

# Professional Development for the Novice Teacher: One University's Initiative to Support the Alternatively Certified Educator

**Marclyn D. Porter**

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
marclyn-porter@utc.edu

*Many alternatively certified teachers, as was the case in this study, are employed as the teacher of record while simultaneously enrolled in education courses. Therefore, experiencing the collaborative, supportive, peer mentoring environmental elements that are present in many traditional "fieldwork" settings is not an option. By examining one university's initiative to support the alternatively certified educator via an online mentoring and professional development course offering, this study focused, in detail, upon the characteristics of the course itself, and evaluated from the course participants' perspective, the effectiveness of the newly re-designed course, as measured by the course goals and objectives. More specifically, this study sought to investigate four themes regarding participants' perceptions: peer mentoring and support; professional development in the area of pedagogy; effectiveness of the online course delivery format; and the effectiveness of course specific components. This study furthers the understanding of the methods by which teacher education programs can provide support and professional development opportunities for those educators who have entered the profession via alternative routes. The findings of this study lend support to the belief that teacher preparation programs can effectively utilize well-designed, appropriately structured online coursework to foster the development of professional learning communities designed to provide mentoring and peer support. By incorporating assignments that present content that is meaningful, relevant and applicable to the individual student, online courses of this type can support the professional development of the alternatively certified educator.*

Please contact the author for all correspondence regarding the content of this article.

A teacher's impact is tremendous. It may, in fact, be the single most important influence in determining a student's academic success (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Yet, there is no magic formula for creating a good teacher. There are some general prerequisites: A belief in all children's capacity to learn and a deep knowledge of one's subject. However, many necessary skills require on-the-job practice and it often requires at least two years for mastery of the basics of classroom management and up to seven years to become a fully proficient, effective teacher (National Academy of Education, 2005; Stronge, 2007; Wallis, 2008; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). Unfortunately, many teachers never reach that milestone. Analysis by the National Center for Education Statistics (1999-2000) estimates that 33% of new teachers leave the profession within their first three years of teaching (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). For teachers working in poor, urban schools that percentage rises to 50% (Schoon, & Sandoval, 2000).

Every year, tens of thousands of novice teachers enter the field with little or no exposure to basic information about children, curriculum or schools (National Academy of Education, 2005). Coupled with growing student enrollment and large numbers of baby-boomer retirements, the education profession is facing a critical shortage of teaching talent (Wallis, 2008). As Tournaki, Lyublinskaya, and Carolan (2009) noted, "We are in the midst of what amounts to a national experiment in how best to attract, prepare and retain teachers" (p. 106). Finding and keeping outstanding teachers has taken on a renewed sense of urgency for many school districts (Wallis, 2008). Unfortunately, there is no single measure by which to predict teacher effectiveness. Good teaching is an art, a craft, a skill, a passion, a "...complex interaction of a wide range of teacher characteristics, abilities, dispositions, knowledge of subject fields, experience and pedagogical knowledge" (Andrew, Cobb & Giampietro, 2005, p. 353).

The fierce debates over the "best" way to prepare teachers have implications for teacher preparation programs. Some argue that easing entry into teaching is necessary in order to attract strong candidates. Others argue that investing in high quality teacher preparation is the most promising approach (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009). Most states have responded to the shortage of teaching talent by establishing means by which individuals may be "alternatively certified" in order to enter the profession immediately. Alternative certification programs now produce over 20% of the teachers in the United States (Cochran-Smith & Power, 2010). These programs differ dramatically from school district-based residency programs to university-based programs, and to independent programs such as Teach for America (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). Some alternative teacher preparation programs enable candidates for permanent certification to begin regular contracted teaching positions before they complete any supervised student teaching or pre-service training or experience (Feistritzer, 2005; Oh, Ankers, Llamas, & Tomyoy, 2003).

### **Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification**

Alternative routes to teacher certification, initially developed to address the issues of teacher quality and teacher shortages, have become part of the educational lexicon (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Feistritzer, 2005; Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007; U.S. Department. of Education, 2009). Although in existence for over 20 years, little is known about these programs, the participants, and their level of readiness (Feistritzer, 2005; Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008). Little research exists

regarding “the long-term effects of alternatively prepared teachers, but studies indicate that they may have more initial difficulty in the classroom than traditionally prepared teachers” (Stronge, 2007, p. 5).

