REFLECTING ON TEACHING A COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING COURSE: CONNECTING CLASSROOMS IN THE UNITED STATES AND BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective practice was to critically examine a revelation discovered after facilitating a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) course. COIL is an andragogical teaching strategy that uses innovative technology to connect classrooms worldwide. This reflection will highlight a COIL opportunity that brought together students from classes in the United States of America and Brazil. After facilitating COIL in our intercultural communication classes, we discovered that these global virtual exchange courses or units could be incorporated into various other disciplines. There were two distinct reasons why this knowledge was surprising. First, during our COIL training, we directed our attention to the course we planned to facilitate. Second, we had never taught COIL classes before, so we were unsure how to include this teaching method in other areas of study. We used Stephen Brookfield's model of reflection to critically examine our assumptions and pre-conceived notions about COIL and left with takeaways that can be shared with our colleagues.

Keywords: *critical reflection, Collaborative Online International Learning, intercultural communication*

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a virtual exchange program where international teaching partners are paired to design courses or units that use innovative digital tools to bridge the gap between classrooms in various geographic locations (Anderson, 2022b; Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020). During COIL, students interact with their global counterparts to collaborate on a problem-based learning project (see Figure 1). This activity is great for students because they have autonomy in their learning and improve their cross-cultural communication skills (Anderson, 2022a; Asojo et al., 2019; Naicker et al., 2021; Rubin, 2017; SUNY COIL Center, n.d.a).

Connecting COIL classes from different parts of the world is didactically ambitious (Naicker et al., 2021). In order to be successful, educators may require additional training to prepare for these types of virtual transnational learning experiences. In the article "Reflecting on Training to Facilitate Collaborative Online International Learning Courses," Anderson (2022a) expanded on their experience while attending a global virtual exchange training. In this training, faculty learned about COIL and connected with international teaching partners to plan their COIL classes.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this reflective practice was to explore an unexpected discovery that COIL could

Figure 1. COIL Collaborations. This image highlights the connection between two COIL courses (SUNY COIL Center, n.d.b).
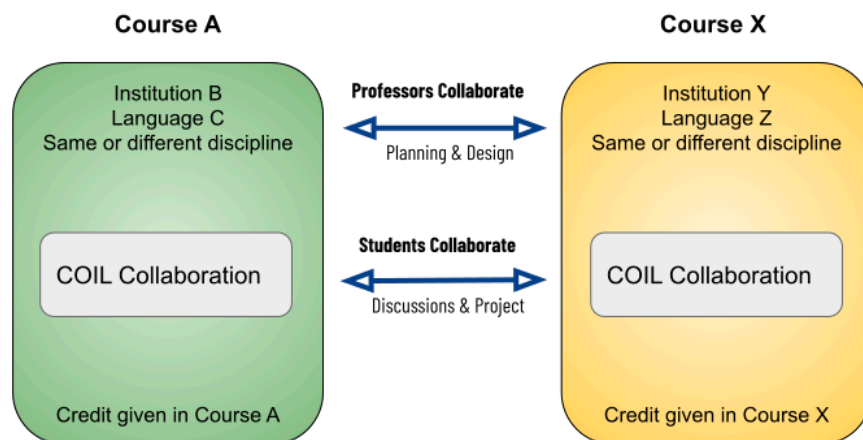
·Educators' autobiographies as learners/teachers

be incorporated into higher education classes across many disciplines. This revelation occurred after teaching a COIL class that connected community college students in the United States (US) with university students in Brazil. Reflective thinking and writing aided us as we processed this discovery.

Reflective Theories

Reflective practice is a valuable tool for educators looking to challenge their assumptions and improve their teaching practice (Brookfield, 2017). 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). Many reflective theories and models can be utilized to gain new insights into virtual educational programs like COIL.

The approach chosen for this reflective practice was Brookfield's (1995) model of reflection. This model was designed to help practitioners recognize and critically reflect on their preconceived notions about how to help students learn in various contexts (Brookfield, 2017). According to Brookfield (1995), critically reflective teachers increase awareness of their teaching from as many different vantage points as possible. To this end, Brookfield proposed four lenses to aid teachers as they critically reflect on their practice (see Figure 2). These lenses relate to parts of the critical reflection process, including self-reflection, student feedback, peer assessment, and connections with scholarly literature.

