

2010

# Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Online and Traditional Classroom Delivery Format for Training Parenting Educators

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## **Abstract**

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## **Comments**

This article is published as Kimberly Greder, Jennifer A. Diers, and Melissa P. Schnurr, Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Online and Traditional Classroom Delivery Format for Training Parenting Educators. *Family Science Review*, 2010, 15(1). Posted with permission.

# Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Online and Traditional Classroom Delivery Format for Training Parenting Educators

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**ABSTRACT.** A program evaluation of the Partnering with Parents training program instructed in the traditional (face-to-face) classroom setting and online was conducted. There was a statistically significant increase in all participants' ( $n = 146$ ) ratings of their parenting education competencies (i.e., knowledge and skills) from before to after the training. Those who participated in the online training rated their competencies before the training higher than those who participated in the traditional setting; however, they also rated their competencies after the training modestly lower than those who participated in the traditional setting. Qualitative analysis revealed that regardless of program delivery format, participants reported a paradigm shift in how they viewed themselves as parenting educators, as well as broadened their understanding of parenting education. Participants reported the following aspects of the program that helped to make it effective: a quality curriculum; formation of a learning community; instructor content knowledge, approachability and professionalism; and flexibility in training design (i.e., a variety of learning tools, options to attend other sites, and asynchronous online learning activities).

## Rapid Growth of Distance Education

Ninety percent of two year and 89% of four year public institutions offered distance education courses during the 2000-2001 academic year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003) and more than 3.18 million students took online courses in Fall 2005 (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Online teacher professional development has swept the professional education arena and continues to grow at a tremendous rate (Madinach, 2005) in part because it is convenient and efficient. It incorporates emerging technologies and provides the advantage of asynchronous learning, coupled with afforded flexibility to learners (Carter, 2004; Harlen & Doubler, 2004). Along with the benefits of convenience and efficiency, studies support that online learning environments can be as effective as the traditional classroom environment when important components to learning are considered (Kelly, Ponton, & Rovai, 2007; Moore & Thompson, 1997; Russell, 2001). Studies also reveal that learners who are uncomfortable and inexperienced with online learning technologies (Hill, 2002; Hooper & Rieber, 1995) and learners whose available resources often have technical problems face difficulties in online learning environments.

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Alley & Jansak (2001) identify 10 keys to quality in learning and describe how the core principles of learning lead to associated recommended practices in instructional design. The practices include: student motivation, higher order learning, spiral learning, prior learning, experiential learning, knowledge construction, learning styles, and collaborative and cooperative learning. A key to worthwhile instruction is the incorporation of thought-provoking, meaningful, interactive tasks and scaffolding to higher-level skills. In addition, building communities of practice among the learners with rich collaborative tools and resources available is recommended (King, 2002; Oliver & Herrington, 2003).

Studies have confirmed flexibility and convenience as strengths of online learning (Petrides, 2002; Schrum, 2002). Learners often participate in online discussions at times most convenient to them (Murphy & Collins, 1997) and access online course materials from their home computers (Poole, 2000). This asynchronous aspect of online learning fosters thoughtful and responsible comments from learners (Petrides, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003) and reinforces Merriam & Caffarella's (1991, p.1) finding related to adult learning, "...the context of adult life and the societal context shape what an adult needs and wants to learn, and to a somewhat lesser extent, when and where learning takes place."

Though the research surrounding online learning can be inconclusive and recommended practices have yet to be determined (Schrum, Burbank, & Capps, 2007), studies have attempted to pull together recommended practice for enhancing online learning. The Concord Consortium, a pioneer in online instruction for students, teachers, and faculty, identified nine characteristics for online learning (Elbaum, McIntyre, & Smith, 2002). These characteristics include: asynchronous collaboration, explicit schedules, expert facilitation, inquiry pedagogy, high quality materials, community building, limited enrollment, purposeful virtual spaces, and ongoing assessment.

In addition, when designing an online course it is recommended to consider the following (Elbaum et al., 2002):

- Format the course so the students' focus is on content, and they are not overwhelmed by animation, graphics, and an unstructured format.
- Create an embedded learning community that is inclusive, engaged, and collaborative.
- Use appropriate, relevant course materials.
- Develop relevant, rich activities that support the objectives of the course.
- Provide a variety of learning activities including individual and group formats.
- Consider the pace of the course based on the content to be covered, the audience, and the instructor's expertise and commitment level.
- Be aware of the rapid change of technology.

Quality instructional design has long been identified and often ranks as one of the top three components in highly effective courses. Decades of research and development have been devoted to create models and processes to assist with the design and creation of instruction (Dick et al., 2000; Smith & Ragan, 2000). It is evident that it takes good design to facilitate good online instruction (Dempsey & Van Eck, 2002).

