

COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

Ann Gow

Professor University of Glasgow (Scotland)

Abstract

This paper examines the emerging Higher Education initiative of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and leads a discussion as to how we can develop an institutional approach to supporting a broad roll-out of COIL activity using the University of Glasgow as a case study.

Collaborative Online International Learning is an approach that brings students and teaching staff together across cultures to learn, discuss and collaborate as part of their class. Educators collaborate to design the experience and students collaborate to complete the activities designed. COIL becomes part of the course, enabling all students to have a significant intercultural experience within their course of study.

COIL connects staff with a contact in another country to develop collaborative projects that students complete together across time zones, language differences and geographical distance using online tools.

The four pillars of COIL are:

- **Collaborative:** staff are co-teaching the module on equal footing; students are put in a position of needing to cooperate effectively and efficiently to produce the required outputs of the activity.
- **Online:** the interaction between the students and staff in question takes place (mostly or exclusively) online.
- **International:** there is meaningful interaction between staff and students in two (or more) different countries, leading to the development of international and intercultural competences.
- **Learning:** COIL is a learning activity, and should be an integral part of the curriculum, not an optional and inconsequential 'extra'.

This paper addresses an international community of learners reflecting on how COIL supports virtual mobility, inter-cultural competences, digital and other skills development, research-teaching linkage (students and staff), inclusive learning experiences and decolonizing learning and understanding global challenges with global partners

Using as case study approach I will explore how a partnership model of design and delivery can work, reflecting on assessment design dimensions of COIL and establishing an implementation plan. The complexities of COIL will be discussed, focusing on the four pillars of COIL which are required to be in place for any activity to be considered as COIL, with a strong emphasis on International meaningful interaction. This paper addresses the key point that HEIs must ensure that students are able to gain benefit from the activity given climate sustainability and access to international experiences.

Keywords: *Collaborative, online, international, learning, global, mobility.*

1. Introduction

The advent of technology has led to new and innovative ways of delivering education. One such approach is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). COIL is an innovative teaching and learning method that brings students and educators from different cultures together to learn, discuss and collaborate as part of a class. The objective of this paper is to examine the COIL initiative and provide an institutional approach for its broad roll-out, using the University of Glasgow as a case study. The paper will focus on the four pillars of COIL, which are crucial to its success, and discuss the complexities of COIL implementation.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a teaching method and pedagogical approach that involves connecting students from different countries and cultural backgrounds through online learning. The goal of COIL is to create a global learning environment where students can work together on shared projects, engage in virtual exchanges, and learn from one another while building cross-cultural competency and intercultural understanding.

In a COIL course, students typically collaborate on a project that is developed and implemented through a series of online interactions and exchanges, such as video conferencing, discussion forums, and shared documents. COIL provides students with the opportunity to learn about diverse perspectives and cultures, practice digital and intercultural communication skills, and develop a global network of peers and mentors.

The COIL method is becoming increasingly popular as a way to internationalize the classroom and prepare students for the global workforce, where they will need to collaborate with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

2. The four pillars of COIL

The four pillars of COIL are collaborative, online, international, and learning. COIL requires staff and students to work together to complete the activities designed. The interaction between staff and students takes place mostly or exclusively online, and there is meaningful interaction between staff and students in two or more different countries. The goal is to develop international and intercultural competencies. COIL is also a learning activity that should be an integral part of the curriculum and not an optional extra.

The Four Pillars of COIL are the core principles that define and guide the collaborative online international learning approach. These pillars are:

- **Collaboration:** COIL is built around the idea of collaboration between students from different countries and cultural backgrounds. Collaboration is seen as the cornerstone of COIL, and students work together on projects, engage in virtual exchanges, and share ideas and perspectives.
- **Online learning:** COIL takes advantage of digital technologies to connect students across geographical distances. The use of online platforms and tools enables students to interact and collaborate with one another in real-time, regardless of where they are located.
- **Internationalization:** COIL seeks to internationalize the classroom by providing students with a global learning experience. Through their interactions with peers from other countries, students can learn about different cultures, perspectives, and ways of thinking.
- **Intercultural competency:** COIL is designed to develop students' intercultural competency, which is the ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences, effectively communicate across cultures, and work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds.

Together, these four pillars form the foundation of the COIL approach and provide a framework for designing and implementing collaborative online international learning programs and courses.

3. Case study: University of Glasgow

The University of Glasgow (UofG) serves as an ideal case study for the development of COIL. By exploring the partnership model of design and delivery, the paper will reflect on assessment design dimensions of COIL and how we established an implementation plan. The paper will also discuss the complexities of COIL and how HEIs must ensure that students can gain benefit from the activity.