Figure 2. Four Lenses of Brookfield's (1995) Model of Reflection
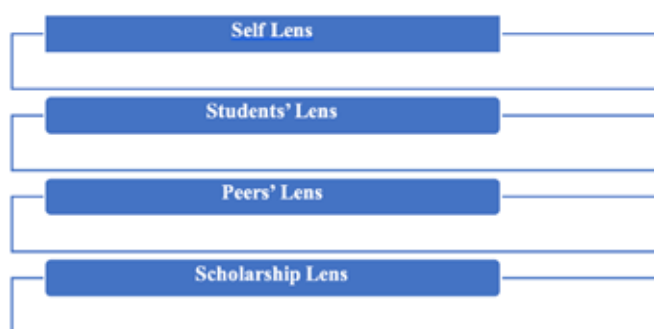
The reflective process started by using an autobiographical or self-lens to examine our experiences teaching this COIL course. In this stage, we thought back to when we were students and discussed how those experiences may have impacted how we conducted the COIL class. Then, we evaluated the COIL class from our students' perspectives using an informal evaluation. During this step, we analyzed the feedback received from students about their experiences in this global virtual exchange (Brookfield, 1995). The third lens of Brookfield's (1995) model of reflection led us to examine the COIL model through our colleagues' experiences in their COIL classes. The final step included looking at the COIL experience through the lens of existing literature to uncover any processes or discoveries that may impact our teaching (Brookfield, 1998). By critically reflecting on our experience teaching COIL, we are contributing to new insights, reframing our existing knowledge,

and making changes to support students' learning in future COIL classes (Saric & Steh, 2017).

PROBLEM

Educators often use reflective thinking and writing to assess the value of their lessons or uncover problems in their teaching practice. Greenberger (2020) stated that reflection can also be helpful when exploring something unexpected or unknown. We were both new to this andragogical method and anticipated learning a great deal from facilitating our first COIL course. Greenberger's (2020) Guide for Reflective Practice (GRP) aided us as we processed our experiences and uncovered new insights that could positively impact how we use this teaching tool in the future.

When we first got paired in our COIL training, we wanted to connect an intercultural communication class at a community college in the US with an intercultural communication class at a university in Brazil since the project could fit seamlessly into this discipline. Furthermore, since these courses were about cross-cultural communication, there was already an expectation that students would learn about interacting with individuals from various cultural backgrounds. However, after teaching our first COIL class together, we realized these virtual exchange units could be incorporated into any higher education course across multiple disciplines.

WORKING IDEAS

We were previously unaware that COIL units or classes could be incorporated into any discipline for two reasons. First, during our training, we focused on planning the COIL project for our intercultural communication classes. Second, this was the first time we had utilized COIL, so we were unaware of how easily this teaching strategy could be included other disciplines.

We didn't realize that COIL units could be implemented into various courses because we primarily focused on our intercultural communication classes during our training and preparation time. Over several months, we attended a COIL training where we learned how to work collaboratively with an international teaching partner to design a course connecting students from classrooms worldwide (Anderson, 2022a). While learning the basic skills to facilitate COIL, we met several times to discuss how to implement COIL into an intercultural com-

munication course. Since most of our preparation time was dedicated to our partnership, we did not explore other disciplines.

Another reason why we did not know COIL could be included in various disciplines was that this was the first time we had taught a COIL class. Without experiential knowledge, we could not fully grasp the possibilities of this andragogical strategy and instead could only hypothesize about the benefits to students. Once we had completed our first course, we better understood how to implement COIL and how it could be utilized outside of an intercultural communication context.

REFLECTIVE-NARRATIVE

After teaching our first COIL course, we discovered that this collaborative online program could be incorporated into classes across various disciplines. Then, we used reflective writing to process our experience leading up to this revelation. This global virtual exchange activity, also known as an event (Greenberger, 2020), is essential to the reflective process. Using a reflective-narrative format to describe our experience with COIL, we can share details about the event, context, and personal thoughts (Greenberger et al., 2021).

Temporality (Prologue)

The backstory began at a training we both attended to learn how to facilitate COIL courses (Anderson, 2022a). The facilitators connected us, hoping we could work together to plan and implement a COIL course. For months we attended workshops that gave us the tools necessary to create a collaborative project for our students in the US and Brazil. We hoped our students could improve their cultural fluency in an engaging and innovative way.

Sociality (Participants or Characters in the Reflective-Narrative)

Our COIL class combined two classrooms on different continents. One instructor taught a hybrid intercultural communication class with 27 students from a community college in the Northwest United States. The other instructor, part of a network of educators promoting the internationalization of Brazilian higher education institutions, facilitated an online intercultural communication class with 23 university students from various parts of Brazil.