### **Program Overview**

In response to the growing demand for parenting education (Carter, 1996; DeBord et al. 2002; Iowa State Legislature, 1998; McDermott, 2002) and the need to ensure that family support

professionals have basic knowledge and skills relevant to designing, implementing, and evaluating parenting education, Partnering with Parents was developed by Cooperative Extension at a Midwestern land-grant institution (Greder, 2004). The first trainings were held in a traditional classroom setting in two communities in a Midwestern state in 2002 and reached 40 parenting educators. In 2004, the complete training was also made available online and reached parenting educators inside and outside the state. Partnering with Parents consists of a series of eleven training modules (Greder, 2004) designed to strengthen the knowledge and skills of parenting educators who work with parents in one-to-one and group settings, and attracts professionals representing an array of family support programs and undergraduate and graduate students preparing to be family professionals.

A key assumption of Partnering with Parents is that parenting occurs within a family and community system and is ecological in nature. Thus, parenting is influenced at multiple levels including individual, family, community, and society (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Reflective practice, a primary principle in facilitating adult learning (Brookfield, 1986), is infused throughout Partnering with Parents as participants are asked to continually examine their values, beliefs, priorities, and biases regarding parenting, as well as their personal preferences for learning and teaching. Participants explore how they are influenced their interactions with parents and the learning that takes place as they facilitate parenting education.

A core feature of the training is learning about theories that shape human and family development and parent-child interactions (Greder, 2004). Understanding various theories that shape parenting education helps participants to see how “theory commits one to ways of viewing realities and methods of inquiry, which can clarify the focus of the work” (Vincenti & Smith, 2004, p. 63). Participants examine parenting education curricula and identify the theory or theories that underpin these resources, and then critically reflect on the “goodness of fit” of the curricula with their own values, biases, beliefs about parenting, and their preferred style of facilitating parenting education (e.g., collaborator, facilitator, expert; Fonseca & Myers-Wall, 1999).

Partnering with Parents focuses on both the content and process that is needed for effective parenting education (DeBord et al., 2002; University of North Texas Center for Parent Education and Family Support, n.d.). The traditional face-to-face classroom format of Partnering with Parents involves 10 days of workshops (each seven hours in duration including stretch breaks and lunch) that are scheduled every two to three weeks over a five month period for a total of 55 hours of direct contact time. Classroom activities include peer discussions, reflective learning activities related to daily practice as a parenting educator, oral and written content delivery activities, the use of video technologies, and interactive small and large group activities. In addition, parents are invited to serve on parent panels to share their experiences, perspectives, and expertise with participants. To apply what they learned in the workshops to their work with families, participants complete online learning activities (e.g., discussion board forums, reflection papers) after each module. These online learning activities typically involve an additional two to three hours per module for a total of 20-30 hours (Greder, 2004).

The complete online version of the Partnering with Parents training program is conducted over a five month period through a web-based courseware program (WebCT) that supports both asynchronous and synchronous communication among participants and instructors. The online training typically requires seven to eight hours of online learning per module for a total of 77-88 hours of online learning activities. Each of the eleven modules takes place over a specified two week period. Online learning tools include chat rooms, discussion boards, video streams,

eJournals, small group and individual assignments, and readings. The modules are presented through the web-based program as Module 1, Module 2, Module 3, etc. During the scheduled time period for each module, participants read the module content and complete the activities. Participants are required to participate in a large group chat session that takes place during the second week of each module, and have the option of participating in the morning or evening chat session based on their schedules. They are also assigned to a small group with whom they work via the discussion board or chat room to complete the small group assignments in each module.

Throughout the modules, reflective questions are posed regarding the module content that is communicated via short web-based readings, online journal articles, and video streams that depict experiences and perspectives of parents and professionals who work with families. Participants record their responses to these questions in their eJournals, which are private discussion board spaces to which only the instructors and individual participants have access. See Appendix B for an example of the organization of one online module and some of the online learning activities.

Partnering with Parents is supervised by a faculty member in the department of human development and family studies at a Midwestern university who holds a joint appointment with cooperative extension.

The instructors include a team of cooperative extension human development and family studies, nutrition and health, and family resource management specialists, as well as experienced community-based parenting educators who possess specific knowledge and skills related to the content of the modules. Each instructor is provided with a detailed curriculum that guides each module (Greder, 2004).

Two studies are presented and reflect information from participants who have participated in the Partnering with Parents training program since 2002. The first study sought to determine whether or not there was a statistically significant difference in participants' ratings of their competencies (specifically their knowledge and skills) related to parenting education using the Parenting Educators' Self Assessment (PESA) (Greder, 2009) based on program delivery format (online vs. traditional classroom setting). Two primary research questions that guided this study included:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference in participant ratings of their parenting education competencies (i.e., knowledge and skill) prior to participation in the training and after participation in the training?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference in participant ratings of their parenting education competencies (i.e., knowledge and skill) before and after program participation based on program delivery format (i.e., online vs. traditional classroom)?

