

*Benefits of Collaborative Online International Learning
Projects*

Deniz Gokcora

Higher education institutions include a variety of faculty development initiatives to stimulate faculty interest and foster greater student engagement. As a faculty member, if you are interested in international exchange by collaborating with a faculty member in another country, keep in mind that there are several benefits of using collaborative online international learning (COIL) or virtual exchange in college courses.

Collaborative Online International Learning can be used as a method to encourage collaboration between students on two campuses to enhance their academic skills. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most instructors had to carry on their curriculum through distance learning. Study Abroad programs have been suspended, so this situation enforces college professors to include COIL as an energizer to stimulate critical discussion in their academic courses. COIL presents a rich learning experience for students particularly during the pandemic and distance learning, but one that could be continued even when face-to-face instruction resumes. Many universities can adopt this model.

How does it work?

Basically, in online international collaboration, two classrooms connect in different parts of the world. This happens when two professors at different corners of the world, teaching the same subject areas or in different disciplines, can use an already established curriculum or assignments or projects (Guth, 2013). They can also use an existing syllabus. COIL projects could last four to eight weeks, including a) an icebreaker (meeting -introductions) b) collaborative task c) reflection (“Global Learning”) Therefore, COIL creates an empowering effort

to involve all learners in the classroom, and there are several ways to organize projects. There are many benefits both for students and faculty members although some constraints have been mentioned regarding technology and configuration (Chun, 2015). State University of New York (SUNY) has a well-known COIL center that provides partner matching and workshops (“SUNY-COIL. *Connect. Engage. Collaborate*”). Although a personal network of professors in colleges will be helpful to find a partner, the SUNY COIL center maintains a global partner network.

Benefits of COIL in writing

1. **COIL courses provide pluralistic points of view and academic freedom** - Building a community of learners and a community of practice, if established in proper collaboration, is a successful way to create space for students who will learn from each other. Students bring different points of view and talk with each other to share knowledge, and this enriches the curriculum. In a COIL course, professors collaborate to bring topics to the course that would have been difficult to integrate without collaboration. For example, in an oral COIL project involving global social justice issues, students can be asked to explain social justice issues from their context and teach each other the cultural significance of the topic and offer solutions. In this way, everyone will be aware of a variety of social issues. Students are engaged with each other and develop a growth mindset that will help them to learn in a pluralistic setting. (Dweck, 2016).
2. **Peer to Peer learning motivates students to get engaged in projects:** – Students become information providers to each other. In a collaborative learning environment, knowledge is shared or transmitted among learners as they work towards common learning goals, for example, a shared understanding of the subject at hand or a solution to a problem. Learners are not passive agents but take on an active role in their process of knowledge acquisition as they participate in discussions, search for information, and exchange opinions with their peers. Knowledge is co-created and shared among peers, not owned by one particular learner after obtaining it from the course materials or instructor. Besides, students peer-review each other’s essays or projects.
3. **Professors are less concerned about the violation of academic integrity** – As students work together to generate ideas and give feedback on each other’s assignments, genuine knowledge is generated without consulting any written sources. Students get information from their partners in increments through interviews. Therefore, students

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Corresponding Author: Deniz Gokcora, sgokcora@bmcc.cuny.edu

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can maintain academic integrity. The project-based nature of COIL eliminates the direct lifting of information from external sources. The information is created by the interaction of peers in the group. The primary source of information is created by partners working together. For example, Utilizing CUNY Academic Commons-in- a- Box, (CBOX-OpenLab) platform, and live Zoom conferencing, students were asked to read R. Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire" and to write an expository essay based on interviews of their assigned COIL partners in which they support or criticize the main ideas in the essay. Then, they needed to peer review each other's essays to provide some reflection and constructive feedback (Gokcora & Everson, 2020). Peer-reviewing each other's projects provide an opportunity to co-construct knowledge and enables students to establish autonomy.

4. **Students Establish critical thinking and global awareness** - For those students who might not have an opportunity to speak with native speakers or do not have the financial ability to participate in study abroad programs, COIL is an excellent opportunity. Writing faculty members would like to bring new ideas and better learning opportunities to improve students' critical thinking (Simpson, 2010), global awareness, and writing skills. For example, when American students interview their non-native English speakers in France or Morocco, they gain global awareness or learn another perspective.

In another COIL project, students can discuss social justice issues in live Zoom discussion groups and then investigate one in their home culture by making a rhetorical analysis of an authentic digital image. Next, they can record an oral presentation using a screencasting tool and published it on the COIL website. Then, students post responses to these social justice videos. Consequently, they understand that one social problem at one location can be a global issue.

5. **Students can get engaged in interdisciplinary learning.** - Sometimes two unrelated courses can be matched, and partner professors develop goals and student outcomes covering these courses. Complementary courses, such as history and anthropology, gastronomy and statistics or developmental writing skills, and freshman composition classes can be teamed up to exchange ideas on an assigned essay. The interdisciplinary exchange fosters career advancement both for faculty and students. Students establish better networks and career skills, and faculty members find opportunities for scholarly collaboration.

6. **Students gain digital literacy by engaging in online tasks.** - COIL projects can be established in fully online, hybrid, or face-to-face classes and still get experienced in

using online tools to complete their tasks. Each professor might use a different learning management system (LMS). For example, one college might use Blackboard, and the partner institution could use Moodle as the MLS for the overarching course. For the joint COIL projects, independently used LMS can be used; some examples are CUNY Academic Commons, or SLACK, Padlet, or a social media platform, such as Facebook. As students learn to use these platforms, they develop cross-cultural communication skills, refining research, and academic writing skills, peer reviewing and revising skills, as well as critical technical literacy skills. COIL users create an online persona and learn to react to each other's comments.

These six points align well with common learning objectives of higher education courses across a range of disciplines. However, just because there are attractive technology tools, professors do not need to use all of them. COIL motivates students to participate in projects, and partner professors should put students in groups strategically since matching also involves an emotional and psychological exchange. Professors should keep in mind to reward behavior connected to intrinsic motivation, as always.

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