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INTRODUCTION

In an effort to increase the prevalence of online education in Europe, the European Union commissioned the development of the “distance learning portal” to offer students an opportunity to locate courses and/or degree programs that are offered online. Approximately, 180 European Colleges and Universities are participating in this effort to make online education more “transparent” (StudyPortals, 2013). As more courses and degree programs move to an online or blended format, instructors are challenged to conceptualize how the active and engaging style of many first-year seminars (Hunter & Linder, 2005) can be adapted to fit these formats.

This presentation draws from a study that involved a sample of first-year seminar instructors and students to determine the perceived impact of instructional tools used in blended and online seminars on student learning and engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What influence, if any, do teaching methods used in first-year seminar courses taught using aspects of online, blended, or distance learning have on perceptions of learning and engagement?
2. To what extent do student and instructor perceptions of the impact of the methods used in the instruction of first-year seminars differ?

METHODS

Mixed methods study, conducted over 4 years, involving 500 first-year students in 23 online, blended, and face-to-face sections of KSU 1101. Additional data were collected from instructors.

The purpose of the study was to determine student perceptions of academic abilities and the extent to which those were influenced by elements of the course design and/or delivery.

The first-year seminars in the study all had common learning outcomes focused in the following areas:

1. Life Skills
2. Strategies for Academic Success
3. Campus and Community Connections
4. Foundations for Global Learning

SELECTED FINDINGS

The majority of the participants in the study, from all of the different section types, indicated they were “effective” in the area of academic skills (e.g., effective note taking, test taking, etc.), and there were nominal changes from pre- and post-surveys. Similarly, more than 60 percent of the participants indicated they were effective time managers, further suggesting the students self-reported academic skills needed to be successful in the course. Approximately the same number of participants agreed that online assignments and/or classes were an effective way to learn, and in the post-survey more than 70 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Related to these findings, more than 90 percent of the participants reported a positive self-concept/self-esteem/motivation, yet, only 35.2% strongly agreed when asked if they are able to do things as well as most and 40.3% strongly agreed in the post-survey.

Approximately 42% of students enrolled in online or blended sections of the first-year seminar either prefer to not participate in online group discussions, or are undecided about participating. When students were asked to rank what they felt was important in an online environment/course, they consistently rated communication with instructor higher than communication with other students, and sometimes it was rated as the most important aspect of the course environment. The participants’ interest in communicating more frequently with the course instructor than with other students in the course, helps explain the lack of interest students expressed in discussion board participation. Ultimately, these emerging findings appear to demonstrate the participants’ engagement with individual instructors vs. their engagement with peers in the course. Discussion boards are a common feature in online classes because they provide a way to engage students in discussion around a topic or idea while promoting interaction. Yet, as the initial analysis of data in the aforementioned study suggests, students may not perceive this to be an effective pedagogical approaches.

CONCLUSION

The current study demonstrates the role instructors and instructor presence play in an online environment, particularly in online and blended first-year seminar courses, although this finding might be generalized to other undergraduate courses. Instructors also play an important role in facilitating interaction between students through the course content, design, and delivery. It is through interactions in the course that students begin to develop friendships and supportive networks. Because the students in the study were all in their first semester at the university, they may not have had opportunities to develop friendships, thus they perceived family to be more important than other types of supports.

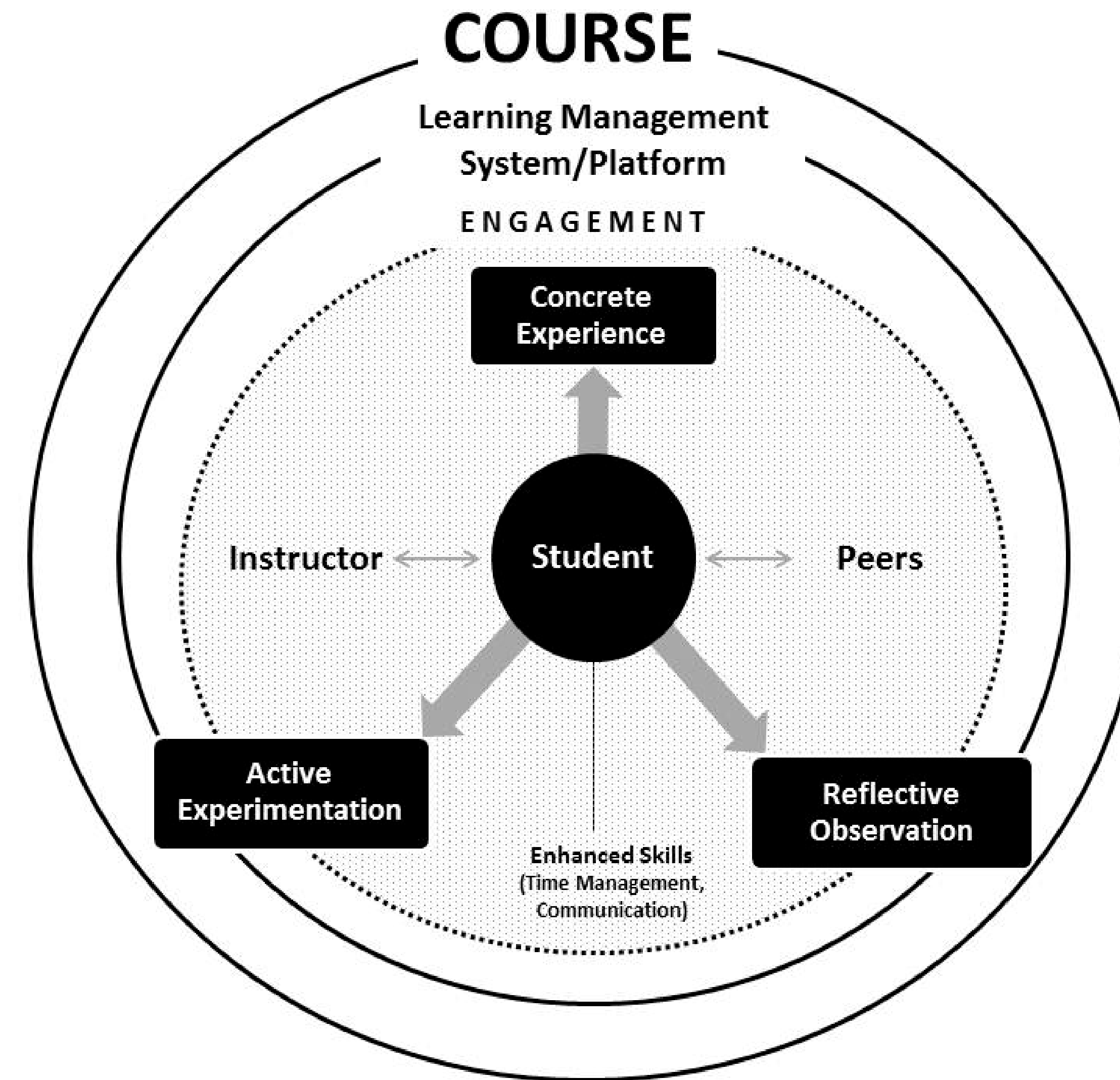


Figure 1. A Model of Student Learning and Engagement in Online and Blended Courses

Foote, S. M., & Mixson-Brookshire, D. (2014). Enhancing learning with technology: Applying the findings from a study of students in online, blended, and face-to-face first-year seminars. *Currents in Teaching and Learning*, 6(2).

CHANGES TO PEDAGOGIES

- Course organization
- Timely feedback
- Student engagement and interactions
- Communication

