INTERNATIONALIZATION AND VIRTUAL COLLABORATION: INSIGHTS FROM COIL EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze possibilities and limitations of the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) approach to foster international collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) so as to boost their internationalization process. With that aim, a documental meta-analysis of twenty-three case studies carried out in 2012 by the Global Center of the State University of New York (SUNY) were reviewed and discussed in terms of the potential of COIL to foster the development of global learning, social capital, and international academic collaboration between international HEIs. Results of the analysis suggest that COIL is an approach that can promote online academic mobility and international collaboration as well as enhance intercultural competence when combined with the Intercomprehension Approach (IA) to enable the use of different foreign languages.

Keywords: COIL; internationalization of higher education; intercultural competence; IA.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) all around the world are dealing with the impacts and changes brought about by globalization and its advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) in general and the internet in particular. Internet has shortened distances forcing modern education to reflect about how to prepare students to become global citizens (WOOLF, 2010) while maintaining their local identities (FINARDI, 2014).

The creation of effective strategies that address the challenge of cultural globalization has encouraged educators to seek alternatives to prepare students and academic disciplines for the globalized world, once most traditional disciplines are based on cultural views of the world

that are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other systems of knowledge (SMITH, 1999).

In this regard, Woolf (2010) suggests a solution in terms of virtual mobility mentioning that we have ignored or failed to recognize other alternatives to foster international academic collaboration. The term *Collaborative Online International Learning* (COIL) refers to an approach that aims to provide possibilities of virtual collaboration between HEIs and because of its potential to foster internationalization even in face of financial limitations, it will be considered here as an alternative for academic mobility and international collaboration. So, in order to reflect about possibilities and limitations of using COIL for internationalization, the present study offers a review of 23 case studies carried out in 2012 by the State University of New York (SUNY) with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Internationalization and intercultural competence

Knight (2004, p. 07) defines internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". For Marmolejo (2010), internationalization is the highest stage of international relations among HEIs. Approaches to internationalization vary across regions, although, conceptually, we can divide them into two types: passive internationalization - that basically focuses on the academic mobility type OUT, or the sending of academics abroad; and active internationalization - that focuses on academic mobility type IN, or the attraction of foreign academics (LIMA; MARANHÃO, 2009).

As suggested by Finardi and Ortiz (2015) and Finardi and Guimarães (2017), in the case of Brazil, most universities in the so-called Global South (SANTOS, 2005, 2011) have a passive internationalization process whereas countries in the Global North show an active internationalization process with the opposite flow. The term Global North is a geopolitical rather than geographical term used by Boaventura Sousa Santos (2005, 2011) to refer to hegemonic countries – despite their geographical location –, whereas the term Global South is used, by comparison, to refer to peripheral countries.

Finardi and Ortiz (2015) investigated the motivation for internationalization of two Brazilian institutions, one public and one private. Results of the study suggest that Brazilian universities, unlike the ones in the Global North, have mostly an academic motivation for internationalization whereas universities in the Global North are driven mainly by a financial imperative to internationalize (OROSZ; PERNA, 2016).

Internationalization at Home (IaH) (TEEKENS, 2013) is characterized by curricula with an international orientation and it has become one of the strategies used by universities to internationalize reaching all the academic community instead of employing the traditional mobility that is reserved for a minority of students. IaH may be an alternative to prepare the academic community to understand diversity/multiculturalism while developing intercultural competence, understood as the ability to act effectively across different cultures.

Chun (2011, p. 393) defines intercultural competence as "[…] an understanding not only of the culture and language being studied but also the readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment about the other culture and the willingness to reflect on one's own culture and question the values and presuppositions in one's own cultural practices."

For Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), intercultural communication competence is necessary to act in the globalized society, both domestically and abroad. An individual should have the flexibility to interact with other cultures and ethnical, religious groups because cultural diversity is manifested everywhere. Language cannot be disassociated from culture because the forms and uses of a given language are reflections of the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. According to Kramsch (1993, p.23) "we cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it." Given the role that languages play in the construction of identities, cultures and realities, access to foreign languages must be guaranteed through inclusive language policies to stimulate multilingualism (FINARDI; SANTOS; GUIMARÃES, 2016; FINARDI; GUIMARÃES, 2017).

