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## Research article

# Decolonising the film curriculum through South–North collaborative online international learning (COIL) initiatives

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## Abstract

Collaborative online international learning (COIL), also known as 'telecollaboration' or 'virtual exchange' among other terms, has been employed as a strategy for internationalisation of the curriculum in various disciplines for several years, but the COVID-19 pandemic has provided renewed impetus. This article argues that it can offer an effective means to decolonise approaches to teaching film studies through South–North collaborations. In brief, COIL is a pedagogical approach that holds that 'learning takes place through a distributed network of connections to other people and their resources, and formal and informal educational assets in the public domain' (Reo and Russell, 2015: 64). In this article, we argue that a COIL approach with a South–North focus, partnering with a higher education institution in Latin America, would provide unique opportunities to decolonise the film curriculum, given the features of COIL. In 2020, two universities in Mexico, one in Brazil and one in Colombia founded the Latin American Network for COIL. To date, it comprises 135 institutional members, some of which have students from Indigenous backgrounds and are already actively engaged in decolonising the curriculum. Our article proposes ways to take this forward.

**Keywords** decolonisation of the curriculum; COIL for film studies; South–North partnerships in higher education; Latin America

## Introduction

Collaborative online international learning (COIL), also known as ‘telecollaboration’, ‘global classroom’ or ‘virtual mobility’ among other terms, has been employed as a strategy for internationalisation of the curriculum in various disciplines for several years, but the COVID-19 pandemic has provided renewed impetus. This article argues that it can offer an effective means to decolonise approaches to teaching film studies through South–North collaborations in higher education.

In brief, COIL is a pedagogical approach based on situated learning theories that hold that ‘learning takes place through a distributed network of connections to other people and their resources, and formal and informal educational assets in the public domain’ (Reo and Russell, 2015: 64). When it is fully online, two groups of students in different countries enrol on the course, two or more faculty members teach it (normally one in each country), and all interaction is online. The curriculum for all students may be identical. When it is hybrid, students in different countries take the course with faculty co-teaching at each participating institution. Each group of students meets face-to-face with their instructor, while the larger group works together online on specific assignments and shared productions. The curriculum may or may not be identical, but it can be complementary, with only the shared units and assignments being similar or identical, as agreed by the faculty involved. The COIL approach considers participatory learning as ideal for students to discover ways of being global citizens, since new media foster a sense of shared belonging and are naturally collaborative.

The approach does have some drawbacks, and its implementation involves a number of barriers to collaboration that need to be managed. Some are institutional, such as different course calendars in participating institutions; some are contextual, for instance different time zones that constrain the possibilities for synchronous interaction, or the access to required online platforms; other barriers are personal and idiosyncratic. Moreover, it involves considerable preparation and support, so resources must be in place if it is to be successful.

However, it also has various significant advantages as we detail below, in particular holding much potential for decolonisation of the curriculum. In 2020, four universities, Universidad Veracruzana, Universidad de Monterrey (Mexico), Instituto Tecnológico Metropolitano de Medellín (Colombia) and Universidad Estadual Paulista (Brazil), founded the Latin American Network for COIL. To date, it comprises 135 institutional members, some of which have students from Indigenous backgrounds and are already actively engaged in decolonising the curriculum. They aim to provide education that respects and values Indigenous cultures, in the words of a staff member, ‘not merely as a form of compensation, but seeking to question and transform the dominant western model of education so that it can incorporate the knowledge, and indeed millennial wisdom, of the native peoples’ of the countries concerned (Sandoval Arenas and Meseguer Galván, 2017: 174). As de Sousa Santos and Meneses put it, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice (2020: 34).

