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USING COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING (COIL) AS MEANS FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION: REFLECTIONS FROM ACADEMICS

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Abstract

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an educational strategy that promotes international learning through online cooperation between academics and students from various countries or regions within the context of a course. The purpose of this research is to uncover the function of COIL projects in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. Reflections from two Central University of Technology, Free State academics who collaborated with international partners to teach courses in different locations and co-facilitated online collaborative activities are shared. The study is qualitative in nature and a case study research design was adopted. Results revealed that a greater international awareness in curriculum design

solutions and an appreciation for innovative teaching solutions is needed. The recommendations in this paper are to develop COIL initiatives at Universities of Technology (UoTs) in order to aid in the development of global-minded students and curricular internationalization.

Keywords

Collaborative Online International Learning, Cultural globalization, Multicultural Environments, Internationalization

1. Introduction

The term "Collaborative Online International Learning" (COIL) refers to a new and innovative method of teaching and learning that gives academics and students the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with peers from other countries through the use of online platforms (Mestre-Segarra & Ruiz-Garrido, 2022). COIL encourages meaningful exchanges between academics and students with peers located in geographically dispersed locations and hailing from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds by utilizing internet-based tools and innovative online pedagogies (Naicker, Singh, & Genugten, 2021). In today's globalized economic environment, academics are increasingly utilizing technology to collaborate across cultures, continents, and time zones. As the world becomes more interconnected, academics in all professions should be prepared to collaborate and interact with colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result of the globalization and international collaboration trend, universities and academics hold responsibility for curriculum development and internationalization. According to Asojo, Kartoshkina, Amole, & Jaiyeoba (2019), there are numerous phases to increasing one's cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, the journey of international collaboration is progressive, and with experience, awareness, and practice, one can shift from cultural ethnocentrism, which sees one's culture as intrinsic to reality, to cultural ethno-relativism, which sees culture as relative to circumstance (Beelen, 2016).

Overall, intercultural sensitivity is becoming aware of cultural differences and being able to understand and accept those differences. According to this study, two COIL projects in various fields have been completed by three universities namely: the Central University of Technology (CUT) in South Africa, The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) in the Netherlands, and National Taiwan University (NTU) in Taiwan. The tasks assigned within these collaborative projects were to establish an intercultural dialogue among students from very

different geographical, linguistic, political, and cultural backgrounds, resulting in different outcomes and research into a culture that was new to both classes of students in the other. This online exchange was intended to facilitate the practice of collaboration skills, increase students' interest in cultural diversity, demonstrate the dynamics of this online learning experience, as well as motivate higher education academics to include this modality of technology-based education in curricula across all disciplines as an internationalized pedagogic practice. Academic reflections on the initial project, a partnership involving students from CUT, THUAS, and NTU, are detailed in this paper. The second project was carried out with various groups of students who were assigned different tasks centered on the urban environment, but a similar practice was employed to develop team interactions utilizing Padlet as the primary platform for information exchange. The following section provides a synopsis of the literature. The research question for this study was to unpack how COIL can be used as means of improving curriculum internalization at a UoT. The aim of this research was to uncover the function of COIL projects in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. Reflections from two Central University of Technology, Free State academics who collaborated with international partners to teach courses in different locations and co-facilitated online collaborative activities are shared.

2. Literature Review

This section aims to briefly outline the literature focused on internationalization and how it is associated with COIL, which is the fundamental aspect of this paper.

2.1. Background on Internationalization

The term "internationalization of higher education" refers to the many efforts made by institutions of higher learning, national and regional governments, and other key players in the field to better prepare students for life in a more interconnected world (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). The internationalization of higher education has many advantages, but until recently only a privileged few could reap them. Internationalization at home, which primarily utilizes the mobility of international students enrolling at universities in South Africa, has been implemented to ensure that a larger number of students have access to the benefits of internationalization (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). It is estimated that fewer than one percent of African students have the financial means to take advantage of study abroad programs. Lack of financial resources is the primary hindrance to wider participation. South African universities have been

forced to think creatively about how to overcome obstacles to internationalization in order to expand and improve existing programs for the benefit of a greater number of students (Chasi, 2021).

2.2. Definitions of Key Terms

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an acronym that stands for collaborative online international learning. Accredited courses can be taken through COIL, which links classrooms at two or more universities across the world. The COIL model is more than just a framework for international student collaboration. COIL encourages academic and student interaction across language and cultural boundaries through the use of innovative online pedagogies and Internet-based tools (Guth & Rubin, 2015).

Cultural Globalization refers to the phenomenon by which the experience of everyday life, as influenced by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, reflects a standardization of cultural expressions around the world (Suejam, Chuaychoowong & Champakaew, 2023).

Multicultural Environments refers to an ideology that promotes the institutionalization of communities containing multiple cultures. It is generally applied to the demographic make-up of a specific place, usually at the organizational level, e.g. schools, businesses, neighborhoods, cities, or nations (Suejam et al., 2023).

3. Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and a case study design was adopted. It was decided that the most appropriate form of qualitative research to use is autoethnography. Autoethnography is a method of research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to gain a better understanding of cultural experience (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). The study was based on the experiences and reflections of two academics who facilitated projects at a higher education institution with undergraduate students in the 2022 academic year.

