MENTORING ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION TEACHERS: IMPLEMENTING AN ONLINE COLLABORATIVE CONSULTATION COMMUNITY

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Online discussion boards have the potential to provide significant support to beginning teachers; thus, we designed an online collaborative consultation community to provide mentor support to university students enrolled in an alternative certification program. The results suggest that although students in alternative certification programs will use an online forum in ways similar to those of traditionally trained teachers, students in alternative certification programs need more guidance in some specific content areas such as curriculum and instruction and classroom management. Comments regarding how the use of online discussions might improve participants' education are also provided.

The transition from pre-service teacher to being wholly responsible for one's own classroom is, in many cases, overwhelming (DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003; Utsumi & Kizu, 2006). Add to that, matriculation through an alternative certification program (ACP) and the challenges are typically even greater. The majority of ACPs place teachers in classrooms following a condensed period of pedagogical coursework and little if any practice in a classroom with an experienced teacher (Utsumi & Kizu, 2006). Not surprisingly, many of these novice instructors immediately struggle with the basic aspects of leading a classroom. One of the first messages posted to the online discussion board presented in this article bears out this point: "Student 'R' is a major distraction, always wants to be the center of

attention. When he is absent (my favorite days) the whole class is on task. As soon as he walks in, the room is in chaos … Sincerely, Desperate Teacher."

The demand for qualified teachers has led to the proliferation of alternative certification programs. According to Feistritzer, Haar, Hobar, & Losselyong (2004), alternative methods of entry into the teaching profession have been utilized by U.S. policymakers to address growing teacher shortages with 43 states and the District of Columbia having a route that eliminates the need for prospective teachers to attend college with a major in education. It is estimated that the number of teachers who have entered the teaching profession through nontraditional methods has exceeded 200,000 (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). The *No Child Left Behind Act of*

2001 (NCLB, 2002) requires that by 2006 every classroom in the U.S. be led by a teacher with certification in the subject she/he instructs (Tissington, 2006). While ACPs grow in popularity, critics are quick to point out their limitations (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005). Certainly, one the most widely reported challenges regards the culture of isolation experienced by induction level instructors (Gold, 1996; Rogers & Babinski, 2002; Singer & Zeni, 2004). Isolation is, arguably, an even greater challenge for the ACP teacher. Many times such teachers are required to be fully independent, often in the most challenging environments with the most disadvantaged students and without the benefit of extended pedagogical coursework and fieldwork experience (Berry, 2001).

Mentorship has been recognized as a critical component of teacher preparation (e.g., National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and Council for Exceptional Children). Effective alternative certification programs attempt to address the support needs of their participants through mentorship experiences (Kais et al., 1998). A mentor is typically assigned to the novice instructor at the inception of the certification program and, ideally, that mentor remains with the teacher throughout the ACP training. However, the assigned mentors may not be available to the new teacher when she/he is in need of advice or assistance. In addition, the hiring school may provide support through administrative channels, which often includes a formally assigned onsite mentor. Though many schools have mentoring programs of this nature, they are often reported to be ineffective (Dow & Webb, 2003; Hobbs, Day, & Russo, 2002). In response to these and other concerns, numerous traditional postsecondary education programs have begun to supplement conventional support of induction-level instructors through the use of online discussion boards.

Online discussion boards have been used as a potential means of alleviating some of the challenges facing novice instructors. Singer & Zeni (2004) shared an example of an individual who noted that without the online discussion board as a lifeline she would have likely quit teaching. Novice teachers have also used online discussion boards as a means of acquiring practical advice (Klecka, Cheng, & Clift, 2004). For example, Hobbs et al.(2002) shared a story about a first-year teacher who requested guidance regarding how to assist a child who was engaging in self-injurious behavior. Thus, many postsecondary education programs are recognizing the value of online discussion boards as a way of providing social, emotional, practical, and professional support to novice teachers (Dewert et al., 2003).