One such alternative certification program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) was the focus of a program evaluation study in which participants enrolled in the UTC alternative certification program from 1999-2007 were asked to evaluate, based upon their experiences, the effectiveness of various elements of the program (Porter, 2009). Findings from that study identified programmatic areas in need of improvement. Porter (2009) found 86% of respondents reported either “no mentor supervision or contact” or only “monthly/bimonthly contact,” suggesting that mentoring activities were not present for the majority of these program participants. In response, UTC in 2008-2009 re-designed a one semester Education 483/596 course in order to provide additional mentoring support, enable peer to peer mentoring opportunities, encourage the development of professional learning communities, and foster group learning.

### **Mentor and Peer Support**

The social or peer modeling theoretical framework identifies peer to peer and peer to teacher interactions as providing opportunities for the imitation of successful problem solving behaviors, thus resulting in changes in levels of competence (Slavin, 1996; Stacey, 1999; Warschauer, 1997). When students are asking questions, responding to each other, and responding to the instructor it “stimulates ideas, questions, reactions, disagreements...the more interaction the better” (Draves, 2002, p. 234). Most teacher preparation and teacher induction programs attach great importance to mentoring (Feistritzer, 2008). However, mentors are used in different ways and take on many different forms. Not all mentoring activities are of equal value. Watching demonstration lessons, collaboratively planning lessons, talking about the strengths and needs of specific students, and receiving curriculum materials were deemed to be the most valuable to the novice teacher (Humphrey et al., 2008). Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) noted,

“alternative programs and other nontraditional pathways into teaching should ensure that new recruits-in-training can practice under the close supervision of expert teachers, so that their students from their very first days in the classroom have the benefit of a classroom informed by a prepared teacher’s advice and counsel.” (p. 23)

Johnson, Birkeland, and Peske (2005) found that “new teachers’ readiness for teaching depended not only on the what the program offered, but also on the skills and experience they brought to their training and the support they received in their schools” (p. vii).

As a result of the course re-design, the alternative certification program participants at UTC have the opportunity to participate in weekly, one-on-one mentoring with either the course instructor or their university appointed supervisors, as well as to engage in peer to peer mentoring activities.

### **Professional Development**

Engaging in effective professional development is critical to the process of improving one’s teaching practice, whether one is a novice or veteran teacher (Darling-Hammond &

Richardson, 2009; National Academy of Education, 2005; Stronge, 2007). However, often teachers are left to work in isolation within the four walls of their classroom. “This isolation enables few opportunities to interact with other teachers and even fewer opportunities to work together as a group to address and solve problems” (Gersten, Dimino, Jayanthi, Kim, & Santoro, 2010, p.725). Meaningful learning does not take place when teachers are left to “sink or swim.” Effective professional development activities are collaborative, collegial, challenging, and socially oriented; include frequent opportunities for feedback and coaching; and meet the needs of the individual teacher in a practical and applicable manner. Guidance and peer support are particularly important to the novice teacher for improving teacher effectiveness (National Academy of Education, 2005). The establishment of a collaborative and collegial environment helps to develop active and dynamic communities of practice. Communities of practice enable teachers to work together, enable them to support one another in improving practice, and provide a basis for inquiry and reflection. Teachers are empowered to raise issues, address problems, take risks, and solve dilemmas in their own practice (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gersten et. al, 2010; Phelps, 2006). One objective of the Education 483/596 course re-design was to create just such an environment by establishing small discussion groups of teachers who share similar teaching settings, content areas, and/or grade levels. Specifically tailored assignments, which incorporated multiple opportunities for participants to relate the course work to their real world teaching experiences, provided opportunities for structured dialogue, inquiry, reflection, and professional growth.

