

REFLECTING ON TRAINING TO FACILITATE COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective practice was to explore an unexpected revelation that Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) courses are an engaging and equitable way to enhance my students' intercultural communication skills. This discovery happened after participating in a COIL training designed to mimic a virtual global exchange course. In this training, I learned to work collaboratively with an international teaching partner to design a course that would include a problem-based learning project with students from the United States and Brazil. Through the reflective process, my views about online learning were transformed, and I discovered that virtual learning could be collaborative and engaging. I also realized that COIL is a cost-effective alternative to study abroad programs where students can learn about various cultures. This reflective manuscript details my experience as I participated in training to facilitate COIL courses. A subsequent manuscript will elaborate on the reflective practice of my experience teaching a COIL class.

Keywords: *reflection, collaborative online international learning, intercultural communication skills*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past half-century, many higher education institutions have worked to increase students' global awareness and intercultural competencies (Rubin, 2017). Students can better understand and communicate with people across cultures by developing these skills. The goal is to prepare students to contribute to an interdependent and intercultural world (Sol, 2017).

In order to improve students' global awareness and cultural fluency, colleges and universities promote intercultural communication courses and study abroad programs (Leavitt et al., 2017). Intercultural or cross-cultural communication courses positively impact students' way of thinking and their ability to break intercultural barriers, which are important components of cultural fluency (AlTaher, 2019; Klyukanov, 2020). Although

these courses offer valuable information about various cultures and subcultures, students often read out of textbooks and do not apply these concepts in real-life situations. Similarly, study abroad programs offer students an impactful activity, particularly concerning their "ability to foster intercultural competence" (Costello, 2015, p. 57). However, these immersion activities are expensive and not readily available to all students, especially non-traditional students.

Therefore, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) classes were designed as an accessible alternative to teach students intercultural communication skills and improve their cultural fluency (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020). COIL is a virtual exchange study abroad program that utilizes technology to bridge the gap between geographical classroom locations where students can

collaborate on a project (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020). In these programs, two or more teachers connect and plan a course or unit combining curricula from each discipline. Although the experience is virtual, COIL classes are an effective way to promote cultural competence for students (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this reflective practice was to explore an unexpected revelation that COIL courses are an engaging and equitable way to enhance my students' intercultural communication skills and cultural fluency. This realization occurred after participating in a COIL training where educators worldwide learned contemporary, evidence-based practices to implement global virtual exchange classes. During this training, I was paired with an international teaching partner, working to create our specific COIL course. Reflective thinking and writing helped me process this training experience and the revelation that these courses are an accessible and engaging option to teach intercultural communication skills.

REFLECTIVE THEORY

Reflection is an “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads” (Dewey, 1933/1989, p.118). Dewey, widely known as the founder of reflection, posited that education cannot be understood apart from one's experience and that reflective thinking is one way for individuals to make sense of that experience (Schmidt & Allsup, 2019). As individuals—specifically educators—utilize reflective thinking and writing, they also gain personal knowledge and experience growth (Dewey, 1933/1989). Furthermore, reflective thinking helps individuals identify something surprising or unknown they encountered in their practice (Greenberger, 2020), and reflective writing helps them share what they learned with others (Greenberger et al., 2022).

To reflect on my experience in COIL training, I utilized Dewey's (1933/1989) model of reflective thinking. This five-step process helps individuals make sense of events that cause uncertainty in their practice (Greenberger, 2020). Using this model, I identified something unknown, defined the uncertainty, analyzed what was unknown or surprising,

