

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**COIL Experience. Intercultural Case Analysis: Sports Brand
Company Perspectives from Canada and Spain**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic posed many challenges, including travel restrictions, which limited the opportunities for student-exchange programs. One solution to promote intercultural learning during the pandemic and form relations with students in different countries was COIL. This paper presents a Collaborative Online Intercultural Learning (COIL) case study that engaged students from Canada and Spain in an intercultural learning experience. Instructors worked collaboratively to design learning objectives and related course activities to establish a five (5) week program of co-instruction within their higher-education course schedules. Using technology, and a combination of asynchronous and synchronous opportunities, students were engaged in the course content (business-marketing strategy). Students learned about their unique cultural applications in relation to the content, and also learned about their cultural perspectives. Along with a variety of interpersonal and intercultural learning opportunities, students completed learning activities in cross-cultural teams (a balance of members from each country, three from Canada and three from Spain, with eight teams in total). Administrators, students and faculty were excited about the cultural learning experience and found the benefits to far outweigh the improvements needed. This paper shares the details of this experience from both administrative and faculty perspectives, to help other administrators/faculty members develop COIL and provide students with this rich intercultural online-learning experience.

Keywords: Collaborative, Online, Intercultural, Lessons Learned, Higher Education

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for some students to travel abroad during the course of 2020-2021. As such, COVID-19 also made it almost impossible to participate in exchange programs, and hindered the possibility of acquiring intercultural competences through such programs. In this paper, we present an experience from Canada and Spain based on a Collaborative Online Intercultural Learning (COIL) case study. COIL enabled students to develop intercultural competencies using technology as a means of connecting students in different classrooms from different countries. In this vein, we wanted to know if the COIL experience would lead to the acquisition of intercultural competences, due to the lack of real contact with the other country beyond the computer screen. We present the positive feedback students and faculty shared after having concluded the program. First, we did a literature review, then we outlined the procedure followed to implement the course, then we presented the results obtained from the students and faculty. Finally, the authors reflected on the results and the applicability of this methodology.

Literature Review

The concept of intercultural competence has become more important for university students (Ceo-DiFrancesco & Bender-Slack, 2016). Students are required not only to learn much knowledge, but also different ways of doing things, with various points of view in an interconnected world, so they are able to develop and maintain relationships with different cultures (Fantini, 2000). Bennet (2008) defines intercultural competence as consisting of three core competencies: Mindset, or cognitive competences; Skillset, or behavioural competencies; and Heartset, or affective competences. These are some of the reasons why internationalization of higher education has become a priority for universities. It is based on the idea that having classmates from around the world will help the students to be self-aware of their own culture, by contrasting it with the knowledge they gather from their peers' culture (Deardorff, 2006; Kahn & Agnew, 2017).

However, there are some circumstances that might hinder the possibility for students to study abroad, such as, financial issues, family, work or, lately, the COVID-19 pandemic. In situations where students are unable to study abroad, COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) promotes an opportunity for students to be immersed in an intercultural project without having to travel. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated personal and professional use of online learning technologies and video communications. COIL provided an exciting opportunity for faculty and students in higher education to engage interculturally. Collaboratively, administrators and faculty provided an online project with teams. Teams were formed by members of two or more universities from different regions or countries (Zhang & Pearlman, 2018). Learning is not restricted any longer to the boundaries of the classroom, giving the possibility to the students to have access to international education (Khan et al., 2020).

In a way, COIL also has strong ties to Internationalization at Home (IaH) and Virtual Exchange (VE). Virtual exchange is an educational practice that involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online, intercultural interaction and collaboration, with international peers as an integrated part of their educational programs, and under the guidance of

educators and/or facilitators (O'Dowd, 2021). IaH is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (Beleen & Jones, 2015). IaH can also serve as a means to promote common values and closer understandings between different peoples and cultures, enhance cooperation between post-secondary institutions in their internationalization efforts, while also improving the educational quality of the sector and human resources through mutual learning, comparison, and exchange of good practice (Almeida & Morosini, 2019). These intercultural competencies and skills students acquire are necessary for academic success and success in life.