### **Group Learning, Mentoring, and Online Delivery Formats**

Mentoring activities and peer support opportunities are collaborative efforts. Improved student achievement has been shown to result from collaborative learning in the traditional classroom environment (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). The question then becomes whether the same achievement benefits can be realized by incorporating collaborative learning experiences within a distance education environment, and if so, *how* might such a collaborative learning atmosphere be developed? Warschauer (1997) observed in a meta-analysis of online interaction studies that “the special features of online communication...provide an impressive array of new ways to link to learners...these features make online learning a...useful tool for collaborative learning” (p. 477). Distance education environments of the past were characterized by learner independence and isolation, however, today learning networks have enabled collective approaches to emerge (Anderson & Garrison, 1998). In their study of the impact of communication on collaboration and performance, Ohlund, Yu, Jannasch-Pennell, and DiGangi (2000) defined collaborative learning as “the acquisition by individuals of knowledge, skills or attitudes as a result of group interaction, where that specific learning could not be derived individually” (p. 406). The online environment enables the creation of a learning community in which the core learning occurs as a result of the interaction between the instructor and participants and between the participants themselves (Anderson & Garrison, 1998; Draves, 2002). Computer mediated communication provides a supportive environment for the learning that is an important aspect of the collaborative learning process by furthering the learners confidence through sharing discussions of their progress (Stacey, 1999). By utilizing the university’s Blackboard platform, the re-designed Education 483/596 course included an on-line instructional component that enabled both whole group and small group communication and collaborative learning opportunities.

## **Effectiveness of Programs**

Concern over program effectiveness, rigor, and quality has fueled much of the current debate about teacher quality and alternative certification programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2005). Alternative certification programs are as varied and different as the number of programs that exist (Cochran-Smith, & Power, 2010). Programs range from the “highly centralized approach in which [states] operate [their] own alternative certification programs, to [the] highly decentralized approach in which [states approve] all programs that satisfy basic requirements and then allow them to operate on their own” (Johnson et al., 2005, p. v). This current study sought to determine what impact various components unique to the re-designed Education 483/596 course had upon participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness and appropriateness of the course elements.

## **Program Evaluation**

The nature of evaluation can serve as an agent to ensure that all objectives have been met and that an organization is held accountable (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). Program “...evaluations should help assure that educational goals are appropriate, learner development is addressed, promised services are delivered, and ineffective or harmful programs are removed, this provides accountability” (The Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation, 1994, p. 83). The current study followed this line of reasoning and evaluated from the participants’ perspective the effectiveness of the newly re-designed Education 483/596 course at the UTC, as measured by the course goals and objectives.

## **Course Objectives**

The re-design of this particular education course was based upon research-based best practices that emphasize personal reflection, discussion, and collaboration. The stated objective was to foster the development of the personal, professional, and instructional practices, which are exhibited by effective teachers, within the alternatively certified educator. Emphasis was placed upon encouraging students to incorporate these skills and activities into their daily teaching experiences and practice. Course readings and assignments were specifically designed with the alternatively certified teacher in mind. Research on the effectiveness of alternatively prepared teachers has revealed that teachers with little or no coursework in education consistently have difficulties in the areas of classroom management, curriculum development, student motivation, and specific teaching strategies (Stronge, 2007). By the end of the course, the objectives were for students to be able to meet and/or exceed performance expectations in the areas of planning, teaching strategies, assessment and evaluation, and the creation of effective learning environments; demonstrate a knowledge of and appreciation for self-reflection as a means to inform and improve practice; establish and maintain professional relationships with peers, administrators, parents, and students; and develop a professional development plan based upon personally identified goals, strengths, and areas for improvement. The re-designed course was structured around three themes: The Reflective Practitioner, Education Professionalism, and Practical Application.

**Reflective Practitioner.** Effective teachers continually practice self-evaluation and self-critique as learning tools. Reflection is an active behavior in which the individual contemplates past, present, and future decisions and is considered an important component of a teacher’s

professional expertise (Stronge, 2007). Organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards include reflective decision making as a desired competency. Journal writing and professional dialogue are the best venues for honing reflective thinking (Danielson, 2008). The re-designed elements of the “Teaching Experience” Education 483/596 course enabled participants to engage in both practices. Effective reflective practice is more than an isolated, haphazard endeavor. Thoughtful reflection requires “...continual self-evaluation and self-critique as learning tools” (Stronge, 2007, p. 30). An educators’ professional learning is done by the learner through an active intellectual process that involves three essential features: self-assessment, reflection on practice, and professional conversation that promotes teacher growth and contributes to enhanced student learning (Danielson, 2008). By incorporating a personal reflective journal into the online course, the students were empowered to post reflections regarding their daily practice and identify areas of strength and areas that they determined required strengthening. As novice teachers, the opportunity to submit reflections concerning their views, capabilities, concerns, and opportunities, in relation to their experiences as both a teacher and a student, can be invaluable.