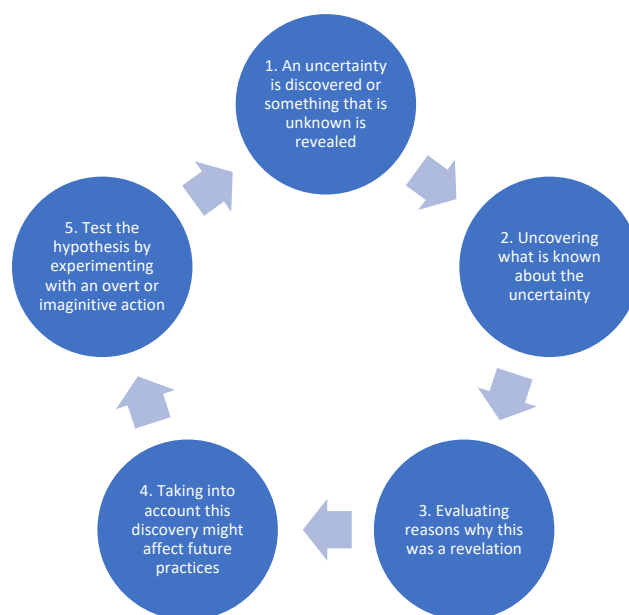
came up with possible reasons for the ambiguity, and performed an informal experiment (Dewey, 1933/1989). The intended outcome of this reflection was to share what I learned during my COIL training about an engaging pedagogical approach that could equitably enhance my students' cultural fluency (see Figure 1).

PROBLEM

Practitioners often begin reflection by acknowledging a problem in their practice; however, Greenberger (2020) stated that individuals could also reflect on something unexpected or unknown. My reflective process started with a surprising realization (Dewey, 1938/1986; Greenberger, 2020). Over the last decade of teaching in higher education, I have often had enlightening moments, particularly during professional development opportunities, where I was presented with new pedagogical approaches (Anderson, 2022). My most recent revelation occurred after participating in a COIL training, where I discovered that virtual exchange classes are an engaging and equitable way to teach students intercultural communication skills.

First, I was surprised to discover that COIL was an engaging instructional method. My educational background in teaching and learning taught me the importance of active and engaging lessons, especially for adult learners (Anderson, 2021).

Figure 1. Dewey's (1933/1989) Steps for Individual Reflection



According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2022), these high-impact activities offer significant educational benefits for students, especially those historically underserved by higher education. Furthermore, these classroom projects improve students' interactions with their peers and sense of belonging in the classroom (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Initially, I doubted that I could feel engaged in an online course. However, once I was involved in the training, which mirrored a COIL class, I realized that I was thoroughly interested in the material and learning process.

Second, during the COIL training, I also learned that these virtual exchange programs are an equitable option for teaching students about intercultural communication and giving them an opportunity to interact with international students. Historically, colleges and universities have promoted study abroad programs as the most effective method for students to learn cultural competencies (Kommers & Bista, 2021). However, this is not always an option for non-traditional students or those who experience financial hardships (Kommers & Bista, 2021). Since COIL is embedded into existing classes and the technology is provided, students have no additional cost.

WORKING IDEAS

After discovering that COIL courses are an equitable and engaging way to teach intercultural communication skills, I needed to explore what might have caused this feeling of surprise in my teaching practice (Greenberger, 2020). This step involves using my intuition and experience to determine the potential causes of this revelation (Greenberger, 2020). Then, I needed to analyze these working ideas to see if there were similarities between these proposed ideas (Greenberger, 2020).

Lack of Exposure to Collaborative Online International Coursework

As a student, my exposure to engaging coursework was limited to my face-to-face classes. Activities such as collaborative group work, community service projects, and role-play games helped me build rapport with my classmates and made learning more enjoyable. However, my online classes were asynchronous, and I was not given the opportunity to work collaboratively with my classmates. Further-

more, these face-to-face and online classes did not incorporate interactions with international students.

Lack of Training to Teach COIL Courses

Not only did I lack exposure to COIL as a student, but I also had no training to teach a COIL course. I was uncertain of the technology needed to facilitate this type of class or how these online platforms made learning more accessible to students. I also lacked access to international teaching partners to pair with me for an endeavor of this magnitude.

Differentiating the Working Ideas

After determining that my lack of exposure to this class activity and lack of skills to teach a COIL course contributed to my feeling of surprise, I analyzed these working ideas. Then, I evaluated their similarities and differences (Greenberger, 2020). I discovered that both working ideas centered on my lack of knowledge. The difference between these working ideas was my role. As a student, I had no control over the learning environment and could not determine what activities were offered in class. However, once I became a teacher, I had the power to design accessible courses and the academic freedom to offer engaging assignments like collaborative online activities with international students.

REFLECTIVE-NARRATIVE

After discovering that COIL courses are an equitable option for teaching intercultural communication skills, I used reflective writing to process my experience leading up to this revelation. This activity, also known as an event (Greenberger, 2020), is vital to reflective practice. By describing this event in a reflective-narrative format, I can share details about the event, context, and personal thoughts throughout (Greenberger et al., 2022).