The teachers placed students into small groups of six to eight participants. Due to the nature of

this experience, there were two considerations when placing students in these collaborative work groups. First, each group needed to have at least one Brazilian student who was proficient in English to navigate communication in their meetings. Second, each group from the US needed at least one person with access to computers and the internet to conduct weekly synchronous Zoom meetings with their Brazilian counterparts. By planning for our students' technology and communication needs, we were able to prevent potential issues that could negatively impact the learning experience for our COIL class.

Situation (Setting)

Our COIL classrooms looked quite different in the US and Brazil. The community college class was hybrid and met synchronously in person four days a week and asynchronously online one day a week. The COIL portion of this class was a unit on culture, specifically focusing on communicating with individuals from various parts of the world. The university class in Brazil was held synchronously online, two days a week. The intercultural communication class was solely designed as a four-week COIL experience to allow students to improve their cultural fluency and practice their English skills. As a result of these unique modalities, time zones, and goals, we had different settings for this collaborative work.

Amy's Experience. During the four-week COIL unit in the community college class, most of our time was spent synchronously using a face-to-face modality. Once a week, we met on Zoom for small group meetings with the Brazilian students. Since it would be challenging to communicate with this many students in one Zoom room, small groups used breakout rooms for discussions and to work on their collaborative projects. For these meetings, we reserved nearby classrooms to accommodate each group's need for quiet working spaces.

Students also needed to communicate with their groupmates and peers outside of class since we were working in different time zones. We used a private LinkedIn group to post videos and communicate asynchronously. Students were also encouraged to connect with their Brazilian counterparts using other communication techniques, such as email, social media, or WhatsApp.

MARCIA'S EXPERIENCE.

The four-week COIL experience in the Brazilian class was conducted using a synchronous online modality, as there were students enrolled from all over the country. This intercultural communication class met twice a week on Zoom. One large group meeting each week focused on learning communication topics related to our COIL work. The other weekly Zoom meeting connected students from Brazil and the US in breakout rooms to work on their COIL projects. English was spoken in both sessions, so Brazilian students could practice speaking this new language.

I also utilized WhatsApp to communicate asynchronously with my Brazilian students. As our COIL course was ungraded, I felt responsible for ensuring my students completed all their tasks. If they did not complete their work, it might negatively impact the grades of their colleagues in the US. This communication tool allowed me to answer questions and clarify expectations quickly to ensure their work was completed in a timely manner.

PLOT

We had two goals for this COIL experience. First, we wanted to connect our classes so that students would have the opportunity to work closely with individuals from another culture. Like a study abroad experience, global virtual exchange classes equitably bring students worldwide together and give them high-impact learning opportunities (Anderson, 2022a). Second, we wanted our students to collaborate on small-group projects to improve cultural fluency.

WEEK ONE.

We had much to accomplish in our first week of the COIL class as we needed to build a foundation for our work together. First, we put students into small groups. Second, our students created LinkedIn accounts and were invited to join our private COIL group. Third, we assigned students short introduction videos to post on this platform so they could get to know their groupmates.

In our first synchronous Zoom meeting, students entered breakout rooms to meet with their small groups. In this meeting, they introduced themselves, exchanged contact information, and decided how to communicate outside class. This

meeting was essential to building rapport within the small groups.

WEEK TWO.

Our second week focused on learning more about public speaking and culture, and students were assigned a cultural artifact speech and asked to post it to the COIL LinkedIn page. For this assignment, they spoke about a meaningful item in their culture, such as traditional clothing or an item passed down in their family. The community college students also met this week with a librarian to learn how to find scholarly sources for their upcoming research projects. Students were asked to find three sources, five relevant images, and one short video clip they might incorporate into their collaborative projects.

In our synchronous Zoom meeting this week, the small student groups were assigned a region for which they would research and prepare a cultural presentation. Students were also asked to delegate parts of the project so they could work asynchronously. For example, students could research and present on the region's food and eating practices, spoken language, relationships, business practices, non-verbal communication, or about the dress and appearance in the area. Each group was given a link to a shared PowerPoint to work collaboratively on their visual aids.

WEEK THREE.

In our class this week, we gave students time to work on their research and contribute to their visual aids. Since each student could access the shared PowerPoint, they could see how their group members' work was progressing. Their goal was to have the PowerPoint slides completed by our Zoom meeting this week, and those slides needed talking points, relevant images, and a short video clip.

