

Collaborative Online International Learning to Prepare Students for Multicultural Work Environments

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Background: Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a pedagogical approach using digital technology to provide experiential international learning without travel abroad. Through web-based, cross-country intellectual exchange, COIL helps prepare nursing students for increasingly diverse and multicultural health care work environments globally.

Problem: Opportunities to engage in multicultural learning experiences have traditionally relied on intensive study abroad trips, which can be prohibitive for students with limited fiscal resources or who are place-bound.

Approach: A COIL experience for undergraduate nursing students at universities in the United States and the Philippines was designed to fulfill academic degree program goals related to professional communication, collaborative practice, and respect for diversity.

Conclusion: After completing the COIL experience, students expressed valuing shared learning with peers in another country and reported gains in intercultural competence. Our efforts indicated that COIL-style endeavors provide meaningful, rewarding opportunities to engage with others across borders, while enhancing students' skills to relate positively to an increasingly diverse world.

Keywords: Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), cultural humility, international educational exchange, nursing education, Philippines

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With increasing attention and opportunities for globally networked learning environments,¹⁻³ Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has emerged as a pedagogical method to deepen global engagement of place-bound students (without requiring travel abroad) through digital technology that links university-based classes in different countries.^{4,5} Rubin⁶ emphasized COIL as a teaching paradigm to develop cross-cultural awareness in a shared multicultural learning environment and not simply as the use of technology or a technology platform. Students enrich their intercultural learning by examining a specific subject or content through a cross-cultural or global lens, working collaboratively to address globally relevant issues, applying communication skills

that help build rapport with others from different regions of the world, and exploring self-awareness and appreciation for cultural diversity as opposed to ethnocentrism.^{6,7}

Characteristics differentiating COIL from other forms of online learning include the following: (1) faculty from different academic institutions located in different countries cocreate, coteach, and comanage an entire or portion of a course over a specified time frame; (2) students in different countries participate in the course, yet remain enrolled and obtain credit at their own academic institution; (3) students are evaluated and graded by their own in-country faculty, which allows for learning objectives to be distinct between student groups; (4) students engage in highly interactive, shared problem-solving exercises and projects with international peers; and (5) course communication, content, and assignments use Internet-connected technology that is readily accessible and low cost to participating students.⁸

COIL courses can be developed within and between academic disciplines, often leading to unique insights unobtainable in single-country learning settings. Scaffolded interactions allow students across countries to get to know each other and share assignments that involve exchanging views on a given topic. Students typically work in small groups to solve a challenge or develop a communal product. Through these activities, cross-cultural differences emerge, which are reflected on and debriefed by both sides throughout or in a culminating interaction.⁸

For any COIL experience, it is critical to be mindful of equity and ethics working across international borders.

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Power imbalances between student groups from participating countries can result from differentials in academic preparation, language proficiency, cultural norms about “classroom” participation, and privilege in the form of access to resources such as time, Internet, or technology. That said, COIL harnesses the power of digital technology, making it a positive and practical way to instill a sense of global citizenship among students stepping into an increasingly multicultural world.

Furthermore, COIL presents the prospect of fostering cultural humility, which results in mutual empowerment and respect through a process of openness, self-awareness, and self-reflection after interacting with diverse individuals unlike oneself.⁹ COIL experiences facilitate—through teaching strategies, project assignments, writing tasks, and student participation—student engagement in this process. Bringing together student groups in a shared learning space, COIL offers the opportunity to purposefully examine multicultural, multisetting perspectives and information sources, while also productively using difference as a context for knowledge gain about, not only subject matter, but also others as well as self. In this sense, COIL can serve as a meaningful mechanism whereby students cultivate a recognition and an understanding of their own worldview by relating to students from another country. COIL provides the space for exposure to different points of view and contributions that students across countries bring to relational learning. This cross-country, cross-culture learning can prompt awareness of one’s own biases and misconceptions, while also inspiring respect for different groups of people.

In contemporary nursing education, COIL can be integrated into a curriculum to promote global citizenship among students in preparation for work careers in multicultural health care environments. As an example, a previously reported undertaking with nursing students in Finland, Scotland, and the United States showed how they explored nursing preparation in each country, compared trends in health and social care issues across the countries, and reflected on nursing’s contributions to an international health care system. Student evaluations revealed a broadening of their perspective about nursing, learning more about nursing in their own country by examining nursing in another country, and high satisfaction and appreciation to learn interactively with students in another country.¹⁰ Another similar prior endeavor was executed between nursing education programs in Brazil and the United States. Using a hybridized online practicum course, students across these countries engaged in collaborative learning about community health nursing, as well as gained insight into another country’s culture and health care system. Students reported broadening their worldviews and learning how to communicate with peers from a different culture.¹¹

Problem

The opportunity to develop a pilot COIL experience (described in this article) stemmed from a prior research-related relationship between faculty at the University

of Washington Bothell (United States) and University of Santo Tomas (Philippines). Faculty had discussed creating a conventional study abroad experience where students from one institution and country traveled to the other. But, given the fiscal burden and place-bound lives of students and faculty, a COIL approach was pursued as a novel alternative.

