

Innovative Pedagogy in Action: Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) between Malaysian and Japanese Students

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Abstract

Online international collaboration in teaching and learning represents a valuable investment in training university students to thrive in diverse global contexts. By engaging in such collaboration, students gain exposure to diverse perspectives, develop cross-cultural communication skills, and cultivate a global mindset to navigate the complexities of an interconnected world and drive positive change. This research seeks to examine the experiences of students participating in collaborative online international learning programs. Qualitative self-reflection involved participants writing daily reflections, offering insights into their experiences participating in this collaborative online learning. A total of thirty undergraduate students from Malaysian (n=17) and Japanese (n=13) universities participated in the four-day COIL program. Findings indicated that students had the opportunity to learn about diverse cultural perspectives and enhance their intercultural communication skills through the collaborative online learning experience. At the same time, students gained confidence in their English speaking skills. Eventually, this programme can serve as a conduit for building bilateral relationships between universities in Malaysia and Japan.

Keywords: Global Learning, Intercultural, Online Teaching, University Students

Introduction

The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an educational method that links students and teachers from different nations using virtual platforms to enhance cross-cultural learning and cooperation. The COIL program incorporates worldwide viewpoints into the curriculum, enriching the understanding of global concerns and cultural diversity for 82 pupils (Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016). This approach encourages active participation and cultivates proficiencies such as cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and resolving issues across different locations (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). The COIL program will provide academics and students with expanded chances to enrich their global and cross-cultural knowledge by collaborating with international peers. Christensen et al. (2022) state that in order to be classified as COIL, activities must satisfy the following criteria:

- Collaborative: Faculty members from various universities work together to teach a module. In order to get the desired outcome, it is imperative that their students collaborate efficiently.
- Online: Interactions between students and instructors take place on the internet.
- International: The interactions are transnational, encompassing one or more prestigious institutions from distinct nations. This engagement improves their abilities to understand and navigate different cultures and countries.
- Learning: COIL classes are a fundamental component of the curriculum, rather than being elective or optional assignments.

Jon Rubin, the Director of the SUNY COIL Center, part of the State University of New York (SUNY) System, introduced COIL initiative in 2006 as a project to develop globally networked learning opportunities for students and faculty. COIL not only offers a platform for academic and professional growth, but it also provides an opportunity for personal development (Appiah Kubi & Annan, 2020). Engaging in cross-cultural exchanges and working on shared projects can lead to profound personal growth as students learn to navigate unfamiliar cultural landscapes, challenge their own perspectives, and develop empathy for others. This kind of experiential learning goes beyond the classroom, allowing students to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

According to Davierwala et al. (2022), Gokcora and Oenbring (2021) and Ryabova (2020), COIL significantly contributes to the promotion of global leadership skills among university students across the world by fostering an environment that encourages intercultural communication, collaboration, and the development of a global mindset. In addition, students from diverse cultural backgrounds engage in joint lectures, interactive sessions, and collaborative research projects through the implementation of COIL programs, which are instrumental in developing their global competency and sense of international community, even amidst global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Edward, 2023; Minei et al., 2021). Furthermore, the interactive nature of COIL programs encourages students to proactively engage with each other, fostering collaboration, problem-solving abilities, and decision-making capabilities in real-world contexts (Davierwala et al., 2022).

This research seeks to examine the experiences of undergraduate students from Malaysia and Japan participating in COIL. The COIL program was conducted over four days in 2022 and consisted of diverse interactive activities tailored to teach students global leadership skills, including presentations related to social issues in Malaysia, such as HIV/AIDS among women and dropout among high schools. The objective of this paper is (i) to examine the perceived impact of COIL on the students' learning experiences and (ii) to identify the successful factors influencing students' engagement and participation in COIL activities.