The second study sought to identify components of the Partnering with Parents training program that participants recognized as helpful in the learning process, and components that participants identified as challenges to the learning process. Two primary research questions that guided this study included:

3. What are the components of the Partnering with Parents training program that participants recognized as helpful in the learning process?
4. What are the components of the Partnering with Parents training program that participants identified as challenging in the learning process?

## **Methods**

### **Context and Participants**

These studies are based on self-reported data from 146 Partnering with Parents training program participants. The supervisor of the Partnering with Parents training program provided access to the program evaluation data to two researchers to conduct this study and was not involved in the data analysis. Sixty-two of these individuals participated in traditional classroom delivery (face-to-face) of the training, and 84 individuals participated in the complete online version of the training. Almost all the participants were Caucasian (89%) and female (96%). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old. Most were married with children and had at least a high school diploma or Bachelor's degree with academic training in social work, early childhood education, or family and consumer sciences. In addition, almost all participants were currently working with families with young children, worked in both one-on-one and group settings, and had been directly involved with parenting education for one to 10 years. Most study participants had personally experienced a non-normative family challenge such as divorce, teen parenthood, raising a child who has physical or mental disabilities, domestic abuse, or substance abuse.

## **Evaluation Tools**

### **Study 1: Quantitative Analysis**

To answer the first two research questions, PESA (Greder, 2009), participants completed a self assessment consisting of 44 items (see Appendix A), which corresponded to competencies addressed in each of the 11 modules after they completed the training. The assessment asked the participants to respond to each statement using a Likert scale of 1 to 5. Response choices included: 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (somewhat disagree); 3 (unsure); 4 (somewhat agree); 5 (strongly agree). Case ID numbers were assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality of the data. Reliability analysis indicated that PESA was a highly reliable measure with a Cronbach's alpha of .98 for the pre-test and post-test assessment. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis suggests that the items in each composite hang well together. Composite pre-test and post-test scores were made by averaging items together for all 11 modules as well as for each individual module. In addition, difference scores were calculated by subtracting the pre-test composite scores from the post-test composite scores.

PESA utilizes a retrospective post then pre-test design. Participants are asked to respond to the statements as they would rate their competencies after the training. They are then asked to respond to each of the statements again thinking about their competencies before participating in the training. In other words, perceptions of their parenting education knowledge and skills before the training and after the training were both reported after completing the training. This "post-then-pre" method of self-report evaluation offers credible results and indicates program impact (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000; Rockwell & Kohn, 1989). In some cases, participants did not respond to all 44 statements included in PESA, and therefore their assessment of their knowledge and skills were only reported for the statements they did respond. For example, if a participant only responded to the statements in PESA associated with nine of the modules, then only data related to the self-assessed competencies for those nine modules were reported. In the present study, 30 participants did not complete the statements in PESA associated with module 3 and therefore, were not included in the analysis of all the statements in PESA, or in the analysis of the PESA statements related to module 3, reducing the total sample size to 116.

### **Study 2: Qualitative Analysis**

To address research questions 3 and 4, descriptive qualitative analysis of data from study participants' responses to seven open ended questions/statements was conducted to identify emerging themes to illustrate the findings. Participants were asked to submit their responses anonymously through the survey function of WebCT, the courseware program used to collect the data. Two researchers read the responses separately to identify key concepts and themes that emerged from the data. They compared their findings with each other. When their findings were inconsistent they re-read the responses and discussed the data until they agreed upon consistent findings. Through this process the researchers sought to gain a deeper understanding of study participants' experiences in both the online and traditional classroom settings of Partnering with Parents. Statements and open-ended questions study participants were asked to respond to included:

1. Describe ways you have used information you gained in Partnering with Parents in your work with families.
2. Describe ways you have used information you gained in Partnering with Parents with other professionals.
3. Describe ways you have applied information you gained in Partnering with Parents to your personal life.
4. Describe the greatest benefits that resulted from your participation in Partnering with Parents.
5. How, if at all, was Partnering with Parents different from other trainings you have participated in?
6. How, if at all, has Partnering with Parents influenced your beliefs, attitudes, and/or behaviors regarding parenting education?
7. Describe other information you would like to share about your Partnering with Parents experience.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

To answer the research questions, qualitative and quantitative data analysis were used. For Study 1, paired and independent samples t-tests, and pre- and post-test differences were included to analyze self-assessment data. For Study 2, descriptive analysis of the qualitative data gathered from participants' responses to open-ended questions/statements was used to identify overarching themes regarding helpful and challenging components of the training.

