

Fall 2021

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Recommended Citation

Gokcora, Deniz and Oenbring, Raymond (2021) "Experiential Learning across Borders: Virtual Exchange and Global Social Justice," *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 12. Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol4/iss2/12>

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Experiential Learning across Borders: Virtual Exchange and Global Social Justice

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Introduction

Following the development and widespread adoption of learning management systems (LMSs) such as Blackboard and Moodle in the early 2000s, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has emerged as another method to support international education (Dorn er, 2018; Jie & Pearlman, 2018). COIL programs connect students at campuses in two or more different countries to investigate global realities from a cross-cultural perspective through asynchronous (e.g., digital forums) and/or synchronous (e.g., Zoom meetings) digital engagement. As many scholars have noted, COIL collaborations between institutions in differing cultural contexts have several benefits, including: a) students use outside knowledge to create and assess posts in online discussion forums (Beckmann & Weber, 2016); b) students are provided an international perspective on the course content (Rubin, 2017); and c) they are often afforded the opportunity improve second language skills (Kasper & Weiss, 2005). In a time when acquiring global competencies is vital for individual development, a virtual exchange is a meaningful international learning experience for students, especially for those students who might not get to travel internationally. That is to say, COIL encourages the development of key career readiness skills, including global awareness, intercultural competence, digital literacies, teamwork, and problem-solving (De Castro et. al., 2019; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019). Indeed, regardless of their major, students must be competent in these skills, especially in the areas of cultural understanding and global responsible citizenship.

Line of Inquiry/Gap in the Research

While there have been numerous studies descri-

bing COIL collaborations between courses at different levels (for example, between graduate and undergraduate level courses [Kayumova & Sadykova, 2016]) or between courses in the same academic field at the same level (for example, uniting two international business courses [Benbunan-Fich & Arbaugh, 2006; Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016]), the research literature describing COIL collaborations between a developmental ESL class with a credit-bearing first-

year English composition course is very limited. In particular, nonnative speaking immigrant students have not received enough attention in the research literature. Accordingly, in this study, we describe an online COIL collaboration between an ESL class at the Borough of Manhattan

Community College (BMCC) of the City University of New York and a first-year writing course at the University of the Bahamas (UB). We have found that even though the language proficiency levels might be different between the two classes, COIL collaborative activities foster the development of writing skills, oral presentation skills, as well as critical thinking.

Furthermore, virtual exchange proves to be an ideal medium for experiential learning where students can deepen their perspective on global social justice issues, including issues of economic, environmental, and racial justice. We have established an explicit social justice agenda in one of our COIL assignments, the oral project, because we want our students to understand the ongoing legacies of racism, sexual violence, homophobia, and many other issues that violate the rights of individuals. Indeed, we want students to have a positive and empowering college experience in which they can value their identity, culture, and the characteristics of the community they have been brought up in while learning to value different ways of being.

“ . . . virtual exchange proves to be an ideal medium for experiential learning where students can deepen their perspective on global social justice issues”

Institutional Profiles

The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) of the City University of New York (CUNY) is a diverse urban community college serving a largely immigrant student body with students from approximately 165 foreign countries (BMCC Quick Facts, 2018). (For example, the students in the BMCC class in this study hailed from all of the following nations: Bangladesh, Thailand, China, India, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Nigeria, Morocco, and Egypt.) The institutional culture at BMCC supports student engagement and experiential learning in several ways. Since spring 2019, the BMCC Office of Internships and Experiential Learning has partnered with E-Learning and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to prepare faculty to implement COIL into their courses. Although faculty in several different departments at BMCC currently participate in COIL exchanges, the institution hopes to further expand opportunities for innovative COIL collaboration, with the goal of helping its students become more competitive as they enter an increasingly globalized and culturally diverse workplace.

