

“Strategic Management in Turbulent Times” – A Virtual Student Conference as a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Project

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Abstract: The concept of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) portrays an educational approach as a means for higher education institutions to deliver curricular internationalization experience at home. In particular, this approach offers students from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds the opportunity to jointly engage, learn and work in a virtual environment. In our contribution we elaborate how a COIL project with an international student conference on »Strategic Management in Turbulent Times« can integrate internationalization into a course and how it can serve to address and acquire central 21st century skills. We will introduce our concept, critically reflect the lessons we have learned and suggest possible improvements for future COIL projects.

1 Introduction

The concept of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) portrays an educational approach as a means for academics and higher education institutions to deliver curricular internationalization experience at home [10]. In particular, this approach offers students from diverse geographical and cultural background the opportunity to come together and jointly engage, learn and work in a virtual environment [5]. Following the definition of de Wit (2013, para. 9, [4]), COIL »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.« In times of isolation, travel restrictions and uncertainty, COILs could be seen as a critical vehicle for academics and universities to create innovative educational content that allow students between different countries to engage in collaborative interactions in pursuit of development of intercultural and digital competencies.

This article wants to elaborate how a COIL project can integrate internationalization into a course and how it can serve to address and acquire central 21st century skills.

Our considerations are based – in addition to the cited research sources – on the experiences obtained from a COIL project between Coventry University (CU) in United Kingdom and Hochschule Ruhr West (HRW), University of Applied Sciences, in Muelheim, Germany, that took place during the winter semester 20/21. The project is described in greater detail in the paper “Internationalization in a COVID-world: A Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)” [9] which also presents the evaluation of the project.

2 A virtual Conference on “Strategic Management in Turbulent Times”

2.1 Idea of the COIL project

This COIL project was jointly designed and executed by Prof. Dr. Isabel Lausberg from HRW and Sathees Kunjuthamby, Lecturer at CU, an institution which is highly experienced in conducting COIL projects [14]. The first contact and expression of interest in April 2020 was followed by a number of online meetings with exchange and discussion of ideas for a COIL project. This was supported by Kristina Kähler’s counselling, a staff member from the HRW didactics team, who helped to transform ideas into a more structured format leading to a COIL proposal document centred around the idea of a virtual student conference as the scope of the project.

With the conference as a specified and public end product we integrated a project-based learning (PBL) approach [7] into our COIL project. The student-centered approach aims at students working collaboratively in a defined period of time (usually weeks or months) and driving their own learning process through inquiry and the use of various strategies to achieve a common goal [1]. (For a review of the PBL literature see [6]).

The students contributed to the virtual conference in working on two tasks: a self-chosen subject-related task and an organizational task. The first task required each group to conduct a strategic analysis of a company of their choice, to develop a strategy proposal in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis and to examine its implications. The second task of our COIL required all groups to take on an additional responsibility which was related to an organisational department leading to the development of the virtual conference (e.g. marketing, IT support, moderation of the conference or a session).

2.2 Objectives of the COIL Project

The objective of our COIL was to address 21st century skills which the changing labour market will perhaps demand more quickly than originally expected – accelerated by the digitalization of almost all work areas by Covid-19. Our COIL as a format is coherent with the COIL literature and previous projects, noting that with the addition of the project-based learning (PBL) approach of putting together

a virtual academic conference, we were responding to the ‘new normal’ where remote participation and virtual conferences were picking up momentum. In line with the demand of the OECD for fostering 21st Century Skills in higher education [2], we pursued the following objectives for the COIL project (in accordance to [13]): Improving digital skills, improving communication and collaboration skills, improving problem solving skills and improving perseverance and motivational skills. In addition, the project focused at improving the ability to apply strategic management methods to a »real world« business case, to think analytically as well as to support, appraise and identify solutions to key strategic management issues in the context of a worldwide pandemic.

2.3 Course of the COIL project

Initially, it had to be determined which students were to be the target group, how the module could be integrated into the curricula and how the different semester times of the two universities could be brought into line. 41 students were recruited in total, consisting of 25 HRW and 16 CU students.

The COIL project started in mid-November 2020 and provided a mix of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Students engaged in further interactions through group online meetings at their own pace and interest. To drive virtual exchange and communication as well as an international learning experience, we used a variety of different software and technology applications for which students from Germany and UK had ready access to and were free to use [12]. With the digital communication and collaborative working tools HRW and CU students were able to be present in real time and thus engage with their peers, share and benefit from different perspectives within their group and outside their group, establish and build common goals and produce outputs jointly [11].

Prior to the first virtual session, a »welcome pack« was issued to all students consisting of a detailed communication of how we were moving forward, a »COIL card«, a »COIL welcome video« and a »COIL compass«. All participating students were requested to complete two introductory tasks prior to the first virtual synchronous interaction. These activities were taken up again in the first joint virtual session and served as an icebreaker for a dialogue within the groups.

To assure diversity in the teams (following the argumentation of [3];[5];[14] both in terms of nationality and gender, students were pre-allocated and as a result teams consisted of two CU students and three to four HRW students respectively leading to a total of eight gender and nationality-mixed groups.

As mentioned above, the students were given two different tasks:

For the first task, students were asked to choose a company and a method to conduct a strategic analysis. To support all groups with their group project, we created a project proposal document, prompting groups to collaboratively draft their ideas, share and discuss their perspectives on how to address the group

project task. All group proposals had to go through an approval process before they could start working on their final confirmed group project. Later on, a peer-review was introduced to assure the quality and scientific standards of the final conference contributions.

For the second task we requested each group to apply for an organisational department (not pre-defined) and deliver a five-minute pitch on why we should give them the responsibility. As a result, eight organisational groups were created covering essential and yet challenging responsibilities: overall planning, detailed planning (conference day), moderation, IT, internal and external marketing, case film and legal. These organisational departments were suggested by the groups and approved by us in view of its currency, feasibility and importance.

The final interaction was the virtual conference held by the students. The president of the HRW, Prof. Dr. Susanne Staude, opened the conference and all teams presented their work to the COIL course and to the public via a livestream over HRW's official Youtube channel as an online presentation (pre-recorded). The best contribution was honoured with a »Best Paper Award«.

Conclusions

Embedding COIL in the curriculum offers opportunities to benefit from knowledge pluralization between each other and from international experience without the need to leave the country. Thus COIL can be seen as an instrument that makes it possible to create meaningful student experiences and nurture a »globalised working life« [8.]

The pandemic has brought about an almost revolutionary acceleration in the spread of digital tools for communication and collaboration. This has been beneficial to our - and other - COIL projects, and in particular has made the project much easier to implement. Especially in times of Covid-19, COIL thus offers a straightforward way to bring internationalization experiences into teaching and learning. On the negative side, the pandemic has thwarted mutual visits (which can and should be part of COIL projects) and getting to know each other more deeply on a personal level. When travel restrictions are lifted again, COIL projects can be further enriched by getting to know the collaborating country and the university site more closely, as well as by deeper personal contacts.

We knew from the start of our COIL that we are pushing the envelope but we were confident that our students would contribute with meaningful solutions to realise the virtual student conference if we could create a suitable learning environment. With that we provided students a space to work creatively and collaboratively irrespective of different time, geographical and linguistic backgrounds.

Our experience with this COIL has given us confidence to design future COILs, and it has made us understand that with a greater awareness of pitfalls in teamwork, collaboration and communication, we can further increase the value for

our students. As part of an approved DAAD grant »HRW goes COIL« the project will be continued in the next semesters.

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