Methods

The COIL project was presented by Algoma University (Canada) from December 2020 until April 2021, during the COVID-19 lockdown for many countries in the world. In December 2020, Algoma University arranged some virtual meetings, looking for three partners to develop a COIL project with them. Applicants uploaded basic information about their subject/course, their CV and their university, and attended a meeting to determine suitability. After the meeting, three partners were chosen, two from Universitat Jaume I (Spain) and one from Soonchunhyang University (South Korea). Before starting with the project, the three professors from Canada were matched with one of the professors from Spain or South Korea. Professors in Canada also had to apply to illustrate their ability, willingness, and interest in co-teaching and intercultural competency development (both for themselves and their students). In the case of this COIL course, both professors instructed within business and had complimentary fields: management and marketing. All COIL faculty (six in total) were coached on developing COIL courses, and faculty/students were invited to complete pre- and post-surveys online.

The process was initiated by four sessions (between January and February 2021). These coaching sessions were held by an expert (Jon Rubin) who guided faculty to set up their COIL course. During this time, professors had to co-create the following for their five-week intercultural learning component, which was provided within their existing course schedules:

- Learning objectives
- Course content
- Timetable
- Methodology and tools to be used
- Assessment method

The learning objectives and content had to correspond, not only the core knowledge of the subject, but also the intercultural competences the students needed to acquire. The COIL learning objectives established for students in both courses were:

- Develop intercultural understanding as evidenced by knowledge sharing about our cultures and the sports marketing strategies presented.
- Apply interpersonal skills to form teams and communicate effectively from different perspectives as demonstrated by the team agreement and presentations.
- Demonstrate critical thinking in the development of a marketing strategy and plan for a sports case study, and the questions posed on team presentations.

The content was a blend of both courses: Strategy and Policy, a fourth-year subject from Canada, and Fundamentals of Marketing, a second-year subject from Spain. Both courses were from the same field, which is an essential part of COIL content. The timetable was restricted to five compulsory sessions and two optional sessions. Two of the compulsory sessions were synchronous and all the students had to attend. The remaining three sessions were asynchronous, and students could complete these course activities at a mutually convenient time.

There were 24 students from Canada and 22 students from Spain. Both the course in Canada and the course in Spain split students into eight teams (of two or three students). This made it easy for instructors to form intercultural teams (of five or six students) by amalgamating the eight teams from each class (e.g., team 1 from Canada joined team 1 from Spain). It is important to note that team building for faculty and students was an essential component of the COIL program. The relationships developed allowed both the COIL course development and student assignments to be implemented smoothly.

The course started by sharing the COIL schedule, learning activities, and project instructions, along with video introductions, which were all shared online using Padlet. These videos were done in teams for students and professors to introduce themselves and the cities where they lived. The students were invited to pose questions to other students to learn about their culture and answer questions that students asked. They also explained the framework of the course and the pre-survey was distributed to students (this was a brief survey that asked faculty and students about their expectations regarding the COIL experience). Then, students had to complete modules with asynchronous lessons. Professors uploaded videos to explain the content and methods they used for analysis. Students watched videos and were instructed to complete assignments collaboratively in groups. Students could meet in teams whenever they wanted, and many shared their work using various online Smartphone apps to connect with each other. The last lesson was the presentation of the team project results. Students were instructed to reflect on how applications would differ in each country and share key learnings about the other country. Lastly, students and faculty were invited to complete the post-survey.

During the course, we used several tools. For the synchronous classes, we used Zoom, as it allowed us to see all the students on the same screen, or split them into teams, or share documents on the screen. We also used Padlet, as the way to share documents and videos with all the students and to let the students pin their videos or documents. Finally, we used Google Drive to receive the private task from the teams to be assessed.

