

# The High's and Low's of COILs in Action: A case study from Qatar, the UK, and the UAE: Extended Abstract

Christopher S. Dutt<sup>1</sup>, Leonard, Cseh<sup>2</sup>, Phil Hardy<sup>3</sup>, Yukari Iguchi<sup>4</sup>, & Bincy Baburaj Kaluvilla<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor and Programme Leader, Al Rayyan International University College, Doha, Qatar: [CDutt@ariu.edu.qa](mailto:CDutt@ariu.edu.qa)

<sup>2</sup> Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader, University of Derby, Derby, UK: [L.Cseh@derby.ac.uk](mailto:L.Cseh@derby.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Senior Lecturer and Link Tutor, University of Derby, Derby, UK: [P.Hardy@derby.ac.uk](mailto:P.Hardy@derby.ac.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Academic Lead for Hospitality and Business, University of Derby, Derby, UK: [Y.Iguchi@derby.ac.uk](mailto:Y.Iguchi@derby.ac.uk)

<sup>5</sup> Senior Lecturer and Undergraduate Program Manager, Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, Dubai, UAE: [Bincy.Baburaj@eahm.ae](mailto:Bincy.Baburaj@eahm.ae)

## Introduction:

Collaborative Online Interactive Learning (COIL) is an exciting development in pedagogic practice in the contemporary education sector. This is made possible with the developments in technology and the expanding international market for higher education (HE). The collaboration between HE institutions franchising programmes across the globe, has opened the door for innovative teaching practice and the sharing of ideas to add value to the educational offer of these institutions (Dutt et al., 2022).

The objectives of this research revolve around the impacts and best practices related to Collaborative Online Interactive Learning experiences across multiple institutions. This study aims to:

- i. Understand students' perceptions of COIL experiences.
- ii. Measure the impact of COIL experiences on students' learning.
- iii. Explore how students are affected by COIL experiences.
- iv. Develop best practice standards for developing and running COIL experiences.

## Literature Review:

While Collaborative Online Interactive Learning (COIL) has demonstrated a positive impact on student learning outcomes, particularly in the realm of intercultural competence (Melo et al., 2021), existing literature calls for further empirical investigation to yield more robust and generalizable findings. These calls emphasize the need for larger sample sizes and diverse COIL designs (Hackett et al., 2023). The present study aims to explore pedagogical strategies that transcend cultural and geographical limitations. It seeks to contribute to the redesign of Higher Education (HE) curricula, thereby facilitating interdisciplinary learning paradigms that enhance graduate employability for cohorts graduating in 2024 and beyond. Given the collaborative nature of COIL, a structured framework is imperative for optimizing the learning experience. This is especially salient considering the involvement of multiple international partners (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Williamson (2017) advocates for the optimization of assessment strategies through the utilization of big data and objectivity within transnational networks. The proposed framework aims to integrate national and local pedagogical approaches into a cohesive transnational pedagogy, thereby transforming both student and academic perspectives on teaching resources across traditionally restrictive boundaries (Krejsler, 2021). The study will employ a conceptual framework that diverges from empirical language, focusing instead on the discourses surrounding local HE institutions and educational policies. This approach enables a critical deconstruction of traditional pedagogical and curricular designs, thereby challenging and reimagining established academic norms (Townsend & Bates, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed a shift from traditional face-to-face delivery models to online platforms, necessitating a re-evaluation of pedagogical and educational paradigms (Qadir et al., 2020). The proposed framework aims to facilitate the development of self-assessment and metacognitive skills among students, thereby enhancing their learning engagement and management.

Drawing upon the foundational theories of Bandura (1986, 2001), the COIL framework aims to foster a socially cohesive learning environment that integrates both student and academic experiences to conceptualize change and strategize future interventions (Coudel et al., 2011; Wilner et al., 2012). The co-creative learning experience is posited to improve learning outcomes and adaptability to cultural and geographical variances. Social learning, as a transformative mechanism, enables collective actions and knowledge accumulation across diverse social interactions. Finally, the framework's design must reconcile the tension between rigidity and flexibility, particularly when applied across national and international contexts. As previously indicated, the framework must be sufficiently adaptable to accommodate varying paradigms and contexts (Bettini et al., 2015; Johannessen & Hahn, 2013; Lee & Krasny, 2015; Medema et al., 2015; Vinke-de Kruijf et al., 2014).

#### Methodology:

The study followed a qualitative approach with focus groups being conducted with students after they participated in a COIL activity. Two COILs were run between students at three different institutions located in the UAE (United Arab Emirates), Qatar, and the UK (United Kingdom).

