

eQuest: A Case Study with this Comprehensive Online Program for Self-Study and Personal Growth

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ABSTRACT

eQuest is an online program that guides participants through a variety of online activities in order to help them address some specific personal issue, as well as encourage self-insight on a broader level. These activities include locating and evaluating information, joining discussion/support groups, establishing one-on-one relationships with knowledgeable people, experimenting with different types of online communication, utilizing and evaluating online psychological tests, creating a personal web page, and experimenting with freeform browsing techniques. eQuest stimulates integrated learning by encouraging people to compare and combine what they discover in these different online activities, and to bring their online and offline lifestyles together. It includes educational/therapeutic exercises to help people prepare for and benefit from these activities. Unlike traditional forms of clinical intervention, in which a professional "does" psychotherapy with a client, the eQuest consultant assists people through the program, helps them evaluate their experiences, and encourages the integration process. Underlying all these therapeutic activities is a philosophy that advocates the therapeutic value of developing an online lifestyle and integrating it into one's offline life, while also recognizing the potential pitfalls of cyberspace.

INTRODUCTION

AS A RESEARCHER and citizen of cyberspace, I've become fascinated by the diversity of educational resources and personal growth experiences that are available on the Internet. While teachers encouraged students to gather information and communicate online, and clinicians began to conduct psychotherapy in cyberspace, I imagined a comprehensive program of online activities that could serve as both an educational and personal growth experience—a program overseen by a consultant that guided people in developing an online lifestyle in which they would learn to master information as well as benefit therapeutically from a variety of online activities. In this article I will describe the preliminary version of such a program, which I call eQuest. Currently, I am developing it as an educational experience with my students. The implications

of such a program for psychotherapists also will be discussed.

eQuest is designed to be comprehensive as well as flexible. Summarized concisely, it works like this: A person enters the program with some specific personal issue or question in mind, something they want to understand better about themselves or their lives. Perhaps it involves a problem of some kind, something they wish to change, or resolve. Some of the topics my students have chosen included divorce, menopause, online stalking, racism, borderline personality disorders, suicide, premarital cohabitation, sensation seeking, and sexual harassment. Almost any issue can be applied. Constructed as a web site with multiple sections corresponding to different activities, eQuest then guides the people through this collection of online activities and exercises in order to help them explore and perhaps reach some resolution of that issue.

eQuest philosophy

Every educational and therapeutic system has an implicit or explicit ideology, a belief system or philosophy that underscores what its adherents believe to be true, what's important regarding the issue at hand, how to learn and change. Here are the basic elements of the eQuest philosophy:

- Feel empowered to become a knowledgeable user of online resources.
- Experiment with different modalities of online communication.
- Experiment with new behaviors and expressions of self while online.
- Integrate online resources and activities with each other.
- Integrate online activities with one's in-person lifestyle.
- Develop a healthy online lifestyle.
- Explore a personal issue . . . Know thyself.

Whatever the personal issue that people bring to the program, they can explore and perhaps resolve it by becoming a knowledgeable user of online resources and activities, by empowering themselves in that respect. The philosophy is all about developing a healthy lifestyle in cyberspace so they can address that issue as well as any other issue that may come up in their lives. By experimenting with different types of online communication, and by integrating online and offline living, people can learn a great deal about themselves. On a specific level, the person uses online experiences to tackle a particular personal issue, but on a broader level the person comes to "know thyself" by exploring an online lifestyle. Those two levels work hand in hand.

In the sections that follow, I will describe some of the basic components of how eQuest works. The eQuest website is constructed laterally, with different sections corresponding to different online activities, as well as hierarchically, with the top level pages providing basic information and guidelines, along with links leading to deeper level pages that users—when they are ready and interested—can access for more detailed information and guidelines. Because it is a comprehensive program, I will highlight just a few key elements concerning these various activities.

CASE STUDY

In order to create a clear picture of how all these activities combine to create an integrated program, I will briefly describe the experiences of one eQuest

user, who I will call Brian. Brian was 35 years old, married with three children, and had returned to college to get a masters degree. He also was in face-to-face psychotherapy when he started the eQuest program and was in the program for about 3 months.