**Education Professionalism.** Collaborating on small group activities and projects, engaging in networking opportunities, developing professional relationships; participation in peer mentoring; demonstrating appropriate and effective verbal, non-verbal and written communication skills; and engaging in professional development activities all enable the novice teacher to further develop those qualities that are connected to effective teachers (Phelps, 2006; Stronge, 2007). Course assignments were developed to specifically incorporate and focus upon the further development of these skills. Additionally, students were placed into small groups based upon their school, grade level, or content area. The purpose of these groups was two-fold: to provide an immediate network of peers with whom to share, question, support, encourage, and mentor; and to provide a small group learning experience within the larger class. As Routman (2002) stated, “Ongoing professional development through reflective, self-guided, weekly conversations about teaching practice is a necessity for sustained growth and transformation for both students and teachers” (p.35). Small group assignment topics included but were not limited to: Classroom Management, Differentiated Instruction, Project-based Learning, Technology and Instruction, Authentic Learning, Meaningful Student Work, and Evaluation and Assessment.

**Practical Application.** As all participants were employed as teachers of record while enrolled in the course, a typical “fieldwork” element was not included. Rather, observations and follow-up discussions were conducted by university assigned Professors-In-Residence (P.I.R.), in addition to required observations conducted by each student’s respective school-based administrator.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to address the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived strengths and deficiencies of the re-designed Education 483/596 course as reported by the participants?
2. What role did the online component of the re-designed Education 483/596 course play in the participants’ perception of the effectiveness of the course?

3. What role did the mentoring component, in the form of peer support play in the participants' perception of the effectiveness of the re-designed Education 483/596 course?
4. What specifically identified features of the re-designed Education 483/596 course did the participants' report influenced their ability to positively impact their growth as an educator?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was utilized in this study. Participants were invited to participate in the end-of-the-course survey based upon their enrollment in the re-designed Education 483/596 course in the alternative certification program at UTC. There were no incentives offered, nor were there any benefits or risks associated with the completion of the survey. It was a "non-graded," voluntary element of the course. Sixty students were enrolled in the course either in fall 2009 or spring 2010 ( $N = 60$ ). Of those, 16 did not complete the survey ( $N = 44$ ), representing a 73% response rate.

### **Study Design and Materials**

This study was descriptive and utilized a case study design. The study collected information on program participants' attitudes, behaviors, and opinions pertaining to their participation in one specific online course during their alternative certification program of study. This design was selected as it best enabled the researcher to identify and describe trends and to determine the extent to which the research questions had been answered.

### **Materials and Procedure**

This study used a mixed methods design incorporating quantitative and qualitative data collected via an instrument consisting of 24 survey questions, participants' journal entries, and participants' online group discussions were used in this study. The purpose of the survey was "...to measure opinions, behaviors, attitudes [and] life circumstances quite specific to the program" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004, p. 342). The survey consisted of twelve, 7-point Likert-scale items (the evaluation scale established and required by the University), six structured questions, and five open-ended essay questions. Data generated from the survey provided a "snap shot" of program participants as well as information describing the attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of participants. The incorporation of program participants' personal journal entries, discussions, and group dialogues provided the researcher with a richer understanding of participants' attitudes, behaviors, and opinions. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection allowed for triangulation of data sources from the same population and enabled the researcher to develop a deeper, more complete understanding of the participants' perceptions (Creswell, Shope, Plano-Clark, & Green, 2006; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). No identifying information was collected other than the semester in which participants were enrolled in the course. All documentation related to the surveys was anonymous and data were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office.

## Data Analysis Methods

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted in order to report responses on individual survey questions. Survey data from scale items were considered as ordinal data, thus frequencies, percentages, and means were calculated (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004). It should be noted that “Many important questions of concern to stakeholders can be answered with descriptive statistics” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004, p. 359).

To establish patterns in the open-ended question data, journal entries, and online group discussions, respondents’ responses were subjected to a content analysis using a constant comparative procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002) modified by using findings from past studies. Rather than beginning with little or no underlying theory, the analysis focused on broad areas derived from findings of teacher induction, mentoring, alternative certification, and distance education studies. An analysis procedure was established prior to coding to ensure a systematic analysis that yielded accurate and reliable results (Berg, 2007).

## Results

### Findings from Quantitative Survey Data

Respondent characteristics that served to define the profile of the participants are represented in Table 1. It is important to note that the enrollment in this course was based upon very specific criteria, namely that the participant had, at a minimum, completed a bachelors’ degree and was currently employed in a teaching capacity. Additionally, the State of Tennessee requires the successful completion of six “teaching experience” course hours in order to obtain a permanent teaching license.

*Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents*

<b>Respondent characteristics</b>	<b>N = 44</b>	<b>%</b>
How enthusiastic were you about taking this course?		
Very	8	18.18
Somewhat	28	63.63
Not	8	18.18
Is this course in your major?		
Yes	40	90.90
No	2	4.54
Don’t have a major	2	4.54
Current Standing?		
Graduate Student	44	100
What grade do you expect in this course?		
A	38	86.36
B	4	9.09
other	2	4.54
How often were you prepared in this course?		
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Always	36	81.81
Usually	8	18.18
Occasionally	0	0
Never	0	0
Describe your current GPA		
Below 3.0	0	0
3.0-3.49	2	4.54
3.5-4.0	42	95.45

Survey questions, in the form of attitude and opinion statements, were utilized to gain a better understanding of the respondents' perceptions regarding the strengths and deficiencies of the re-designed Education 483/596 course, specifically the course content/assignments, instruction and delivery format. Responses were expressed as ratings of satisfaction and effectiveness and are shown in Table 2 and Table 3. Means were calculated for each response statement in order to gain a clearer picture of overall trends. It is important to note that in both Table 2 and Table 3 the rating scale utilized was a one to seven scale, which was used on all university generated surveys (strongly agree, moderately agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, moderately disagree, strongly disagree, and unable to judge).

It is interesting to note that students expressed a high level of satisfaction in relation to all four of the effective teacher descriptors, yet expressed less satisfaction when asked if the instructor was effective (see Table 2). One interpretation of this data suggests that some students were not fully aware the instructor's role in this course was to serve as a mentor, coach, and facilitator rather than a traditional lecturer.

*Table 2. Course Content and Instruction*

Survey Question <sup>1</sup>	N = 44	%	Mean
<b>Instructor willing to help</b>			<b>6.63</b>
Strongly Agree	30	68.18	
Moderately Agree	12	27.27	
Slightly Agree	2	4.54	
<b>Instructor grades fairly</b>			<b>6.36</b>
Strongly Agree	32	72.72	
Moderately Agree	6	13.63	
Slightly Agree	2	4.54	
Slightly Disagree	2	4.54	
Unable to Judge	2	4.54	
<b>Instructor responded to e-mail in timely manner</b>			<b>6.31</b>
Strongly Agree	28	63.63	
Moderately Agree	12	27.27	
Moderately Disagree	2	4.54	
Strongly Disagree	2	4.54	
			<b>6.04</b>

**Instructor well-prepared**

Strongly Agree	32	72.72
Moderately Agree	6	13.63
Unable to Judge	6	13.63

**Instructor was an effective teacher**

Strongly Agree	26	59.09
Moderately Agree	8	18.18
Slightly Agree	2	4.54
Slightly Disagree	4	9.09
Unable to Judge	4	9.09

**5.90**

1. Response options that received 0 responses are not reported on table

Note: 7= Strongly Agree, 6= Moderately Agree, 5=Slightly Agree, 4= Slightly Disagree, 3= Moderately Disagree, 2=Strongly Disagree, 1= Unable to Judge

Analysis of the data suggests that respondents were comfortable with the online delivery format in general, as well as the specific elements of this particular course such as the assignment feature, online journal feature, and discussion forums (see Table 3). It is interesting to note the less positive responses when respondents compared this online course to traditional face to face courses offered at the university. Further investigation of this finding is warranted, particularly as the university continues to expand online course offerings.

*Table 3. Course Delivery Format*

Survey Statement <sup>2</sup>	N = 44	%	Mean
<b>I would take an online course again</b>			<b>6.45</b>
Strongly Agree	26	59.09	
Moderately Agree	6	13.63	
Slightly Agree	10	22.72	
Slightly Disagree	2	4.54	
<b>Course organized in understandable manner</b>			<b>6.59</b>
Strongly Agree	28	63.63	
Moderately Agree	14	31.81	
Slightly Agree	2	4.54	
<b>Course requirements were presented clearly</b>			<b>6.36</b>
Strongly Agree	24	54.54	
Moderately Agree	12	27.27	
Slightly Agree	4	9.09	
Strongly Disagree	4	9.09	
<b>Course quality equal to traditional F-T-F courses</b>			<b>5.50</b>
Strongly Agree	18	40.90	
Moderately Agree	8	18.18	
Slightly Agree	6	13.63	
Slightly Disagree	6	13.63	
Moderately Disagree	2	4.54	
Strongly Disagree	4	9.09	
<b>I was aware of the expectations for the online course before I enrolled</b>			<b>5.10</b>
Strongly Agree	12	27.27	
Moderately Agree	8	18.18	
Slightly Agree	6	13.63	

