

Virtual Internationalization: What and Why

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Abstract

In the coming academic year, Jissen Women's University will partner with the American Women's College at Bay Path University in the United States to provide a shared course focused on women's leadership. While this partnership entails students' visiting each other's country and campus, the collaborative component, a project for which students explore the topic of women's leadership from their different cultural perspectives, will take place virtually. To accomplish this, the course design will adhere to the guidelines of COIL, Collaborative Online International Learning, an educational paradigm put forth by the State University of New York (SUNY). The purposes of this paper are to provide a brief description of COIL and to place it in the context of the larger movement of virtual internationalization in education.

Technology, Culture, and Education

To say that information technology has influenced the enterprise of education would be an understatement. One struggles to imagine any kind of formal education in the absence of some form of technology. A partial list would include some dated examples: VCRs, overhead projectors, film strips, tape recorders, and blackboards. At this time, of course, the word "technology" usually refers to information technology and typically evokes an image of devices used to connect us, via the Internet, to resources and people regardless of physical location. Beyond the hardware are the web-based tools that facilitate any number of tasks, including email, video-conferencing applications, instant messaging and many others. Information technology has impacted education in numerous ways, from the way students take onboard new information to the way they create their own assignments.

Another opportunity made possible by information technology is virtual internationalization, which allows students and instructors in different countries to collaboratively explore their chosen fields of

study and to complete projects together. This is not an incremental change in traditional classroom education; it is something new. Moore and Simon (2015) refer to this development as “a sea change in higher education” (p. 1), and with this change come opportunities as well as challenges.

Investigation into virtual internationalization reveals a lack of agreement on terminology. A number of terms with varying degrees overlapping meaning are employed in this area. These include “virtual mobility,” “virtual exchange,” “telecollaboration,” “virtual transnational education,” “online intercultural exchange,” and “globally networked learning environments.” While not interchangeable, these terms do share an essential element without which they could not exist: the Internet.

Let’s start with a few terms that fall into this general category. “Telecollaboration” describes a type of virtual exchange employed to provide foreign-language learning opportunities for language students in different countries (Belz, 2002). Telecollaboration arrived in what Kern, Ware and Warschauer (2004) refer to as the “second wave of online language learning,” in which the goal goes (emphasis in the original) “beyond language learning to an emphasis on *culture* [...]” (p. 244). Other approaches that share this emphasis on intercultural learning include “virtual mobility,” the preferred term in Europe (Moore and Simon, 2015), and “collaborative online international learning,” or “COIL,” which allows groups of geographically separated learners to explore a particular field of study while using and strengthening intercultural communication skills in the process.

Another term that must be introduced here both for continuity in understanding virtual education and for contrast is the “massive open online course,” or, as it is more commonly known, “MOOC.” deWit (2013) draws an interesting distinction: “If one follows the divide between globalization and internationalization in higher education, MOOCs fall more into the former category and COIL into the latter, with a strong focus on the internationalization of the curriculum and of teaching and learning” (para. 4). Moore and Simon (2015) touch on this dichotomy as well: “Even where distance learning is offered, including the recent eruption of massive online open courses (MOOCs), rarely has intercultural dialogue or learning been a key component of online courses” (p. 15).

COIL: Collaborative Online International Learning

From this point forward, this paper will focus exclusively on COIL courses. The reason for this tight focus is that COIL is a well established, non proprietary framework that can be readily implemented by institutions wishing to create a virtual exchange program or course.

COIL is a term associated with SUNY, the State University of New York. In 2006, the SUNY Center for Collaborative Online International Learning was created. While the center originally focused its mission on developing international courses for SUNY schools, it now seeks to support the development of COIL

programs on a global scale (SUNY COIL Center). Appropriately, the term COIL seems now to have a life of its own and is widely used to describe the paradigm that the center originally articulated and continues to refine and strengthen.

For an understanding of COIL, it is helpful to look at the acronym letter by letter. As deWit (2013) writes, “The term ‘collaborative online international learning’ combines the four essential dimensions of real virtual mobility: it is a collaborative exercise of teachers and students; it makes use of online technology and interaction; it has potential international dimensions; and it is integrated into the learning process” (para. 9). Taken together, these four elements comprise a composite sine qua non; there is no non-essential component.