Rheingold (1993) described the use of asynchronous discussion as an "online braintrust" (as cited in Jetton, 2003). Results of research related to online discussion boards note that they have provided novice teachers with opportunities to clarify complex educational issues and make informed choices regarding professional practice (Kurtts, Hibbard, & Levin, 2005). Further, these online communities have increased emotional support, teacher confidence, enthusiasm, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and reduced feelings of isolation (DeWert et al., 2003; Nicholson & Bond, 2003). Other constructive features include the alleviation of time, geographical, and scheduling issues (Nicholson & Bond, 2003). That is, discussion is not necessarily limited by time, nor is one's location or availability during the day a factor. Last, researchers regularly point to the value added to reflective discourse regarding instruction (Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Hernandez-Ramos, 2004; Pena-Shaff &

Nicholls, 2004; Singer & Zeni, 2004).

Given the recommendation that ACP teacher candidates consult with a quality mentor teacher (Feistritzer, 1999) and the limitations noted earlier regarding access to mentors and the unique needs of ACP instructors, the authors developed and administered an online collaborative consultation community as a means of providing multiple levels of mentor support. The ACP teachers were provided a school site mentor and access to the online collaboration community mentor program. The online community included students enrolled in a university's alternative certification program focused on special education, college of education teaching faculty, and a set of nationally board certified master teachers (i.e., mentors) as participants.

The purpose of this paper is to present several findings related to this pilot project. First, we discuss the types of issues that the university students were interested in discussing with mentors given that many of the students were simultaneously beginning their teaching careers. Although we had previously identified topics that would likely be of interest to beginning teachers, we wanted to ascertain which topics were most critical to the students in this alternative certification program that focused on special education. Next, we compare the types of issues discussed by the ACP students to those discussed by more traditionally-trained teachers who had participated in similar online forums (e.g., DeWert et al., 2003). Last, we identify how asynchronous online discussions might positively impact the education of the online participants.

METHOD

Participants

Participants included 18 graduate students, seven master teachers, and two university faculty. The students were enrolled in an alternative certification program at a public state university. Ten of these students also taught as beginning teachers at local elementary and middle schools. The seven master teachers taught at local elementary and middle schools and were selected based upon their status as nationally board certified school teachers. Because the nationally board certified teacher mentors were required to meet service criteria to remain board certified, they used their participation in the online community as a means of meeting their service obligation. The university faculty included one full-time faculty member (who served as the discussion board facilitator) and one doctoral candidate who also taught courses at the university as an adjunct instructor.

Procedure

Prior to the start of the project, participants attended a half-day orientation session facilitated by the authors of this paper. The first part of the session included training for the mentor teachers and provided the mentors with an overview of the ACP, discussion of the notion of coaching, and a conversation about the types of responses that might be suitable in an online mentorship environment. Additionally, examples were provided and discussed. The second portion of the session, which included both the mentors and the ACP teachers, provided an overview of the goals of the project, a discussion of participant roles and responsibilities, guideline development for the community, practice in the online community process, and information on how to access the discussion board.

Participants contributed to the project through an asynchronous online

discussion board using the *Blackboard Learning System*. Students accessed the discussion board through the university website available to students anywhere they had access to the Internet. The discussion board was password protected and only participating students, master teachers, and university faculty were provided with access.

Students posted messages on the discussion board from the beginning of the fall semester to approximately one month past the end of the semester for a total of about five months. Resultant data reflect that participation was evenly distributed across the five-month period. As a means of organizing the discussion board, the facilitator divided it into eight forums at the beginning of the semester. The forum names corresponded to categories that had previously been found to be valuable to beginning teachers, similar to those use by DeWert et al. (2003). Each of the eight forums in the discussion board was identified with a title and a one- sentence description as shown in Table 1. Students could either create a new discussion thread within a forum by posting a new message with a question or comment, or they could respond to an existing message. Participation was entirely voluntary and the ACP teachers determined their own level of actual participation.