#### **Study 1: Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative analysis was used to answer the first research question pertaining to whether or not there was a statistically significant difference in participants' assessment of their competencies (e.g., parenting education knowledge and skills) before participating in the training to after participating in the training. A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the pre-test mean scores to the post-test mean scores of all participants who completed all modules ( $N = 116$ ). Findings revealed that there was a statistically significant increase in participants' assessment of their competencies across all 44 statements (representing competencies targeted in all 11 modules of the training program) and within each of the eleven modules (see Table 1). Specifically, participants' ratings of their competencies were higher after they participated in the Partnering with Parents training program than before they participated in the program.

*Table 1.* Paired t-test results comparing participants' PESA ratings of competencies (i.e., knowledge and skills) associated with each module before and after participating in the Partnering with Parents training

Module Title	N <sup>A</sup>	Pre <sup>B</sup>	Post <sup>B</sup>	t-test <sup>C</sup>
All 44 statements (11 modules)	116	3.50 (1.05-5)	4.26 (1.70-5)	-8.82
M1 The Journey of Parenting Education	146	3.29 (1-5)	4.32 (2-5)	-11.78
M2 Cultural Perspectives on Parenting	146	3.42 (1-5)	4.31 (1.33-5)	-11.18
M3 Parenting with Special Challenges	115	3.73 (1-5)	4.41 (1.25-5)	-7.83
M4 Exploring Child-rearing Strategies and Assessing Parenting Education Resources	146	3.37 (1-5)	4.31 (1-5)	-10.09
M5 Parent Learning in Small Groups	146	3.37 (1-5)	4.16 (1-5)	-9.98
M6 Understanding Child and Parent Development	146	3.47 (1-5)	4.29 (1.20-5)	-10.40
M7 Feeding Children and Physical Activities for Families	146	3.50 (1-5)	4.29 (1.33-5)	-9.61
M8 Guiding, Nurturing, and Motivating Children	146	3.80 (1-5)	4.40 (1-5)	-8.84
M9 Measuring Program Outcomes	145	2.92 (1-5)	3.97 (1-5)	-9.30
M10 Financial Stability and Family Well-being	146	3.61 (1-5)	4.39 (1.25-5)	-9.42
M11 Building Support for Yourself and Professional Development	146	3.23 (1-5)	4.27 (1-5)	-11.02

*Notes:* <sup>A</sup> N for 'Total' is less due to missing data for Module 3; <sup>B</sup> A 'post-then-pre' data collection method was used; scores reflect means and ranges (in parentheses) for all items and within each module. Scale = 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (somewhat disagree); 3 (unsure); 4 (somewhat agree); 5 (strongly agree); <sup>C</sup> All significant at  $p < .001$ .

Next, an independent samples t-test was conducted to answer the second research question pertaining to whether or not differences existed in self-assessment ratings between participants who participated in the online training and participants who participated in the traditional training format of the Partnering with Parents program. Independent t-test analysis indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the self-assessment ratings of participants who participated in the online training and participants who participated in the traditional training format (see Table 2). Specifically, participants who participated in the online training rated their overall parenting education competencies (i.e., rating of all 44 statements in PESA) marginally higher before participating in the training program (i.e., pre-test score) than participants who participated in the traditional training format. On the other hand, those who participated in the online training format rated their competencies lower after completing the training (i.e., post-test score) than those who participated in the traditional training format. However, there was a larger increase in the overall PESA rating from before participating in the training (pre-test) to after participating in the training (post-test) for participants in the traditional training format than for those in the online training format. In other words, participants' ratings

of their competencies before Partnering with Parents training were only marginally different, with individuals who participated in the online training rating their competencies higher than those who participated in the traditional format. However, ratings of competencies after completing the training program reversed, and those who participated in the traditional format rated their competencies higher than those who participated in the online format, and traditional training participants also had a greater increase in total assessment rating scores from pre to post.

Table 2. Independent t-test results comparing online participants’ PESA rating of competencies to traditional classroom setting participants’ PESA rating of competencies.

		N	Mean (Range)	t-value	Sig.
Total pre-test	Traditional	62	3.37 (1.05-4.68)	1.97	.05
	Online	54	3.65 (1.48-5)		
Total post-test	Traditional	62	4.39 (2.23-4.98)	-2.42	.02
	Online	54	4.10 (1.70-5)		
Total difference	Traditional	62	1.03 (.05-2.43)	-3.39	.01
	Online	54	.45 (-2.80-2.11)		

Notes: Response scale = 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (somewhat disagree); 3 (unsure); 4 (somewhat agree); 5 (strongly agree); A ‘post-then-pre’ data collection method was used.

With respect to each individual module, pre-test differences existed between the online ( $M = 3.59$ ) and traditional ( $M = 3.20$ ) participants for Module 2 ( $p < .01$ ). Post-test differences existed for Module 3 ( $p < .05$ ), Module 9 ( $p < .001$ ), and Module 11 ( $p < .01$ ), with traditional participants scoring higher than online participants in each of these modules. Finally, the majority of the differences between online and traditional participants were in the difference scores. Specifically, the difference scores for Module 2 ( $p < .01$ ), Module 3 ( $p < .05$ ), Module 4 ( $p < .05$ ), Module 5 ( $p < .05$ ), Module 7 ( $p < .05$ ), and Module 10 ( $p < .01$ ) were significant, with traditional participants reporting a greater increase in scores from before participating in the Partnering with Parents program to after participating compared to the online participants.