Collaborative describes work that is done by more than one person. In collaborative projects, individuals employ their own strengths, skills and perspectives as the team works toward a shared goal. *Online* signifies that participants in COIL projects use internet technology to execute projects. Importantly, there is no specific platform or set of applications that is associated with COIL. Rather, COIL instructors and learners employ the tools they find most effective as they communicate, create, and share. *International* means that COIL teams are made up of participants in different countries, and for this reason, intercultural communication is always and necessarily a part of the experience; thus, the preconditions for growth in the area of intercultural competence are put in place by the basic design of the COIL paradigm. *Learning* is the fundamental aim of COIL. However, the learning goals of a COIL project could come from any field of study. Thus, COIL is a framework that allows groups of people in different countries to use online tools to work together on educational projects—accomplishing learning goals in their areas of study while also developing intercultural competence.

Benefits

Intercultural Competence

To begin a discussion of the benefits of a COIL course, it is helpful to first consider the benefits of traditional study abroad, some of which include increases in confidence and maturity, as well as gains in foreign language ability (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Furthermore, study abroad can lead to growth in intercultural awareness (Kitsantas, 2004) and intercultural competence (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004).

Is it possible that students can experience some of the benefits of studying abroad without leaving their home countries? While there can be no substitute for actually visiting another country, participation in a COIL course can catalyze some of the same kinds of developmental steps. This is a defining component of the COIL paradigm. Consider the following from deWit (2013), describing a COIL course on sports management: “the different approach to sport in the US and Europe, as well as the different way the subject is taught, becomes clear and makes students think differently about the subject” (para. 19).

The intercultural nature of a COIL course impels participating students to look at a problem, a cultural phenomenon, a case study, a historical event, or a piece of art through the eyes of peers from another part of the world.

It will be useful here to define the term “intercultural competence.” Deardorff (2006) reports that the preferred definition among intercultural experts is “behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” Given this, it would seem that a COIL program would have an impact on the second component of this definition: knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which would, in turn, inform the first piece in a virtuous cycle.

Democratization

Needless to say, not everyone will have the opportunity to study in another country. Factors prohibiting international travel include lack of financial support, health concerns, and lack of parental permission. COIL, however, can provide nearly any student an opportunity for a cross-cultural learning experience, regardless of many issues that would preclude physical travel. Thus, schools, families and individual students who value international education should not feel limited.

21st Century Skills

Though the 21st century is well underway, the term *21st century skills* and the associated scholarship and literature provide a nexus that has an important relationship with virtual internationalization in general and the COIL paradigm in particular. From the introduction to their book *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times* (2009), Trilling and Fadel describe a series of questions they have asked “scores of diverse groups” (p.xxv). First, they ask people to imagine the world just twenty years in the future. They then go on to share the typical answers they’ve heard. Several of these relate directly to the kinds of experiences participants in COIL programs can expect.

The first hallmark of the near future, is “a ‘smaller world,’ more connected by technology and transport” (p.xxvi). Without a doubt, this smaller, interconnected world has made the virtual classroom an inevitability. This is perhaps a function of globalization, as distinct from internationalization. Mitchell and Nielsen (2012) explain this difference (emphasis in the original): “Internationalization is seen as something higher education institutions **do** while globalization is something that is **happening to them.**” (p. 4). Thus, against the backdrop of inexorable globalization, a COIL course can be an appealing choice for those seeking to consciously provide an international component to their institution’s offerings.

Trilling and Fadel continue describing the near future, suggesting there will be “more work in diverse teams spanning languages, cultures, geographies, and time zones (p.xxv).” This is, in essence, a

description of a COIL project: participating students will necessarily be working in the type of environment described here.

In addition to asking us to imagine the world of the near future, Trilling and Fadel have asked people to describe the skills needed to thrive in this future. These include the following: “communication and collaboration, ... information and communication technologies literacy, ... social and cross-cultural interaction” (p. xxvi). These skills, selected from a larger list, form the core skill set students will need to develop to participate in a COIL course.