TABLE 1
Forum Titles and Descriptions

Forum title	Forum description
Community bulletin board	This forum includes issues related to general information, your MAT program (e.g., paying for your textbooks, personal information, or stories about teaching).
Curriculum and instruction	This forum includes issues such as instructional strategies, how to implement literature circles, or information about specific content areas such as fractions.
Professional identity	This forum includes topics such as professional development work (e.g., county mandated workshops or courses) and your identity as a teacher within the classroom context.
Classroom management	This forum includes discussion about managing the classroom and/or individual students.
Individual students	This forum is about addressing the special needs of specific students; for example, how do I work with students who have autism, learning disabilities, or ADHD?
Policy and politics	This forum includes topics such as (but not limited to) school policies, teacher accountability, inclusion, and state mandated testing.
Technology	This forum includes topics ranging from using the discussion board itself to topics related to using technology in your classroom or school.
Working with colleagues/family	This forum includes discussions about working with parents/guardians, teachers, or administrators

RESULTS

We first sought to determine whether the participants had posted their initial message in the appropriate forum. To do so, the two authors independently read the messages within each forum and using the forum descriptions provided in Table 1, coded the discussion thread as either correctly placed or incorrectly placed. Discussion threads incorrectly placed were shifted to the forum in which we believed that they should have been included. With respect to inter-rater reliability, we were in agreement on 90% of our placements and after discussion, came to a mutual agreement on the remaining 10%. Of the 145 discussion threads, we identified 26 (18%) as incorrectly located and placed them in other forums.

The number of discussion topics and responses from the discussion board is provided in Table 2. Besides the *Community Bulletin Board* forum, the *Curriculum and Instruction* forum generated the most discussion and responses, followed by *Professional Identity*, *Classroom Management*, *Individual Students*, and *Policy and Politics*. In contrast, the *Technology* and the *Working with Colleagues/Family* forums did not generate much discussion.

Table 2
Number of discussions and responses in each forum

Forum title	Number of discussions	Number of responses	Mean number of responses
Community bulletin board	69	171	2.5
Curriculum and instruction	20	84	4.2
Professional identity	17	58	3.4
Classroom management	14	53	3.8
Individual students	10	39	3.9
Policy and politics	8	58	7.3
Technology	5	7	1.4
Working with colleagues/family	2	4	2.0
Totals	145	474	3.3

As noted, the topics discussed within each forum are accurately reflected in the forum descriptions provided in Table 1. Here we provide specific examples that represent the tone of the messages posted in each of the forum categories. For instance, students shared personal information in the *Community Bulletin Board* forum, such as "Monday at 10:30 I will be defending my Honor's thesis in the lounge. If you are on campus, you are invited to attend." Additionally, students shared entertaining classroom experiences. One such thread involved a teacher's first experience using a substitute teacher while another, titled "You just can't win" shared a story in which the student's asked for more challenging work, but then balked when it was presented. Other messages in this forum discussed information related to their university program such as "When is Dr. Doolittle's case study due?"

Participants discussed a range of ideas in the *Curriculum and Instruction* forum. One participant described a board game she created for "Commitment to Character." Other participants asked for support in areas such as math, reading and writing. One participant specifically asked, "Does anyone have any suggestions for books or ideas for my special diploma Language Arts class…My principal told me that I can order books but I have no clue what books I should order." Another asked, "Would anyone like to discuss lesson plans for special diploma high school math?" Other participants shared resources that they thought would be helpful to others, such as: "If you can get the Sunday New York Times there is a large article in the travel section about our area with pictures, a nice map, and

places described."

The *Professional Identity* forum included fewer messages related to their identity as a teacher and more messages related to professional development, such as: "How and where do I take CLS classes?"; "Is anyone else going to the professional development workshop?"; and "I highly recommend the math training by Jake Soltys." Others discussed their coursework in the university program, including: "What courses are you going to take this summer?" and "I would think that now would be the time that we, as a group, plan on what courses that we are going to take during the summer. If we inform the powers that be the intentions for the majority of the students, then maybe we can be accommodated."

The *Classroom Management* forum was often used by the students who were working as beginning teachers in elementary and middle schools. Examples include: "One student stole something from another in my classroom, but I don't know who it was. Any suggestions?"; "How do you write a discipline plan for a student?"; "I need some ideas for rewards and consequences in regards to discipline"; and "I've thought of these ideas related to behavior management, do they seem doable?" Remarkably, many of the responses provided by the novice teachers were helpful. For example, one suggestion involved using a "common ground" activity. The classroom teacher would ask students to stand based upon specific statements such as, "I share common ground with someone who has gone to the beach." One mentor teacher suggested locating the "Kagan books" that include team or class building activities.