Slightly Disagree	4	9.09
Moderately Disagree	6	13.63
Strongly Disagree	4	9.09
Did not respond	4	9.09

2. Response options that received 0 responses are not reported on table

Note: 7= Strongly Agree, 6= Moderately Agree, 5=Slightly Agree, 4= Slightly Disagree, 3= Moderately Disagree, 2=Strongly Disagree, 1= Unable to Judge

## Findings from Qualitative Survey Data

In order to further inform program improvement, participants were asked to respond to the following five open-ended questions as to their perceptions of the strengths and deficiencies of the course. Responses were intended to inform the continued development of course offerings for the alternative certified educator.

- **Question 1:** What should this instructor do to improve his/her instruction?
- **Question 2:** What did you particularly like about this instructor that should NOT be changed?
- **Question 3:** What changes in the mechanics of this course should be made to improve the learning experience?
- **Question 4:** What should NOT be changed about the mechanics of this course?
- **Question 5:** Other comments?

The response rates for the open-ended questions ranged from 50%-60% for questions one through four, and 30% for question five.

**Instructor and Instruction.** In response to questions one and two regarding instruction (what should the instructor do to improve and what did you like that should NOT be changed) the most commonly cited items were related to the level of engagement and instructor responsiveness or lack thereof. Eighty-eight percent of the responses were of a positive nature, with the need for additional feedback on graded assignments being the only area identified as needing improvement. The respondents' comments provide further support for the findings presented in Table 2, which represent a very high level of satisfaction with both the instructor personally, and the instruction in general. Some illustrative comments are given here:

“Thank you for your words [of support and encouragement]. It has given me a lot to think about.”

“[Responses to] the journal entries and supervisor observations provided very helpful feedback.”

“...quick to respond to emails, concerns, etc....provides positive, encouraging feedback”

“She had an understanding of teachers and what they are placed into everyday...being open minded about those with full schedules...keeping in mind when we are stretched.”

“...more communication [is needed] with the final grades for each assignment to [help] the student learn from mistakes.”

**Course Content/Assignments and Course Structure.** In response to questions three and four regarding specific elements of the online course (what should be changed/improved and what should NOT be changed), the most commonly cited items referenced the course structure, the various assignments, the collaborative group work, and peer mentoring and interactions. The respondents' comments provide further support of the findings presented in Table 3, which reflected a high level of satisfaction with the course specifically, and online courses in general. Online group work was one area in which some students expressed some dissatisfaction. In addition, some students expressed desire for more face to face classes. Some illustrative comments on these themes are given here:

“The mechanics in general were excellent...”

“I'm enjoying reading everyone's posts and gathering ideas...”

“I've enjoyed the opportunities to journal my thoughts [and] the interactions between my group members and the book reviews are a valuable exercise”

“I've already applied two of the practices [from course readings] in my classes, and they work really well! I even shared them with a fellow new teacher because I think they're so great! It is wonderful to have these tools. I've been excited to use them and do so as much as possible. I can't believe these two little things have changed some [student] behaviors so drastically! I can't imagine what other tools are out there to help manage my classroom so I can teach more effectively”

“I have truly grown and learned a lot from the group assignments.”

This course enabled participants to connect and interact with their peers in a manner that was risk-free, supportive, and positive. The dialogue reported below is one such example. Following a group assignment incorporating readings on “meeting students where they are,” student #1, an inclusion teacher at an urban high school, reached out to her peers to address and help solve a problem:

Student #1: “Do you have any information about teaching LD students Spanish? websites, books, anything...”

Student #2: “I use two web sites. The first is [www.studyspanish.com](http://www.studyspanish.com). The second is most easily accessed by going to Google and typing "Spanish Grammar Exercises" in the search box. Both of these sites have some self-grading exercises that are free of charge and easy to use.”