Temporality (Prologue)

The backstory began when I enrolled in doctoral courses to enhance my knowledge of teaching and learning for adult learners. These courses covered various models and theories relating to the engagement of adult students and andragogical teaching practices. As a result, I left my program knowing the importance of active and engaging teaching practices for effective higher education instruction.

Although I typically included some collaborative work in my classes, such as service-learning

projects, I wanted to learn to facilitate more engaging activities to improve students' intercultural communication skills. Last fall, I received an invitation to apply to take a COIL training, and I quickly submitted my application. I was one of 20 faculty accepted and was thrilled to have an opportunity to learn about a new teaching practice that could improve my students' cultural fluency (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Kirby & Thomas, 2022).

Sociality (Participants or Characters in the Reflective-Narrative)

The COIL training group included a facilitator who had experience teaching global virtual exchange classes, a person who organized the meetings, and 20 teachers from various parts of the world. We were also joined in several of our sessions by other faculty members who had previously worked with international counterparts in COIL classes. We also met with the author of a book we read as part of our training.

Situation (Setting)

The COIL training sessions took place on Zoom to accommodate educators from various geographic locations and time zones. Our meetings included large group lessons, and we were often placed in breakout rooms so small groups could complete various activities. These small groups contained faculty from the United States and faculty from other global locations and were designed to mimic a small group in a traditional COIL class.

Plot

The first training began with a brief overview of the COIL training, including a discussion on the benefits of these course offerings. Then, we watched videos highlighting the work that could be done with these international collaborative student groups. Next, we worked on several activities in small groups. For example, we created videos where each participant gave a short speech about an important cultural artifact, such as a family heirloom or piece of traditional clothing. Since our COIL training was designed to mimic a COIL class, faculty could better understand some challenges our students might face while working in an online forum with international peers.

After our first training session, I connected with my co-teaching partner from Brazil. We discussed our goals to combine our disciplines in order to create an engaging learning opportunity for our stu-

dents. My international counterpart and I addressed obstacles we might encounter in our COIL course, such as language barriers, technology issues, and different time zones. We also worked on a collaborative video highlighting the strengths we each brought to teaching in a COIL course, another recommended activity for COIL students.

Our next large-group training session included a lesson on problem-based learning (PBL). The goal was that each COIL class could undertake a problem, and our students could work collaboratively to solve that problem. Trainees were given examples of projects done in the past, and we had time to meet with our teaching partners to discuss possible PBL activities that our students could work on collaboratively. After considering various problems that our COIL student groups could address, we decided that a lack of cultural fluency was detrimental to individuals in the United States and Brazil. We thought it would benefit our students to research another culture and share what they learned with their classmates and communities.

Subsequent training sessions included content on culturally relevant pedagogy and course design. We also learned how to work effectively with our international teaching partners and overcome challenges we might encounter while working together. Furthermore, our sessions included discussions about various technology options that could aid us as we designed our COIL courses. We were given tasks and time to work with our international teaching counterparts in each meeting.

Takeaways

Since this training was designed like a COIL course, trainees could see the real benefits of these virtual exchange classes. With each meeting, we built rapport with our international peers resulting in a feeling of community. Faculty utilized new technology to solve problems collaboratively. However, my most significant revelation was that this was an equitable and engaging way to improve intercultural communication skills, as we were given the opportunity to interact with individuals from different cultures and subcultures in an accessible modality.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

Reflective practice begins by identifying something surprising or otherwise unknown, defining that uncertainty, and analyzing why it might have

occurred (Dewey, 1933/1989). I discovered that COIL courses are an equitable and engaging way to teach intercultural communication skills. I realized there were two reasons, or working ideas, why this surprised me. First, I lacked exposure to online collaborative coursework in my educational background. Second, I lacked the training to facilitate a COIL course. The next step in this reflection process was to evaluate these two working ideas using theories and literature to analyze their strengths and weaknesses (Greenberger, 2020).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Working Ideas

One reason why I lacked exposure to collaborative online international coursework was that my undergraduate classes were conducted using a face-to-face modality. All group projects with my classmates were done in person. Therefore, I did not work cooperatively with international students. This working idea has merit as online classes were not prevalent when I enrolled in undergraduate school, and the literature supports this idea (Harasim, 2000; Li, 2022).