Latin America does not feature frequently on most majors in film studies, but when it does, typically as a unit on ‘world cinema’, the concepts of ‘utopia’, ‘social transformation’, ‘emancipation’ and ‘revolution’ – all concepts relevant to decolonisation – are frequently associated with it. When teaching the history of Latin American cinema, for example, it is often highlighted that the period in the 1960s and 1970s, with the ‘Imperfect Cinema’, the ‘Third Cinema’ and ‘the Aesthetics of Hunger’ manifestos, served a social and political function that produced ‘a revolutionary imagination not only in Latin America but also in the former Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, Eastern Europe, Jamaica, Africa, and the United States’ (Venegas, 2012: n.p.). ‘Imperfect Cinema’, as coined by Cuban film-maker Julio García-Espinosa in 1969, argued that the imperfections of a low-budget cinema that sought audience engagement were preferable to the sleek Hollywood productions that constructed passive viewers. ‘Third Cinema’ (1960s–1970s) was a Latin American film movement that sought to become an alternative to what was viewed as the neo-colonial and capitalist Hollywood model (the ‘first’ cinema) and the art cinema of Europe (the ‘second’ cinema). Put forward by Brazilian film-maker Glauber Rocha in 1965, the

'Aesthetics of Hunger' manifesto characterised hunger as a form of violent expression and a source of critical power. The language of Latin American political cinema, and the various ideologies and practices it generated globally, aimed to decolonise film aesthetics, and to articulate a new cultural and political praxis. More recently, the sustained activism of Indigenous groups from the region, their use of digital tools and their global networks of distribution have also brought issues of decolonisation to film studies classrooms. And from a perspective of teaching transnational cinema, Alex Lykidis has singled out films such as *Children of Men* by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón (2006), which deal with issues of migration and displacement that are especially pressing in the region, as particularly useful for what Lykidis (2016: 59) terms 'a pedagogy of humility'. Instead of establishing 'a set of narrative oppositions and crises that are resolved by a protagonist with whom the spectator identifies, providing the viewer with a privileged position from which to deal with the situations' (Lykidis, 2016: 59), in *Children of Men* (and other similar films) strategies of disidentification are pursued. The protagonist is mistaken for an immigrant, and a dramatic loss of social status and agency thus ensues. This leads to feelings of disempowerment in the viewer that question the universalist, celebratory narratives of determination in the face of adversity that other films on the subject adopt, resulting in the 'pedagogy of humility' that Lykidis (2016: 59) articulates.

Building on this background of decolonial connections, here we argue that a COIL approach with a South–North focus, partnering with a higher education institution in Latin America, presents unique opportunities to decolonise film education beyond that of providing (occasional) curriculum content in the North, and challenging the Eurocentric curricula of many institutions in the Global South, transforming the mode of teaching and learning, and achieving a deeper and long-lasting impact. In the paragraphs that follow, we examine the features of COIL that make it an ideal tool to pursue the decolonisation of film education, and provide concrete examples of action that can be taken to achieve that end.

## Collaborative: all about partnerships

The collaborative nature of COIL implies reciprocity, an alternative to the extractive relationship between North and South that has characterised colonialism and neo-colonialism. Ramón Grosfogel (2020: 203) defines extractivism as:

the mechanism that links the exploitation of resources and raw materials in the periphery – with all its damaging consequences for the lives of mine workers, their communities, and the environment – to scientific projects such as Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire (CERN) in Switzerland, computer chips, and iPhones.

In addition to ecological destruction, this process involves violence to remove inhabitants from their territories. In the academic context, North–South collaboration frequently reproduces colonialism, as it is also highly extractive, from raw talent to data, subordinating the relation to the needs and interests of the North. COIL provides a means to pursue mutually beneficial agendas and outputs, as well as knowledge transfer, reconsidering issues around inequality in all its facets. It is indeed a truly networked format of education 'where no university and no campus can succeed without the direct involvement of international partners' (Rubin, 2016: 78), which must nonetheless remain independent so that the engagement involves a shift of perspective. The goal is not to 'export' knowledge, as is the case with massive open online courses (MOOCs), but rather, using a nautical metaphor, 'to take passengers back and forth to explore the cultures on each side, learning about the value of the differences found on those shores' (Rubin, 2016: 78).

