



Examples and Outcomes of Embedding Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in the Curriculum

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Abstract

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) uses technology to connect students and staff in different countries and is a rapidly developing format of internationalisation at home. COIL offers students an international learning experience through virtual collaboration.

It is imperative that we expand opportunities like this for students to interact and collaborate globally. As global companies continue to employ a diverse workforce, intercultural online interactions are becoming part of the job market and its demands. Students in online environments are learning not only the content of the course(s) they are enrolled in, but also how to work as part of an international team. Collaborating across cultures, being open to other ways of knowing, being and doing, and being flexible and adaptable are all skills that students learn about and work to refine in COIL courses, and which are vital to thriving in our globalised society.

Keywords: Virtual collaboration, employability skills, intercultural sensitivity

AUAS began its first COIL project in 2014 with a partner university in Finland because both were looking for ways to set up an international collaboration but we could not ask the students to travel. After some promotion within the department, we got the green light to not only continue this project (which is now in its 3rd year), but to expand to other projects as well.

Next this format of internationalization of the curriculum, through virtual collaboration, was included in the policy plans and strategy of the Faculty of Business and Economics. This step ensured long term commitment from the management team. After that it was important to share this experience with colleagues, within the department, but also university-wide. Numerous presentations illustrating best practices followed. Since then, COIL projects have increased from 1 project in 2014 to 26 in 2017.

AUAS develops and sustains international partnerships needed for COIL courses by attending conferences, organizing international events for our partner network, and sharing COIL expertise with partners during staff mobility. Exchange in COIL experience and expertise enriches partnerships which, before, were merely based on student mobility.

After participating in a COIL course students are more open to the idea of study abroad. And partnerships formerly based only on mobility are intensified and strengthened by COIL projects.

COIL has provided an embedded way to internationalize the curriculum and enrich the student experience.

Preparing the students for transferable and employability skills, is one of the main tasks and COIL projects enables AUAS to better prepare students for their global careers. Another positive outcome has been that COIL enables us to offer lecturers an international experience without stretching the budget. Even small efforts, like mutual e-lectures or very short COIL projects, motivate lecturers to develop their skills and learn from peers abroad.

To support instructors developing COIL courses, a training program has been created that runs for 2 afternoons with some preparatory assignments: Introduction to intercultural sensitivity (working in a diverse team); Connecting with your partner and setting up a COIL module; Internationalizing learning outcomes and assessing a virtual collaboration; Coaching virtual teams; Tips & tricks for collaboration tool; Assessing & grading with an international partner.

What does a COIL project entail and what does it look like?

Virtual collaboration projects can have a multidisciplinary approach, where one of the participating groups studies business and the other student group studies, for example, design or communication.

In the AUAS Faculty of Business most COIL projects consist of groups with semi similar learning outcomes, like business or communication and, most often, intercultural competence. The virtual exchange spans a period of a week to a semester. In a short, intensive project, the learning outcomes focus more on cultural exchange and experiencing virtual teamwork. In the projects of longer duration,

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learning outcomes also include content driven learning outcomes, such as analysing new markets and writing an export plan.

Most COIL projects consist of various phases:

- Socialising (getting to know the other)
- Project management and process planning (organising the team work at a distance)
- Research & analysis
- Presenting the research results
- Evaluation & reflection

The first phase may seem trivial and merely “fun”, but is of utmost importance to create an in-group feeling. During this phase trust is built and cultural differences are explored. If this phase is skipped, students are likely to encounter more miscommunication and project management issues throughout the project. This is the time when the person behind the email address is discovered. For that reason, it is encouraged that lecturers facilitate some ice breaker activities and motivate students to use video conferencing as a tool for collaboration.

The second phase should also be given the necessary attention. Cultural factors such as time orientation, leadership, communication styles, task orientation, ambition level and group focus play an important role. It is up to the lecturers to explain how cultures can differ in their approaches and to help students navigate these differences. To give an example: making a timeline for the project management, encourages the discussion about deadlines and visualises special holidays and other time limitations.

The research and presentation phases show similarities with regular, face-to-face, projects. One thing worth mentioning, is the importance of building in milestones in the assignment deliverables. Virtual teams are already challenged by the need to work remotely. Having shorter deadlines and reflection moments, helps them to keep momentum and stay on track. Just as a face-to-face team would have regular meetings, in the same manner virtual teams should be encouraged to have regular meetings to discuss the process and progress, preferably by video conferencing. Using virtual collaboration tools, to share documents, communicate and collaborate, are even more important than in regular teamwork.

Finally, the evaluation and reflection phase gives students and lecturers the opportunity to assess the learning outcomes and give meaning to the experience. Without reflection, and specifically reflection about the intercultural collaboration, there is little point to do a cross cultural project in the first place. Eventhough, as lecturers, we want our students to succeed and have a pleasant experience, it is in the difficult or challenging moments, that most of the learning occurs. Helping students to make the transfer to a lesson learned for a future experience, enables them to enhance their employability skills.

In 2016 84 students participated in a survey about virtual collaboration and employability skills.

When asked what skills improved most by participating in a virtual project, cross cultural skills and communication ranked 1, followed by critical thinking and problem solving and collaborating across cultures in a shared second place.

On the skills that most impacted the success of the virtual teamwork, 76% said communication, 67% cultural awareness and both establishing team norms and team problem solving and conflict management scored 59%.

The skill most developed by working in a virtual team was cultural awareness and sensitivity with 68%.

As the biggest challenge the following aspects are mentioned most frequently:

- Time orientation and time differences
- Cultural differences
- Communication and languages
- Managing the group process (creating a common understanding of the tasks)

Amsterdam UAS, Business School programme, is embedding internationalisation through virtual collaboration in its second year of the Bachelor programme. In April-June of 2017 a total of 510 students will participate simultaneously in an international learning experience. This requires an enormous effort from the lecturers who will coach the groups, the organisation to facilitate the process and the partner network with whom we collaborate.

Our example is being observed by universities both nationally as well as internationally. The scale of operations in Amsterdam, due to its size and student numbers, makes this endeavor a risky



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undertaking. Ownership and empowerment of lecturers, coordination of the partner network and quality control are being monitored closely.

The lessons learned in spring 2017 will enable AUAS to continue to embed and reinforce internationalisation of the curriculum at home, thereby giving 100% of students the necessary international or intercultural learning experience, as opposed to the 10% or less students that can study abroad. In a city as multicultural and international as Amsterdam, we believe this is essential to prepare them for the rapidly changing and globalising labor market.