Finardi (2017) suggests that the use of the Intercomprehension Approach (IA) is a relevant alternative to multilingualism while Guimarães *et al.* (in press) suggest the use of the IA in the context of internationalization to develop intercultural competence. Guimarães *et al.* (in press) suggest that the IA is not an alternative to learning all language skills; instead, it is an alternative to boost internationalization with a more critical and multilingual approach. The IA aims to develop linguistic awareness, focusing on the value of all languages and defending linguistic diversity as an alternative to a single language of communication. Araújo e Sá *et al.* (2009) state that the IA is useful for developing multilingual educational projects as well as to prepare students for the globalized world by evolving comprehension of different languages and establishing relationships at several linguistic levels – lexical, morphosyntactic, and phonic.

Guimarães *et al.* (in press) propose that the IA may help to fight against the hegemony of English in the internationalization scenario by expanding access to education and information

besides increasing intercultural awareness and global integration in a fairer and more peaceful way (GUIMARÃES; FINARDI, in press).

Traditional teaching/learning approaches have been gradually transformed and adjusted to the global, connected, dynamic and interactive world. Internet has revolutionized human relations facilitating access to information overcoming geographic and temporal barriers. In this context, blended or hybrid approaches to teaching/learning can aid to integrate face-to-face teaching and distance learning pedagogical practices and interactions (GRAHAM, 2006).

This blended approach can be delivered synchronously and asynchronously. The former occurs when teachers, tutors, instructors and students need to be present/online in real time during classes/sessions to promote interaction among all involved, whereas the latter proposes a different model whereby the time and space of classes are aligned with participants' needs. Asynchronous sessions are ideal for participants from different locations because of their different time zones.

Graham (2006) considers blended learning ideal for the higher education scenario due to its flexible, economical and innovative features besides its potential to help institutions to better explore physical space and faculty time (DZIUBAN *et al.,* 2006). Telecollaboration in the educational context is defined as internet-based intercultural exchange among people of different cultural/national backgrounds set up in an institutional blended-learning context (GUTH; HELM, 2011). It is based on the sociocultural view (VYGOTSKY, 1986) of language learning in social contexts through interaction and collaboration. It is a blended approach aiming at critical reflection and ongoing scaffolding (the gradual move towards greater understanding and independence) to bridge learning gaps (GUTH; HELM, 2011).

Telecollaboration, initially seen as written and asynchronous communication, refers to "multimodal environments that offer both synchronous and asynchronous communication and oral, written, and media-sharing communication among learners" (GUTH; HELM, 2011, p. 43).

The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) approach fosters the development of intercultural competence and collaborative teaching and learning with the use of digital technology, more specifically, the internet. This approach is also known as globally network learning, telecollaboration (GUTH; HELM, 2011) or virtual mobility/exchange.

The American Council on Education (2016, p. 02) defines COIL "as a new teaching and learning paradigm that develops intercultural awareness and competence across shared multi-cultural online learning environments." The COIL approach emphasizes the collaborative

process between both teachers and students; offers neither a platform nor a specific set of tasks and activities; tries to engage players at all levels within institutional settings.

De Wit (2013) claims that the term "collaborative online international learning" combines the four essential dimensions of virtual mobility, namely: a collaborative exercise of teachers and students; the use of online technology and interaction; potential international dimensions and integration into the learning process. In the COIL approach, collaboration takes place when two or more individuals from different language-cultural backgrounds interact to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to possess on their own. The COIL approach, therefore, emerges an alternative to unidirectional approaches for considering local and global contexts, languages e cultures.

Methodology

Twenty-three case studies carried out by the Global Center[3] of the SUNY were chosen for this documental meta-analysis. In the 23 selected case studies, American Colleges/Universities used COIL to connect with partner institutions in other countries to internationalize their curriculum. All of the courses/modules were in areas related to Humanities and Social Sciences. The year of 2012 was chosen because of the vast occurrence of COIL projects in that year and also due to the range of institutions in partnership from different lingua-cultural backgrounds and geographical locations.

An analysis matrix was created considering the following parameters: *language of instruction*; *course length*; *class size*; and *on-line/blended class.* In order to synthesize the name of the course, they were numbered from 1 to 23. Regarding the analysis of language, students' feedbacks were taken literally from the site where the studies are described: http://coil.suny.edu/sites/default/files/coil_institute_case_studies.pdf.

In what follows the main characteristics of the COIL courses offered at SUNY in 2012 were summarized in Table 1:

Table 1: Documental meta-analysis

No.	Course Name	U.S.A. Institut.	Class Size	Partner Institution	Class Size	Partner institution country	Language of instructi	Length (week	Online or Blended

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[3] The SUNY COIL Center is a leader in the emerging field of collaborative online international learning, that aims to develop new teaching and learning paradigms to foster cross-cultural competence across shared multicultural learning environments. The COIL Center is a unit of SUNY Global, the largest comprehensive university system in the U.S. with nearly 500,000 students across its 64 campuses.