Literature Review

The Emergence of International Online Learning

In the contemporary landscape of education, international online learning stands as a cornerstone, offering a dynamic platform that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries to enrich the educational journey for students worldwide (Borger, 2022). This paradigm shift is characterized by a myriad of key features that synergistically enhance the learning experience for a diverse cohort of learners. Integral to this transformation is the

integration of COIL models, heralding a new era of intercultural communication effectiveness and cultural humility among adult learners (Mallon, Richards, & Rixon, 2023). Engineering technology students have made significant strides in fostering cross-cultural collaboration through COIL experiences, as evidenced by their enhanced project work performance. Additionally, the advent of digital technologies, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic, has underscored the imperative of leveraging online platforms to cultivate global learning and intercultural competencies (Ryabova, 2020)

Educators must use their international and pedagogical knowledge to effectively internationalize curricula in this rapidly evolving landscape. Cutting-edge practices inform the development of online, cross-cultural curricula, highlighting the importance of addressing cultural barriers and differences to promote effective learning (Anderson & Oz, 2023). Similarly, Yang et al. (2024) shared that teachers should use an independent online app, "BookWidgets" to improve students' grammar skills and provide a safe platform for learning language. Studies reported that COIL can become a transformative international online learning tool to empower students to engage with diverse perspectives, broaden their understanding of global issues, and cultivate collaborative skills, which are essential in this increasingly interconnected world. Therefore, the multifaceted approach of international online learning serves as a crucial step in equipping students to prosper in the intricate fabric of our globalized society.

Educational Implications and Challenges

Effective international online learning is characterized by several key features that collectively enhance the educational experience for students across diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds. The integration of COIL models plays a critical role in facilitating intercultural communication effectiveness and cultural humility among adult learners, as evidenced by significant increases in these areas following COIL experiences (O'Dowd, 2022). Ji et al. (2020) further underscores the effectiveness of COIL by highlighting its ability to enhance project work performance among engineering technology students through cross-cultural collaboration. The adaptation of education to online platforms, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has highlighted the importance of utilizing digital technologies to foster global learning and cultural understanding (Hamzah et al., 2022). This shift necessitates that educators develop international and pedagogical knowledge in order to effectively internationalize the curriculum and promote intercultural competencies (ICC) (Anderson & Oz, 2023). Moreover, the design of online learning environments should prioritize accessibility in terms of pedagogy, language, technology, and economics to promote social inclusion and enhance the learning experience (Ahmad et al., 2021; Aškerc Zadavec, 2023; Jaafar et al., 2022).

Research has shown that COIL experiences effectively enhance intercultural effectiveness and cultural humility among participants, underscoring the significance of simulated global exchange experiences (Anderson & Or, 2023). Moreover, experiential learning through COIL and other internationalized classroom activities is crucial for developing intercultural competence, especially in fields that require cross-cultural collaboration, such as engineering (Law et al., 2019). The pivot to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the potential of digital technologies to foster global interconnectedness and cultural understanding, emphasizing the need for educators to develop pedagogical knowledge that

bridges international and pedagogical insights (Abdullah et al., 2024; Ibrahīm & Sulaiman, 2023; Sanusi et al., 2022; West et al., 2024). Studies have also demonstrated that COIL can significantly enhance intercultural competence, as evidenced by increases in cultural intelligence and multicultural personality among participants (Ramanau, 2016). Heuristic evaluation models and collaborative tools like iRemix facilitate the development of critical thinking skills, critical friendships, and a teamwork spirit in the shift to digital education (Borger, 2022). Research has shown that COIL projects enhance cultural competency and collaborative learning outcomes, resulting in high levels of student satisfaction (Mallon et al., 2023). Effective distance learning requires the adoption of various teaching methods and forms, including practical, problem-solving, and interactive methods, to enhance learning effectiveness (West et al., 2024). Lastly, the success of online international learning closely links to the inclusion of intercultural and international dimensions in the curriculum, with a significant correlation between the use of online international learning activities and the incorporation of international elements into teaching practices (Christensen et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism is a prominent theoretical perspective in education. Rooted in the work of theorists such as Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, social constructivism posits that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction and collaboration within a cultural context (Mishra, 2023). According to this perspective, learning is not simply a process of acquiring information passively but rather an active engagement with others and the environment, wherein individuals construct meaning through dialogue, negotiation, and reflection (de Soto, 2020). In the context of participating in COIL programs, social constructivism suggests that students engage in collaborative online activities and interactions with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, actively constructing knowledge and understanding through social interaction and dialogue. Through collaborative projects, discussions, and shared experiences, students collectively negotiate meanings, perspectives, and solutions to complex problems, drawing on their diverse cultural perspectives and experiences (Muniyappan & Sivakumar, 2018). This collaborative learning process enables students to develop a deeper understanding of global issues and challenges, fostering the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills essential for effective leadership in a global context (Alghamdi, 2021).