Overall, regardless of delivery format, all participants perceived that their parenting education competencies increased after participating in Partnering with Parents. With regard to differences between delivery formats, those who participated in the traditional classroom format rated their competencies lower before the training and had greater gains in self-assessment rating scores (pre score to post score) than those who participated in the online training format. Reasons for these differences are explored in the discussion section.

**Study 2: Qualitative Analysis**

Several themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data relating to participants’ likes and dislikes about the Partnering with Parents program. Despite an attempt to tease out information based on delivery format, the themes presented extended across program delivery format and emerged from data collected in both the traditional classroom setting and online delivery formats. The qualitative results affirmed current literature in the study of online learning (Kelly et al., 2007; Moore & Thompson, 1997; Russell, 2001). Emerging themes identified as key features that led to the effectiveness of the Partnering with Parents training program include:

the formation of a learning community; knowledge, approachability and professionalism of the instructors; quality curriculum; and the flexibility of the course delivery (especially within the online delivery format). While these themes may seem superficial, they represent a growing body of research in the field of online research and support the development of future training programs.

**Theme 1: Formation of a learning community.** Opportunity for deliberate and extensive interactions with parenting educators who represented a diversity of experiences, academic backgrounds, and organizations was a prominent theme that emerged from the data. Participants were able to discuss parenting education issues and challenges with others that allowed for an extension of learning above and beyond the developed content of the training. As participants strengthened relationships with one another, some began to coordinate parenting education efforts across agencies and better understand and appreciate their colleagues. When asked what they liked best about Partnering with Parents, participants stated:

*“I enjoyed working together with other people and I enjoyed the differences in opinions.”*

*“I liked the ability to spend time with co-workers and to learn together.”*

*“This helped us get closer as a staff through our discussions and personal experiences.”*

Historically, studies have shown the importance of a sense of community in students' learning experiences regardless of delivery format. Rovai's (2002) study examined 314 students who were enrolled in 26 graduate education and leadership online courses. In the study, Rovai found a significant relationship between students' perceived sense of community and perceived cognitive learning. This sense of community also seemed evident in Partnering with Parents.

*“I liked that this was an involved class and that we had to interact with our classmates. Sometimes it seemed like a challenge, but we learned a lot by interacting with each other.”*

*“I really liked the discussions among the participants as it helped me develop my philosophy of parent education.”*

*“I enjoyed hearing outside perspectives and the community it built among those who attended.”*

*“The class discussions were great. I really liked meeting other participants and learning about their positions working with families and others.”*

Within this new community, participants noted exposure to a diverse blend of opinions, perspectives, and experiences. Participants in both the online and traditional classroom training formats noted benefitting from learning about each others' experiences, forming a network with other providers, and having the opportunity to reconnect with providers in their own service agencies.

*“I enjoyed the different ideas that were brought up in class in ways to work with individual families. The interaction between the students is what I liked best.”*

*“I really enjoyed reading what the other students wrote and said in the chat sessions.”*

*“I loved the bonds I was able to make with the other students taking the class. We felt like a team by the time the classes were over.”*

**Theme 2: Instructor knowledge, approachability, and professionalism.** In 1999, Wlodkowski wrote that “Inclusion is the awareness of learners that they are part of an environment in which they and their instructor are respected by and connected to one another” (p. 69). This was evident in Partnering with Parents as a second theme emerged from the data related to the quality of the instructors. The quality of instruction, both in person and online, was highly valued by the participants.

*“The instructor/student interactions for the individual sessions were great. The instructors were professional and yet listened to our concerns and sought out resolutions when required.”*

*“I very much enjoyed the classroom environment. The different speakers helped keep things interesting and also firsthand gave us ideas about different teaching styles.”*

*“The instructor’s willingness to help is great!”*

*“I largely signed up for this to learn about professional education, at a distance with online technology-the organization and management and delivery of this program is excellent.”*

Instructors were considered not only highly competent and skilled in the area of parenting education but also very personable and approachable. These qualities led to the formation of a network between instructor and student that enhanced and improved student learning.

**Theme 3: Quality Curriculum.** A third theme that emerged from the data was the high quality and utility of the information presented in the program. Participants stated the curriculum was well-designed, used research-based information and materials, and contained practical information they could immediately use as a parenting education professional.

*“This provided useful, applicable information for working with families.”*

*“I enjoyed the material covered...the handouts, history of parent education, philosophies, etc.”*

*“The research I did on theories and the philosophers were helpful to me. The stories regarding culture were helpful.”*

Partnering with Parents incorporates many of the adult learning strategies recommended in current research (Elbaum et al., 2002; Schrum et al., 2007).

