

COIL@RGU Workshop: Presentation Notes

Izzy Crawford, 2022

Slides 1 through 8

[No notes.]

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This workshop will provide a model or key elements for developing and evaluating COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) projects based on the findings and experience of the researcher/practitioner. Participants will have the opportunity to design their own COIL project and consider some of the challenges and opportunities that exist within their own disciplines. There are six 5-minute activities embedded in this presentation, which are designed to help you create your own COIL project - or at least to consider some of the fundamental principles and concepts involved.

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The world is global, whether we like it or not. The Fortune 500 leading global companies employ 67 million people in 34 countries. Tertiary-level teaching within this global context presents instructors with several challenges. Through easy accessibility to information throughout the world, instructors of all disciplines must continually keep up with new developments, as well as impart critical thinking skills and fundamental subject knowledge to their students.

Furthermore, technical savviness, knowledge of foreign languages and intercultural competence are prerequisites for graduates today. These skills are no longer exclusively for global careers but also for positions in middle-sized companies. In order to compete and be successful in these world businesses, no matter the level of employment, employees need intercultural communication competency skills.

According to the Society of Human Resources Management (para. 2), *"a global mindset is crucial, no matter where an employee is located. In the past, an organization's leaders, managers and employees needed to understand a culture only if they were going to another country to live. Now, employees work virtually across*

borders via technology, they work with a variety of ethnicities at home, and they interact with a globally dispersed customer base. So a global mindset and skills are necessary for all employees."

There are many student projects that involve working in teams, with students from the same university and clients who operate within the UK. However, these do not directly or intentionally develop intercultural competency and communication skills. According to Deardorff (2009), intercultural competence can be defined as possessing the necessary attitudes and reflective behavioural skills, and using these to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. The emphasis in this context is upon attitude and behavioural understanding when entering a multicultural / international environment, and correspondingly effective behaviour. This understanding facilitates success in achieving the goals set out for the cross-cultural interaction - e.g. increasing staff motivation, carrying through a cross-border merger, or meeting clients to discuss a business venture. There are numerous academic sources that deliver this type of intercultural communication theory. However, teaching theory doesn't necessarily translate into competency.

Recent research also suggests there is a gap in perceptions of intercultural competency between graduates and employers. The 2018 Jobs Outlook Survey issued by the U.S. National Association of Colleges and Employers found, among other results, that the percentage of graduating seniors and young employees who believed that they were proficient in global/intercultural fluency was much higher than the percentage reported by employers (Bauer-Wolff 2018).

If capitalism is replaced by "talentism" (IMF, 2017), the future workplace will also need employees who are innovators and disruptors. There is therefore a need for more intercultural, experiential student projects to bridge this gap, and to develop the global mind- and skill set that employers want and need.

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[No notes.]

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COIL projects enable innovative, cost-effective, internationalisation strategies for any educational discipline, level or context, because they embrace emerging cloud-based communication and learning technologies (SUNY Center for COIL, 2019). Students acquire the skills, confidence and mindset that will help them to navigate the work-based technological challenges of the fourth industrial revolution.

Every aspect of COIL is borderless. It crosses organisational, disciplinary, geographical and institutional boundaries, and promotes high quality, vocationally relevant learning. COIL projects prepare students for the future workplace, and the challenges associated with globalisation and technological progress. This is achieved through intercultural and interdisciplinary experiential learning using real-life, multi-national clients in a virtual team environment. Students from different countries enrol in shared courses, and faculty staff in each country co-design, deliver and evaluate the project (SUNY Center for COIL, 2019).

The COIL concept was founded by the State University of New York (SUNY) and has been a unit of the SUNY Office of Global Affairs since 2010. It is part of the emerging field of Globally Networked Learning (GNL). GNL promotes intercultural competence and the attitudes and reflective behavioural skills that are vital for a globalised economy (SUNY COIL Center, 2019; Deardorff, 2009; Tucker et al, 2013).

Experiential learning through a collaborative project across cultures exposes students to differences in a real-life situation. By stumbling over intercultural blocks (which are inevitable) and emerging unscathed, students begin to appreciate the ambiguity inherent to multicultural interactions. Essig (2013) suggests that heterogeneous groups can provide fertile ground for entrepreneurial thinking. The hyper-heterogeneous nature of COIL projects positions them well to encourage new ways of looking at the world and to promote creative problem-solving through experiential learning.