Furthermore, social constructivism emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development, suggesting that learning occurs through the scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable peers or instructors (de Soto, 2020; Mishra, 2023). In COIL programs, students engage in collaborative activities under the guidance of facilitators or instructors, who provide support, guidance, and feedback throughout the learning process. Through this scaffolding process, students gradually develop their global leadership skills, language proficiency, and cross-cultural competencies, building on their existing knowledge and experiences (Muniyappan & Sivakumar, 2018). Moreover, social constructivism highlights the importance of cultural and contextual factors in shaping learning experiences and outcomes (Alghamdi, 2021). In COIL programs, students from different cultural backgrounds bring their unique perspectives, values, and ways of knowing to the learning environment, enriching the collaborative learning experience. By engaging with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, students gain insights into alternative viewpoints and approaches, expanding their worldview and enhancing their ability to work collaboratively in multicultural settings.

Methodology

Study Design

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of students participating in COIL. We employ a phenomenological design to gain rich insights into their perceptions and reflections on COIL programs.

Sampling and Sample

The sample size includes university students from Malaysia and Japan. We select a total of thirty undergraduate students from a Malaysian ($n = 17$) and a Japanese ($n = 13$) university using purposive sampling. Six groups of students met for two hours each day.

Recruitment Process

Academic institutions offering COIL programs in Malaysia and Japan collaborated to recruit participants. We electronically distribute recruitment materials, including information sheets and consent forms, to potential participants via email or online platforms. We obtain informed consent from all participants prior to their involvement in the study, ensuring their participation is voluntary.

Data Collection and Management

Data collection involves reflection notes that were written by participants via the Padlet link. Padlet is an online platform where users can create virtual bulletin boards to post and organize various types of content. People commonly use Padlet for collaboration, brainstorming, and real-time idea sharing. At the end of every session, participants wrote their reflections on their experiences with COIL and its impact on their global leadership development skills. The first author also took field notes to capture contextual details and observations of the program. All data is securely stored and managed in compliance with data protection regulations.

Rigor and Triangulation of Data Sources

We utilize multiple data sources, such as participant reflection notes, field notes, and relevant documents (e.g., COIL program materials), to ensure rigor and credibility. Triangulation of data sources enhances the validity and reliability of findings by cross-verifying information from different perspectives. We also employ member checking to validate the accuracy and interpretation of participants' responses.

Data Analysis

We employ thematic analysis to analyze printed reflection notes (transcripts) and identify key themes, patterns, and insights related to participants' experiences with COIL and its impact on their global leadership skills. Data analysis involves coding the transcripts, categorizing codes into themes, and interpreting findings within the theoretical framework of global leadership development. Iterative process allows for constant comparison and refinement of emerging themes until they reach saturation.

Findings

Three themes emerged based on the reflections of undergraduate students from Malaysia and Japan participating in COIL programs. The first theme focuses on the perceived impact of COIL on learning experiences. Findings suggest that participating students perceived COIL to

have a significant positive impact on their learning journey. Through interactive activities tailored to address global social issues, students reported gaining a deeper understanding of challenges specific to Malaysia. The second theme described the factors that influence students' engagement and participation in COIL activities. Key factors include the relevance of topics discussed, the interactive format of the program, and the supportive learning environment fostered by facilitators. Finally, the third theme discusses success factors and challenges encountered during the COIL program.

Impact 1: Enhancement of Global Social Issue Awareness

The findings of this study underscore the substantial positive impact perceived by participants regarding the COIL program on their learning experiences. Through their engagement with COIL, participants articulated a profound enhancement in their comprehension of global social issues, with a specific focus on those prevalent in Malaysia.

According to participants, the interactive framework of COIL activities facilitated robust cross-cultural exchanges, fostering an environment where they could exchange perspectives, insights, and potential solutions to shared challenges encountered within their respective nations. Participants further added that presentations addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS among women and high school dropout rates in Malaysia ignited profound discussions, prompting them to undertake critical analyses of the underlying causes and explore potential avenues for remediation via group discussion and presentation. Furthermore, the collaborative nature inherent in COIL fostered the cultivation of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and a broader worldview among students, thereby enriching their overall learning experiences and equipping them with invaluable skills for navigating diverse global contexts.