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1	Global Environmental Politics: The Galapagos as Case Study	Coastal Carolina University	15	La Universidad San Francisco de Quito	15	Ecuador	English	5	Online	
2	Coping with Violence: Experiences in the 20th Century	George Mason University	30	National. Research Univ. Higher School of Economics	14	Russia	English	12	Blended	
3	Global Citizenship and Corporate Social Responsibility	Lehigh University/ Drexel University	-	University of Ghana	23	Ghana	English	6	Blended	
4	The Global Village	Marymount University	-	Hanze University	23	Netherlands	English	17	Blended	
5	Cinematic Storytelling Across Cultures	National University	5	Queensland College of Art, Griffith University	5	Australia	English	08	Online	
6	Jazz! Born in America, Created Internationally	North Carolina Central University	26	Univ. of South Africa / Royal Acadeny of Music	25	South Africa and Denmark	English	12	UNISA – Online RAMA/NCCU - Blended	
7	What are Human Rights?	University of NC Greensboro	12	American University of Beirut	18	Lebanon	English	11	Blended	
8	Writing Seminar	Rochester Institute of Technology	22	American College of Management & Tech.	34	Croatia	English	10	Blended	
9	Global Youth Culture: Technology and Youth Networking	San Jose State University	17	Kwansei Gakuin University	23	Japan	English	11	Blended	
10	Japanese and American Culture	San Jose State University	30	Kagoshima University	40	Japan	Japanese	06	Online	
11	Re-Envisioning Diasporas	Swarthmore College	7	Ashesi University College	33	Ghana	English	13	Blended	
12	Imagining Nations: Cultural	University of Texas El	20	Victoria University	25	Australia	English	7-8	Blended	

	Divers. in Aust. and the US-Mex. Border	Paso						
13	Technical Communication	Texas Tech University	20	MyongJi University	31	Rep. of Korea	English	10	Blended
14	Science Fiction and Modern Society	Texas Tech University	5	Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena	8	Germany	English	10	Online
15	Confronting National Identity	Univ. of Wisconsin-Milw.	10	Osaka University	5	Japan	English	10	Blended
16	Gender Roles Across Cultures	College at Brockport	20	Novgorod State University	11	Russia	English	15	Blended
17	Transatlantic Public Administration & Policy	Buffalo State College	16	Manchester Metro. Univ./ Babes Bolyai Univ.	7	UK/Romania	English	06	Online
18	Global English Composition	Corning Community College	7	University of Belize	8	Belize	English	09	CCC – blended UB – Online
19	Voice and Movement for Actors	Corning Community College	15	Actors College of Theatre & Television	20	Australia	English	09	Blended
20	Internat. Development and Internat. Migration	SUNY Cortland	15	Anadolu University	15	Turkey	English	08	Blended
21	Planet Hip-Hop	Empire State College	15	University of Victoria	25	Canada	English	05	ESC – Online UV – Blended
22	Spanish / English	Empire State College	11	University de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	13	Spain	Spanish/English	10	Online
23	Intercultural Communications	SUNY Geneseo	16	Moscow State University	17	Russia	English	08	Blended

Source: Adapted from the report on case studies from the COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities

Analysis

Language of instruction

English was the main language of instruction in the courses analyzed here. One of the reasons is due to the fact that the COIL Center at SUNY engages American Universities with international HEIs to create and develop a shared syllabus. Crystal (2012) explains that English is a "global language" or "world language" with a leading role in international communication. Wolf (2010) claims that English is the main language of access to contents online. In the same line, Finardi, Prebianca and Momm (2013) claim that some knowledge of English and some digital literacy is necessary to have a wider access to information online once most of it is available in English. In the same line, Finardi and Tyler (2015) claim that English is necessary to increase access to education online through MOOCs.

According to *We are Social 2018 Digital Yearbook*[4] report, if we consider the estimation of the world population (7.593 billion) and the number of internet users (4.021 billion) in January 2018, this represents almost 53% of the total population on Earth. The same report estimates that around 51,2% of the internet content is in English. Regarding the use of English in social media, English respresents 50,9% of the languages used on Facebook for communication. The 2017 top ten hashtags used on instagram were all in English (#love, #instagood, #fashion, #photooftheday, #beautiful, #picoftheday, #fitness, #style, #travel, #happy). Even though not all social media users speak English, they tend to share images or make a reference to an event by hashtagging them with acronyms in English and in association with their own language (JIMMA, 2017).

