COMPARING ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS
A Case Study of Three Online Teacher Education Candidates

Nicole L. Thompson
The University of Memphis

Nicole C. Miller and Dana Pomykal Franz
Mississippi State University

This case study examined learning experiences of three nontraditional online learners who were unsuccessful in an online course, Middle Level Education, and opted to repeat it in a face-to-face setting. Their unique experiences and perspective provided an opportunity to shed light on the nature of preservice teacher education for nontraditional learners in both contexts. Self-regulated learning and the Community of Inquiry model underpin the research and were lenses for analysis. Findings indicated the importance of establishing all elements of the Community of Inquiry model, but specifically, effectively establishing teaching presence and cultivating social presence among students to support online success.

INTRODUCTION

The comparison of online and face-to-face learning experiences has been studied extensively in educational research (Braun, 2008; Ernst, 2008; Mullen & Tallent-Runnels, 2006; Reisetter, Lapoint, & Korcuska, 2007). However, teacher preparation in an online context is a relatively new phenomenon with unique disciplinary challenges, but it has grown rapidly in the past decade for both undergraduate and alternate route programs leading to initial licensure (Huss, 2007; Olson & Werhan, 2005; Thornton, 2013). Online teacher candidates tend to be nontraditional students with unique characteristics (Carr, 2000). The purpose of

• **Nicole L. Thompson**, 415 C Ball Hall, 3798 Walker Avenue, The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152. Telephone: (901) 678-2459. E-mail: nlthmpsn@memphis.edu

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this study was to examine the learning experiences of three nontraditional online program area students who were unsuccessful in an online course, Middle Level Education (MLE), and opted to repeat it in a face-to-face setting. Their unique experiences provided an opportunity to shed light on the nature of preservice teacher education for nontraditional learners in these different contexts. Given the unique disciplinary context of middle level teacher preparation online, we initially attempted to ground our research in this literature. However, only a small research base was found with limited relevance for this study. We expanded our review of the literature to online teacher education experiences.

Online Versus Face-to-Face Instruction

Although there are many similarities between online and face-to-face learning experiences, there are unique challenges to online learning, especially with adult learners (Park & Choi, 2009). Often online programs are populated by nontraditional students, with multiple competing demands on their time, including families and other job responsibilities. This can result in higher attrition of students in online programs than those taught face to face (Herbert, 2006; Rovai, 2003; Walsh, Abi-Nader, Poutiatine, 2005).

Despite this reality, limited learning outcome differences have been found between online and face-to-face instruction. Comparative research between online and face-to-face instruction has been conducted in a variety of universities with a variety of students and in a multitude of courses—many of which were not based on professional education and traditional *education methods* courses. Researchers examining learning differences between online and face-to-face college students found significant differences did not exist between delivery formats (Johnson, Sutton, & Poon, 2000; Lim, Kim, Chen, & Ryder, 2008; Warren & Holloman, 2005). Warren and Holloman's (2005) study of online instruction outcome revealed no significant difference in students' satisfaction between online and face-to-face sections. A comparison of a face-to-face and online course analyzed by Ernst (2008) found 85% of student participants from an online instruction group, either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in an online learning environment. Further, Reisetter et al.'s (2007) examination of student satisfaction and quality of learning in online and face-to-face learners, exposed equal measures of learning outcome and satisfaction despite the dissimilar learning experiences.

The function of teachers in online and face-to-face learning experiences has been found to have limited differences as well. Diaz and Entonado's (2009) examination of instructor functions (e.g., the work or activities of teachers) in online and face-to-face learning settings focused on content area, student and teacher interaction and design. Overall, the results observed no relevant variance in the functions of teachers in online and face-to-face courses; if differences did exist, they were likely to be as a result of teacher involvement and institutional commitment (Diaz & Entonado, 2009).

Effectiveness of Online Teacher Education

Although, in general, online learning has been found to be comparable to face-to-face learning, unique characteristics of teacher education make online learning in this context complex. Success of an online teacher certification program studied by Harrell and Harris (2006) explored performance achievement in candidates of an online certification program and a traditional face-to-face program. Candidates from both programs were analogous on state licensure tests and standards-based self-assessments (Harrell & Harris, 2006). This study provided evidence that online teacher certification can yield both student satisfaction and effective educators. Chiero and Beare (2010) also sought to compare the effectiveness of an online-supported teacher preparation program to that of more traditional campus based programs. This 7-year investi-

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gative study analyzed data from annual system wide evaluations of teacher preparation programs. Ratings for the online-supported program were consistently higher than those for the selected campus-based program, and the system as a whole. These reports of success "suggest that a well-designed online teacher preparation program can be as effective or more effective as a campus-based program and should be considered in preparing teacher candidates to meet current and future challenges" (Chiero & Beare, 2010, p. 788).

Even though online teacher preparation has not shown any significant difference in learning outcomes, perceptions of such programs are not always positive. Huss (2007) found that principals at all levels of K-12 education were apprehensive about hiring online teacher candidates. In particular, principals indicated concerns about the ability of online programs to evaluate dispositions and the more social aspects of teaching. Personal dispositions and affect can be tweaked if or when concerns arise in face-to-face programs. The same type of intervention is far more complex in the online environment.

The virtual sameness of online and face-to-face instruction and effectiveness of online teacher education programs did not immediately reveal reasons for failure or success in a particular context. Therefore, researchers sought to explore additional components of online and face-to-face instruction. This study explored the experiences of three nontraditional online learners who failed an online course and opted to repeat it in a face-to-face environment.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Self-regulated learning and the Community of Inquiry model together provide a framework through which we were able to make sense of the experiences of the online students in this study.