The *Individual Students* category included discussions related to the needs of specific students. For instance, one participant wanted to know when to allow a student with behavior problems (who was in a small varying exceptionalities class) back into regular classes. Another discussion involved how to handle a disruptive student with Tourette's Syndrome. One participant was unsure how to reach the quieter girls that don't demand your attention, but need it nonetheless. Finally, one participant wrote: I have had very little success with a particular student that has been labeled severely emotionally disturbed (SED). He's easily frustrated, bangs his head on the wall, and flips over tables. I take him on walks around the school just to tire him out and burn off all that latent energy he has. I'm not supposed to restrain him, although I've had to in order for him not to injure his head. Can anyone give me some advice or suggest some strategies?

The *Policy and Politics* category included topics such as questions about assistants and policies related to the curriculum for Special Diploma students. One participant showed how much help she really needed as a new teacher: I am interested in hearing how to more efficiently find out how things run … I guess my question is really borne out of the day I was having: desks were thrown directly at me, both my assistants were playing hooky, my computer was not hooked up, I did not know how to call within the school, and I had no phone numbers to call anyway…you get the picture.

 mentor teacher provided the following response: "Get to know and befriend some key people in your school: the secretary, the head plant operator, and the cafeteria manager. If a behavior specialist position exists at your school, add him or her to your list."

The questions in the *Technology* forum were very limited. There was a short discussion about the use of the school district's email system and a couple of messages about using the forum which received no responses. Of the two messages that related specifically to teaching, one of them shared an online website and another asked if it was okay for students to take notes with a laptop during classes.

Only two messages were posted in the *Working with Colleagues/Family* forum. One asked, "Any suggestions for talking to a mother who has been confrontational to others in the past?" and the other asked "Any suggestions for interviewing with principals during job interviews?"

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that students in alternative certification programs will use an online forum for receiving mentoring in areas similar to those that have been reported in other studies that examined more traditionally trained teachers. Yet, important differences emerged between the participants in this study and those in other studies. These differences indicate that students in the present study need more help in some specific areas. For instance, the most pronounced difference when comparing the present findings to those of similar studies, such as DeWert et al. (2003), is that participants in that project were less likely to discuss issues related to curriculum and instruction. In contrast, the *Curriculum and Instruction* forum had the most discussions and responses in the present study (besides

the *Community Bulletin Board* forum). We speculate that this difference may be attributed to the amount of teacher preparation that the groups had received. In the present study, the students (many of whom were also beginning teachers) were merely beginning their education courses and had little or no prior K-12 classroom experience. In comparison, teachers in the DeWert et al. (2003) study were bachelor's-level graduates of a traditional teacher education program. As a result, the students in the present study may have needed more advice related to issues of curriculum and instruction. It should also be noted that in the present study the *Technology* and *Working with Colleagues/Family* forums produced very few posts. One might conclude that technology concerns and matters related to colleagues take a backseat to struggles regarding what to teach and how to manage a classroom.

Another difference between our findings and those described by DeWert et al. (2003) is that the *Professional Identity* category was expanded in the present study to include issues related to professional development. Whereas professional development was of little concern to teachers in the DeWert et al. project, students and teachers in the present project often asked questions about professional development opportunities or shared information about upcoming workshops. This focus on professional development is understandable considering that these students had less coursework preparation and were not yet certified.

The fact that 82% of the discussion threads were placed in the "correct" forum indicates that the participants took time in selecting a forum and were able to do so with a good deal of accuracy. The *Community*

Bulletin Board forum discussion threads were most likely to be re-categorized because the discussions often included personal or general information that did not relate specifically to the forum that the participant had originally chosen. These results suggest that while participants generally selected the placement of their message carefully, they sometimes decided to share information within a forum in which they were currently reading or writing. This type of misplacement could be problematic if some participants (such as the mentors) only read the discussion in certain forums. In this case, the messages would not be read or responded to by others. However, given the relatively small number of participants and discussion threads, we do not believe that the misplacement of messages was a major problem for the participants in this project.