*“I have used the websites, sought out the first video on the history of parenting, and will use a couple of the activities presented this fall.”*

*“I really liked the history listing of parenting practices and also the video on cultural diversity. Although I have not used either yet, I am planning to incorporate into upcoming child care provider trainings.”*

*“I have been able to use what I learned about building relationships with parents in my after school program.”*

It was also apparent from the data in both the online and traditional learning environments that course design was a primary component to the effectiveness of the program.

*“This course provided me with a comprehensive overview of parent education in that it puts into perspective and sequence much of what I have been learning in my job.”*

*“The challenging nature of the material for the non-parenting education student was a real accomplishment to understand and master. I enjoyed the challenge and learning completely new information!”*

Partnering with Parents is based on a constructivist approach to learning, whereby participants engage in the course content and construct their own meaning of the new knowledge through reflection, collaborative learning, peer discussions, and higher order learning assignments. The components of the training align well with previously mentioned recommended practices identified in the current research relevant to online and adult learning practices.

Although participants consistently stated that they gained valuable information in the training, some participants stated that the program required more time than they had available to complete homework assignments. Many participants worked full-time and had extensive family responsibilities in addition to participating in Partnering with Parents. This training was the first in-depth professional development training held over several months for the majority of the participants.

Participants who rarely used a computer or Internet in their professional or personal lives, used a computer that was not compatible with the technology needed for WebCT, or did not have access to high speed Internet, typically experienced frustration when completing the accompanying online learning activities in the traditional classroom format of the training. This was rarely an issue in the complete online version of the training. This might be because individuals who chose to participate in the complete online version were comfortable with online learning formats, had computers that were compatible with the technology needed, and had access to high-speed Internet.

**Theme 4: Course Flexibility.** Participants of the online-only version of Partnering with Parents affirmed the findings of previous research related to the online instruction strengths of flexibility and convenience.

*“I liked that this was offered online. It was flexible and there was plenty of time to work on assignments.”*

*“The self-paced approach of the modules worked well for me.”*

*“The course was convenient and easy to use!”*

### **Discussion**

The researchers involved in these two small studies of the Partnering with Parents training program sought to 1) find out whether or not there were differences in how participants rated their parenting education knowledge and skills based on the delivery format (i.e., online vs. traditional classroom), and 2) identify aspects of the training that promoted learning, as well as aspects that presented barriers to learning. Findings revealed that overall participants in both the online and traditional classroom setting rated their parenting education knowledge and skills higher after participating in the Partnering with Parents training than they did before they participated in the training. In addition, participants in both delivery formats reported a broader understanding of the field of parenting education; understanding how their own values, beliefs, and culture shape their view of parenting, interactions with and expectations of parents; and gaining specific knowledge and developing needed skills to effectively plan and deliver parenting education programs.

Although quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant increase overall in participants' ratings of their parenting education knowledge and skills after participating in the training as compared to before participating in the training, there were differences in improvements between those who participated online and those who participated in the traditional setting. This finding contradicts findings in other studies (Kelly et al., 2007; Moore & Thompson, 1997; Russell, 2001). Specifically, this study found that after completing the Partnering with Parents training, those who participated in the traditional classroom setting rated their competencies higher than those who participated in the online version of the training. To better understand this difference, further program evaluation of the training needs to occur. It would be important to identify in future trainings whether or not participants' ratings of their competencies continue to be higher for those who participate in the traditional classroom setting. Also, it would be important to closely assess whether or not the quality and quantity of feedback instructors provide to learners is consistent across program delivery format.

### **Educational Implications**

Given that both online and traditional classroom delivery formats of the Partnering with Parents training were made available, and there were several parenting educators registered for each delivery format, it appears that both delivery formats are desired by parenting educators. However, some parenting educators may have a stronger preference for one delivery method over another.

The findings of this study suggest that if professional development training programs are thoughtfully designed, delivery of content can be effective in either the online or traditional classroom setting. Given the limited professional development funds and limited number of days allotted for professional development of many parenting educators, further developing online professional development opportunities for parenting educators is timely and important. Parenting educators can participate in online training from any location as long as they have

access to a computer and high-speed Internet, and are willing and able to effectively interact in an online environment. Online training can reduce travel costs commonly associated with trainings held in traditional classroom settings. Assuming there is a broad range of computer experience and comfort level among parenting educators, it is important to build in support (e.g., clear directions, technical assistance) to help participants be successful in navigating the online learning environment.

Qualitative data suggests that parenting educators who participated in this study valued interacting (via the traditional classroom setting as well as online) with other professionals (e.g., participants, instructors) to share ideas, challenge their thinking, and learn from each other. Thus, integrating opportunities for regular interaction among participants and instructors is important to continue in Partnering with Parents, as well as other trainings for parenting educators.