4. Universities Involved and Courses

For project one, office Management and Technology students (34 second year students) from the CUT were working on a scenario, together with students in the other countries, namely Taiwan (47 students) and Netherlands (44 students). Students were discussing the Intercultural Communication subject, which was the focus of the Collaborative Online International Learning

project. In project two, the collaboration was between the CUT and THUAS. The project was themed the ‘Urban Environment’ and the duration of the project was from the 29 April – 21 June 2022. The module coiled was Fundamentals of Human Settlements (40 students) whilst international partners coiled Facility Management (80 students); therefore, the project was an interdisciplinary project.

4.1. Project One Reflections

4.1.1. Content

An international team was established to explore cultural dimensions in different places, whether certain products would be popular in these places and how to communicate about them. Academics role played as the bosses/supervisors to evaluate the final presentations and findings of the student teams. Students were exposed to different varieties and styles of communication in English and different work styles.

4.1.2. Teaching

The project started with a brief (self-learning online) module on padlet regarding intercultural communication. It consists of brief videos, readings and a cultural self-test. By doing that, students became aware of their own cultural programming and the cultural identity of people in other cultures. Students also reflected upon what to expect when working with colleagues from other cultures. What did the South African students expect the Taiwanese and the Netherlands students’ counterparts to be like? Why? How? Furthermore, students posted videos as a group explaining who they are and what their culture holds and what should people from other countries know about South African cultures. Students were given tasks throughout the project that they were expected to do in groups and submit as a team, and padlet was always utilized as a submission platform.

4.1.3. Assessments

Students were given a final assignment that includes the entire project themes, and they were asked to create live videos as a team addressing the subjects. Any format was acceptable. In order to record their final presentations, groups used MS Teams, WhatsApp, and Zoom meetings. All presentations were then uploaded to YouTube using a URL that was placed on Padlet. Thereafter, each student was required to evaluate their peers using a Microsoft Word form, as well as other teams (group Evaluation via a link on Padlet), but academics were entitled to provide a

final mark. Finally, students were also awarded participation certificates, which were sent to them through email.

4.2. Project Two Reflections

4.2.1. Content

The second COIL project was between the CUT and THUAS universities. The partnering and project phase was from December 2021-March 2022. Weekly meetings were conducted to structure the project and students had to complete four tasks. The platforms that were used during this project were Padlet, Zoom and Blackboard.

4.2.2. Teaching

The project had 21 groups in total where the students had to collaboratively work together to complete the tasks. Each group was assigned a coach and the role of the coach was to guide the students on their assignments as well as to grade the group assignments.

4.2.3. Assessment

Activity 1: Students were asked to introduce themselves by creating a short Power Point or a video of their backgrounds, sharing where they come from, interests, hobbies and pictures. These were then shared and posted on the team padlet before the kick-start of the project.

Activity 2: Students were tasked to meet up with all their group members on zoom straight after the kick start meeting. Thereafter students had to get acquainted with each other and do the group alliance, which included creating a collage of all the group members.

Activity 3: Students were allocated different neighborhoods in the two cities and they had to do neighborhood walks and take pictures of various themes that were provided. They then had to create short clips or PowerPoint presentations showing what they saw in their walks. Thereafter, students had to create an infographic collaboratively showing the differences and similarities in these two neighborhoods. Students were then able to see how different concepts are interpreted given the different contexts and thus appreciate the diversity and linkages of such.

Activity 4: students returned to the same neighborhoods and conducted interviews with locals. From those responses the groups had to write a newspaper article in order to compare the two neighborhoods using a chosen theme within the urban environment. Reflections were written at the beginning of the project where students spoke about their expectations of the project, in the middle of the project where students spoke about their challenges and then at the end of the project where students reflected on their experiences and what they would take going forward.

Figure 1: An Example of a Rubric Used to Assess the Students during the Projects

Students' names, group, team					
Trait	Criteria				Points & Remarks
	1 Points Unacceptable	2 Points Minor issues	3 Points Acceptable	4 Points Good	
Content <i>Did the presentation have valuable material meeting the first 3 learning outcomes (see below)?</i> 1. Analysis of patterns 2. Potential issues 3. Solutions to issues	Presentation contained little to no valuable material.	Presentation had moments where valuable material were present but as a whole the content was lacking.	Presentation had a good amount of material and benefited the class.	Presentation had an exceptional amount of valuable material and was extremely beneficial to the class.	2 x
Collaboration <i>Did everyone contribute to the presentation? Did everyone seem well versed in the material?</i>	The teammates did not work on each others' ideas. Only few people worked on the presentation.	The teammates sometimes worked from other ideas. However, certain members did not do as much as others.	The teammates worked from other ideas most of the time. And it seems like every member plays their role.	The teammates always worked from prepared ideas. It was evident that all of the group members contributed equally to the presentation.	1 x
Organization <i>Was the presentation well organized and easy to follow?</i>	The presentation lacked organization and had little evidence of preparation.	There were minimal signs of organization and preparation.	The presentation had organizing ideas but could have been much stronger with better preparation.	The presentation was well organized, well prepared and easy to follow.	1 x
Presentation <i>Did the presentaters Speak clearly? Did the presentation engage the audience?</i>	Presenters were unconfident and demonstrated little evidence of planning prior to presentation.	Presenters were not consistent with the level of confidence.	Presenters were occasionally confident with their presentation however the presentation was not engaging as it could have been for class.	All presenters were very confident in delivery and they did an excellent job of engaging the class. Preparation was very evident.	1 x
Bonus points from weekly assignments (max 4):					1 x
Total:	The student team automatically fails if two or more traits are graded as insufficient. This cannot be compensated with bonus points. Max points: 24 = excellent, Passing grade: 13 = sufficient Grade: points x 4,166: 24 = 100, 20 = 83, 18 = 74, 16 = 67,, 13 = 55, 10 = 42 etc				
Overall feedback					