Student #3: “I am a Spanish teacher also and several of my students would be classified as LD. I am doing some research on your

question and will get back to you soon. I have found in the past that finding something that the students are already good at and turning that into a Spanish exercise helps them stay interested and focused. This works with music, poetry and many other things I'm sure. For example, if the students like to make rhymes or songs, create a vocab list that has rhyming words in Spanish and have them create short simple rhymes...This keeps them from being too intimidated. Also, use as many visual aids as you can. I've found this holds their attention well. Maps, posters of animals, common items, trees, plants, etc... Hope this helps. Let's collaborate in this area as much as we can.”

Student #1: “Is there a connection between English grammar and Spanish grammar?”

Student #2: “There are lots of connections between English grammar and Spanish grammar. Instead of giving you a litany here, let me refer you to the web site [www.studyspanish.com](http://www.studyspanish.com). It offers clear, concise explanations (in English and with comparisons to the English Language) of many different Spanish grammar topics, as well as quizzes and drills that the students can do themselves. These activities are self-grading. Plus, many of the activities are free of charge. You have to sign up for and possibly pay for some of the more advanced activities, but I have found that the activities that are free of charge offer my students enough material for extra study.”

Student #3: “Check out this Spanish subtitled Bob Marley video. Also search for Disney songs in Spanish and you will find Aladdin in Spanish and many others with subtitles!!!”

Student #2: “I also use the video series from the textbook "Realidades." They are 2 to 3 minutes each, and they are great for those times when you have about five minutes left in a class, but you have finished your planned material for that day. You can usually find them at a used book store like McKay's. Download them to your computer using QuickTime, and you can show them in class from a USB drive.”

Student #1: “Oh my gosh- thaaaank you soooo much...”

**Targeted Assignments.** The conceptual information presented in the reading assignments specifically focused upon difficulties in the areas of classroom management, curriculum development, student motivation, and specific teaching strategies. Course participants also had opportunities to choose various readings from within the various topic areas, thus ensuring the relevance and applicability of the content for each student. This study seems to suggest that this is an effective model. As one student stated after reading an article on differentiated instruction:

“After reading this article, I have to say that it fits one of the students in my class perfectly. It is almost scary how much the student in the article and the student in my class resemble each other. This particular article can hopefully be utilized in a way to help this poor kid in my classroom. I am going to show this article to the 9th grade guidance counselor...as well, and try to get this poor kid some help. I am sure glad you put this article in our readings because I really want to help this student get the help he needs. Thanks for such a good read...”

### **Findings from Journal Entries**

By requiring an on-going, semester-long professional dialogue and self-reflection, the course encouraged participants to develop an appreciation for and understanding of this important discipline. Although a required component of the course, the process of reflecting upon one’s teaching practice, as evident via the journal entries, proved to be an important and powerful learning tool for these participants. As one respondent stated in her journal:

“After reading the articles from my group assignment this week, I realized that I have a lot of work to do with my students. I have a lot of things that I want to implement in my lesson, lectures and my assignments. I think I am going to first tackle the battle with homework. I usually get a pretty good percentage of students to bring their homework back, but I am still struggling with a few. I would like to work on preparing homework for those who are struggling and giving them less work, and fewer problems, but still covering the material. This week has been a learning week for me. I am ready to instill in my kids everything that I have learned this week about making work meaningful and making sure that every assignment, whether its homework or class-work has a purpose and the kids understand my expectations and that the parents are somehow connected to this assignment. I want there to be a "relationship between the students and the content" of what I teaching. I am eager to attend school in the morning, but also very exhausted mentally and physically. Teaching is a very hard, stressful but fulfilling job. Let me get to work!”

### **Findings from Online Group Discussions**

Professional development endeavors are most effective when the experience integrates conceptual understanding with pragmatic “real-world” aspects of the day-to-day teaching practice in a manner that fosters interactive discussions (Gersten et al., 2010). The Education 483/596 re-designed course provided students with research-based information, instructional techniques, and resources in a manner that enabled them to reflect, discuss, and implement this information into their daily practice. The findings from this study suggest that the collaborative interactions and dialogue enabled students to build a common conceptual understanding as well

as fostering practical application. The course format provided students with facilitator guided discussion opportunities in which the students were active participants, not passive listeners.

**Peer Mentoring.** As one respondent stated: "...the group work and discussions were very informative, positive, and encouraging..." This study lends support to Draves' (2002) notion that this type of communication and interaction results in student learning as evident from the entries described below.