Assessment and goal setting

The first stage involves assessing the person's computer skills and psychological condition, in order to determine if they can benefit from the program. Strategies for this assessment were adapted from those created by the ISMHO Clinical Case Study Group¹ for determining a person's suitability for online therapy, including such issues as writing and typing skills, knowledge about computers and the Internet, and prior experience with online activities. eQuest provides fundamental information about establishing an online lifestyle for people who possess just basic skills in web browsing and e-mail, but the program also works well for people with intermediate and advanced knowledge of online living, particularly in the feedback offered by the eQuest supervisor or consultant on the person's experiences in the program, as I will discuss later.

None of my students who expressed an interest in undertaking the program were ever prevented from participating due to their psychological condition; however, the consultant must take care to assess any contraindicated vulnerabilities in personality, as well as the possibility that a particular person might choose an issue to explore that is too emotionally charged or inappropriate in some way. For example, due to the possibility of acting out and intense transference reactions in online relationships, people with severe personality disorders might not benefit from eQuest social activities, or might require detailed consultation. Some issues—like online sexual perversions and crime—might be explored via readings, but perhaps should not be investigated via social contacts.

In this initial stage, the eQuest supervisor or consultant helps people clarify the particular topic they wish to pursue in the program. My advice to participants is simple: pick an issue that is personally meaningful to you, an issue that is important in your life. Although some people have a difficulty in deciding which of several possible topics to choose, they rarely if ever are unable to identify an issue they wish to explore. Sometimes they need help in focusing an otherwise vague or broad topic. Sometimes they choose a topic that appears to be, at first glance, abstract and academic rather than personal. However, even a cursory discussion usually clarifies quite quickly the personal significance of the topic they selected.

For his eQuest endeavor, Brian wanted to learn more about alcoholism. His wife was a chronic alcoholic, and their marriage was headed for divorce. In addition to his in-person psychotherapy, he also attended in-person Al-Anon meetings. He wanted to explore online resources to see how they might supplement his understanding of how alcoholism was affecting his life and his family. He was a bright, mature, very responsible person who showed no signs of any significant psychopathology that might preclude him from using eQuest. He was somewhat new to cyberspace, but had the necessary e-mail and web browsing skills to make use of the program.

Utilizing online information

As everyone knows, there is a great deal of information on the Internet. Adapting the advice of educators and other advocates of online research, the eQuest website contains a set of guidelines that helps people learn how to search for information related to their issue; but more importantly, how to evaluate whether that information is good or bad in an objective way—that is, what are the credentials of the person who wrote that web article, is it a reputable organization that created the web site, what do reviews of that site say about it. The guidelines also encourage the person to evaluate whether that particular resource is good or bad in a subjective way. Is it valid to you personally? How can you make sense out of that information and apply it to your issue? To help people compare the various resources they discover, eQuest provides a rating system, based on the kinds of criteria mentioned above, to rank resources on a seven-point scale.

Given all the information that an eQuest user might discover, it can be very helpful to understand why a particular piece of information catches the person's eye. Conscious as well as unconscious needs may be reflected in the information people choose to study. Brian looked over many web sites devoted to alcoholism, but one article in particular caught his attention—an article about confronting the alcoholic spouse. Having lived with an alcoholic wife for many years, the idea of finally meeting the issue head on proved to be an emotional challenge, requiring confidence and skills that he was in the process of developing.

Using different communication modalities

eQuest encourages and guides the person into becoming involved in a variety of online social activities and other interactive endeavors. Its philosophy maintains that we learn about ourselves by

experimenting with different communication modalities, by trying out new ways of expressing ourselves using text, visuals, audio, synchronous and asynchronous communication, imaginary versus real environments, and varying degrees of invisibility and presence. The theory behind this multiple modality emphasis is that identity manifests itself in the medium in which it is expressed.² Because each communication environment—for example, email, chat, IM, blogs, SMS, discussion boards, social network systems, avatar communities—offers a different expression of self, understanding oneself within a particular media and transitioning to new media may enhance the cohesion and the development of identity.