Our Zoom meeting this week was designed to be a working meeting where students could complete their visual aid. In synchronous meetings,

it was easier for students to make decisions as a group in real time. However, we did not anticipate that this meeting would fall on a Brazilian holiday, so not everyone was in attendance. Luckily, students could communicate outside of class to continue their collaborative work.

WEEK FOUR.

The focus of our class this week was finalizing our presentations. Students were asked to write a script for what they planned to say and to practice their portion of the speech. Since the students in the US would be recording the presentation during the synchronous Zoom meeting this week, they met with an eLearning specialist to ensure they had the necessary technology. Along with accounting for potential technology issues, we also had to adjust class for a Daylight Savings Time change.

Since this was our last Zoom meeting and our only chance to record the presentation, it was essential that students attended class and were prepared. Reminders and the link to the Zoom meeting were sent to students on the COIL LinkedIn page and through WhatsApp. For this final meeting, six classrooms were reserved so each group would have privacy as they practiced and recorded their presentation.

Although we planned for possible technology issues and space concerns for our recording session, we could not account for the fire drill that occurred during class. As a result of this interruption, groups had two choices for recording their presentations. First, the small group members could find time to connect outside of class and record their presentations together. Second, the students could individually record their parts of the presentation, and all videos could be incorporated into a shared presentation. Once groups completed their presentations, they uploaded them to our COIL LinkedIn page (see Figure 2).

Figure 3. Weekly COIL Overview

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

Reflective thinking can be beneficial when practitioners identify something surprising in their practice so they can explain that uncertainty and analyze why it might have occurred (Dewey, 1933/1989). By reflecting on our COIL experience, we discovered that these global virtual exchange experiences could be incorporated into classes across various disciplines. There were two reasons or working ideas why this surprised us. First, we focused on our intercultural communication class throughout our training. Second, we had never facilitated a COIL course before. Once our working ideas were clarified, our next step was to analyze them using theories and literature to conclude their strengths and weaknesses (Greenberger, 2020).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Working Ideas

One of the reasons we were unaware that COIL units or classes could be incorporated into various disciplines was that during our COIL training, we focused solely on implementing this andragogical teaching technique into our intercultural communication courses. This working idea has merit as research on multitasking has uncovered clear evidence that it is more difficult for humans to process information while attending to multiple stimuli and performing several tasks (Chun et al., 2011; Junco, 2012; Koch et al., 2011; Rosen et al., 2011; Tombu et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2012). Researchers noted, "Multitasking is often conceptualized as completing multiple tasks at one time, but a definition that better captures what occurs in class defines multitasking as divided attention and non-sequential task switching between relevant and irrelevant tasks" (Tassone et al., 2020, p. 2). During our COIL training, our attention was directed toward the material relevant to the class we were planning.

Although multitasking has been shown to decrease metacognition for individuals who are splitting their attention between various tasks, some believe that multitasking allows the optimal productivity necessary for successfully completing tasks in modern work and learning environments (Courage et al., 2015). Therefore, one must weigh the risks versus the rewards in these moments where multitasking might be required. As COIL trainees, we decided that it was more valuable for us to focus on designing our COIL class during the training than to weigh the possibilities of how this content might be incorporated into other disciplines.

Another reason we were unaware that COIL courses could be implemented into various disciplines was that we had never taught a global virtual exchange class before. This working idea has merit because many individuals who learn new skills require practice to adequately implement them in real-world settings (Allen, 2009). Furthermore, while training classes can give a person the gist of how to incorporate new skills into practice, the action itself may be quite different. Educators, for example, may experience a feeling of disconnect between hearing or reading about a new teaching method and putting those techniques into their practice (Allen, 2009). Without hands-on experience, we could not predict how COIL could be incorporated into other courses.

Although new educators may struggle to switch from theory to practice, experienced teachers should be able to hypothesize how new teaching techniques could be implemented in various ways within educational contexts. Given adequate time and additional training, they could likely foresee the possibilities of COIL projects and the potential for this method to be uniquely utilized. However, with limited training and time, we did not consider the range of possibilities for this teaching tool.

DECISION

Reflective practitioners first identify a problem in their practice or something surprising they have discovered. Then, they analyze why they were surprised by what occurred. The next step is to develop solutions to the problem (Dewey, 1933/1983).