One of the main barriers to implementing Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is the need for coordination and communication among different parties. This includes the costs associated with coordinating efforts between different institutions and ensuring that all parties involved have the necessary know-how and resources. Additionally, there is the challenge of obtaining course approval for COIL activities and incorporating them into existing curricula. Assessment and recognition of achievements also pose significant challenges, as does dealing with the practicalities of working across different time zones and timetables. Staff time and workload can also be a significant barrier to successful implementation of COIL initiatives. At UofG, we established a team of academics, professional services staff to explore these barriers.

The team at UofG recognized that there are several enablers that can help facilitate successful implementation of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). These enablers came from extensive research into COIL at UofG and beyond. One of the most significant enablers is the presence of existing collaborations between institutions, which can provide a foundation for future COIL activities. Additionally, the increasing comfort level with online tools and the use of technology for teaching and learning can help support the success of COIL initiatives, the pandemic increased blended learning and the adoption of collaborative online tools. A positive strategic context, including a clear focus on skills and employability, can also help create the necessary conditions for success. Staff and student interest is also a key enabler, as their engagement and participation are critical to the success of COIL. Finally, having a network of partners and internal capability can help support the ongoing development and sustainability of COIL initiatives. Together, these enablers can help institutions, such as UofG create a strong foundation for successful COIL activities

3.1. Initiatives at UofG

Some examples of initiatives at UofG are:

Nursing: embedding elements of COIL for students with Singapore Institute of Technology; Many examples within Education, especially around Children's Literacies and online courses for international and home students (ERASMUS Mundus); and English Language and Literature (culture and English language teaching) Partners are from across the globe, including South America, China and European HEIs.

There is a strong desire at UofG to embed Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) more systematically and to facilitate it more readily within academic and service areas. To support this goal, the UofG working group has delivered a model that has the aim of creating clear guidance and a toolkit for staff. This has helped to facilitate the integration of COIL into existing curricula and make it more accessible to a wider range of students. There is also a great deal of enthusiasm for doing more COIL projects, particularly those that relate to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This enthusiasm reflects a desire to engage with global issues and to provide students with opportunities to develop a greater understanding of the challenges facing the world today. By working together and developing clear guidance and tools, institutions can create a more systematic and sustainable approach to COIL, while also promoting a culture of global engagement and collaboration.

4. Assessment design dimensions

The design of COIL activities should take into consideration the assessment design dimensions of COIL. This includes how the students will be evaluated, what the assessment criteria will be, and how the assessment process will be managed. The assessment design dimensions of COIL should also consider the objectives of the activity and ensure that they are met.

The Assessment Design Dimensions of COIL refer to the various components that need to be considered when designing assessments for a collaborative online international learning (COIL) course. The assessment design dimensions of COIL typically include the following elements:

- **Assessment purposes:** The purpose of the assessment should be clearly defined, whether it is to evaluate student learning, provide formative feedback, or both.
- **Assessment types:** A variety of assessment types can be used in COIL, such as exams, essays, group projects, presentations, and digital portfolios. The choice of assessment type should align with the course learning objectives and the collaborative nature of the course.
- **Assessment criteria:** The assessment criteria should be clearly defined and communicated to students. This includes the standards by which student performance will be evaluated and the weighting of each assessment component.
- **Assessment methods:** Assessment methods should be designed to support collaboration, intercultural communication, and cross-cultural understanding. For example, peer evaluations, self-assessments, and cultural reflection essays can be used to assess students' intercultural competency.
- **Feedback:** Feedback is an important component of assessment in COIL. Feedback should be timely, constructive, and tailored to the individual needs of each student.
- **Grading:** The grading system should be transparent, consistent, and aligned with the assessment criteria. Grading should also take into account the collaborative nature of the course and the intercultural competency of each student.

The assessment design dimensions of COIL should be carefully considered in order to ensure that assessments accurately reflect student learning and support the development of intercultural competency.

5. Implementation

The implementation plan for COIL should take into account the four pillars of COIL. This includes ensuring that staff and students are equipped with the necessary technology, that there is a meaningful interaction between staff and students in different countries, and that COIL is an integral part of the curriculum. The implementation plan should also consider the assessment design dimensions of COIL and ensure that the objectives of the activity are met.

UofG Implementation Plan is currently being rolled out but the research and consultation that has taken place by the WG has developed clear guidance, aims and objectives. The Toolkit is developed and aids staff developing COIL processes. Yet to be decided is any incentivization for staff and students, this is a longer term goal.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Collaborative Online International Learning is an innovative teaching and learning method that has the potential to transform the way education is delivered. The four pillars of COIL are crucial to its success and must be in place for any activity to be considered as COIL. The University of Glasgow serves as a case study for the development of COIL, and the paper has provided an institutional approach for its broad roll-out. The implementation plan for COIL should take into consideration the four pillars of COIL, the assessment design dimensions of COIL, and the objectives of the activity. By doing so, HEIs can ensure that students can gain benefit from the COIL experience and develop their intercultural and international competencies.

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