The problem is that it takes time, effort, sometimes money, and perhaps even some courage to experiment with new communication modalities. People typically enter eQuest with their familiar and favorite media in mind. New environments may be intriguing but anxiety provoking. What are the cognitive, personality, and social factors determining why someone chooses one media and avoids others? Might the loyalty to one communication modality and the resistance to entering a new one, reflect aspects of the person that need to be understood? Evaluating which media people choose and how they are willing to experiment can lead to important insights. Often these cognitive, personality, and social aspects of the person are related to the issue that they bring to eQuest. Brian had once tried chat software, but it crashed his system. Because other family members used the computer, he didn't want to risk problems resulting from new software. In eQuest, he preferred not to venture beyond email and web browsing.

Participating in online groups

Participating in online groups is an important social activity that eQuest encourages. There are thousands of groups in cyberspace devoted to almost any psychological or social issue one can imagine. Some are simple discussion groups, but others many serve as a support group that addresses the types of issues people bring to eQuest. Gathering useful information, learning vicariously from observing people interacting, sharing and seeking advice from others, and providing assistance to others—as the “helper therapy principle” suggests³—can all enhance the process of personal growth.

However, there is a learning curve in understanding the culture of online groups and knowing how to participate in them effectively. Guiding them in this process, eQuest offers practical suggestions about how to create an archive for email and chat

discussions, what to say in a personal profile for the group, the importance of observing the group before participating, how to introduce oneself, and what to expect as a newcomer.

Because some groups are something less than useful and benign, even hurtful or blatantly pathological, eQuest also contains a set of guidelines about how to evaluate whether the group is helpful or not—for example, how active is the group; how do members react to newcomers; what are the conversations like; how does the group handle disagreement and conflict; what are the components of the groups ideology concerning the issue it addresses, is this ideology amenable to the eQuest participant's belief system, and how might the ideology be therapeutically beneficial to the participant, perhaps even serving as a "cognitive antidote" for the participant's maladaptive beliefs.⁴

Throughout the program there are suggested readings—many of them from the online book *The Psychology of Cyberspace*⁵—that describe the pros and cons of online living. Many of these articles pertain to Internet groups and relationships. Of special interest are the ways that a person might behave in online groups as compared to in-person groups. Understanding any significant differences can lead to important insights into the participant's personality as well as the issue being addressed in eQuest. For example, Brian joined an Al-anon email group where he felt much less inhibited as compared to his in-person Al-Anon group, which supports that idea of an online disinhibition effect.⁶ He wasn't as worried about confrontation and being rejected. He also enjoyed talking with people from around the world, which helped him appreciate how many of the issues in dealing with an alcoholic spouse were universal, regardless of culture. Recognizing universality—that one isn't alone or somehow unusual—is a powerful therapeutic aspect of a group experience.⁷ Cyberspace excels in its opportunities to offer this experience.

One-on-one relationships

eQuest also encourages its participants to establish relationships with people online. It helps them find others with similar interests, backgrounds, or experiences related to the personal issue that the participant is addressing in the program. The relationship that forms may involve mentoring or peer help and support, in some cases evolving into a friendship. Often participants privately contact via email a few people they encounter in the online groups they have joined, people with whom they sense the possibility of a rewarding relationship. In

some cases, others in those groups establish first contact with the participant.

Brian made contacts with a few people from his online Al-Anon groups, which were brief but supportive for him. He also began emailing two people that he knew from his in-person Al-Anon group. This integrating of online and in-person contacts turned out to be very powerful for him. Being able to touch base with his group members at any time during the week was a great comfort, especially at those times when he was upset with his spouse, or just felt isolated and alone.