Self-Regulated Learning

Within any learning experience, individuals use varying degrees of self-regulation processes. One of the challenges of online learning is the reported increased need for self-regulation in the more autonomous environment (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Bol & Gardner, 2011). As a part of this process, students must regulate cognition, motivation/affect, behavior, and context (Pintrich, 2004). The areas of self-regulation include such self-regulatory processes as goal setting, planning, self-monitoring, effort expenditure, help-seeking, persistence, evaluation of task, and context. Self-regulation can be confounded by the nature of the majority of online students who have competing demands on their time such as jobs and families, which can potentially interfere with their ability to perform various self-regulatory processes (Artino & Stephens). As a result of these factors, and the more independent nature of online learning, there is generally a greater need for self-regulation online than in a face-to-face setting.

Community of Inquiry

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001), provides a framework with which to examine student experiences in an online learning environment, a method of examining both their online and face-to-face learning experiences. This model blends three elements related to online educational experiences: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Each aspect of the model is interrelated to the other to create the framework for the student's educational experience. Cognitive presence can be defined as the "nature and quality of the critical-thinking process" (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 14). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) indicated that cognitive presence consists of triggering events, exploration, integration of ideas, and resolution. Social presence, according to the CoI, can be defined as "the ability of learners to project

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themselves socially and emotionally in a community of inquiry" (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999, p. 52). Social presence consists of three categories in online learning: (a) emotional expression, (b) open communication, and (c) group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000). Teaching presence includes "designing and managing learning sequences, providing subject matter expertise, and facilitating active learning" (Rourke et al., 1999, p. 52). Teaching presence is said to bind cognitive and social presence together (Garrison et al., 2000). Related to teaching presence, issues with the availability of online instructors is an oft reported complaint in online learning (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Falloon, 2011). The interaction between cognitive presence and teaching presence is identified as involving the regulation of learning which also plays a role in this study.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Failure, defined as earning less than the grade of "C" in any education course, is not acceptable. When three nontraditional students enrolled in a foundational online education course, MLE failed it and opted to repeat the course in a face-to-face environment we were interested in their learning experiences in both contexts. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine these experiences. In our effort to describe and analyze a naturally occurring phenomenon, an intrinsic case study approach was employed (Stake, 1995). This approach was taken because "in all its particularity *and* ordinariness, the case itself is of interest" (Stake, 2008, p. 122). The research was guided by the following questions: What was the nature of the learning experiences for three repeating nontraditional students? And, how did the content and delivery formats in both the online and face-to-face Middle Level Education course influence their academic performance? Understanding the reasons why the three students were more successful in the face-to-face setting, when they were active online students, was of utmost importance to us as both course designers and instructors. Further, comparison of the three repeating students' experiences in the different learning environments afforded us, as instructors, a unique opportunity to examine the instructional methods used and assignments given so as to make them more effective.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants for this study were purposefully selected (Merriam, 1998). As online elementary education majors, the three participants were nontraditional students completing their online degree in a cohort model. As online degree seekers, they were fully aware of the technological requirements and commitment needed to complete the degree successfully. However, they failed a foundational course in their program of study; then opted to repeat the course in the face-to-face environment. Had they not chosen the face-to-face course, they would have delayed their progress in the program by a year, and joined a new cohort.

Although the three students were successful in the first semester of their online Elementary Education program, they earned a failing grade in the online MLE course. These students were the only students who had not passed the course in the two semesters it had been offered online. All three students would be considered nontraditional (Carr, 2000; Walsh et al., 2005). They resided within 40 miles of the university, but selected the online program because the distance coupled with their familial and work commitments made attending a traditional face-to-face program impossible. All were married with children and worked at least part time. One was male, two were female, and all three were Caucasian.

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Setting and Context

The online elementary education degree program has been offered at this southeastern university for three years. The participants in this study were part of the second online cohort of preservice teachers. The online degree consists of five semesters, one of which is completed during the summer term. Preservice teachers enroll in four classes per semester during the academic year and three in the summer. The first semester focuses on early childhood and the second focuses on middle level education. The summer term focuses on education foundation courses, and the fourth semester consists of content area methods courses. The final semester consists of a student internship and a classroom management seminar. This sequence parallels the traditional face-to-face program. Expectations regarding student responsibility and initiative, workload, and field hours increase as students progress through the program.

Two of the researchers who have taught the face-to-face MLE course for many years collaborated to design the online MLE course. Two issues were of primary concern when creating the online MLE course: (1) fidelity between the face-to-face and online course and (2) differences in student population (i.e., traditional versus nontraditional learners). The online course incorporated readings, online interaction, including threaded discussion and chat, and varied forms of assessment. The online course used WebCT as its course management platform.

Data Collection

After the three preservice teachers failed the online MLE course and committed to repeating the course face to face, they were approached to participate in this study. All three consented to participate. Collection of online archival data began at this point. Although there were a variety of data to evaluate, we focused on total time spent in WebCT, the number of sessions/times logged into the course, the number of e-mail messages sent, e-mail messages read, discussion postings read and made, web-links and files viewed. In addition, researcher observation, student e-mail content, and student work completion were documented. Upon completion of the face-to-face course, individual interviews and face-to-face archival data sources were collected. Semistructured interviews (Merriam, 1998) with each preservice teacher were conducted to assess individual educational histories, and general educational experiences in both face-to-face and online. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the two female participants. The male participant was unreachable for further participation. Given that the three participants lived at a distance from the university, all interviews were conducted by telephone using Google Voice technology for recording.