In the first COIL (COIL A), between Qatar and the UAE, students enrolled in research methods modules participated in a shared lecture on research ethics. Instructors from the two institutions presented to both groups of students through Microsoft Teams for about 20 minutes before providing students with an in-class activity. This activity lasted for about 25 minutes before students shared their outcomes with their lecturer who presented the results through MS Teams to both groups of students.

In the second COIL (COIL B), between Qatar and the UK, students enrolled in an operations management modules participated in an activity related to supply chain management. Instructors presented theory to the two groups of students through MS Teams for about 40 minutes, before students across both institutions were split into two mixed groups to work on an activity. After about 20 minutes, students returned to the main classroom/MS Teams call to share the results of the discussions and the instructors wrapped up the session.

In both cases, students were physically present in the classroom with their instructor. An MS Teams call was held between the instructors and students to bring both groups of students together. Immediately after the COIL, students were provided with questions related to what they liked, disliked and would like to see improvements in. The results of these focus groups were compiled into two documents (COIL A and COIL B) and analysed through content analysis (Baker et al., 2023). The transcripts were read multiple times and analysed looking for repeated themes by one researcher (Baker et al., 2023). Codes were developed and shared amongst the researchers who reviewed the codes and text allocation to validity in coding.

#### Findings and Discussion:

On reflection of both COIL's and thematic analysis based upon the feedback collected from the sessions, a key theme that emerged was the new experience and the widening of international participation to the sessions that held most value. The students found that there was more life experience and cultural backgrounds present that could provide added value to the learning environment. This links to the social learning theory noted above from Bandura (1986, 2001). Although an interesting viewpoint, it is essential that the topic of the COIL is something that can be stripped of potential biases and a topic that multiple international opinions see and can add value to the discussion points. It would be silly for example, to have a localized case study contextualized very specifically to a region where international viewpoints may only serve as an acknowledgment to the topic rather than widening discussion. This is especially important as the target audience are students, who may not feel they cannot engage comfortably with the discussion. This does tie to KOLB's learning cycle (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016) by providing an environment of concrete experience and active experimentation ultimately allowing for the other areas such as reflective observation and abstract conceptualization. A COIL can be a valuable learning experience for all involved, no matter what their learning preference is.

Although the parameters of the sessions were to be made consistent, there were some technical issues in the online learning space that sadly meant some student engagement opportunities between the two institutions were not possible for one of the COIL's,

however even with this set back the students saw the value of the interaction of a different international perspective for the session. This highlights the value of drawing on various viewpoints in the learning environment to add context and perceptions of the wider community and external environment. As many education institutes share a such a diverse cohort of students studying in a dynamic environment due to changes in policies, social beliefs, and technology to name a few, promoting this COIL style of teaching practice can only enhance the learning and the participant's own professional development in response to contemporary society. This is true for both students' participants and academic staff participants as a means to develop their own pedagogic practice throughout their other work. This will be the catalyst to Gunn's (2020) suggestions around it enhancing research, innovation and competition in developing practice.

The key limitations of COIL that were highlighted in the themes were firstly the impact of technology. One would think in contemporary society, where technology is forever changing and developing, this shouldn't be a main stumbling block of a COIL. This did raise some comments from the feedback from a few participants. It could suggest further research into the best possible platform to host an event for minimum disruptions.

Another impact was the motivation of some students to get involved in the activity at hand as some feedback stated that 'not all students were contributing equally'. As a key risk to the success of the COIL, one potential treatment could be to have a specific facilitator or academic lead that hosts the online rooms that the activities take part in. This wouldn't necessarily be differing practice for what happens in the traditional face-to-face learning in Higher educational institutions with academics taking a role of facilitator of knowledge as a common teaching approach rather than the traditional didactic teaching practice. This also links to the above stressing the importance of having a more open comfortable topic to discuss also widening participation.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the more common the COIL teaching practices become in an institution, the more these limitations will become normalized developing engagement in the learning environment, setting and managing expectations of the students and ironing out and troubleshooting the technical issues that arise. It is clear that there is added value in these experiences, they just require careful planning and consideration around the topic to provide a valuable learning experience. Students demonstrated interest in repeating their COIL experience, and even in COIL series, despite some of the limitations they faced. The value of COILs is also important to take note; not only do students gain topic-related knowledge, but also additional insight into event organisation, cultural differences, and cross-cultural communication.

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