In addition, the immersive nature of COIL activities extended beyond conventional classroom settings, providing participants with practical insights and real-world applications of theoretical concepts. Participants described that through case studies and online group discussions, they were able to translate theoretical knowledge into actionable solutions, thus reinforcing their understanding and retention of course materials. For example, one participant described that her group members were able to design a social entrepreneurial program to empower women living with HIV/AIDS in Malaysia. Participants also shared that the peer-to-peer learning dynamics inherent in COIL encouraged them to actively engage with course content and collaborate with their counterparts from different cultural backgrounds. This peer learning environment not only facilitated knowledge exchange but also fostered a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among participants.

Moreover, the diverse range of topics covered within the COIL curriculum served to broaden participants' horizons and expose them to multifaceted global issues. Majority of participants reflected that by addressing pressing social issues such as HIV/AIDS prevalence among women and high school dropout rates, COIL challenged them to think critically and empathetically about complex societal problems. Through these discussions, they gained a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of global challenges and the importance of collaborative approaches to effecting positive change.

Impact 2: Cross-Cultural Learning through Lectures on Social Issues

In their daily reflection, participants reported numerous pivotal factors emerged as influential in shaping their engagement and participation in COIL activities. Firstly, participants described that the relevance of the topics discussed emerged as a cornerstone in capturing their interest and fostering active involvement. Presentations from lecturer who addressing social issues prevalent in Malaysia resonated deeply with both Malaysian and Japanese participants, offering invaluable insights into real-world challenges and serving as catalysts for cross-cultural learning and collaboration.

Additionally, participants also reflected that the interactive nature of the COIL program, characterized by group discussions, case studies, and virtual simulations, served to promote active engagement and participation among students. This interactive format provided students with opportunities to apply theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios, thereby fostering deeper learning and critical thinking skills. Participants also reflected that the creation of a supportive learning environment within the COIL program proved instrumental in encouraging them to express their opinions freely and engage in constructive dialogue with their peers.

According to these participants, facilitators who are also lecturers, played a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity and ensuring them to feel valued and heard throughout the program. Participants later added that facilitators guidance and support contributed significantly to creating a conducive atmosphere for collaborative learning. Additionally, the seamless communication and collaboration facilitated by technology played a crucial role in overcoming geographical barriers and fostering meaningful interactions between Malaysian and Japanese students. Through the utilization of various digital platforms, students were able to engage in dynamic exchanges, further enriching their learning experiences and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Impact 3: Enrichment of Discussions through Diverse Perspectives

In addition to the factors influencing engagement and participation, several other critical aspects emerged as pivotal to the success of the COIL program. Participants shared that one of the main factors was the diverse range of perspectives brought by students from Malaysia and Japan. Participants reflected that diversity in perspectives served to enrich discussions and facilitated the exploration of multiple viewpoints on complex social issues. Furthermore, they also described that the collaborative nature of COIL activities fostered teamwork and cooperation among group members, leading to the development of essential interpersonal skills.

However, despite the overall positive outcomes, participants reflected that the implementation of the COIL program encountered various challenges. According to these participants, one significant challenge pertained to technical issues, including connectivity problems and language barriers. They reported that these challenges occasionally disrupted smooth communication and collaboration between Malaysian and Japanese students, thereby affecting the effectiveness of certain activities. Additionally, some participants described that disparities in cultural norms and communication styles occasionally led to misunderstandings or misinterpretations among participants, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity and effective cross-cultural communication training.

Moreover, majority of participants described that the short duration of the COIL program presented a challenge in fully exploring and addressing complex social issues. While the four-day format provided a valuable introduction to global leadership skills and cross-cultural learning, participants suggested that a longer duration could facilitate more in-depth exploration of topics and foster deeper engagement among members. Therefore, future iterations of the COIL program may benefit from extending the program duration to allow for comprehensive exploration of global issues and enhanced student engagement.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this study reveal the profound impact of COIL programs on participants' learning experiences. Similar to a study from Anderson and Or (2023), participants highlighted the significant enhancement in their comprehension of global social issues, particularly those prevalent in Malaysia. COIL provided a platform for students to engage in robust cross-cultural exchanges, exchanging perspectives and insights on shared challenges within their respective nations (Mallon et al., 2023). In addition, presentations addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS among women and high school dropout rates sparked insightful discussions, prompting critical analyses and exploration of potential solutions. The collaborative nature of COIL fostered empathy, cultural sensitivity, and a broader worldview, equipping students with invaluable skills for navigating diverse global contexts (West et al., 2024). Additionally, the immersive nature of COIL activities facilitated practical insights and real-world applications of theoretical concepts, reinforcing understanding and retention of course materials.