Data Analysis

A constant comparative approach (Merriam, 1998) for analysis was taken. Initially, individual open-coding of the data was performed by two of the three researchers; to reduce the potential for bias, the researcher who conducted the interviews did not participate in interview analysis processes. Researchers used an iterative process for transcript review, which led to the creation of descriptive codes and to the establishment of initial codes for each participant. After descriptive and interpretive codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were created by each researcher, they were compared for consistency and agreement. This analyst triangulation served to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam, 1998). Next, axial coding was performed to make connections among the codes and to identify common patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Ultimately all three researchers discussed the axial codes and came to agreement regarding the themes.

The two researchers who completed the analysis used within- and cross-case analysis to identify themes. The researchers performed independent reviews of the data, indepen-

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dently coded the data, and then compared codes to identify themes. At this point, the researcher who conducted the interviews was asked to review codes as a form of member checking and to verify the validity of the codes as this researcher had in-depth knowledge of the participants. Further, member checks (Merriam, 1998) were conducted by two of the three participants.

The archival data sources were open-coded and placed into tables for categorization. Chat participation was extracted and placed into a table for review. Descriptive counts of the number of times each student participated in chat sessions were performed. Further, the types of comments made and interactions completed were documented. The number of times students viewed course documents and discussion board postings was tallied. Using this process, patterns were identified enabling researchers to identify similarities and differences regarding preservice teachers' experiences in both the face-to-face and online MLE courses. Taken together, all of the data sources complement each other to create a fuller picture of each participant's experiences.

Researchers' Positionality

As instructors of the MLE course and proponents of online education, two of the researchers were disheartened when the students were unsuccessful in the online course. Historically, we had never had three students be unsuccessful in the same class either in the online or face-to-face environments. We hypothesized as to why this happened before deciding to do the research.

At the onset of the study, we contended that the program failed the students rather than the students failing the course. Basing our judgment on knowledge of research regarding nontraditional learners, we believed that the overall program was not structured in a way that supported the learners. We were intrigued by the research given our belief that the students did not fail due to lack of ability, but as a result of programmatic issues and life circumstances. We believed these nontraditional learners would offer unique insights into the nature of online versus face-to-face delivery formats.

FINDINGS

The research questions that guided this study were: What was the nature of the learning experiences for three repeating nontraditional students? And, how did the content and delivery formats in both the online and face-to-face MLE course influence their academic performance*?* In order to provide sufficient context for the experiences of the three participants, a narrative of their educational histories was generated. As researchers and instructors of the online and face-to-face courses, we believed that understanding the educational histories of each participant and their motivation to seek an online education would be beneficial as we attempted to understand their learning experiences in both the online and face-to-face learning environments. Following the brief participant narratives, findings are presented as they relate to the theoretical framework that guided this study: self-regulated learning as well as cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.

Joe

A "decent" student through high school, Joe graduated in the mid-1990s and enrolled at a community college. His attendance was sporadic at best, which resulted in his decision to withdraw formally. The following spring, he enrolled at a different community college and dropped out. He admitted to being "young and just really didn't care." With no "desire to actually sit [in class]" Joe repeated the enrollment, random attendance, dropping out process one more time before finding an online associate's degree program that he could stick with. At this point, Joe had married and recognized the need for additional education; he completed an online 2-year associate's degree

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in one year. After that, he worked. He and his wife started a family. Though he wished for additional education, his lifestyle had changed and attending a traditional brick and mortar university no longer fit into his world. Joe contemplated enrolling at a major for-profit online university to complete his bachelor's degree, but was hesitant due to the expense as well as the public perception of that online degree program. In discussions with his family, Joe learned that a local 4-year university had converted their teacher education distance education program into an online degree program. This option was more viable because he could complete the degree while still working to support his family, and his diploma would be from a traditional college. Given his educational history, Joe did not want anyone wondering "did he actually get that degree? Or, did somebody else do it for [him]? and [he] "wanted to make sure people knew [he] did it." Because of his start-and-stop educational history, in the fall of 2010, when Joe enrolled in the online Elementary Education teacher education program, he "didn't let his parents, his sister or anyone in his family" know he was in school. His wife served as his sole support system. Even though Joe experienced some academic and motivational difficulties while completing the program, after an additional delay, he did persist to graduation.

Madelyn

Self-described as an "A-B student in high school," Madelyn was "active in clubs, cheerleader, and all that fun stuff"; she was not challenged by the curriculum but felt confident entering college. Her postsecondary career began at a local community college where Madelyn completed one year of basic coursework designed to fulfill degree requirements for a bachelor's degree in elementary education. In the second year of her program, Madelyn relocated and transferred to a different campus of the same community college. She had also married and was pregnant with her first child. She decided to change her major from elementary education to business. After completing one semester of business courses, Madelyn changed her major back to elementary education and took additional courses that would lead to a bachelor of science in elementary education. Madelyn "wasn't concerned with graduating and walking from a community college" so she completed all courses that she could and transferred into the face-to-face elementary education program at a local 4-year university. At this point in her life, Madelyn was married and a first-time mother of an infant; as such, she decided to take a semester off. Upon returning to the university, Madelyn did not enjoy the face-to-face classes or the time away from her child. When she learned she was pregnant with her second child, Madelyn "could not imagine going back to school face-to-face … and decided to do it all online" and she has been doing that ever since. Madelyn always wanted to graduate from this university so entering their online elementary education program "made sense … it made more sense for me and my family that that's where I'd go, and that was really the only [option] … I've never even considered anywhere else." Madelyn began her college career knowing that she wanted to graduate from this specific university, and after a complex educational journey, she achieved her goal.