Conversely, the University of the Bahamas is the national institute of higher learning in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. While the institution does hope to welcome significant numbers of international students in the near future, at present the University of the Bahamas serves almost entirely Bahamian nationals. Most students of the University of the Bahamas speak a mix of English and Bahamian Creole English, the home language of most Bahamians. However, a not insignificant number of UB students are members of the Haitian minority in the Bahamas. Like BMCC, UB is an institution serving a student body of largely socioeconomically disadvantaged, first-generation college students. Also of note is the fact that UB has only recently (in 2016) transitioned from being the College of the Bahamas; it is still, in many ways, a developing institution. Further, online education and COIL exchanges are both relatively new developments at UB, only beginning at UB in 2018 and 2019 respectively, with the former increasing dramatically at the institution in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COIL Projects

As we have suggested, our COIL collaboration was somewhat unique because it paired two classes with students at different levels of competency in English.¹ The BMCC students participating in the COIL project were enrolled in ESL 95. ESL 95 is a developmental course emphasizing writing

and reading skills while integrating a multi-modal approach to learning; however, oral skills are developed as well. In their writing tasks in the class, ESL 95 students focus on introducing, developing, supporting, and organizing their ideas in exposition as well as in descriptive writing. Conversely, the UB students were enrolled in English 119, a first-year academic writing course, focusing on critical reading, thesis development, and use of in-text citations.

Our COIL collaboration consisted of two major projects. In the first assignment sequence, what we called the education essay, students worked toward the production of an academic essay using Richard Rodriguez's noted autobiographical essay "The Achievement of Desire," an excerpt from his book *The Hunger for Memory*, as a springboard reading.² The purpose of the first task was to help students build a cross-cultural understanding of the expectations of college life, and the challenges of postsecondary education. In the second project, what we termed the global social justice video assignment, students chose an image or advertisement reflecting a social justice issue from their home culture and produced a YouTube video oral presentation in which they critically discuss the cultural context of the image, analyzing it according to the Aristotelian rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos. We collected data for the current study in a variety of ways, including: pre- and post-project surveys of students; analysis of students' posts to group forums and assignments; and informal feedback from students at the end of Zoom sessions. The current study was authorized by BMCC's IRB, and all students provided consent to participate in the study.

Education Essay COIL Project

To begin the education essay assignment sequence, we asked students in both classes to read Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire" (1978), hosting a number of joint class Zoom meetings to discuss the content of the reading. In the work, Rodriguez describes his English literacy development as the child of first-generation Spanish-speaking immigrants to the United States. In the piece, Rodriguez paints himself as a student who strives very hard to achieve and be successful in an English medium learning environment; he is ambitious to be an outstanding good student, so he constantly reads and imitates his instructors to be successful. However, as he advances in his education, he finds himself more aloof from his working-class immigrant family. Further, in Rodriguez's piece, there is the theme of "scholarship boy"—that is, an over-achieving immigrant student who attempts to mimic and please the teacher rather than think critically.

A major reason we selected Rodriguez's piece as our springboard text is because students at both BMCC and UB share Rodriguez's experience of coming from non-traditional academic backgrounds; almost all of the students in both classes are first-generation college students. Further, many BMCC students share with Rodriguez the fact that their home languages and cultures differ from the language of instruction in, and the academic culture of, the United States. Although the Bahamian students live in their home culture (where they are receiving a postsecondary education), they share with Rodriguez, and their BMCC counterparts, the fact that they are largely first-generation college students—that is, they are outsiders to the academic environment. Further, as previously mentioned, the home language of most Bahamians is Bahamian Creole English while the language of schooling in the Bahamas is Standard English.

After our initial joint Zoom sessions, we paired students off—one from BMCC and one from UB—and directed them to interview each other (twice).³ The first interview was a getting-to-know-you task consisting of a series of questions on students' personal and educational backgrounds. The second interview, however, focused directly on Rodriguez's essay; it asked students to delve deeper into the text, as well as the educational backgrounds and the cultural contexts of literacy, language learning, and education in their and their partner's respective home nations or family heritage cultures (recall that many BMCC students are immigrants to the United States). The interview questions and students' postings were hosted on a joint private implementation of the CUNY Academic Commons In A Box (CBOX-OpenLab) platform ("Commons in a Box") accessible to students from both institutions. Finally, at the end of the first assignment sequence, we asked students to write an expository/academic essay on attitudes to education in their and their partners' home nations using evidence from the Rodriguez essay. After composing their draft essays, students received feedback from both their COIL partners and their professor to guide their revisions for their final drafts.