Because online text-based relationships can be quite unique compared to in-person relationships, eQuest offers suggestions, readings, and exercises to assist the participant in maximizing the benefits of these relationships while avoiding the pitfalls of miscommunication in text relating. Transference reactions due to the ambiguity of text communication is a common problem in cyberspace, so eQuest provides an exercise in which a person mentally imagines the online companion and then compares that mental representation to mental images of significant others in the person's life. Another exercise involves reading out loud one's text message, using different vocal tones and speech patterns, in order to evoke the various meanings and emotions that the online companion might perceive in the message. To get a "big picture" of what a relationship has been like—and to better understand the development of that relationship over time—another exercise encourages the person to scan the titles of email messages in the archive for that relationship, and then reread some of those past emails.

The eQuest guidelines also encourage people to explore how they perceive and react to the consultant via online communication compared to in-person communication (assuming they have in-person contacts). The relationship between the participant and the consultant can become a safe place for people to openly discuss online self-expression, distortions in interpersonal perceptions, and transference reactions. For example, even though many of my eQuest students had interacted with me face-to-face before beginning the program, some of them perceived me very differently via email. Understanding that discrepancy, led to important insights into the nature of online communication, and into themselves.

Text communication is a skill that a person develops with time and experience in online relationships. In an exercise involving "creative keyboarding techniques," the participant composes a text message (usually email) to a real or imaginary person online, using as many expressive keyboarding techniques as possible. People usually choose to write a

message to a friend, family member, or close companion. Because it is simply an exercise, the person is not expected to actually send the message, though some decide to. Here is an excerpt from the email that Brian composed:

Jennifer!

The party went well, thankx for asking. Of course, I wish you were there:-(A lot of my {{{{friends}}}} and {{{{family}}}} came. *WOW* I was so happy. My favorite gift was a pillow from one of my sisters. It said, "A Brother is a Lifelong Friend" (Aaaah!) My 4 year old {{{{nephew}}}} got into trouble (uhoh) when it was time to leave and he was still hiding. BTW, remember the "chocolate pudding pie" dream I told you about (inside joke)? Well, the "chocolate pudding pie" showed up at my party!!! It was quite good :-)

On a more serious note, we did not serve alcohol at this party. One reason is that some family members have a serious drinking problem. Another reason is that it helps to weaken the association between alcohol and having a good time, in the eyes of children (and adults) :-)

TTYL,
Brian

The significance of this email is that Brian, in-person, can be rather quiet and reserved. However, in this email, we see him being very open and emotive, which is more evidence of the disinhibition effect. He uses emoticons, parenthetical self-disclosures, and many virtual hugs. These expressions reflect a side of his personality that is not always visible in face-to-face contact.

Online tests and interactive programs

At web sites such as queendom.com and allthetests.com, people can sample a wide variety of personality tests, aptitude tests, interest inventories, and other types of interactive programs. Whatever the issue a person brings to eQuest, there is almost always some test or questionnaire related to it. Participants are encouraged to browse through these sites and complete any tests that look interesting to them. Sometimes they select tests that are obviously related to their personal issue, but often they try a test simply because it catches their eye. They are strongly encouraged to discuss the results of these tests with the consultant.

The eQuest guidelines advise people that most of these tests are not valid psychometric instruments that the results should be taken with a big grain of salt. This alone is a significant lesson in cyberspace, where such tests proliferate as commercial endeavors or simple entertainment. However, it also can

be a valuable learning experience in "knowing thyself" to experiment with these tests and determine for oneself whether they are accurate or not. In the eQuest guidelines—and especially in the discussions with the consultant—participants are encouraged to use these questionnaires as springboards for thinking about themselves and the personal issue being explored. It is also very valuable to see which particular tests or programs people choose, to understand why the person wanted to experiment with them. The choice often reflects underlying concerns, wishes, and needs. For example, Brian was intrigued by a test that assessed emotional intelligence. He scored quite high, which helped to bolster his self-esteem and his confidence in dealing with the divorce.

Freeform browsing

When people go online, often they are searching for specific resources or intending to go to a specific place. The destination is predetermined. That mental set tends to narrow one's field of view. It can prevent people from discovering other resources that they didn't know existed in cyberspace. Sometimes that agenda even imposes a kind of directional or linear intention into one's movement through cyberspace that defeats the purpose and beauty of the hypertext, associational structure of the World Wide Web.