Julia

Older and established in her career, Julia entered the online elementary education program as it was the most appropriate fit for her lifestyle. Having worked in the business world for several years, Julia was in pursuit of a career change. Both Julia and her husband had established careers in the "business" world and were working 40-50 hours a week. Their schedules left little time for family as they were

> going different directions … with one child at elementary school, one at a daycare, and then, my parents were keeping the littlest one. And, it was just too much. And so, once

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> two of them got in the elementary school, I decided I needed a change, so that one of us could be around. And so, I went to the elementary school to become an assistant teacher. And, just loved it and realized that was one, a way, to be around my family but, two, I just … It was what I enjoyed.

Julia learned about the weekend distance education program leading to a bachelor's degree in elementary education program from a fellow assistant teacher. Upon further investigation, Julia discovered that the weekend program had transitioned into an online program. Julia knew then that going back to school was a viable option. Also, the online format was a better fit for Julia as she had been out of school for several years and considered herself to be "ancient compared to who I would be sitting in class with." In addition, she didn't "think [she] could handle going back and sitting in a classroom" because she had been on her

> own for so long. I mean, I was a manager. I mean, I was a boss for 10 years, you know? And, it was just almost like a submissive thing. Like, it was gonna be hard for me to go in there and almost be submissive to somebody else, you know?

Taken together, the online degree option was the only option for Julia.

In summary, Joe, Madelyn, and Julia chose the online learning environment primarily for convenience. Though the participants selected online learning for the convenience it offered, the learning format, confounded by their personal lives, did not support the development of their cognitive, social, or teaching presence. Further, self-regulation, which is inextricably linked to motivation, played a significant role in the students' success and failure. In what follows, we tease apart the issues—somewhat inherent in online education—that hindered their success.

Self-Regulation, and Success or Lack Thereof

The question that motivated this research "Why were these students not successful in the online class?" had a rather basic answer—the students' personal lives complicated their academic lives, which in turn impacted their ability to self-regulate their learning. The nontraditional students had competing demands for their attention, making it more challenging to direct their attention to the learning process. For example, in one chat session where Madelyn only stayed for 15 minutes and the students were asked how they were doing. She stated, "Very tired … actually I'm past tired. I'm barely awake right now. I'm just glad my babies are asleep. My house hasn't been this quiet in a week." It is going to be a challenge for any student to engage deeply in the learning process and self-regulate their learning and motivation when exhaustion sets in as a result of other demands on time and energy. Pintrich (2004) discussed four areas for self-regulation: cognition, motivation/affect, behavior, and context. Of these, the three areas that were the most significant in the experiences of these students were motivation/affect, behavior and context.

Motivation/Affect. With regard to motivation and affect, the students struggled for various reasons, but primarily it was related to course and domain specific issues. None of the three was particularly interested in teaching at the middle level. Julia had extensive experience with the day care, and Madelyn wanted to teach Grades K-3. Only Joe was interested in teaching Grades 4 and 5, which he did not identify as being "middle school." This could have contributed to their lack of cognitive presence within the course. Given a lower level of interest in the content, the need for teacher and social presence would have been greater, providing some explanation for the fact that they did better in the face-to-face environment where the teacher and social presence were more significant.

Behavior. With regard to behavior as an area of self-regulation, these learners did not expend a lot of energy planning time and effort expenditures in the online class. In addition, their very busy lives did not allow for much self-observation of behavior. Generally, their

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self-regulation was related to increasing or decreasing effort as needed, including persistence or giving up. Madelyn was over-extended as she began working extra hours as a substitute teacher to earn additional money for her family. Madelyn and her family lived with her husband's mother and during the semester "[her] kids had bronchitis and [she] couldn't get on the computer for three days." She acknowledged that "stuff like that just happens." Madelyn demonstrated the lowest levels of self-regulation as she progressed through both courses. She was accepting of the fact that sometimes "assignments just won't be done." She chose to "give up" at times. Madelyn needed more extensive reinforcement from the face-to-face instructor. For example, in class, she needed more prompting and direction than either Joe or Julia. She was seemingly less motivated or engaged. Initially, the time Madelyn allocated to her course work was reallocated to different family and mothering activities. In neither case did she reach out and indicate a need for help.

This group also did not demonstrate effective help-seeking behaviors. Julia became ill with mononucleosis and "could not get out of bed for three weeks." She fell so far behind in the MLE course that she could not catch up. Rather than seeking help from her instructors, Julia convinced herself that she could catch up; she thought

> "this isn't a big deal …" and convinced herself that "I [could] get on [the computer], but I just couldn't do it … it was almost like a defeated thing for me … with the online class you kind of allow that to happen to yourself.

While Joe did ask for an extension on one project, he missed both the extension deadlines. At one point, he did ask for reassurance about his progress in the course via chat. He said, "I am just concerned … I have been so slow and seem as though I am not getting anything done." This did demonstrate a degree of help-seeking effort, as well as monitoring of his behavior. The problem is that this was limited and insufficient for him to be successful.

Chat was used as a way to provide support with monitoring their progress and helping them to do so. For example, the instructor would ask how their progress was on various longer term projects, such as the instructional strategies portfolio. In chat, when asked if they were working on the instructional strategies portfolio, Madelyn responded, "kinda." At this point in the semester, she should have been significantly involved with this work as was reinforced in class agendas. Her reaction indicated a lack of sustained effort on the project. Joe and Julia were not present at the chat and therefore were not even there to be prompted in this manner. Their lack of participation did not allow the instructor to support regulation of their behavior.