(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

5. Results and Discussion

The following section aims to outline the results and discussion of the study from the experiences/reflections of academics in the said case study.

According to the first project: “Students from South Africa were able to work together with their international partners according to their predetermined schedule. We initially had some small difficulties, such as students being unable to connect with their partners due to time zones and connectivity problems because students were working from home. However, following their initial discussion, they were able to agree on a schedule that worked for everyone. The students were able to conduct virtual meetings via Ms. Teams to discuss the content, and they were updating their lecturers on their progress. The use of the Padlet technology, which presented a hurdle to South African students since they were unfamiliar with it, was the other problem that emerged from this collaboration. While the project was time-consuming and sometimes difficult to embed into an already-demanding curriculum, they considered the project a valuable contribution in experiential learning and will continue to incorporate the project in their courses. Nonetheless, they were able to use the technology after conducting their own unique study on the web. Following the final task submission, students had the opportunity to assess their groupmates. The assessment helped the students improve their academic skills.”

According to the second project: “Initially, there was a communication breakdown among the students due to preconceptions about the groups. For instance, the South African students did not feel confident enough to collaborate only until they discovered that English is not a first language either for their Dutch counter parts. The Dutch students could not understand why the South African students could not meet promptly during the set meetings times. This only changed once they researched and asked about load shedding and the effects thereof. Once the groups started working on the collaborated tasks, the students were able to appreciate each other’s backgrounds and cultures based on the tasks they did together.”

This study sought to unpack how COIL can be used as means for internationalization at home. From the findings, it was evident that through the said COIL projects, western approaches tread to dominate the internationalization arena, therefore COIL provided a platform decolonize the curricular by showcasing South Africa. The tasks that the students had do ensured that no student feels excluded in their education and that they could relate to the tasks personally. The ability to connect with others and understand the world around you are highly valued in today's

information age. Institutions are putting more emphasis on internationalization because today's job market demands that graduates have international, foreign language, and intercultural skills so that they can interact effectively in a global setting (Egron-Polak, 2011). The internationalization of a university is a much deeper and more nuanced topic than just student mobility. Students can gain international and intercultural competence without leaving their home country through a strategy known as internationalization at home, which involves incorporating intercultural and international dimensions into the curriculum, teaching, research, and extracurricular activities (Almeida, Robson, Morosini & Baranzeli, 2019). Internationalization at home also develops students' critical thinking skills. According to Liu (2023), Critical thinking has been regarded as an important and necessary educational outcome because it helps students in the regulation of their study skills, and subsequently empowers them to effectively contribute to their future careers.

6. Conclusion

The COIL projects support academics in enhancing their technological, teaching, and learning skills as well as their technical knowledge to make it more interdisciplinary. This is crucial because our students need to be able to think critically, communicate, and collaborate, and these are the skills required in the post-pandemic new normal. Overall, students were satisfied with the redesigned online study-abroad course, which suggests that traditional study-abroad courses can be redesigned into fully online COIL courses. Academics had the opportunities to develop personal and professional skills for collaboration, learn some unknown information about the life of their partners from abroad, as well as master basic tools for virtual communication and evaluation throughout the project. The collaborative process gives a clear and elaborative way to achieve the goal through joint work. Academics are supposed to collaborate in the implementation of project-based learning and support their students and each other throughout the process. Collaborative online international learning can be a new method of learning and evaluation.

7. Recommendations

Academics found the collaboration among themselves to be an enriching experience. While the project was time-consuming and sometimes difficult to embed into an already-demanding curriculum, they considered the project a valuable contribution in experiential learning and will continue to incorporate the project in their courses. Future collaborative projects will

ensure that all students have equal conditions within the project. This means aligning the project content, syncing the timeline and assignment deadlines better, and adjusting the assessment criteria so that demands on students are similar. Future study-abroad courses should consider flipped online course design to include short lectures, leaving more time for student-student and student-instructor interactions. Online course schedule and student communication should accommodate different time zones. This paper suggests that universities involved in the COIL project hold a ceremony to award certificates to students and lecturers who have completed the course as a source of motivation. A community of practice (CoP) for COIL projects is also recommended at CUT as part of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), which will promote the collaborative culture and the implementation of COIL in curriculum development.

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