"I have learned a lot throughout this course from my group members and the assignments given. I think I have learned more from hearing about their classroom experiences and I will be walking away from this class with a great deal of activities, resources, and strategies to add to my "little bag of tricks" to use with my students."

"I have enjoyed the dialogue! It is a stress relief to know that others are thinking, feeling, and questioning along the same lines as I am."

"Talking with my group has been amazing-so helpful...I feel like I'm always climbing the learning curve! It's a lot to comprehend...I feel as if I don't have a clue..."

"I have discovered that it is so much better when there is more than one brain at work!!!! Hummmm...I need to do more group discussion in my classroom..."

For approximately 10% of the course participants, the exact opposite proved to be true. These individuals felt that "...the group assignments were pointless." Not only did these respondents fail to engage in the group process, but as one student reflected, "...the group work was a joke and in no way reflected how collaboration happens in the real world."

### **Discussion**

Based upon this study of one program's participants' perceptions, a number of course components were identified as having positively impacted the participants' professional growth, namely reflective journaling, engaged peer dialogue, and targeted "real world" assignments. It appears that the online delivery format was perceived as either a strength or deficiency depending upon the respondents' level of engagement and participation. Additionally, instructor engagement was frequently mentioned as being a required element for online course success.

It is important to note, there is a significant and fundamental difference between being an engaged instructor and presenting instructor-centered instruction. As Huber (2010) noted in *Professional Learning 2.0*, regarding effective professional development, teachers no longer need to

"...wait to hear someone from the outside to tell them what they need to do...rather, ongoing professional learning is part of the culture...as [teachers] collaboratively construct understanding, [they] define who they are, how they communicate and how they can best serve their students." (p. 46)

This study lends support to the literature that teachers can serve as support groups for one another in improving their professional practice (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). The instructor's role in this course was to support and encourage the participants to engage in these types of behaviors. Through the various assignments and readings, the instructor presented opportunities for students to acquire new knowledge, apply it to their practice, and then reflect upon the results with both their peers in the course and the instructor. In order for this to occur, an instructor must be an active participant. As one respondent noted, "She is an excellent instructor, particularly with regards to providing feedback, suggestions, advisement and the like. She is very responsive to student needs and enthusiastic about the subject."

It would seem that one important improvement for future online courses of this type would be to incorporate a more comprehensive description of the reflective, active, student-centered nature of the course. This finding is further supported by the fact that slightly more than 31% of respondents indicated some level of disagreement with the statement, "I was aware of the expectations for the online course before I enrolled." Clearly this is an area requiring attention.

The components of this course were re-designed to follow suggestions outlined by the National Academy of Education (2005), namely to provide opportunities for novice teachers to "learn from their practice and from the insights of others when they assume their initial teaching responsibilities" (p. 31). It is important to note that this study was not designed to investigate the participants' teacher effects upon student outcomes. However, research indicates that teacher learning is strongest when it is embedded within a broad community of practitioners involving content in contexts in which it can be applied (National Academy of Education, 2005). By providing such experiences, the participants of the re-designed Education 483/596 course were enabled to further develop those qualities necessary for effective teaching.

Given the variety among alternative certification programs and the small sample size of this study, the findings of this study may not be generalize-able to other programs. However, this study does provide useful insights into one program model and its participants. The findings lend support to the belief that teacher preparation programs can effectively utilize well designed, appropriately structured online coursework to foster the development of professional learning communities designed to provide mentoring and peer support. By incorporating assignments that present content that is meaningful, relevant, and applicable to the individual student, online course work of this type can support the professional development of the alternatively certified educator.

By examining one university's initiative to support the alternatively certified educator via an online mentoring and professional development course offering, this study focused, in detail, upon the characteristics of the course itself. This study furthered the understanding of the methods by which teacher education programs can provide support and professional development opportunities for those educators who have entered the profession through alternative routes. Many alternatively certified teachers, as was the case in this study, are employed as the teacher of record while simultaneously enrolled in education courses. Therefore, traditional "fieldwork" is not an option. The results from this study suggest that online courses, which create a collaborative, supportive, peer mentoring environment, can provide many of the supportive and mentoring elements that may be present in a more traditional "fieldwork" setting.

Further studies of the kind reported here would be helpful in further defining successful alternative certification program models, and setting the stage for an even better, more informed understanding of what it means to prepare individuals for the challenging field of teaching.

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