The freeform browsing component of eQuest attempts to reverse that mental set, to get people to explore more freely, to revive the playful and creative attitude of discovery that arises within divergent thinking. There are several types of freeform browsing exercises within eQuest, but they all encourage the person to devote a few online sessions to simply wandering around cyberspace with no specific agenda. People might use a random link generator that launches them onto a web page somewhere on the Internet as an arbitrary starting point to begin their wandering. Or they may start their journey on a familiar page, then begin clicking on links, sometimes choosing those links randomly and sometimes clicking ones that catch their eye for some reason. The exercise works best when people do not rely on a conscious analysis or evaluation of where they are going, but instead on intuition and "gut feeling." For some people, the process involves a contemplative form of free association. It becomes a fascinating kind of projective test in which people allow unconscious needs and feelings to direct their path. How the person experiences the process of freeform browsing, as well as what the person discovers online, are both revealing.

Brian said that these exercises were hard for him. He realized just how goal-oriented he is. It was easier for him if he thought of wandering as his specific task to accomplish. During his browsing, two web sites in particular caught his eye. One was devoted to Dorothea Lange, a photographer who wanted to draw attention to the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. He also was fascinated by a site for the history of dance in America. His attraction to these particular web sites revealed important aspects of his personality.

Creating a personal web page

Creating a personal web page can be a valuable self-reflective exercise. What do you think is important about you and your life? What do you want others to know about you? What might be the reactions of others to how you present yourself? In particular, how people choose to present and in a sense create their online identity is an intriguing aspect of life in cyberspace. That identity may not correspond exactly to one's in-person identity.

eQuest contains guidelines and an explanation of basic web-building tools that help people construct a personal web page and think about the creation of that page in a self-reflective, therapeutic way. The guidelines suggest that they say something about their lives, personalities, backgrounds, and interests—as well as describe what they have learned about the personal issues they are exploring in eQuest, and hence about themselves. With the help of the consultant, they are encouraged to experiment with fonts, backgrounds, colors, graphics, and photographs—to be as creative and self-expressive as they wish. Links to online indexes of thousands of personal web pages, as well as pages of previous eQuest participants, gives them the opportunity to examine how other people decided to present themselves.

Because self-awareness and personal identity revolve around how others perceive us, the consultant offers feedback on how participants present themselves in their web pages. The person is instructed to ask family or friends for their feedback as well. How personal identity is expressed also depends on the nature of the relationship in which it is being expressed. Participants are encouraged to think about how the page they create would be different depending on the audience: friends and family, people who are familiar with their issue being explored in eQuest, or almost anyone online. My students create a final version of their web page that is designed for viewing by other students who are undertaking eQuest.

Creating a personal web page was an eye-opening experience for Brian. Never before had he created anything in which he focused on himself rather than other people. This exercise helped him feel like an individual, and he liked that.

Integration

One of the most important features of eQuest is its attempt to help participants integrate the various endeavors and experiences generated by the program. For example, participants are encouraged to integrate their various online activities with each other. Talk to your online companions about your online groups. Show them your web page. If you found something interesting on the web, discuss it with your online companions and groups. In your personal web page, talk about your online lifestyle. It is important to overlap these various online activities, to enable them to combine, balance, and interact synergistically with each other.

Of special significance is eQuest's emphasis on people integrating their online and offline lifestyles. Dissociating online and offline activities—immersing oneself in cyberspace as an experience isolated from the rest of one's life—can be a problem for some people. It is one of the classic features of Internet addiction.⁸⁻¹⁰ Therefore, eQuest contains guidelines to help people bring their online and in-person living together. The suggestions are deceptively simple: discuss your offline life with your online companions; contact online companions on the phone or in-person; talk with family and friends about online experiences; interact online with the people you know in-person. As simple as they seem, these activities are essential for gaining new perspectives, preventing misperceptions of online experiences, and discovering different dimensions of our personalities.