Context. Researchers' initial thoughts about the three students' lack of success were guided by initial hypotheses about programmatic issues, a significant part of the context for the online students learning experiences. Historically the courses that comprise the *middle level education block* are challenging for the majority of face-to-face students. The content is distinct and demanding. The age of adolescence—students between 10-15 years old—tends to be intimidating. The assignments and field experiences are designed to be more intense and involved than in the *early childhood block*. In the face-to-face environment, students typically feel a tension as they move from the early childhood to the middle level education block, and beyond. Programmatically, the course work involves more intense work and field experiences over each given semester. When discussing the progression of courses and sequencing of semester blocks with the repeaters, they did not report feeling this tension. As Joe explained:

> I was doing some things for kids, and then doing some things for older students. So, just the type of work I was preparing was a little different. But, other than the courses themselves, no. No, I didn't really see a major difference in them.

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Madelyn had a different perspective regarding the middle level block; while she did not feel tension between the shifting of blocks, she was aware of difficulties with the field experience and assignments. She noted:

> To me, each class had their own kind of field experience and observations. So, that to me was a little bit more difficult because I always thought we were just supposed to focus on our content areas … it was just a lot of field work … we didn't do that really [in the early block], we did in one or two classes of early block, but middle level, it was essentially every class that I was taking, [I] had to go out … I had to keep a journal to figure out what all I did in [each] class just so I wouldn't get confused.

Julia relied on her previous work experiences of setting up and operating a state licensed child care center to carry her through the early childhood block. Thus, she admitted that she

> didn't pick up a book, because I just knew it. But, it was because I had taken a whole summer of early childhood education through the State … I knew all of the theories, I knew all that. And so, a lot of the stuff that was [taught] during fall semester of early childhood … it was already there. And the, whenever I went to middle [level block], it just wasn't there.… It was a different workload for me, but for somebody not having all that information that summer, it would have probably been about the same.

Essentially, Joe, Madelyn and Julia maintained a constant level of effort and cognitive engagement as they progressed from the early childhood to middle level blocks. Compounding the status quo effort level was the responsibility of working autonomously in an online environment with challenging content.

Face to Face. The related question, "Why were these students successful in the face-to-face environment?" also had a simple answer: greater self-regulation along with additional supports provided through greater cognitive, social, and teaching presence.

After experiencing a range of emotions regarding failing the online class and having to alter their lives to complete the summer face-to-face course, the students realized the severity of the situation and knew they had to perform, resulting in strong self-regulatory behaviors. The face-to-face course, because it was taught in the summer, was a shortened, more intense version of the online course. However, expectations of students and their workload did not change, and they had to complete new projects rather than resubmitting prior work. Familiarity with the content, immediate feedback from the instructor, and fellow students' reaction to verbal and nonverbal cues, and increased help-seeking behaviors were reasons given for successful completion of the face-to-face course.

Cognitive Presence

In this study, we did not examine directly how the students were able to construct and confirm meaning through reflection and discourse (Garrison et al., 2001). The lack of cognitive presence did emerge from the interview data and a review of class participation. This was found to have hindered students' success, but was also primarily the result of a lack of engagement with the content and assignments related to self-regulatory challenges discussed previously. Additionally, lack of behavior regulation and motivation/affect regulation diminished the students' cognitive presence in the class. As a result, they existed on the fringes of the community, rather than an integrated member.

As noted above, none of the three students was particularly interested in teaching middle school in the future, influencing their motivation, including interest and task value for the course work. As a result of their lack of interest in this age group, they also were less likely to engage in the learning experiences to the degree they did in the prior semester that focused on early childhood.

Additionally, some of the content essential to understanding young adolescents is easier,

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TABLE 1
Participant Characteristics and Course Participation Online

	Total Time	*Sessions*	*E-mails Sent*	*Discussion Postings Read*	*Discussion Postings Made*	*Files Viewed**	*Chats Attended***	*Major Assignments Not Completed*
Joe	56:27	284	26	205	33	617	2/8	2
Madelyn	25:51	59	23	115	23	212	3/8	0
Julia	34:35	198	24	183	25	198	4.25/8	1
Class Average	66:03	217	36	252	34	334	6.7	0

Note: *Forty-five total files were essential. Numbers reflect viewing files multiple times. **Five chats were required, but eight were offered.

at least from an instructor's perspective, to present in a face-to-face environment. When discussing the physical, social, emotional, and moral development of students this age, segments from movies, like *Thirteen* (Hardwicke, 2003), and clips from websites/YouTube, like *Need to Know: Already Out—Part 1* (Wxxitube, 2008), are able to be shown and immediately discussed. Instructors are able to gauge the students' reactions to the presentation of sensitive material such as sexual exploration including discussions of lesbian, gay, bi, transsexual, and queer students, drug and alcohol usage, bullying in different environments, peer pressure, and immediately respond and capitalize on teachable moments. While these topics could result in great cognitive engagement and presence in an online environment, the students have to first be willing to enter the conversation. As indicated by the students when discussing these topics in the face-to-face class, they "skipped that stuff" in the online context and further explained that if they did not like the topic, they did not view it or complete the tasks. They opted to let their grade suffer rather than complete a module that made them uncomfortable.

The lack of cognitive presence and participation can be seen in their more limited involvement in online discussion boards (see Table 1). While Joe, Madelyn, and Julia read 205, 115, and 183 discussion postings made by others respectively, the class average was reading 252 discussion postings. In Madelyn's case, she read less than 50% of the discussion content than did her peers. In addition, Madelyn and Julia both spent about 50% less time in the course management system than the class average. Joe, on the other hand, spent almost as much time in the course management system as the class as a whole, it seems that he was less efficient in his use of the materials as evidenced by the files viewed. He viewed the online files almost twice as much as the class average. Therefore, it appears that while he spent time in the course, he did not use that time efficiently, repeatedly viewing files rather than making progress with the learning of the content.

