

Multiple countries, languages, disciplines and academic levels: Overcoming barriers by working on a UVE-COIL project

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INTRODUCTION

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) provides multicultural experiences. Knowing and working with people from different countries promotes students' motivation for learning activities, increases cultural awareness and builds their confidence in practicing other languages.

In Fall 2019, the University of Texas (UT-Austin) in the USA, Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral (ESPOL) in Ecuador and Universidad Arturo Michelena (UAM) from Venezuela partnered in a COIL initiative.

AIM


The goal was to foster intercultural collaboration, encouraging students to communicate, provide project-based feedback and learn from international peers.

CHALLENGES


Key challenges included language barriers, different academic levels, subjects, courses schedules, diversity in student groups, and limitations to internet access.

PARTICIPANTS

54 students participated:

21  **senior students** from UT-Austin taking "Capstone Research in International Relations and Global Studies"

27  **first-year students** from ESPOL taking the course "Analysis and Problem Solving"

06  **graduate students** from UAM taking the "Decision making and problem solving"

METHOD

Platform used for planned activities: **Google Classroom**
COIL activities:

1.- Icebreaker activity

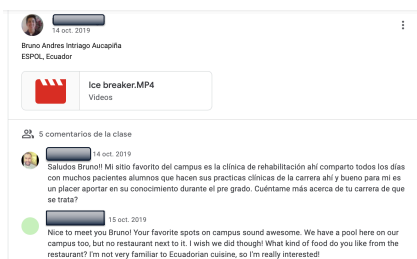
Students posted a 90-second introductory video:

What is your name, school, major, and grade level?

What is your favorite place on campus?

What is your city famous for?

Why is intercultural/global exchange important today?

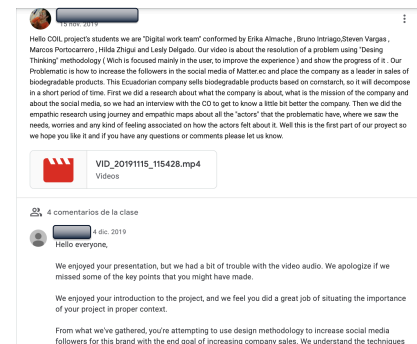


2.- Engaging in research

Sept: UT students posted 3-minute videos describing their independent research projects, along with an abstract summarizing their project. ESPOL and UAM students provided feedback.

Oct: ESPOL students, who worked on real-life projects in teams, posted videos about their research, including abstracts in English. UT and UAM students gave feedback.

Throughout: Since UAM students were in a master-level program, they served as mentors, giving feedback to UT and ESPOL's students.



3.- Reflection

To conclude the COIL project, students wrote a short paper reflecting on their experience in this way:

- Describe what your discussions were about.
- What surprised you about something they said or discussed?
- What are some of the cultural differences that you have been made more aware of as a result of working with teams from other countries?
- How will this change the way you research your own project?

Testimonials reported by students in the reflection:

"(...) this online course (COIL) was an amazing experience for every student who participated in it; we could exchange many ideas, points of view and even culture. The fact that we were able to communicate in English was really nice because it made me develop my English skills." ESPOL

"As a result of the international collaboration in the course I have become more aware of the importance of communicating and collaborating with people from cultures outside of my own." UTA

"This experience helped us to understand better the views of other students, but also to understand more about ourselves." ESPOL

"Having to explain my project to students unfamiliar and also with a language barrier allowed me to conceptually grasp the contents of my project at its core. It helped me understand my project better." UTA

"This COIL experience will help me in the way I do research because I learned that there are multiple ways of solving a problem and seeking for help of others is important, feedback is important." ESPOL.

RESULTS

Results showed an overall satisfaction of the experience.

UT-Austin students gained greater awareness about partnering countries and their own, examining bias in their own language. Students also learned that intercultural conversations can inform their research.

On the other hand, despite ESPOL students being Spanish speakers, most of them prepared videos and provided feedback in English for the COIL activities. The COIL experience helped them to overcome some fears about interacting with people from other countries/cultures.

UAM students especially liked providing feedback because they felt like tutors since they were at a master's level.

CONCLUSIONS

Universities must show enough support and flexibility to include COIL activities within the academic curriculum. It is recommended to plan more time or activities to build rapport among students before collaborating on graded work.

Moreover, it is essential to provide enough support to students for activities; for instance, rubrics with criteria for assessing specific tasks on others' work and regular contributions by the teachers to the online discussions.

Finally, when working with students from different regions, teachers should provide some tips about what to expect/to do when interacting with people from other cultures/countries; thus, they can feel more comfortable working together.

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