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The primary goal of this project was to develop students' ability to demonstrate intercultural communication knowledge, sensitivity, understanding and competency.

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In an attempt to develop a global mindset and skills among students, this international, virtual and collaborative student project specifically aimed to:

- Improve English language skills
- Improve the ability to work with non-native English language speakers
- Develop intercultural competencies

- Promote the use of digital channels in cross-border communication
- Cultivate team project management skills
- Develop an understanding of the communication challenges facing companies operating in a global context
- Improve collaborative writing and speaking skills

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Instructors in four countries (USA, UK/Scotland, Germany and Portugal) created a 6-week, cross-cultural, virtual team project designed to achieve the project aims. It was conducted with postgraduate and undergraduate students in university business programs, whose courses ranged from organisational communication and multicultural teamwork to social media communication and public relations. In 2017, each team was allocated a client with a business presence in one or more of these countries. In 2018 each team selected their own global client - e.g. Coca Cola, Nike, McDonalds.

The team overseeing the project consisted of four academics with backgrounds in business communication, marketing, public relations and intercultural competence:

- Stephanie Swartz is Professor of English and US-American Culture at Mainz University of Applied Sciences in Mainz, Germany. Originally from New Jersey, she has spent thirty years studying, researching and teaching in Germany. She specializes in business communication, legal English, intercultural competence, negotiation skills, and recently has been teaching and researching virtual team communication. She has a PhD in American Studies from Paderborn University, Germany. She has continued certifying in online teaching, which she does on an adjunct basis for Pfeiffer University, Charlotte, North Carolina.
- Belem Barbosa received her PhD in Business and Management Studies (with a specialisation in Marketing and Strategy) from the University of Porto, Portugal. She is Adjunct Professor at the

University of Aveiro and the current programme director of the MSc in Marketing. She is a member of GOVCOPP, the Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policy. Her research interests lie primarily in the area of consumer behaviour, including word-of-mouth communication, internet marketing and sustainability marketing. She is also interested in internationalization of Higher Education Institutions, namely teacher and student mobility, internationalization at home, and soft skills development.

- Susan Luck is currently Professor of Business in the Graduate School at Pfeiffer University in North Carolina, specializing in organizational communication, electronic communications, negotiations, public relations, and diversity communication. She has a PhD from the University of South Carolina, and is an arbitrator for FINAR and a certified mediator for NC Superior Court. A former TV writer, she teaches both online and in the classroom, and is the author of *Zen and the Art of Business Communications*.
- Izzy Crawford is an Academic Strategic Lead within the School of Creative and Cultural Business at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland. She has an undergraduate degree in Social Science from the University of Glasgow and postgraduate qualifications in Management, Public Relations, Higher Education Learning and Teaching and Research Methods. She is an accredited member and Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Izzy is currently studying for a PhD with a focus on Collaborative Online International Learning.

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[See separate file for video - "**CRAWFORD 2022 COIL at RGU workshop (VIDEO - SLIDE 17).mp4**"]

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[No notes.]

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In virtual teams, the students had to:

- Research a named company operating in more than one country

- Identify corporate communication issues and solutions
- Prepare a team presentation
- Submit an individual reflective summary

In 2017, the student work focused on the potential difficulties that companies may experience on the foreign market - e.g. brand recognition, human resource policies or competitors. Theoretical tools to support SWOT, PESTLE, Stakeholder and Competitors analyses were provided by the tutors. In 2018, in response to student feedback, the brief was simplified to focus on the online presence of each company.

The output and learning from the activity were used to inform various aspects of the students' assessed coursework.

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Students formed local teams of approximately 2-3 members and created a team identity - with a logo and slogan, as well as a short video clip introducing themselves. Instructors randomly assigned their local teams to those of their international partners (two nationalities per team). Teams exchanged information about themselves and held their first icebreaking Skype meeting with their counterparts in other countries. They agreed to a collaborative platform such as Google Drive, SLACK, Facebook group etc. where they uploaded their information and shared files, divided up tasks amongst themselves and agreed to benchmarks along the project timeline. The teams focused on the assignment, exchanged information and created presentations; they also wrote debriefings on the results. Students presented the results and gave feedback on the collaboration.