Before the invention of the World Wide Web in 1982, teachers did not know how the landscape of education would change (Harasim, 2000). There was a paradigm shift in attitudes toward online education at the beginning of the 21st century (Harasim, 2000). At first, the changes were subtle, but the impact of online education was profound as it opened up the possibilities for students and educators to interact across the globe. As a result of this new teaching modality, pedagogical approaches began to emerge (Harasim, 2000; Li, 2022).

As technology continued to evolve, there were more educational offerings using an online modality, and this push to offer online class options gave students more flexibility in their education. However, early on, many higher educational institutions hesitated to commit to these technological advancements as they limited student and teacher interactions, reduced student engagement, and required that teachers learn new classroom management systems (Dumford & Miller, 2018). Nevertheless, online teaching became necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed academic institutions to focus on facilitating an unexpected transition to online education and assessment (Jack & Smyth, 2020; Li, 2022). As a result of this push toward online education, instructional designers

and educators began looking for ways to engage students in these online classrooms (Murphy et al., 2022). Now, teachers can engage students with breakout groups, online polls, interactive whiteboards, and other digital activities to inspire participation and engagement while offering various ways of interacting with the class material (Murphy et al., 2022). Now, global-virtual exchange is a reality, and teachers can connect across the globe to offer interactive and engaging lessons that enhance students' intercultural communication skills and cultural fluency.

Along with a lack of exposure to online COIL coursework in school, I also lacked the training to facilitate COIL courses. Although I have worked in higher education for over a decade, I had not heard of COIL classes or global virtual exchange. Furthermore, the institutions where I worked had never offered professional development opportunities for this pedagogical approach. This working idea has merit because online teacher training was less prevalent before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the literature supports this idea (Bao, 2020; Coman et al., 2020; Yusuf & Al-Banawi, 2013).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual learning was often viewed as a less effective alternative to face-to-face instruction (Coman et al., 2020). As a result of this perspective, fewer professional development offerings supported online instruction, and many higher education faculty members noted a lack of online teaching experience (Bao, 2020). Subsequently, virtual classrooms posed challenges for students as they decreased their motivation, limited teacher availability to answer questions, and created feelings of isolation for students (Yusuf & Al-Banawi, 2013).

In March 2020, classes were predominantly moved online, and many institutions had to expand their professional development opportunities to include more online instructional strategies. The community college and universities where I work began offering more training to enhance educators' virtual teaching skills. Then, in November 2021, I received an email invitation to apply for training on global virtual exchange. Since I was looking for engaging activities to incorporate into my classes, I was intrigued to learn more about this innovative teaching technique.

Informal Experiment

One way to test my theory that COIL classes would be an engaging and equitable way to teach intercultural communication skills was to conduct informal research. After reflection, I realized that my COIL training fit the requirements for this type of experiment. When I took part in the COIL training, I got a chance to experience a glimpse of what my students would encounter in their COIL classes. I was engaged with the course material and invested in the project's outcome. I also had free access to communicate with my international colleagues, which proved that these classes are also an equitable option for students who cannot afford a traditional study abroad experience.

After this informal experiment, I feel confident that my students will also benefit from participating in a virtual exchange course. These classes allow students to work collaboratively with international peers, regardless of their economic status. Furthermore, students in these small collaborative groups can build meaningful relationships, solve problems, and enhance cultural fluency in an engaging way (American Council on Education, 2016).

DECISION

According to Dewey's (1933/1989) five-step reflective practice model, practitioners should first identify a problem or something that surprised them in their practice. Then, they should analyze why they were surprised or felt uncertain. Finally, decide the most plausible explanation for what was previously unknown (Dewey, 1933/1989).

This process started when I discovered something surprising during professional development training. While learning to facilitate a COIL course, I realized that these virtual global exchange opportunities were an engaging way to enhance students' intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, I learned that COIL is an equitable alternative to study abroad programs as they are more accessible for non-traditional students and those with financial hardships.

The next step in the reflective process was determining why this was surprising. I realized two main reasons this was new knowledge to me. First, I was not exposed to COIL coursework in my educational background. Second, I had no training in teaching COIL courses.