Given the reciprocal nature of COIL partnerships, film co-productions would make an excellent theme for a course with decolonising aims. Film co-productions are generally regarded as a positive model for international cooperation that should be encouraged and emulated, mainly as this format strikes a balance between international collaboration and various national interests. Co-productions are also a way to enhance film and television budgets, and the wider distribution of the films increases outreach, thus

'creating cultural screen encounters between people in different nations' (Bonderbjerg, 2018: vii), echoing Rubin's (2016: 78) visits to different 'shores'. Indeed, it might be said that co-productions themselves potentially provide a way to enhance cultural diversity redressing colonialist models: the more producers, creative film and television people, and distributors work together across borders creating networks, 'the more audiences are confronted with not just national and American film and television but also a broad variety ... the bigger the chance that ... diversity becomes a part of our everyday life' (Bonderbjerg, 2018: ix). However, many of the existing schemes for South–North collaboration are also considered neo-colonial. Of two of them, *Aide aux cinémas du monde* and *Produire au Sud*, Ana Vinnuela (2018: 236) has said that they are underpinned 'by a desire to promote an otherness, as part of negotiating an alternative to Hollywood films and seeing international co-production as the locus par excellence for symbolic and economic exchanges'. They are said to represent proactive approaches towards the exportation of the European (in this case, French) co-production culture. Critically engaging with co-productions would thus be an ideal task for a COIL course to pursue.

Further, because the COIL syllabus must be negotiated, it presents an opportunity to include students as partners in the process. Assignments for COIL around the topic of co-productions might have teams of students researching specific films, funding schemes and/or festivals, as chosen by the students, to assess the extent to which they have a decolonial or neo-colonial impact. Like decolonisation efforts in education, the proposal to include students as partners in the curriculum design is rooted in the belief in 'the importance of social justice, the value of cultural diversity and the key role of critical education in developing individual and community potential' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: n.p.). Like COIL, staff–student partnerships are collaborative and reciprocal processes in which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally – if not in the same ways – to pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making and the implementation of a course. COIL is germane to these equalising approaches because it seeks to establish third spaces of co-creation of knowledge. The concept of 'third space' has been used in social theory to explore the impact of difference and diversity, when a combination of 'insider' and 'outsider' voices may coalesce into new perspectives (Whitchurch, 2013: 21). The fact that these third spaces are online is important, as we now argue.

## Online: widening access and levelling up

Digitisation has extended and broadened the learning environment. Digital tools and resources for the study of film, such as repositories, the ability to post media files, to create links to films streaming online, or to embed them, annotate them, write blogs and so on, have allowed film lecturers and tutors and their students to engage more effectively 'in the process of working analytically, of reading and interpreting primary documents and moving images, and to write as a process of learning and disciplinary thinking' (Aronson, 2012: n.p.).

The online learning experience is also often described as having an equalising effect. For example, in Gunawardena et al.'s (2019) research, Latin American students reported perceiving the online medium as one that equalises status differences in society, and therefore rejected suggestions for their peers to interject social context cues that would alter that. Other students report perceiving the lack of physical presence in the online environment as a positive feature, because it provides a reduced risk of social embarrassment (Gunawardena et al., 2019: 46). The opportunity that technology offers for people to craft an alternative identity should not be underestimated: it can enable one to experience the world in a new way.

In addition to this, and importantly for the decolonisation of education, Eurocentric accounts of history can also be challenged through technology. These accounts typically represent history as the progressive passage through stages of economic and technological development, going from the most primitive to the most high-tech, invariably characterising colonised peoples as 'early', savage or uncivilised. To transcend this characterisation, 'the false inevitability of a truncated present' (de Sousa Santos, 2020: 122), combining very ancient resources with the most recent or advanced technology is often necessary.

Moreover, in film studies, it is important to highlight the role of technology in subjugation. The use of COIL will easily draw attention to ‘the conditions of technological exchange (e.g., patent or projection equipment ownership) and their links to later, unequal industrial and technological exchanges’ at the root of colonialism and neo-colonialism (Venegas, 2012: n.p.).