Brian composed an email to his online Al-anon group in which he revealed quite a bit about his situation with his wife. He felt good about how well he expressed himself. Later, when he read that same message to his in-person Al-Anon group, he cried. His emotional reaction surprised him. Brian also found it very helpful when he talked about eQuest with his psychotherapist. Moving from one communication modality to another (including face-to-face meetings as a modality), combining modalities, integrating modalities, can reveal dimensions of the self that may not be obvious in one modality alone.¹²

As we sit in our chairs staring at the monitor, we often forget about our bodies. In fact, we tend to ex-

perience cyberspace as a disembodied activity. Although some advocates of online living herald the value of minds connecting directly without the “distraction” of physical cues, it is a mistake to think that our bodies play no role in our sense of self, or in our online encounters. Using felt-sense exercises,⁹ eQuest encourages people to become aware of body sensations while online and to understand how those sensations inform our experience of what we encounter in cyberspace. Aching backs and necks are common symptoms of excessive and perhaps compulsive computing—a bodily warning that it’s probably time to stop—but much more subtle sensations reveal underlying emotional reactions to online activities, especially concerning online relationships. Such explorations into subconscious and unconscious responses to online living are further enhanced by the eQuest exercise that encourages people to understand their dreams about computers and the Internet.

The eQuest consultant

Although people can pursue many of the activities in eQuest on their own, the program is much more effective with the assistance of a consultant—or, in the case of students, a “supervisor”—who can answer questions and guide them through the process. Ideally combining both online and in-person contact with participants, the consultant can offer feedback on a variety of important questions. Are there underlying meanings to the personal issue the participant wishes to address in the program? Why is the person drawn to certain types of information, tests, and communication environments, but not others? What do the results of the freeform browsing and personal web page exercises reveal about the person? Most importantly, how is the person reacting, consciously and unconsciously, to online relationships and groups—including any possible transference reactions?

The consultant can help people explore these questions on the broad level of “know thyself,” as well as assist them in applying these insights specifically to the personal issue being addressed. The program will be most effective when the consultant facilitates this integration of self-discovery related to the personal issue with self-discovery in one’s life in general.

This integrative function is a critical feature of the consultant’s overall role in eQuest. The participant’s experiences in the various activities of the program are like pieces of a puzzle, or facets of a mosaic. The consultant can help the person com-

pare, contrast, and assemble those pieces to arrive at a bigger picture of that person and the issue being explored. Across these different activities, the consultant and the participant can detect patterns that might not be evident in any one activity alone. In the bits and pieces I described of Brian’s eQuest experience, you may have noticed such patterns.

Even advanced Internet users, who already are familiar with the basic information provided in eQuest, can benefit from these collaborative efforts with the consultant. However, to be effective in this role, the consultant must have a comprehensive knowledge of personality theory and interpersonal relationships, including an expertise in online communication, behavior, and relationships. A background in psychodynamic therapy will also benefit the consultant greatly in helping people understand the meaning of how they react to the consultant during online text communication.

CONCLUSION

There is a trend nowadays to think of the Internet as a place where we can take individual psychotherapy and translate it into an online mode, as in chat and email therapy. These are important and effective approaches. We also can begin thinking about ways to shape the wide variety of growth-promoting experiences in cyberspace into therapeutic models that are quite different. In such models, the clinician may not play the same central role in the transformative process as they have in the past. It may mean empowering the client by guiding them into their own process of educational and personal growth, by indeed acting as a “consultant” in that process rather than a “psychotherapist” per se.

Programs such as eQuest can serve as a stand-alone therapeutic activity for people, or they might become supplements to more traditional styles of in-person and online therapy. Even selected modules of eQuest activities might be added into traditional therapy. However, one of the elements of the eQuest ideology is that cyberspace is more than just a collection of online activities. Cyberspace can become a lifestyle that enriches in-person living, that offers people new opportunities for learning and self-expression. It can be an environment for understanding and developing healthy relationships, as well as understanding and preventing tendencies to act out. When clinicians recognize this ideology and integrate it in their psychotherapy by exploring the client’s online lifestyle, they will gain access to new perspectives on their clients.

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