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[No notes.]

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- Each university had different semester schedules and varying requirements for each course.
- Built-in project versus add-on activity.

- Students differed in age, family status, professional careers, ethnic backgrounds and English language ability.
- Courses involved various disciplines within undergraduate and graduate business programs, and were taught either online or seated.
- Evaluation of students.

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[No notes.]

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The project led the team to develop the following research question: do experiential international classroom projects using virtual team collaborations increase intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence in students?

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Online survey:

Students completed an online intercultural sensitivity survey, based on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale created by Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta for the University of Rhode Island (2000). This comprised 24 items, divided into five factors: Interaction Engagement; Respect of Cultural Differences; Interaction Confidence; Interaction Enjoyment; and Interaction Attentiveness. Students were asked to respond to each item on a five-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = uncertain; 2 = disagree; and 1 = strongly disagree).

Items from the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) scale were also utilized in the survey (Arasaratnam, 2009). Students were asked to respond along the same five-point scale to statements concerning the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of intercultural communication.

Examples of questions from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale:

- ISS_F1_33 [I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction]
- ISS_F1_35 [I am open-minded to people from different cultures]
- ISS_F1_39 [I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues]
- ISS_F1_41 [I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me]
- ISS_F1_42 [I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures]
- ISS_F1_43* [I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons]
- ISS_F1_44 [I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally distinct counterparts]
- ISS_F2_6* [I don't like to be with people from different cultures]
- ISS_F2_14* [I think my culture is better than other cultures]

Examples of questions from the ICC Scale:

- ICC_Cognitive_6 [I often notice similarities in personality between people who belong to completely different cultures.]
- ICC_Affective_2 [I feel that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach me.]
- ICC_Affective_4* [I feel more comfortable with people from my own culture than with people from other cultures.]
- ICC_Affective_7* [I usually feel closer to people who are from my own culture because I can relate to them better.]
- ICC_Affective_10 [I feel more comfortable with people who are open to people from other cultures than people who are not.]
- ICC_Behavioral_3* [Most of my friends are from my own culture.]

Qualitative Reflections:

Students were asked to respond to post-project qualitative questions to ascertain feelings towards the project and identify areas for improvement. They were asked about their personal feelings towards the project, what they found most difficult, their satisfaction with the project, and what they would do differently next time. They were asked to rate the activity, and to evaluate both themselves and their team members, both at home and abroad, concerning commitment and active participation. Their answers were compared between native team members and also between international counterparts, to see whether tendencies arose concerning positive or negative attitudes towards the project.

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In addition to national cultural differences among the respondents, there existed disparities in gender, ethnicity, generation, educational level, professional experience and family status, as well as areas of study and length of time at university. Key findings included:

- Increased awareness of verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication:
 - Students reported increased sensitivity towards subtle meanings conveyed by their counterparts during intercultural interaction.
 - Students displayed a greater understanding for the need to watch their counterpart's behaviour more closely to determine their meaning.
 - Students placed more importance on making affirmative responses during communicating.
- Increased appreciation of cultural differences:
 - Students reported a positive (if slight) increase in enjoyment towards differences between culturally-distinct counterparts and selves.
 - Students displayed an increase in respect for the way people from different cultures behave.
 - A tendency to avoid those situations where students will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons marginally increased.
 - Students reported slightly more antipathy towards interacting with people of another culture.

- Students stated that they felt more comfortable with people from their own culture and preferring friends from own cultures.
- Reduction of ethno-centristic tendencies and stereotypes:
 - Students registered less openness to diversity and foreign ways of thinking and behaving
 - Students displayed less value for opinions different from their own.
 - Students affirmed less difficulty differentiating between similarities in cultures such as Asians, Europeans, Africans, etc.
 - Students displayed a marginal increase in their feelings that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach them.
- Reduction of fears and increase in confidence in dealing with other cultures:
 - Students responded that they found it less difficult to talk in front of culturally different people.
 - They felt less discouraged or useless when engaging with people of different cultures.
- Increased awareness of difficulties in dealing with other cultures:
 - Students reported that they enjoyed the interaction with people from different cultures less and would avoid such interactions more.
 - Students signalled a decrease in respecting the values of those people after the project.
 - Students also noted a decrease in informing themselves more when interacting with other cultures.
 - Students reported an increase in frustration when dealing with people of other cultures.
 - Students responded that they were less open-minded to people of other cultures.