Teaching Presence

In the online MLE course, weekly synchronous chat sessions and instructor responses to e-mail within 24-hours were provided as mechanisms to foster teaching presence beyond the role of designing and facilitating the other aspects of the course, but proved to be insufficient for these three students. Synchronous interaction in this online program is at the discretion of the individual instructor. The participants listed the lack of quick, personal contact with their instructors as a deterrent to their academic success online. Participants indicated the ease of asking clarifying questions in person during or after class,

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listening to the responses to classmate's questions, or listening to classmates as they discussed among themselves in the face-to-face setting to be more effective in promoting understanding of content and assignments. For example, a classmate may ask a question, using different language that makes the directions, assignment, or content clearer. Alternately, the instructor may choose to use different or clarifying language when discussing an assignment or given topic of study. The participants felt that when they had to pose their question electronically and wait for a response, the interplay did not result in the same quick, in-depth understanding as they received in a face-to-face setting. This can be seen in the synchronous chat sessions. The vast majority of the discussions in the synchronous chat sessions surround clarifying questions about assignments and due dates, despite being given a weekly agenda with due dates, as well as instructions for each assignment. In addition, in chat both Julia and Joe asked at separate times if their work was going to be reviewed prior to submitting the assignment. This type of feedback was more easily given during brief conversations surrounding the face-to-face class sessions. Joe noted that by the time the more asynchronous electronic conversation was complete in the online course, there might not be sufficient time to correct an assignment. Madelyn reiterated Joe's feeling, and stated,

> Whereas doing it online, I'm just kind of taking a shot in the dark. I'm like, "Okay, I think this is what she wants. Let me just see if this is it." And, if it's not, you know, then I guess I'll know next time. It's just harder to get your explanations and get your complete understanding of what's going on and what you're supposed to be, you know, working on and what you're supposed to be taking from the lessons. Whereas if you're face to face, you know that teacher. You know how they are. You know what they expect. You know their personality. You know, and you just know them.

Additionally, it is much more difficult to hide in a face-to-face classroom when one has not completed an assignment, than it is online. Joe, Madelyn, and Julia felt a greater sense of accountability in the face-to-face class. In a personal conversation in class, Joe and Madelyn expressed that being accountable to a person, rather than a computer makes things different. Thus, teaching presence also had an impact of their performance as live reminders and focused feedback caused the students to have higher levels of self-regulation as they completed assignments and worked to please others. Joe's people-pleaser nature and need for recognition about his academic ability caused him to interact more effectively in the face-to-face class. He was "terrified" as he started face-to-face class and wondered "am I set up to actually do a traditional class?" but found that "when [he] actually got into the class and started participating" face-to-face learning was not "anything like I remembered classes being."

Instructors with good classroom awareness can quickly pick up on student cues. For example, having one's head and eyes buried in a book as opposed to looking at the instructor, may indicate that the student has not completed a reading or related assignment. Joe's chronic procrastination would have been easier to address in a face-to-face class given that he acknowledged it in an early online chat session, "I really need to develop educational time management skills. My time management skills are great when I am at work, but getting myself to study is quite another story."

Another challenge presented by the differing learning environments was in understanding differences in course organization. When an instructor provides guidance to keep students on track, students should benefit. For instance, the instructor may start or end each session with reminders of upcoming assignments or readings, or provide previews of the next class. Julia summed up the difficulty related to course structure in an online environment:

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> And, I'll be honest, I think that's one reason I did so poorly in middle education in the spring was it was set up so differently from anybody else's.… There was like a weekly page that kind of had everything out there. And, I just … I couldn't get the dates together. Like, I don't know. I couldn't get like if they were a reminder, or if they were due, or if it was like looking forward without having somebody face to face. That class just was complex for me to keep straight for some reason.

It is possible that one of the challenges Julia experienced was the middle level block of courses, and this course in particular, included significantly more work than the early childhood block. Her inability to "keep everything straight" could have been caused by a variety of factors, including the increased workload, but also her lack of prior knowledge and prolonged illness. Madelyn experienced similar organizational challenges and commented about the complexities of managing a full-time online students' workload, she said "I had to keep a journal to figure out what all I did in this [semester] just so I wouldn't get confused." Although other students in the online course commented on the clear nature of the weekly instructions, the instructions were not completely compatible with Julia's or Madelyn's learning processes.

Often in a face-to-face environment, an instructor can monitor the behavior, effort, and ability of students in a given class. In an online environment, the instructor is more dependent on student help-seeking and information sharing behaviors to provide students with the necessary personal and academic supports. As indicated previously, Julia did not communicate her illness, which did not allow for accommodation. Other students in the course did share personal and health circumstances, such as a difficult high-risk pregnancy, and received appropriate support. Joe, in his attempt to balance his personal, professional, and educational responsibilities, did not communicate effectively about various circumstances he encountered during the online course. For example, his employment status shifted significantly during the semester from being a traditional workday employee, to a night shift worker, to unemployed. In addition, the death of a close family member combined with Joe's previously mentioned procrastination caused him to forgo submitting a major assignment. When the instructor e-mailed Joe regarding the missed work, a brief explanation was provided; however, no offer to submit the assignment was made. When student communication regarding major life events is lacking in the online environment, instructors can do little to mitigate this impact.

One aspect that was particularly important to Julia in the online learning context was personal and specific feedback. At the time of the interviews, she was enrolled in two more online courses. In one, she received no grades, nor any other type of feedback. In the other course, feedback was both personal and specific. She explained,

> after each assignment like she would note at the end of the assignment, "Hey, this was really great. This is really your niche," or, "I can see where you have experience here." It was always something personal. It wasn't a generic, "Great work," at the end, and you're done. You know?