Through their engagement with COIL, participants articulated a profound enhancement in their comprehension of global social issues, particularly those prevalent in Malaysia. This increased awareness is critical as it helps students understand the complexities and nuances of social issues beyond their immediate environment, similar to a studies by Anderson and Oz (2023) and Vahed and Rodriguez (2021). For instance, when discussing HIV/AIDS among women, participants were able to understand the cultural, economic, and social factors contributing to HIV/AIDS issue, leading to a more holistic understanding and fostering empathy and cultural sensitivity.

The findings of this study also have implications for the design of COIL modules to ensure high levels of student engagement and participation. The results show that the content or topics presented during the COIL module is important in attracting students' interest and in promoting active student participation. For example, social issues addressed during the COIL module were relevant to both Malaysian and Japanese participants' experiences, knowledge, and interest. Moreover, these issues provided real-life examples of how to address cross-cultural issues or challenges. In addition to all this, a safe space for participant-centered pedagogy allowed participants' voices to be heard and valued during the COIL module through an inclusive facilitation approach by facilitators. This highlights the importance of designing a safe space where participants feel that their perspectives are valued in promoting cross-cultural awareness learning outcomes.

Furthermore, several key factors that influenced students' engagement and participation in COIL activities, including the relevance of social issues discussed during the program. The interactive format of COIL, characterized by group discussions and case studies promote active engagement and provide opportunities for applying theoretical concepts to real-world

scenarios (Law et al., 2019). A supportive learning environment, facilitated by lecturers and technology, encouraged COIL participants to express their opinions freely and engage in constructive dialogue. Use of technology and online tools such as Padlet and Mural also enabled seamless communication and collaboration, overcoming geographical barriers and fostering cross-cultural understanding among participants.

Finally, the findings suggest that the diverse perspectives brought by students significantly enriched discussions and facilitated the exploration of multiple viewpoints on complex social issues. This diversity fostered teamwork and cooperation, leading to the development of essential interpersonal skills (Christensen et al., 2022). However, the implementation of the COIL program faced challenges such as technical issues, connectivity problems, language barriers, and cultural misunderstandings, highlighting the need for cultural sensitivity and effective cross-cultural communication training. The short duration of the program also limited the depth of exploration and engagement. Therefore, extending the duration of future COIL programs could allow for more comprehensive exploration of global issues, deeper engagement, and enhanced student collaboration. This implies that addressing technical and cultural challenges, while providing a longer and more immersive experience, could further maximize the benefits of cross-cultural learning programs like COIL.

Conclusion

The study's findings emphasise the beneficial influence of COIL on the educational experiences of undergraduate students from Malaysia and Japan. This study contributes to the understanding of effective international collaborative learning initiatives by analysing the perceived impact of COIL and identifying the elements that influence students' involvement and participation. In the future, it will be essential for students to be prepared for an interconnected world by actively developing and executing COIL programs that tackle global concerns and promote cross-cultural understanding. Integrating these discoveries into upcoming COIL efforts can amplify the efficiency and influence of worldwide collaborative learning experiences for undergraduate students from various cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the creation of significant cross-cultural links between students from Malaysia and Japan showcases the capacity of COIL programs to foster intercultural comprehension, reciprocal admiration, and worldwide citizenship among university students. COIL initiatives promote peace, collaboration, and solidarity in a linked world by establishing collaborative ties and partnerships. In summary, this study highlights the significance of COIL programs as an essential resource for equipping students with the skills needed to succeed in diverse cultural and professional settings. These programs contribute to the growth of students as global citizens and forward-thinking leaders who can effectively tackle the intricate problems confronting our interconnected world. Institutions can enhance the comprehensive education and growth of students by integrating COIL programs into higher education curricula and research agendas. This will provide students with the necessary skills to make significant contributions to their communities and society.

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