The underlying motivation for an international learning experience was to help students, in both countries, gain appreciation for working in multicultural professional nursing practice environments in the future. The long history and continued migration of nurses from the Philippines to the United States have made commonplace the presence of Filipino nurses in American health care work settings. Recognizing the multicultural profile of health care workforces worldwide, nursing students should learn to relate and work collegially with coworkers different from themselves, which can have bearing on their employability, job satisfaction, and even the quality of patient care. Moreover, the skills of effective functioning, open communication, mutual respect, and shared decision making are articulated as part of the Quality and Safety Education for Nurses teamwork and collaboration competency.¹² Our COIL experience reflected specific areas of this competency, notably the knowledge to analyze differences in communication styles and describe the impact of one’s own communication style on others, the skill to act with integrity and respect differing views, and the attitude to value different communication styles.

Approach

Our vision was to create a COIL experience that encouraged respect for multicultural perspectives, provided the opportunity to reflect about practice and professionalism expectations in one’s own country in contrast to another, and cultivated an interest in collaborative processes for problem solving and task completion. Our COIL experience was oriented to meet specific academic program goals for BSN students at each institution. At the University of Washington Bothell, students need to demonstrate professional communication and collaboration, as well as value-based, professional behaviors that respect diversity. At the University of Santo Tomas, BSN students are expected to acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes to practice professionally, independently, and collaboratively. Both sets of goals served as overarching principles to conceptualize and design our COIL experience. Specifically, the notions of professional communication and of collaborative practice and respect for diversity were cornerstone features.

Finding an appropriate and accommodating curricular space was another important factor in justifying our COIL experience. At the University of Washington Bothell, it was the principal component of an elective course for students. At the University of Santo Tomas, it was slotted in as a required “Related Learning Experience” that students complete during their final-year nursing practicum course. These different curricular spaces demonstrated that a

COIL experience can serve distinct program needs for participating institutions. Alignment of timing of these curricular spaces was carefully negotiated given differing academic calendars between each institution. A 6-week overlap period was determined that fit into instructional dates for both and did not impinge on other content or requirements within the respective courses through which the COIL experience was executed.

An online learning management system (LMS) hosted by the University of Washington Bothell, which allowed protected access to University of Santo Tomas students, was used for all communication and assignments. All activity and content on this LMS were protected under the US Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974. Because smartphones are highly prevalent in both the United States and Philippines, accessibility to the LMS via computer or smartphone ensured equitable participation without the burden of solely having to use an Internet-connected computer. Furthermore, this LMS allowed for uploading large-size digital video and photograph files, as was needed for one of the assignments.

Our COIL experience was designed for students to examine aspects of professional nursing practice in their own country by comparing it to another country context. To make this more explicit and capture the nature of online international learning, the objectives were for students to (1) utilize web-based applications to collaborate with others for scholarly learning, (2) describe strategies that optimize communication skills to build rapport with international colleagues, (3) analyze one's own understanding of professional nursing practice in contrast to an international perspective, (4) develop methods that respect diversity when working in teams to respond to patient/client needs, and (5) evaluate the value of considering multicultural approaches to address health problems in globalizing societies.

Students were assigned to a learning group based on a nursing practice specialty they self-identified having interest in (eg, critical care, pediatrics). Learning groups were composed of students from each institution to ensure cross-country interaction. Throughout the entire 6 weeks, students worked and communicated within their learning group (via dedicated discussion boards within the online LMS) to complete 2 sets of assignments.

The first assignment set focused on rapport building. Weekly, students posted on a discussion board a 300- to 500-word reflective essay in response to a question about being a nurse. For example, during 1 week, students responded to: What do you think nursing is like in the United States/Philippines? Why did you choose to become a nurse? What or who was your inspiration? Another week, students were asked: What is a piece of clinical care equipment/technology or clinical procedure that you find interesting? Explain why? Yet another week, students answered: What is the biggest challenge you experienced in a nursing role? How did you handle the situation? How was it resolved? To illustrate their essay, students (being mindful of confidentiality issues) uploaded an accompanying digital

photograph or video clip. Students were also asked to post a thoughtful, substantive reply to other students' essays (ie, What do you think about what the person had to say? How did it provide insight into their world? How do you now think about your own circumstance?) Through these weekly essays, students provided personal perspectives about being a nurse in their respective country, which prompted them to reflect on their own situations in relation to those in another country.

In complement, the second assignment set guided students in investigating the nursing practice specialty area of their assigned learning group. Scaffolded over 4 weeks, within these learning groups, students individually responded to the same question prompts about their assigned specialty area, which also directed them to find information resources (from both the United States and Philippines contexts) that were contributed to a shared electronic file storage space (specifically for their learning group). For example, 1 week students replied to: What is the professional nursing association for the practice specialty? How does it define and describe the practice specialty? Another week, students answered: What educational or training preparation is needed to work in the practice specialty? What preparation is needed or certifications are available to practice in this specialty? For each information resource gathered, students wrote a 100- to 200-word summary of the content and listed reasons they felt it was useful.