While feedback was provided in the MLE course, it was not necessarily as personal or specific as Julia would have preferred. Julia indicated that this type of feedback was motivating to her. She stated,

> And so, it encouraged me to maybe do even better, or to keep my work as good as it was because somebody was actually acknowledging it. Sometimes in the online world, we just feel like, okay, it's just.… If you turn something in, it's probably okay. Because we never hear. You know, you never get that feedback if it's good or not good.

While this was not brought up directly by either Joe or Madelyn, a greater degree of teaching presence as indicated via additional personal and specific feedback could have

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been beneficial for them as well, though it is clearly unknown if it would have made a difference in their success.

Social Presence

In order to inculcate oneself into an online community of inquiry, one must project oneself as a real person in the online environment. In addition, it is important to share open communication and create a sense of group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000). For these three unsuccessful students, minimal social investment occurred as evidenced by their lack of participation in the online environment; lack of desire to complete group work; and lack of communication regarding personal issues that arose during the online semester.

These three students did not project themselves into the online classroom as much as their more successful peers. This was identified through the online tracking tools of the course management system. For example, while the other students sent an average of 36 e-mails, Joe, Madelyn, and Julia sent only 26, 23, and 24 respectively (see Table 1). In addition, only Joe contributed to the discussion boards to the extent of the other students in the course. This lack of interaction was also seen in the number of chat sessions attended. While the other students averaged 6.7 chat sessions, Joe, Madelyn, and Julia participated in 2, 3, and 4.25 out of 8 total chat semester throughout the semester.

Joe missed 6 of 8 chat sessions where rapport was built, assignments were clarified, directions were given, and materials were reviewed. Even though the chat transcripts were posted in WebCT, Joe did not review them. He indicated that with regard to the "little bits of information, I might miss … I think the only thing that I missed was the actual participation in the class, just to mingle with everybody else, so everybody would see how my feelings or takes on certain things." The social construction of both knowledge and rapport was more convenient in the face-to-face environment for these students.

Madelyn expressed much more comfort in communicating with her peers from the online program in the face-to-face class environment. She felt camaraderie with them, having stated,

> Like, for two semesters, we were in each other's, all of each other's classes. And so, it was easy for me to talk to them. And, it was really easy in the summer class for me to talk to them and be like.… You know, get advice on stuff and get advice on assignments.

However, even once the face-to-face class was over, she retreated from social interaction. She stated, "But now that I don't, you know, have that much contact with them, I kind of am just like … I don't even reach out to anyone, to any other students. And, I don't know why." When asked for clarification, she explained,

> Maybe I just feel dumb, like I should know what I'm supposed to be doing. And, obviously, everybody else knows what they're doing because nobody's asking me. Nobody's asking me for advice, or nobody's asking me. So, I was like, "Well, maybe I'm just the only one that doesn't understand it. So, I'll just figure it out."

She was not comfortable projecting herself socially in the online environment, which impacted her ability to get support to be more successful in the online class.

The students also lacked a sense of group cohesion or desire to collaborate in the online context. Their adamant dislike of group work of any kind played a role in their lack of success in the online course. Some of the assignments in the MLE course are more effective when completed with a partner. For example, the planning and assessment assignment is one of the hardest tasks for students to complete simply because they are only beginning to understand planning strategies and assessment practices appropriate for young adolescents. In the face-to-face course, this assignment is completed with a partner; there is no option to work independently. In the online class, the same assignment is given; however, the students were able to decide if they wanted to

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complete it alone or with a partner. If online students elected to complete the assignment with a partner, chat rooms were created as an additional mode of communication beyond e-mail or phone. In both environments, the instructors reiterated that for this assignment “two brains are better than one.” In the online class, Joe and Madelyn completed the tasks independently and earned failing grades. Julia worked with a partner, and earned a “B.” When Joe and Madelyn repeated the assignment in the face-to-face class, working with partners, they each earned a “B”. Julia earned a “B” as well.

Additionally, none of the three effectively communicated about various life circumstances that were affecting them academically. However, another student in the course experienced significant health challenges as a result of a complicated pregnancy, but regularly communicated her given needs. Also, it is easier for instructors to determine if other factors are negatively impacting a student’s ability to be successful in a face-to-face setting. For example, had Julia been in a face-to-face setting while ill, it would have been immediately obvious to the instructor. Had these three students more effectively communicated their given circumstances, it is likely that accommodations could have been made to support greater success in the course.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the learning experiences of three nontraditional online degree-seekers who failed the online version of a course and subsequently passed the face-to-face version. This study identified aspects of the online learning experience and individual student characteristics that contributed to the initial failure. Findings confirmed the importance of establishing all elements of the Community of Inquiry model, but specifically, effectively establishing teaching presence and cultivating social presence among students supports online success. With multiple factors impacting the students’ performance in the online class, better enabling online learners to self-regulate their learning and develop strategies to better manage their time could also lead to enhanced cognitive presence.

While these students, like many online students, select online programs for convenience, in actuality, online learners generally are juggling multiple life events that add to the complexities of furthering their education via distance. Based on this finding, online instructors should employ as many as, if not more, hands-on, authentic instructional approaches that foster active learning while enabling students to master content than face-to-face instructors (Boling et al., 2012; Diaz & Entonado, 2009). However, online instructors should not import wholesale their face-to-face instructional approaches to the online environment without great thought and planning.