We believe that the COIL education project offered our students a unique opportunity for experiential learning for a number of reasons. First of all, we believe that the interviews between the classes and environment fostered a sense of belonging in the COIL class; in other words, in the COIL education essay, as partners hear about common challenges and read of Rodriguez's experiences, they learn that language accommodation challenges are a normal experience for first-year college students, and they understand that they need to be connected in the social

and academic milieu even if they face challenges. As a number of scholars have noted, it is important that students develop a sense of belonging in the larger campus community in order to avoid dropping out near the beginning of their college experience (Wolf et al., 2017). Immigrant students or newly arrived freshmen coming from diverse backgrounds often face challenges in adapting to the college environment, and some might want to keep their social connections to their native culture enclaves and prefer to socialize with students from their home culture.

As students asked in-depth questions in the second interview to find out specific challenges of getting a college education in the U.S. and the Bahamas, students took part in more active scholarly roles than they had previously been used to. By asking questions, students play out different roles, roles that they are not accustomed to playing in academic environments. For example, students could present themselves as *experts in their own experience* (Helm, 2018, p. 162). That is, they do not only take the role of *knowledge providers*, but they are also information providers and designers for each other. As Kasper and Weiss (2005) state, "learning to assume these roles helps students increase their feelings of efficacy, fosters their active processing and interdisciplinary themes and concepts, encourages them to reconstruct and accommodate existing ideas and make personal connections with learning, and builds metacognitive knowledge associate with enhancing task performance" (p. 283). That is to say, as students engage in conversation with their COIL partners, they take responsibility for providing the correct information about their surroundings and culture.

Furthermore, students learned a variety of valuable language skills through the education essay project. First of all, through the COIL education project, students learned to *negotiate meaning* (see, for example, Pica, 1994); that is, students worked together to understand each other even if their English proficiency levels are different. This negotiation of meaning may help ESL students to acquire vocabulary and native speakers might be role models to produce better L2 output. As stated before, COIL provides an opportunity for nonnative English speakers to interact with a native speaker and native speakers to learn different styles of English as a foreign language. Other language skills are writing, composing, and providing evidence. Especially for ESL students, this might be their first experience of writing a short paper that includes evidence-based primary research. Planting the seeds of important academic literacy skills in writing classes is important for academic growth and establishing confidence in students.

Social Justice Visual-Oral Presentations

As previously mentioned, in the *global social justice video presentation*, students selected a social justice topic from their home nation (or family heritage culture) and developed a YouTube video presentation in which they selected an advertisement or image relating to the topic, analyzing its cultural context, and discussing the image's use of the Aristotelian rhetorical appeals of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Students then responded to each others' videos through posts to the joint CBOX forum. BMCC students presented on a diverse variety of topics, including: gender discrimination and sexual abuse in China; sexual violence in Bangladesh; underage marriages in Morocco; child labor in Ivory Coast; female genital mutilation in Guinea-Bissau; Boko Haram violence in Nigeria; government corruption in Haiti; and Islamophobia in the US. UB students also presented on an interesting, though less geographically diverse, range of topics, including: gender inequality in the Bahamas; environmental protection in the Bahamas; and LGBT rights in the Bahamas.

We established a social justice agenda in our oral project because we wanted our students to understand the ongoing legacies of racism, sexual violence, homophobia, and many other issues that violate the rights of individuals. Both English native speaker Bahamian students and second language learners in New York needed to understand the connection between sensitive topics of economic, racial, and social justice issues. Indeed, through learning about social justice issues in different regions of the world, students build their global awareness and understand how different social issues manifest themselves differently in different regions. For example, child labor in the Ivory Coast has a parallel social justice issue in child marriages in Morocco.

As we have contended, a major benefit of COIL collaboration is that it fosters global awareness in students, helping them build new perspectives. As students across cultures watched and listened to each other's global social justice issues, they learned from each other and became aware of issues that they have never heard of. For example, one student posted to the joint forum the following response after watching a social justice presentation on female genital mutilation in West Africa: "I found this presentation *extremely informative*. This was informative for me because I did not know about this issue happening in Africa... I am a female myself and this is something I would not approve of to take place on my body, this is pathetic" (emphasis added).