Features identified by study participants as supporting the effectiveness of Partnering with Parents could be helpful in the development of future parenting education trainings. These features include nurturing a sense of community among participants to foster coordinated parenting education efforts across agencies and a better understanding and appreciation of colleagues. Competent and approachable professionals as the instructors of parenting education training was also a key feature to the Partnering with Parents program. This requires specific selection and training of instructors with the inclusion of a focus on creating a perceived sense of community among participants. Programming must be based on quality curriculum that is both research-based and has a component of immediate practical application. Finally, the course design must allow for flexibility, especially in the online environment.

### **Limitations**

Although the present study adds to existing literature regarding online education and supports the need for ongoing program evaluation of the Partnering with Parents training and other in-depth trainings, this study has limitations. First, the sample consists of only parenting educators who participated in Partnering with Parents, and for whom there was program evaluation data. The participants were not randomly selected. Second, the participants in Partnering with Parents are predominately Caucasian, middle-class, and female, though this is representative of the parenting educators in this Midwestern state. Third, participants or their organizations paid a registration fee to participate in the training. Thus, parenting educators or their organizations that were not able to pay the registration fee did not participate in the training. Fourth, while there might be selection bias regarding whether a participant chose to take the program in the online or traditional classroom format, there are several possible assumptions that could emerge from this bias. Participants who feel more confident with technology might choose the online format. In addition, participants who feel more comfortable with the content might choose the online format because they feel they can handle the online learning environment. This study did not provide a method for measuring the impact of actual knowledge level on choice of training delivery format. Finally, although the instructors had similar educational backgrounds and in-service training to implement Partnering with Parents, there were different instructors at each training site. The content and process knowledge and skills of the instructors were not assessed and may have varied among instructors.

**Future Research**

Evaluation of the Partnering with Parents program and other parenting education trainings must be ongoing. Future research is needed to identify effective methods for creating a greater sense of community in both versions of the program and assisting participants who lack knowledge and skill in using online learning technologies. In addition, it is important to continually evaluate the dynamic, changing needs of parents, families, and parenting education professionals and the impact that these changes may have on course design and implementation.

Although this study revealed that overall participants rated their knowledge and skills related to parenting education higher after participating in the training, regardless of program delivery format, we do not know whether participants would have reported strengthened knowledge and skills as a result of other events (e.g., participation in other trainings, more time and experience in their jobs). While self-reported data is insightful, more rigorous evaluation of the program is needed including studies that involve more objective assessment of participant parenting education knowledge and skills. Future studies could document observed changes in practice after completion of the training program, as well as compare parenting educators who have participated in the training to those who have not participated in the training. Additional research involving control and intervention groups would help to determine if the intervention (i.e., Partnering with Parents) is truly related to an increase in participants' parenting education knowledge and skills.

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Appendix A

Parenting Educators' Self-Assessment (PESA)  
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**Directions:** Circle the letter that best represents your response to each of the statements below.

**1= Strongly Disagree 2= Somewhat Disagree 3= Unsure 4= Somewhat Agree 5=Strongly Agree**

1. I am aware of my values, beliefs, and attitudes regarding parenting.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
2. I can identify historical events, social policies, and predominant theories that have influenced parenting practices in the U.S.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can communicate my personal philosophy of parenting education.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
4. I can identify knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are needed to be an effective parenting educator.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
5. I can identify and apply principles of family-centered practices when working with families of cultures different than my own.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am aware of how my own culture has influenced my values, attitudes, and parenting practices.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
7. I can identify values and traditions that influence parenting practices among different cultures.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
8. I can identify strategies to support parents in strengthening their personal advocacy skills to help them get what they need and want for their families.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
9. I can recognize and build upon the personal strengths of parents and families I am working with.
 

AFTER the training	1	2	3	4	5
BEFORE the training	1	2	3	4	5
10. I am able to assist families in identifying their personal social support networks.

- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
11. I am able to assist families in connecting with community resources that will help them meet their needs.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
12. I can identify underlying child-rearing strategies of parenting education resources (e.g., curricula, books, videos).
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
13. I can recognize parenting styles of parents I work with and understand developmental outcomes of children associated with various styles.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
14. I am aware of my preferred educational approach in working with families.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
15. I understand the differences between prominent child-rearing strategies and can identify which strategies are in line with my values and beliefs about parenting.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
16. I am able to critically review and select parenting education resources and delivery strategies that best fit the needs of families I work with; my preferred educational approach, values and assumptions; and resource constraints.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
17. I am able to communicate the benefits and limitations of group settings for parent learning.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
18. I can implement strategies to build trust and rapport among group members.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
19. I can implement strategies to effectively respond to difficult moments and group members.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
20. I understand how family and culture influence children's development.
- |                            |   |   |   |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>AFTER</b> the training  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| <b>BEFORE</b> the training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
21. I am able to assist parents in using a problem-solving process to understand the developmental needs of their children and developmentally appropriate ways to respond to children.