Also connected to teaching presence is the use of appropriate instructional strategies for teaching sensitive or controversial topics to better ensure student cognitive presence. While one aspect of cognitive presence is the idea of a triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution or application of new ideas, if students do not engage in the content, then this cannot occur. When designing this online MLE course, we struggled with how to address both content and affective issues surrounding complex young adolescent issues (i.e., sexuality and exploration, and diversity). Use of movie clips, online videos, and websites enabled students to learn about these issues, but only if they engaged with the content. While cognitive conflict is often essential to learning, in this case, the sensitive nature of the content resulted in avoidance rather than engagement. As novice online instructors, we did not consider the fact that students would disregard content based on personal preference. For future online students, more effective approaches, and strategies specific to teaching sensitive content will be employed. Further, as evidenced here, cultivating affective aspects of online teacher preparation is complex and somewhat aligns with Huss’s

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(2007) research that documented principals' apprehension to hire online education degree earners as teachers because of their concern regarding the online teacher education program's ability to instill the necessary dispositions in teacher candidates.

Establishing social presence among students themselves and between students and instructors is essential for effective online instruction. As noted by Garrison et al. (2000), for online learning, social presence can be placed into three categories: (a) emotional expression, (b) open communication, and (c) group cohesion. Emotional expression did not surface as a concern in this data. Nonetheless, the development of open communication and group cohesion did. In this course, establishment of both elements proved to be challenging, as the students simply did not engage when opportunities were presented. Or, the opportunities presented (e.g., students and instructors creating introductory blogs, participating in eight weekly synchronous chat sessions where one employed both audio and text, and communicating via telephone and text), may not have felt like social interactions but assignments. Based on these students' experiences, instructors should provide seemingly more genuine opportunities for social and emotional engagement with both other online learners and content so as to cultivate investment and communication. Online students, like face-to-face ones require purposeful, direct activities that foster social interaction resulting in personal investment. Though multiple opportunities to engage socially were provided in the online course, the three students did not feel well connected to others or content. For them, group cohesion did not form; they remained on the fringes of the course rather than becoming full members of the learning community.

Furthermore, setting clear expectations for performance and participation is necessary to foster the development of social presence. Online students need to know exactly what will be expected of them at all stages of their academic careers. Informing students, in advance of starting a course or program, that they will be expected to work with their peers throughout the class or program and this interaction will be an integral part of their learning is essential. For example, all three participants lamented about being forced to complete online group projects in several of their online classes. The challenges associated with communication among nontraditional students and lack of initiative or direction when in chat rooms designated for group work led to these students being dissatisfied with this learning approach. Online students need to be able to plan their lives around these required interactions. In the online MLE course, weekly synchronous chat occurred consistently.

Additionally, communication approaches employed in face-to-face classes should be used in online classes. For example, contact needs to be made immediately after a student is unsuccessful on an exam or assignment. Intervention focused on determining the root cause associated with the lack of success should foster future success for online learners. Making this type of contact fits more naturally in the face-to-face environment where instructors can speak to a student quietly at the start of class. Identifying ways to informally converse with online students regarding areas of concern should occur so that online students are connected and persist through the program. It is also important to note that not all university faculty members will be effective online instructors. In the case of this online teacher education program, faculty from multiple departments (i.e., elementary education, social foundations, special education), were required to develop and teach online courses. Not all online faculty members had the same degree of preparation to teach in the online medium and therefore were not as able to adapt their teaching style to match the learning environment. In the case of these three students, they could identify clearly the instructors who were more effectively addressing their needs.

Likewise, online learning is not the most appropriate environment for all nontraditional students. These participants fit the characteris-

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tics of typical nontraditional students as identified by Walsh et al. (2005) and Carr (2000). However, for some nontraditional learners, convenience should not be the sole determining factor when deciding how to complete a college degree. In this research, the online elementary education degree was selected because it fit the students' lifestyle and pursuit of a college degree would have been impossible if not for the online degree. However, two of the three students who failed the online MLE course were unsuccessful in subsequent online courses. Eventually, all three students transferred into and completed their degrees from the face-to-face program. Thus they found that face-to-face learning was ultimately a better fit. Further, face-to-face orientations, either live or in a face-to-face online communication format, to each semester of an online degree program, particularly a hands-on type program, like elementary education, would be beneficial or could enable the students to connect better with instructors and peers. Fostering this connection should assist online students as they attempt to form traditional relationships with their online instructors and peers. Ernst (2008) compared face-to-face and online course experiences, and found that 85% of student participants from the online group agreed or strongly agreed to feeling comfortable in the online environment. However, evidence from this study documents that comfort does not equal success, as each of the participants was comfortable with online learning.

With regard to self-regulation, specific attention should be paid to the frequency of interaction in the online management system. As evidenced by Joe's interaction pattern, viewing the weekly instruction document, assignment explanations, and discussion postings excessively can reveal a problem related to understanding the content or assignment. Noting and responding to this type of behavior could actually support student success. When teaching future online courses, charting students' use of the online tools, in real time, could occur so that contact regarding student understanding, confusion, or performance can be made when appropriate.

As indicated by all three students, the typical pressure associated with transitioning from one semester block into another was not felt. Thus, the students maintained their output level when they should have increased it. If innate feelings like this occur in other traditional education programs, but may not be evident to online students, they should be notified of increased demands. Anticipating that online learners will experience feelings similar to that of face-to-face learners could result in unintentional lower achievement by online learners. Increased programmatic difficulty and demands need to be communicated to all students, but online students specifically so they can adjust their actions accordingly.

The final implication of this study focuses solely on the path of nontraditional students. Regardless of the delivery format, nontraditional learners need to recognize that their path through university is not a straight one—it twists and turns—but ideally leads to the same place—degree completion. Nontraditional students need to be reassured that it may simply take them longer to complete the program. They need to be reminded to not give up and persist to degree completion because the prize at the end is definitely worth the bumps in the road.

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