Finally, I needed to decide which working idea was the most plausible explanation for this rev-

elation. Both working ideas had merit and were supported by the literature. Additionally, each of these working ideas reflected a lack of knowledge. However, due to my current role as a teacher, my lack of skills to teach a COIL class was the most reasonable explanation for my feeling of surprise.

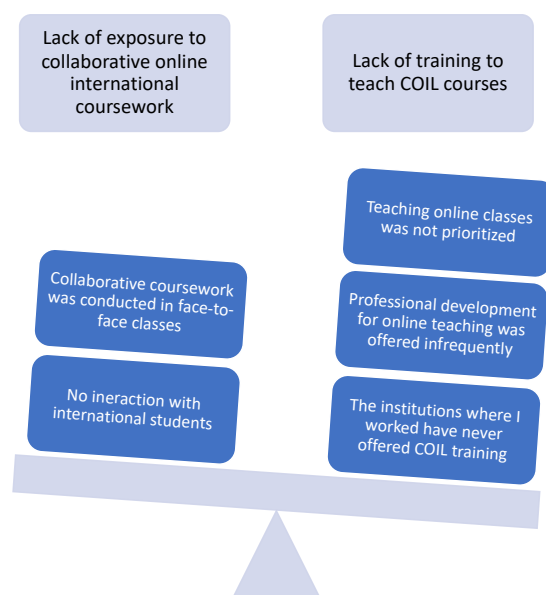
Solution

There is a recent push in higher education to improve students' intercultural communication skills and cultural fluency to prepare them to contribute to a culturally diverse world (Rubin, 2017; Sol, 2017). As an educator, I am responsible for facilitating learning experiences that engage students and teach them these valuable skills. Furthermore, it is vital to be equity-minded as I design my class projects and assignments. COIL classes are engaging and equitable options for teachers who want to improve students' intercultural communication skills.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Reflective thinking includes analyzing and making conclusions about an event to alter one's pre-conceived ideas and beliefs. By using these critical thinking skills, individuals can impact their decision-making about current or future events and share this new knowledge with others who might encounter similar situations (Greenberger, 2020). Reflective thinking also helps bridge the gap between what individuals know and what they need to know to improve their practice.

Figure 2. Decision Tree



This reflective process transformed my beliefs about online learning. Before this COIL training, I viewed online learning as less effective than face-to-face learning. Due to a lack of training and exposure to engaging online coursework, I assumed that virtual classes were not engaging. However, I learned new tactics to get students invested in the curriculum and techniques to help them navigate technology to work collaboratively with their international peers across the globe.

This training exercise also changed my perspective on equity-minded teaching. COIL classes allow lower-income students to engage in virtual global exchange when a study abroad program is not within their budget. Therefore, all students can reap the benefits of interacting with individuals from various cultures.

Once I worked collaboratively with faculty across the globe in COIL training, my eyes were opened to the possibilities for global virtual exchange. I started to think about how I might incorporate COIL into my other communication courses. Additionally, I considered how this activity might benefit my students in other ways.

Throughout the reflection process, I explored how COIL classes are an engaging and equitable way to teach intercultural communication skills. However, the reflective critique revealed two limitations. First, this reflective manuscript focused on revelations experienced during COIL training. Although this workshop prepares educators to facilitate a COIL class, the reflection was limited to the training experience. Additional discoveries will likely emerge while teaching the global virtual exchange course. Second, the reflective critique is conducted by someone who has diligently worked to improve their teaching and make their classes more equity minded. Therefore, the findings in this reflection may not be generalizable to all educators.

Recommendations for Future Research

The Guide for Reflective Practice (GRP) is a valuable tool to aid practitioners as they process feelings of uncertainty and surprise they encounter in their practice (Greenberger, 2020). The GRP can also be adapted to help teachers and students reflect on experiences in various educational contexts (Anderson et al., in preparation). Therefore, further research could be conducted using the GRP or an adapted version of the GRP to help teachers and

students process their experience in a COIL class. Furthermore, to add to the current knowledge on the benefits of Collaborative Online International Learning, empirical research could be conducted to examine the effect of COIL courses on students' cultural fluency, including intercultural communication skills and cultural humility.

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