	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
22.	I understand how the temperaments of both children and parents influence the parent/child relationship.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
23.	I can apply concepts of predominant child development theories to explain how children grow and develop.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
24.	I can apply key concepts associated with the stages of parent development to strategies I use in working with parents who are experiencing different stages of development.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
25.	I am able to create developmentally appropriate and effective strategies to promote physical activities in families.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
26.	I can identify parenting practices that support healthy eating behaviors and parenting practices that do not support healthy eating behaviors at each psychosocial stage of children's development.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
27.	I can identify parent and child characteristics that contribute to problems in the parent/child feeding relationship.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
28.	I can apply the division of feeding responsibilities to solve child feeding problems.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
29.	I can plan meals and snacks for children age 2 and older that follow the USDA Food Guide Pyramid recommendations and provide adequate iron and calcium.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
30.	I can identify physical activities that support emerging skills at each stage of a child's development.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
31.	I can assist parents in identifying age-specific and child-specific strategies to engage their children in appropriate, desired behaviors.					
	<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5

- BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
32. I can assist parents in developing problem-solving skills to establish and maintain reasonable limits for their children.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
33. I can assist parents in developing skills to express affection and compassion to their children, and to listen and attend to their children’s feelings and ideas.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
34. I can assist parents in identifying age-specific and child-specific strategies to help their children learn about themselves and the world around them.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
35. I understand terms and components of outcomes evaluation.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
36. I am able to use a logic model to link program activities and measures to effective outcomes.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
37. I can communicate the purposes for program evaluation.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
38. I can identify how the values of families I work with affect their money management practices.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
39. I can recognize how the values, needs, and wants of families I work with influence family decision-making and family spending.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
40. I understand the importance of goal setting to achieving family financial stability.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
41. I can assist parents in identifying strategies to teach their children about money.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
42. I can identify the status of parenting education as a profession in my state.
- AFTER** the training 1 2 3 4 5  
**BEFORE** the training 1 2 3 4 5
43. I understand the importance of ethical thinking and behavior in my interactions with families and people I work with.

<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5

44. I can apply the levels of family involvement model to my work with families.

<b>AFTER</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5
<b>BEFORE</b> the training	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix B

### Table of Contents and Sample Learning Activities in the Online Version of Module 1: The Journey of Parenting Education

[When participants click on the hyperlinks in the table of contents (indicated with underlines) they see additional content and instructions. A sample of the content and instructions is listed below.]

#### 1. Key Concepts

#### 2. Learners will...(learning objectives)

#### 3. Reading and Survey

Read: NEPEF (National Extension Parenting Educators' Framework, NEPEF)

[http://cyfernet.org/ncsu\\_fcs/NEPEF/](http://cyfernet.org/ncsu_fcs/NEPEF/)

Part 2: Chapter 1: Introduction to parenting education; premises of family support and parenting education on pg 11. See *How We Grow: A Report on the Status of Parenting Education in the U.S.: Definitions of parenting education and family support.*

Click on the Assessment link to the left, then click on the quiz labeled M1: Timeline Activity (5 points).

Select the decade in which you were born

*How was discipline handed and by whom?*

*What were the significant issues and events going on in the United States or the world while you were growing up?*

*What made parenting difficult? Easy?*

After completing the quiz, the group responses will be compiled and posted on the discussion board.

#### 4. Parenting in the 1940's- one perspective

#### 5. Why Parenting Education?

#### 6. Video: History of Parenting Practices

Watch the following video. As you view the video, consider the following questions:

*What are some common factors that have influenced parenting throughout the decades?*

*What has influenced changes in parenting over the last 100 years?*

#### 7. 100 Years of Events, Policies, and Theories in Parenting Practices

Read: *100 Years of Events, Policies, and Theories in Parenting Practices*

On this handout you will find the key events, government policies, and child theorists between 1900-2000 that were mentioned in the video.

*Which events, policies, and theorists are you most familiar with?*

Individual discussion posting: (5 points)

On the discussion board where it says "Module 1 Theories and Models discussion topic." share what you believe are the key parenting theories that are widely followed today. Discuss where (e.g., television, magazines, books, parenting

workshops, etc.) and by whom (e.g., parents, parent educators) you see the theories and models you list practiced.

Note that at the bottom of the chart there is space for the years 2000-2020. *What are your predictions for these spaces? What key events, policies, and theorists will be mentioned?* Record your predictions in your eJournal.

8. Competencies for Parenting Educators
9. Proposed Dispositions for Parent / Family Educators
10. Personal Preferences and Biases - Family Scenario
11. Interacting with Families
12. Personal Philosophy of Parenting Education
13. Reflection Paper
14. Additional Resources