Ethical principles for doing scientific research were applied, including guaranteeing that the survey was anonymous, confidential, and voluntary. Quantitative data analysis was performed with IBM SPSS Statistics

24, comprising descriptive and bivariate analyses such as t-Tests and ANOVA. Content analysis of qualitative data was also performed.

In 2018, the majority of the 97 respondents to the surveys were female and their ages ranged from 19 to 55. Approximately 20% were over the age of 30. A third of the respondents described themselves as foreign students; in other words, they did not grow up in the country in which they were studying. The majority of students considered their English to be "good" to "very good"; one third were native speakers of English. The group from RGU was the most diverse and included distance learners.

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Positive aspects of the project:

- The students considered it a new experience and opportunity to work and exchange perceptions on the topic with people from another country and another culture.
- They appreciated the friendly and inviting atmosphere interacting with the foreign counterparts.
- Students valued working in a multicultural team in a real scenario, finding solutions and solving problems.
- They appreciated being "forced" to work with different people.
- The experiential learning aspect was considered as the most valuable part of the project, as well as meeting new people, discussing cultural differences, engaging with another culture and hearing other points of view.
- They recognized meaningful changes in their own approach to other cultures.

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The most difficult or negative aspects of the project were:

- Coordinating appointments to meet, due to different time zones and schedules.
- Language barriers.

- Co-ordinating tasks through social media.
- Technological issues (different levels of internet savviness).
- Differing expectations and deadlines, as well as difficulties agreeing on what to do.
- Varying degrees of engagement and reliability between teams.
- Working remotely instead of face-to-face.
- Lack of communication and/or organization in and between the teams.

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[No notes.]

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Positive developments in the areas of Interaction Attentiveness and Interaction Engagement went hand-in-hand with statistically marginal but nevertheless negative developments in Interaction Engagement and in Respect for Cultural Differences after interacting with people of other cultures. While many of the negative responses in the areas of Interaction Engagement and Respect for Cultural Differences would appear to defeat the goals of increasing intercultural competence, there are results which give support to the belief that intercultural collaborative projects such as this one can impact students positively and more effectively than classroom instruction.

When comparing the results before and after the project, students appear to have gained an understanding of cultural differences through their interactions and experienced a rise in sensitivity concerning their own communication styles as well as the differences in styles of their counterparts. The difficulties of the project itself - the pressure of wanting a good grade on the project for some, whereas others not receiving a grade at all; the disparities in motivation among team members as well as language skills etc. - could all have had an influence on the positive or negative perception of the culturally distinct counterparts and thus on the values reported in the surveys. Seemingly negative tendencies in some of the results after the collaborative project may indicate a rise in consciousness concerning the difficulties of real interaction with other cultures. What appears simple in theory to students before the project becomes more daunting when put to the test

in a real-life situation. Further reasons for negative trends proceeding the project may be found in the results concerning what students disliked most about the project (time zones, diverging deadlines and expectations) as well as what they would do differently (invest more time) and their suggestions for future collaborations.

The negative results run counter to the objectives of an intercultural collaborative project and need to be investigated further. However, if intercultural competence can be seen as involving an understanding that cultural differences do exist, that there are potential pitfalls involved in interacting across cultures, and that awareness of these factors can better facilitate successful collaboration (Deardorff, 2006), the findings from this project confirm that a virtual team collaboration, however short and small in scope, develops intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence in students.

While the project was time-consuming and sometimes difficult to embed into an already demanding curriculum, the instructors consider the project a valuable contribution in experiential learning and will continue to incorporate the project in their courses. This type of project offers significant potential for enhanced employability and graduate preparedness for a global workplace.

Slides 31 through 34

[No notes.]