions.
- **Immediately and without fuss:** this means that you're straightforward. It is a language strategy that is used in relationships in which the interlocutors know each other better, are close to each other, have already built up a relationship of trust and feel free to communicate more directly. This more direct form is also experienced as more personal and has a disinhibiting effect. The deployment of this strategy leads to participation, openness and honesty.
- **Directly with positive relational means:** at the beginning of a trajectory the social distance is greater and there may be unfamiliarity on the side of the client. That is why it is advisable to formulate your message clearly and unambiguously and, above all, let it contain information that shows that you take the client's needs into account and seek rapprochement with the client.

### *Directly with positive relational means*

The main group of language strategies aimed at reducing social distance includes helpful sub-language strategies that help you emphasize your own role as an empathetic and engaged facilitator. That is why we elaborate on these below. See the table below for these fifteen sub-language strategies.





Table 5: Overview of the approximation strategies to be used (Ribbers & Waringa, 2012, based on Huls, 2001).

In an online trajectory, in which mainly written communication is used to build a relationship, there is plenty of room to deal with language more consciously, strategically and efficiently. This also applies to a blended trajectory. There is more room to think about the language strategies to be used: which strategy do you choose and to which aim? Incorporate one or more of the above (or other) language strategies in your message reduces social distance and accelerates the rapprochement with your client.

### Setting up the message

In the previous steps, you analysed the client's needs and decided through which medium you would respond to his message. You also determined what content your response should have and what language strategies you would like to use. Now you will actually design the response. In the UNLOQ-method we use a standard setup to shape a written message (tool). A message has five fixed elements that together contribute to a smooth communication (Ribbers & Waringa, 2012):

- **Header:** the header of a message with a greeting, the date and time of sending, and the subject.



- **Opening with compliment** (acknowledgement): the greeting is followed by an introductory statement acknowledging the client's efforts. By invariably starting with a recognition or compliment, the client looks forward to your messages, because they give him positive energy and encourage him to keep busy with the process. This part has already been formulated in step 2 within the analysis process.
- **The core message**: the content of the core message has already been determined in the previous steps.
- **Final expectation management** (activating/motivating): here you indicate that it is the client's turn and let them know what you expect of them. It is tempting to sit back and simply wait and see if the client takes action. However, if you want to make maximum use of the advantages of online counselling, it is important to formulate clear expectations. The more attention you give to the execution of and the expected performance of a task, the more independent the client will be (Paxling et al., 2013). Try to formulate this as much as possible in a positive and stimulating way.
- **Finish**: finish with a greeting or a variation on the greeting. This makes it clear to the client that the message has been completed, that there are no loose ends, and that no information has been lost.

### Checking the message

The last step in the process is to check your own work. Although this is crucial, many supervisors skip this step. This has mainly to do with the fact that we are not aware of our own blind spots. In the UNLOQ method we therefore use a tool, the so-called maxims of Grice. These are four simple and clear maxims to make language expressions more functional and effective. The four maxims are applied to the online guidance (Grice, 1975) in the following order:

- **Relevance**: Is what you say relevant, do you go into the right content? Does the message meet the needs of the client? Does it contain a sincere compliment?
- **Quantity**: How strongly or weakly do you express yourself, and are you using too many or too few words? Are you questioning the client? Say enough and be economical because every extra word can lead to new misinterpretations.
- **Quality**: Is what you write true? Does it say what you want to say? Do not say things you think are not true and do not say things for which you have insufficient evidence.
- **Clarity**: Is your message clear? Did you formulate a clear activating assignment or question? Is it clear to the client what you expect? Do not use obscure, woolly, or indirect language.

### Summary

The UNLOQ method connects to the AIS model for online guidance. Together they offer tools to guide the online guidance process and the associated online communication. The UNLOQ method consists of two consecutive processes. The first process comprises the three steps in which the online counsellor analyses the client's communication. The second process comprises the five steps in which the online counsellor shapes his own communication towards the client. If you go through these steps in a structured way, it is easier to communicate successfully in an online process and to build up a positive working relationship.

## 6 From practice

### Example from practice<sup>1</sup>

#### Ron Willems: Neurologist and mental (e)coach

Ron Willems has his own neurology practice in which he regularly guides his patients through e-coaching. Besides being a neurologist, he is also a mental coach. Previously he worked as a neurologist at the Central Military Hospital and as a staff member at the UMC Utrecht he was co-responsible for the neurology training.

My interest in online counselling has arisen from the fact that my patients come from all over the country. Then online counselling is ideal because of location independence. Of course, I see people with somatic complaints face-to-face before an interview and further research. But often a counselling session can take place via the internet.

I recently counselled a female patient with restless legs. She is being examined for this and she is also receiving medication. Besides her physical problem she has a lot of trouble with the 'shoulds'. Her hobby is photography and she is very fanatic about it. When she has a photography assignment, it brings her a lot of tension, but when she takes pictures in her spare time, she enjoys it. She struggles with this and so there are other issues from the past that need to be examined. I guide her online. Initially we had contact twice a week, often that is a good frequency. I usually ask two questions but, in this situation, it turned out that the frequency was too high. She reacted very quickly and that did not work well. We therefore reduced it to once a week. It takes time to change, but she has certainly mapped out a development route in this area'.

#### *Written words say more than you think*

In the beginning, like many others, I was sceptical about online counselling because the non-verbal communication was lost. But it's amazing how you can tell from the tone of a written message which emotion is behind it. For example, by using different words, a different sentence structure or lengthy writing. You can really tell from the way you write that something is going on. To me, it didn't matter whether or not I had met the patient in my example face-to-face before'.

#### *Continuity is an advantage*

The longer the time that a client can reflect about questions, the more a client will be able to relate to his feelings. A big advantage is that as a counsellor you can monitor the time better. In face-to-face conversations there is a lot more space between conversations and therefore what happens in between is largely lost. When I ask people I supervise via face-to-face conversations about the development assignment they received in the last session, 50% say "yes, yes, I haven't gotten around to it yet, but I'm definitely going to". They leave the consulting room, go back into daily life. This is really different when it comes to online coaching. The continuity is a big advantage.

My clients react very positively to this, especially the people who live far away. They like the fact that the moment of contact is not fixed, that they can decide for themselves when they react'.

*"Online coaching is a valuable extension of the treatment toolbox."*

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Digital Coaching Magazine; a joint publication of de Baak and the European Institute.

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