When students make comments on each other's social justice presentations, they also engage in dialogue. For example, the student who wrote a comment about genital mutilation in West Africa is provided with an answer to their concern by the student who developed the presentation. As this was a new awareness for the student from the Bahamas, the presenter wanted to clarify the topic by providing the following response:

Hi XXXX, I understand how you feel about this issue as a female but don't worry; now many organizations fight against this nonsense. Parents who force their kids to undergo female genital mutilation can go to jail.

What is significant in this interaction is that COIL projects prompt students to be part of a community of practice, an online community, and enable them to expand their global awareness about social, educational, and environmental issues.

As we can see from the exchange above, the COIL forum provides opportunities to have a dialogue between the presenter, "knowledge provider", and "the knowledge receiver". That is, students take alternating roles and gain confidence in expressing their points of view on global social issues. Selecting sensitive social and environmental topics fosters international perspectives of the same issue in different countries. These presentations provided a unique opportunity for all students on two campuses to share their local issues with everyone and internationalize the curriculum (Olson & Peacock, 2012). Moreover, students have the opportunity to act as experts in their own culture. For example, one BMCC student commented in a reflection post how the social justice video assignment gave them the opportunity to explain their home culture to their COIL partner through the social justice issue, contending that:

Watching the justice issue in my country is so useful. Because it helps me to let someone know about my country. It also helps to know about how they live in their own country. That can further my understanding all around the world. It is useful to practice my speaking skills.

As we see in the above quote, in addition to the assignment allowing the student to adopt the empowering position of an expert on their own culture, the student also commented on how the global social justice assignment allowed them to practice speaking in English.

Conclusion: Implications for Teaching and Learning

In this paper, we have provided an overview of

a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project between two writing courses at different proficiency levels at institutions in two different nations. While one class consisted largely of immigrant ESL speakers, who are not native speakers of the language of instruction, studying at an urban institution and the other class consisted largely of students who have lived their whole lives in one island nation, both classes consisted largely of socioeconomically-disadvantaged first-generation college students. Despite the physical, linguistic, and cultural divides between the students, we believe that COIL collaboration offered students a transformative experience. Indeed, Winner and Shields (2002) have described how web-based digital exchanges between Anglophone Caribbean postsecondary students and American postsecondary students can expand students' perspectives; that is, they have the potential to "break the island chains." We fully agree.

A major factor we want to emphasize in this study is the important role that peer feedback and interaction play in the learning process in COIL exchanges. Despite the fact that the BMCC ESL students were "remedial" English learners, the Bahamian students acknowledged the richness and strength their counterparts brought to the virtual exchange program. Indeed, we found that students on different campuses coming from different sociolinguistic backgrounds both embraced the asset mindset and value the multicultural aspect of international learning. That is, collaboration makes learning and teaching engaging and encourages critical consciousness for students and teachers in an open society. Through COIL collaboration, students learn to perceive each other as valuable and equal to each other.

Furthermore, the COIL projects in our courses provided an opportunity for students to make a connection between experiential learning and social justice issues. Accordingly, we believe that the pedagogical implications of our study, including those of building students' global citizenship, expand beyond just ESL and first-year writing classrooms to include potentially all academic writing and communication courses. While the overview of the two COIL projects and study results presented in this study provide limited generalizations, we believe that they will inform faculty members to develop collaborative, cross-cultural projects in their courses and enhance student outcomes. Therefore, COILing does not only provide an international perspective, resiliency to grow and learn, but it also satisfies the needs of employers and the community who need individuals with an open mindset. ■

Notes

1. While Bahamian students can be classified as native speakers of English, they are actually native speakers of Bahamian Creole English. Accordingly, standard English is the target language of schooling in the Bahamas.
2. The essay topic is a modified version of an essay assignment originally generated by Prof. L. Anderst of Queensborough Community College, CUNY (Personal Communication, April 15, 2018).
3. Although we did provide guiding questions, we encouraged students to come up with their questions as they conducted the interviews.

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