These findings suggest that the forum titles selected for this project (based on the results of DeWert et al., 2003) were appropriate for this population of participants as well. Induction level ACP special educators used the forum to discuss topics similar to those discussed by first-year traditionally trained general education teachers. The major difference was that the participants in the present study needed more help in some areas; and therefore, they posted messages to those forums more often than had been documented in discussion boards with traditionally trained teachers.

It has been suggested that online conversations can positively impact teaching and learning in at least five areas (Ferdig & Roehler, 2003). First, it may improve interactivity within the classroom setting. Based upon feedback from faculty who taught courses for the

study cohort, topics within the online forum were often transferred to the face-to-face class meetings (Bonnie Braun, personal communication, December 9th, 2003). In fact, the course instructor noted that it was often challenging to redirect discussion regarding online topics back to the class meeting lesson plan. Ultimately, this course instructor requested access to the online forum so that she might better facilitate face-to-face class dialogue in light of the online topics. Second, online discussion may promote active learning. Again, face-to-face course instructors (Bonnie Braun, personal communication, December 9th, 2003; Terry Rose, personal communication, January 6th, 2004) noted that the students were often able to point to online topics and make connections regarding those topics and class lesson topics. More importantly, students reported trying suggestions provided online in their field-based settings. Third, online discussion can lead to stronger relationships between students and faculty. Rather than interacting with faculty only during class time, the collaboration community provided the opportunity to consult with participating faculty members on a much more consistent basis. Fourth, researchers indicate participation in online discussion may improve higher-order thinking (Williams et al., 2001). Students consistently asked for suggestions regarding their practice and sometimes reported whether they had success after the suggestion was implemented in their classroom. When suggestions were not successful, participants sometimes speculated as to why, thus indicating a reach for a deeper level of understanding. It is also worth noting that mentors were not the only community participants making suggestions; the induction level teachers eventually began making suggestions to each other. Last, asynchronous discussions can provide flexibility. Data in the current pilot study indicated that students accessed the forum every day of the week and most often used the forum on weekends and during nighttime hours (i.e., from 11 pm to 1 am). Thus, the asynchronous nature of the system appears to provide a degree of time independence, so to speak.

CONCLUSION

Based upon sheer number of posts and the consistency of participation, we consider the online community to be a success. Though participation was voluntary, student posts to the online discussion board began within 48 hours of its inception and continued well into the students' winter holiday from teaching and university coursework. Our informal discussions with participating students suggest that the mentor support was constructive and helpful. It is worth noting that this project was grant funded and has since been carried forward for the current cohort of alternative certification special education students with financial support from the university.

Given the lack of ready access to school site mentors (personal communication, Mark Mullins, September 19, 2003) and the challenges posed by traditional mentorship techniques noted earlier, the online collaboration community provided a consistent and readily available opportunity to correspond with both mentors and university faculty. Rapid and unfettered mentor access is especially important given the lack of

extended pedagogical instruction and fieldwork experience of the participating ACP special education teachers. The collaboration community provided an almost immediate audience available day or night to assist with myriad school-related matters.

While not an intended outcome of the project, we recognized that the online discussion threads might indicate areas for improvement in the university's courses that are part of the program for the alternative certification students. For example, given that classroom management was a common topic of conversation, it became clear that we should consider how we were teaching the subject in our initial preparation course. Examination of online discussion topics can serve as a feedback loop, so to speak, for faculty who develop and deliver alternative certification programs.

As a final caveat, readers should bear in mind that the findings may not be particularly generalizable. The sample size was small and participation was limited to one cohort of alternative certification special education students. However, our findings, on a pilot basis, do suggest that participants were willing to actively and consistently engage in online dialogue with mentors and university faculty regarding the challenges and concerns of first-year alternative certification special education teachers. Further, it suggests that the concerns of ACP instructors are not dramatically different than those who are traditionally trained.

The outcomes of the present pilot examination may offer additional evidence for supporting the use of discussion boards as a means of mentoring induction level teachers, and in particular, alternative certification

induction level instructors. Given that the results of the present examination align, to some degree, with previous studies of traditionally trained beginning teachers, a more cohesive conversation among all teacher educators regarding mentorship may evolve. A literature base that systematically examines the mentorship needs and experiences of all beginning teachers might allow both faculty and future teachers the opportunity to take advantage of the lessons it provides.

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