Any student participating in a COIL project will need the skill of “communication and collaboration.” Indeed, “collaborative” is a foundational component of the COIL framework. Collaborative learning means that groups of peers work together towards a common goal. Pairing “collaboration” with “communication” is sensible. As Kreijns et al point out, “Social interaction appears to be the key to collaboration. If there is collaboration then social interaction can be found in it, and vice versa....” (p.338). Thus, communication seems a necessary precondition for collaboration.

The second skill from Trilling and Fadel’s list is “information and communication technologies literacy,” which aligns with the “O” in the COIL acronym: “online.” Stating the obvious seems warranted here: communicating via email, video-conferencing technology and some form of groupware is an inevitability for today’s professionals. A COIL course could provide an important first or early opportunity for students to gain experience in a skill they will almost certainly use regularly when they begin working.

The third skill in our selection from Trilling and Fadel is “social and cross-cultural interaction.” Here, again, is an element built into the fundamental definition of COIL: participants will necessarily be working across cultures to complete their tasks.

To conclude: COIL courses provide participants the opportunity to experience some of the 21st century skills firsthand—not as objects of study, but as necessary tools for the job, a kind of on-the-job training for the global citizen.

Implementation

Contact among institutions

In its simplest form, a COIL course requires a partnership between two groups in two countries. This partnership comprises an agreement to work together toward a shared educational goal using internet tools to facilitate the process. Examples of COIL courses completed around the world have focused on a variety of topics, including gender studies, music, cooking and language learning among many

others (SUNY COIL Center). Once faculty members at each university have made the decision to work together on a COIL course, they can begin planning the ways in which students from each school will work together. The process of designing such courses well will be time consuming and will require good communication and cooperation among those involved in the planning. Capobianco, Rubaii and L pez-De Castro (2016) point out that “high levels of trust, respect and openness” are essential for instructors working together to design a course.

Institutional Support

Many schools around the world are taking steps to internationalize their institutions by welcoming exchange students, sending students to study abroad, participating in international conferences, and engaging in faculty exchanges. COIL provides another avenue by which institutions can work with partners in different countries. Moore and Simon (2015) explain that a COIL course can play role in a bigger picture:

Globally networked teaching and learning offers a complementary option to other internationalization strategies such as increased study abroad, foreign language requirements, increasing numbers of international students, and global markers for core or required general education courses. (p. 6)

For this reason, the decision to create a single COIL course is significant for the institution in that it entails international partnership.

Those seeking to explain COIL to students, colleagues, or school administrators might experience some challenges as COIL may be a new concept for some key figures at an institution. Those wishing to implement a COIL course should be prepared to explain the concept. It is important to clarify that there is no specific websites, applications or platforms associated with conducting a COIL. Rather, COIL is a framework; it is a set of guidelines that have been refined over time by practitioners around the world. The SUNY COIL Center has developed this model and maintains an excellent collection of resources on their website.

There are no limitations to resources that practitioners can employ in creating and conducting a COIL course. It could be as simple as using Skype and email, or it could include a more diverse range of online tools. Course designers can choose these based on the specifics of each task. There are tools for sharing videos, photos, and there are tools that allow for various types of linked feedback. However, it is wise to keep Murphy’s law in mind. Capobianco, Rubaii and L pez-De Castro (2016) show that when students spend time figuring out technological tools, time is taken away from productive work toward the educational goals. Thus, choosing tools carefully and investing time to ensure students are able to

use them are important preliminary steps.

Conclusion

Virtual internationalization, as exemplified by the COIL model, provides opportunities for students and faculty in different countries to work together and learn from one another. These learning opportunities transcend subject matter to include a host of skills that will likely serve students in their future careers, such as intercultural competence, literacy in communication technologies, and the ability to work collaboratively. Moreover, a COIL course can stand alone as an alternative to conventional study abroad, or serve as its complement. The SUNY COIL Center provides an excellent resource to those who wish to implement virtual internationalization strategies.

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