Results

Much positive feedback was received from both faculty and students. Considering both Algoma University and Universitat Jaume I had never offered a COIL course in the past, both institutions felt that their COIL pilot was extremely successful. Faculty responded 100% no to the question: “Were there language or cultural differences that might lead you to choose a partner from a different culture next time?” One hundred percent of faculty shared that COIL was a success, they would conduct a COIL course again, and they would work with their COIL partner again. In terms of student engagement, the post-survey reported a 600% increase in students’ virtual intercultural engagement, and a 350% increase in underrepresented student group participation (especially Indigenous students). Note: The pre-COIL survey had 70 participants, and the post-COIL survey had 53 participants. One hundred percent (100%) of

faculty participated in both the pre- and post-surveys. Pre-COIL has a 71% participation rate for Canadian students and 31% for Spanish students, while the post-COIL survey had 35% participation rate for Canadian students and 54% for Spanish students.

The students and faculty felt that through this COIL experience, they:

- Increased intercultural awareness by working closely with students and faculty from different cultures. For most students, this was their first experience working with students from different countries and cultures, so it was an exciting and motivating experience for them. Students learned about other cultural locations, discussed different views of society, and had many opportunities to see themselves more clearly through the lens of the other students.
- Increased their interest in studying abroad and looked forward to future intercultural learning opportunities among students
- Increased the accessibility of underrepresented student groups
- Developed digital literacy skills, especially for working in virtual teams. Students have stated that they have been able to put into practice what they learned in class.

However, both institutions did experience some challenges along the way.

- The short time frame made it difficult for planning COIL. Normally, COIL course development takes at least eight months before its initial implementation. This COIL project development and implementation was done in three months and did not provide enough time to prepare registered students on COIL.
- A suitable e-learning platform that worked for both institutions was difficult to find, and the effect of GDPR (The General Data Protection Regulation) Compliance in Europe, and FIPPA (Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act) Compliance in Ontario, Canada was a challenge. Some faculty felt that e-learning platforms such as Moodle would have been a better tool than using Google Drive.
- The time difference between the two partnering countries, particularly with South Korea, was a challenge. However, despite this challenge, students had the best engagement when they were working synchronously versus asynchronously.
- Also, in some cases, different communication styles coupled with using English as a second language was a challenge for some participants.

All in all, students and faculty felt that this experience was worthwhile and enhanced the learning experiences in the classroom, as it enriched the content taught and improved students' interpersonal and intercultural skills. There were also improvements suggested that will be integrated and evaluated in the next round of COIL course development.

Discussion and Conclusion

If designed effectively, COIL provides engaging, mutually beneficial and equitable opportunities for all participants, and enhances Internationalization-at-Home (IaH) and Diversity Abroad (DA) initiatives for Canadian post-secondary educational institutions. COIL provides accessibility to those students, especially underrepresented student groups, who may not be able to travel to another country for quality international learning opportunities. There are many factors impacting a low student participation rate, such as not having financial resources to travel, work/home obligations, and other socio-economic factors. Although VE programs can never replace an in-person experience of traditional exchange and study abroad programs, COIL-VE, if offered in tandem with physical mobility programs, has proven to be valuable, and, going forward, an integral part of Internationalisation-At-Home strategies.

Higher educational leaders should understand that running a successful VE requires careful planning, resource dedication, capacity building, and thoughtful partnerships, none of which can be achieved overnight. The success of COIL depends on three key pillars: active partnerships, flexible institutional policies, and innovative pedagogies (O'Dowd R, 2021). This means that COIL requires commitment and collaboration from all key stakeholders in higher educational institutions. Building trust among partners, by incorporating all perspectives, from the earliest stages of planning may not seem possible when under time constraints, but the efforts often prove indispensable. COIL is something this case study has shown is worthy to continue and plans to grow through continued evaluation, reflection and learning, as it offers opportunities for enriched student-learning and experiences in the higher educational setting.

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