Over the final 2 weeks, students then used the shared collection of information resources within their learning group to individually create as a final assignment an infographic that characterized and depicted their assigned nursing practice specialty area. An infographic is a visual representation of data or knowledge that presents complex information graphically, such that it conveys quick and clear understanding of a concept or issue by principally using the sense of vision.¹³ To create an infographic, students were given their own personal account for a web-based commercial infographic application editor, along with guidance resources, readings, and examples about creating effective infographics.

This second assignment set was intentionally structured so that students worked individually (although within the group space) to respond to question prompts and contribute information resources. Bearing in mind the asynchronous, online, nonverbal interaction of our COIL experience and that experiences, expectations, and style of working in groups are largely influenced and differ by cultural values and practices, we were particularly mindful to design it in a way that did not require overly complicated ways of collaborating. Also factoring into this decision were challenges of time zone difference, varying degrees of Internet service access, and limited allowable time within the course/curriculum context in which this COIL experience was embedded. Altogether, though, this second assignment set enabled students to methodically discover a nursing practice specialty of their interest in parallel with

peers, both within and across countries, while sharing reflective thoughts and insights.

Lessons Learned

Other important issues beyond substantive learning content needed to be considered. First, approval to pursue and execute a COIL experience required much lead time to obtain support and a memorandum of agreement from several administrative layers at both institutions. Second, at least 1 (more if possible) in-person meeting early in the planning process involving partnering faculty/instructors is needed to create the foundation and set the tone for working together as well as to build rapport for clear communication. Subsequent meetings were carried out via online video streaming. Establishing ground rules and expectations regarding faculty/instructor partner effort and responsibilities during all stages of COIL development and execution was helpful. These do not necessarily have to be equal, as long as conditions are agreed upon in advance and periodically revisited. For example, faculty collectively identified explicit milestones with specific dates for deliverables with regard to drafting, reviewing, and providing constructive feedback of versions of learning objectives and assignments.

Devising an arrangement for information exchange between students that accommodated a global time zone difference was critical. Students were allowed, but not required, to communicate in real time via text messaging, online instant messaging, and online video calling. Language ability was a fundamental, although not problematic, consideration. Because of a long history of American military and governmental ties to the Philippines, English is taught in the educational system and used regularly in civic and business activities. Although both student groups spoke English, they needed to explain colloquialisms, expressions, or idioms they used. Relatedly, students were advised to anticipate cultural differences and avoid judgmental or value-laden tones when communicating and learning with each other. They were encouraged to be open to new ideas and experiences articulated by others, ask questions before reacting with a negative statement, and consider if their respective writing conveyed stereotypes or harmful characterizations. That said, there were a number of similar experiences and sentiments across student groups providing common ground to relate to each other. COIL principles encourage this guidance to foster positive student-to-student engagement across countries, which may also have useful application for other learning strategies used in nursing education such as simulation and think-pair-share exercises.

Students were instructed to use respectful polite language; strive to avoid stereotypes and overgeneralizations; offer reflective and substantive remarks and not merely short, shallow phrases; and allow for clarifying questions to be asked of each other. An example of a difference was that students at the University of Santo Tomas described their regular wearing of a traditional white nursing

uniform with traditional nurse's cap, while students from the University of Washington Bothell described their common use of scrubs. Students across both groups posed questions about this attire difference with sincerity and without judging from their respective perspectives.

Although we did not do this, it may have been helpful for students to do some advanced preparation before engaging with students in the other country. Some activities that could be used are (1) perusing the websites of both universities, including the features of the nursing programs along with course requirements and course descriptions, so students get a comparative sense of each other's academic context; (2) reviewing websites of each national nursing organizations (eg, American Nurses Association and Philippines Nurses Association) to get a preliminary introduction into the profession of nursing in the other country; (3) assigning readings that offer culturally appropriate and sensitive insights and representations about commonplace values and practices, including communication styles, in the other country; and (4) conducting a question-and-answer information session with the in-country course instructor (or even across country via online, distance technologies) to create a space for students to ask questions about the other country.

Regarding evaluation, students completed an intercultural competence self-evaluation^{14,15} at the beginning and conclusion of the COIL experience. Students rated their self-perceived ability (5 = very high, 1 = poor) in interacting with persons from other cultures according to 15 areas (eg, respect, withholding judgment, empathy). The average change in intercultural competence score from the start of the course to the end was +7.4 points. An open-ended question asked students to reflect on a situation requiring intercultural competence and what helped make them more appropriate and effective in their interactions. One student reported, "I was more aware of how things I said would come across... It made me evaluate my biases and consider my wording carefully." The evaluation suggested students from both countries improved their skills in intercultural interaction.

Conclusion

Our first-time COIL effort showed promise as a fruitful international learning opportunity. Without needing to travel abroad, students had meaningful, valued engagement with peers in another country. The COIL approach presented a practical way to prepare students for diverse, multicultural work settings likely in their professional futures, while still helping fulfill academic program goals at each of our institutions. It also helped faculty members conceptualize lessons that promote intercultural respect and appreciation, as well as leverage the utility of online learning methods.

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