After facilitating our first COIL class, we discovered that these global virtual exchange classes or units could be incorporated into various disciplines in higher education classrooms. We realized that there were two main reasons for this discovery. First, we focused on prepping for our intercultural communication course during our COIL training. Second, since we had never used the COIL methodology before, we could only hypothesize how these global virtual exchange classes could be included in other courses and disciplines. Ultimately, both working ideas were valid as they equally contributed to the surprise that COIL could be included in classes across various disciplines (see Figure 3).

Figure 4. Working Ideas Had Equal Merit.
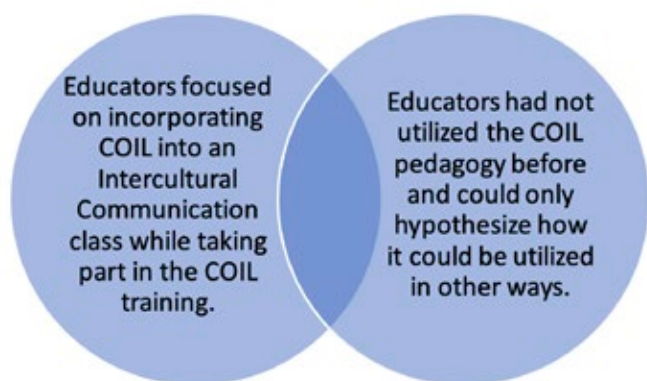
After realizing that COIL could be incorporated into our other classes and various disciplines, we discussed facilitating future COIL classes together. Although our first class was predominantly focused on improving cultural fluency in an intercultural communication course, we are exploring ideas about other COIL projects. For example, students in the US and Brazil could combine in a small-group communication course or unit to work on service-learning projects to benefit both communities.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Brookfield's (1995) model of reflection was designed to help educators reflect on their assumptions about how to best help students learn. The process begins with identifying preconceived ideas about teaching and learning by looking at the situation through the self-lens. In this stage of critical reflection, educators view their practice and teaching techniques from their own experiences (Brookfield, 2017). Since we had never been involved in an official COIL class as teachers or students, our only experience was through our involvement in the COIL training program, which mimicked a COIL class.

The next step in Brookfield's (1995) reflection model is to view our experience in COIL through the students' lens. This was accomplished through informal evaluations during and after the COIL class. Students disclosed that they were excited to work with individuals from different cultures. They also wished they had more synchronous time in their groups to get to know their international counterparts better and to work on their projects. Overall, the students' experiences were positive and increased their intercultural effectiveness and cultural humility (Anderson & Or, in peer review).

After facilitating our COIL class, we met with other colleagues from our training program to debrief our experiences. Through this peer lens, we learned from others who had recently facilitated their COIL classes in various disciplines (Brookfield, 1995, 2017). We also shared with our peers what we had discovered from our own experience with COIL so that they might benefit from our takeaways from this teaching technique and its impact on students.

The last step in the critical reflection process is to explore this teaching strategy and our assumptions of COIL through the scholarly lens and compare it to the literature (Brookfield, 2017). Research shows that there are many benefits of COIL for students, such as increased cultural competence, intercultural communication effectiveness, global awareness, and cultural humility (Anderson & Or, in peer review; de Castro et al., 2019; King de Ramirez, 2021; Liu & Shirley, 2021; Marzetti, 2021; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). Moreover, the literature confirmed that COIL classes could be successful in various disciplines, such as nursing, marketing, or special education (de Castro et al., 2019; Pearlman & Fraile, 2018; Zhang & Capellini, 2018).

Brookfield's (1995) model of reflection aided us as we reflected on our experience facilitating COIL in our intercultural communication course. By utilizing the self, peer, colleague, and scholarly literature lenses, we confronted the assumptions we held before facilitating our first COIL class. Ultimately, we learned that COIL is a beneficial andragogical strategy for students that can be incorporated into various subject areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This reflection demonstrates how higher education practitioners can challenge their preconceived notions about teaching COIL classes. Although identifying assumptions may feel unnatural, it is critical to the reflection process (Brookfield, 2017). Ultimately, the goal is to improve our teaching, and critical reflection can help educators expand their understanding and improve their practice.

Future research could examine how individuals in a COIL class reflect on and describe their experiences in a global virtual exchange program. An adapted guide for reflective practice (Greenberger, 2020) might be a valuable tool for assessment. Furthermore, additional research is warranted on the impact of COIL on students in various disciplines.

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