Regarding other languages used in the studies reviewed here, Japanese was the collaboration language of the online course entitled "Japanese and American Culture" offered in a partnership between the San Jose State University (hereafter SJSU) and Kagoshima University in Japan. The first reason for the selection of Japanese as the course language of instruction was due to the SJSU students be all major or minor in Japanese. Another reason for this language choice was that the course focused on how Japanese culture is reflected in the American people's eyes, such as marriage, popular culture, job hunting, etc. Japanese and English were the languages of instruction at SJSU, although Japanese was the primary language[5] of most students in both institutions.

According to the instructor from SJSU, most of the students from the institution did not reach the level where they could independently choose and use appropriate communication strategies to meet their intention in intercultural settings. One possible reason pointed out by

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[4] Retrieved from: <https://digitalreport.wearesocial.com/> Accessed on May 21st, 2018.
[5] The language used to communicate in class because the students were all Japanese major or minor. In this context, the use of Japanese is as a foreign language.

the instructor was that most of the students were not used to using Japanese with Japanese native speakers.

Spanish was the predominantly used language in the course "Spanish & English, Languages & Cultures" which was offered in a partnership between the Las Palmas University and SUNY, Empire State College. The communication between the instructors was in English, but among students was both in Spanish and in English.

According to the aforementioned document, some Spanish students reported on their experience communicating with the American peers:

1) *"There should be more interaction in groups, not just to do the projects. Although, it was a little difficult because of the time difference."* (Spain)

2) *"I liked best the oral sessions, but I think we should have made more."* (Spain)

3) *"Lo mejor sería planear más interacciones entre los alumnos, en vez de la presentación de trabajos orales, porque de esta manera lo que hacemos es practicar como lo hacemos en clase y no aprovechamos la ventaja de estar hablando con gente que domina el otro idioma y de la que podemos aprender mucho."* (Spain)

4) *"Me gustaría que se nos corrigieran los 'posts' a los estudiantes españoles, porque así sabríamos los errores que cometemos y mejoraríamos nuestro 'writing'".* (Spain)

From the accounts above, it is possible to infer that real oral interaction was a gap both in Spanish and English because it rarely happened during synchronous meetings. However, Student 1 points out that the interaction out-of-class would be difficult due to different time zones. So, in order to overcome this challenge, there were a couple of collaborations on Sundays. Student 2 reinforces this need supported by Student 3 who states that the chance to communicate with native speakers would be a way to learn more effectively.

As put forward by Finardi (2014), the claim that the interaction with native speakers is ideal must be taken with caution once it carries preconceived ideas such as models of native speakers as the "owners" of the target language and culture. Regarding the use of English in Brazil, Finardi (2014) suggests its appropriation ignoring notions of native speakers once the number of non-native speakers of English today outnumber the former.

According to Student 3 report, out-of-class asynchronous interaction happens only in written form in a blog or power point used for presentation in both classes on a topic of mutual interest (topics included family, education, food, etc.). Student 3 said this interaction would be more helpful if the American students gave feedback on the posts in order to help them to correct grammar/writing mistakes. Again, here we see a view of language that is limited to

knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, something already criticized by one of us in many occasions before (e.g.: FINARDI, 2016).

Although there was a great variation in terms of language proficiency among students, communication did not seem to be affected by this, reinforcing the view that language is much more than its representation in proficiency tests. For the Spanish instructor, the different proficiency levels did not represent a problem, on the contrary, the aim of the course was to build on this potential gap to turn it into an opportunity to learn.

Course length

The SUNNY proposal states that a COIL course/module should last a minimum of four weeks for students to get to know one another and to develop trust to work collaboratively. Longer courses may end up causing problems regarding faculty support and their existing syllabi. Out of the 23 COIL case-studies analyzed, there was an overall length varying from five to seventeen weeks.

Out of the five 4-6 weeks COIL courses analyzed, two were carried out in partnership with institutions located in developing countries – Ghana and Ecuador. Some structural aspects such as unreliability of electricity, computer space time and instability of internet connection were considered obstacles to the COIL experience and implicated directly on course extension.

The other three 4-6 weeks courses had issues related to schedule and planning. At first, the collaboration (San Jose State University and Kagoshima University) was supposed to be done over seven weeks, but Kagoshima side found out that the last week fell on the university anniversary and opted for six weeks.

Similarly, the course between SUNY Buffalo State, Manchester Metropolitan University (UK), and Babeş-Bolyai University (Romania) lasted six weeks due to the late start and Thanksgiving holidays, even though the initial plan was to have a four-module course over eight weeks. There was some uncertainty as to whom was responsible for what portions of the course resulting in "leadership diffusion". The collaboration between the Empire State College (U.S.A.) and the University of Victoria (Canada) also experienced initial delay because it was necessary to prepare the American group to collaborate in advance.

Nine of the case-studies analyzed had an average duration of ten to twelve weeks. These courses faced problems such as technological overload and technical issues (such as accessing the LMS, speed of the internet connection, audio fallout and video freezes) institutional calendar differences, among others. However, the major and most common challenge reported

was time difference. All of the institutions claimed to have received at least one kind of institutional support (financial, Administrative, pedagogical and technical) and the courses were successfully completed.

As course length increases, the occurrence of the COIL courses decreases. A possible reason for this is lack of necessary engagement from the faculties, for example, by providing an additional number of professors/instructors to contribute to the course process, physical structure, information technology specialists, etc. Nevertheless, there were two courses with 13-15 weeks length and only one with 16-18 weeks. Their completion was only possible due to institutional financial, administrative, pedagogical, and technical support.

Class size

Table 1 shows the number of students enrolled in each institution per case study. Overall, the groups of students from partner institutions were bigger than those of the U.S.A. In some cases, the class size difference of ten or more students is outstanding such as in courses 8, 10, 11, 13 and 23. Such differences can affect one-to-one interactions and intercultural development.

There was a balance in terms of class size among the case studies analyzed. The report did not present the class size of the American institutions in both courses "The courses "Global Citizenship and Corporate Social Responsibility" and "The Global Village" as the table 2 shows. Smaller/even groups tend to form personal relationships more easily providing hands-on practice of cross-cultural negotiation of meaning to promote skills and strategies in order to communicate based on real needs for interaction/communication. Also, classes with the same number of students enables synchronous class meetings when extra computers, headsets, cameras and equipped classrooms are not available.

On-line/blended class

The COIL classes took place at both institutions either fully online (synchronous and asynchronous) or in a blended format, that is, in an online plus face-to-face format. Both American faculties and partner institutions had a number of sixteen cases from a total of twenty-three. However, in the blended course "Global English Composition", the American College did not consider the Belizean class "blended" due to lack of usual number of people by classes according to the U.S.A. educational system. For CCC, Belizean classes were traditional ones with supplementary online elements.

The "The Global Village" course, offered in a blended format, had half of the class sessions in a face-to-face setting on each campus, twenty-five per cent of the class sessions online and twenty-five per cent of the class sessions exploring the local community.

Partner institutions had only one case of fully online course. In general, there were weekly synchronous meetings via videoconference and then peer/groups of students collaborated in a synchronous or asynchronous way through social media and other technology tools.

Each partner institution determined whether the classes would take place totally online or in a blended environment. For example, in the course "Jazz! Born in America, Created Internationally", classes in the University of South Africa (UNISA) were fully on-line, whereas in the North Carolina Central University (NCCU) and the Royal Academy of Music, Aarhus/Aalborg (RAMA) the course was offered in a blended format with both online and face-to-face meetings in the classroom with students and faculty.

Accordingly, the institutions had different choices regarding class format such as in the course "Planet Hip-Hop". The Empire State College (ESC) course was fully online, with blended opportunities created through synchronous social media tools such as Facebook Live Chat, Google Chat, Today's Meet, e-mail. The University of Victoria (U-Vic), however, offered a blended format course with opportunities created through the tools previously mentioned.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze possibilities and limitations of the COIL approach to foster international collaboration between HEIs and their internationalization process. With that aim, a documental meta-analysis of twenty-three case studies carried out in 2012 by the Global Center of the State University of New York (SUNY) were reviewed and discussed for reflection on the potential of COIL to foster the development of global learning, social capital, and international academic collaboration between HEIs.

Results of the study suggest that the COIL approach may open new opportunities for internationalization of the curriculum of HEIs and online academic mobility once it is low-cost, non-profit. and, therefore, financially accessible. If used in tandem with the IA, COIL may foster more balanced and sustainable internationalization processes as well as the development of intercultural competence and the preservation of multilingualism.

By connecting institutions from different cultures, languages, and contexts, the COIL approach enhances intercultural competence through the creation of opportunities for authentic language use, real communication and a permanent practice of prejudices and

naturalized beliefs. It also promotes the recognition and dialogues with alternative knowledges for a cognitively more equitable and democratic world. Moreover, it enables the access to fuller opportunities for cultural, social, political, and economic participation strengthening social capital.

A limitation observed in the case studies analyzed here was the lack of diversity of languages and the hegemony of English. A suggestion for future COIL experiences is to combine it with the IA as a way to appreciate all languages involved and to avoid a single language of communication.

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