An ideal COIL course for this could see students reflecting on the impact of the digital distribution and exhibition of Latin American films online, on platforms such as Cineaparte and Retina Latina, and even participating with jointly produced outputs. For instance, Retina Latina’s online festival ‘El cine que resiste’ (‘Films that resist’) aims to distribute digital films on social justice, memory and resistance, directed by young film-makers from the region. During the festival, a number of workshops, webinars and networking events that introduce young film-makers to policymakers, producers, copyright and marketing experts are held, all online. A COIL assignment could see translation students from the region working with film students from a higher education institution in the North to subtitle a sample of films on decolonisation, curated by the students, and to screen those films on the Northern institution’s platforms. Alternatively, a COIL course with only film students could centre on a topic from these platforms’ collections, such as short animated documentaries, Indigenous cinemas, or the collection made by students to celebrate film studies in their own institutions (see <https://retinalatina.org/colecciones/>).

## Inter-national: drawing attention to the (implicit) hyphen

The third feature of COIL that can be highly relevant to decolonisation efforts in education is its aim to connect teaching and learning partners across countries, as indicated by the term ‘international’. Many higher education institutions around the world see COIL as a cost-effective way to internationalise (if not necessarily decolonise) their curricula, as students will be exposed to other cultures and teaching models. The most important benefit from mobility appears to be in attitudes, self-confidence and adaptability to cooperate with different kinds of people. This is explained by the effect of being ‘exposed to different situations, contexts and people, and being “forced” to adapt in order to achieve positive outcomes ... Virtual mobility activities, offered as an alternative to physical mobility, should be designed in a way to mimic this profound exposure effect’ (Van Hove, 2020: 10). COIL can achieve similar or better outcomes, as ‘the bottom line for both physical mobility and virtual exchange is that improved competences result from meaningful interactions in diverse groups, both online and offline’ (Van Hove, 2020: 11).

It is our contention that this premise is correct, and that Indigenous peoples must be included as nations in the term ‘international’ (indeed, some Indigenous peoples in Canada are referred to as First Nations), even as they lack a state – precisely due to colonisation. This would be an important step to give internationalisation of the curriculum a decolonial turn. As mentioned above, some of the higher education institutions in the Latin American COIL network serve Indigenous populations, and many are located in areas with Indigenous peoples. Moreover, as Gunawardena et al. (2019) have pointed out, the sociocultural theories of learning underpinning situated learning, on which COIL is based, are compatible with at least some Tribal/Indigenous views of education, which cast learning as a communal process, in opposition to learning in isolation from other students and teachers. In particular, the pedagogies of Aloha, Ubuntuism and Zulu philosophies are mentioned.

A COIL course based on international collaboration as above, with Indigenous partners, could centre on documentary, a topic that has been singled out in film studies as especially suitable to model political activism:

Many of us came to the teaching of documentary through our interest in social change and our recognition that the documentary wields a power of engagement for young audiences. It would be difficult for any pedagogue to avoid documentary’s historical convergence with political activism ... It offers a great opportunity for a mutualist, experientially driven rather than top-down approach to pedagogy. (Renov, 2012: n.p.)

Indeed, we concur that the ‘mutualist’ (rather than ‘top-down’) approach emphasised by Renov (2012) would make documentary an ideal way to approach a COIL assignment with decolonisation goals, in a South–North partnership as we propose. Sample content could be a history of documentary that considers important examples of the genre, researched and co-presented by small groups or pairs of students; a critical appreciation of documentaries on current issues of mining, deforestation and the general exploitation of natural resources in Latin America that acutely affect Indigenous peoples (and the world) and coincide with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; or a hands-on approach with students making their own short documentaries, perhaps on a topic such as ‘Education’ according to Indigenous traditions. The possibilities are endless.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the features of COIL, namely collaboration, online delivery and international scope, make it an ideal means to decolonise the curriculum in film studies, when working in South–North partnerships with Latin American higher education institutions. At the level of the working set-up, the collaborative nature of the engagement is based upon reciprocity, redressing the traditional neo-colonial relation of North–South academic collaborations. Moreover, the online technology is often perceived as having an equalising impact, levelling up the learning field for learners in the Global South that have been disadvantaged. And further, the understanding of the ‘international’ scope of COIL can be broadened to include stateless nations such as Indigenous peoples, a fact that on its own vividly points to the origins, causes and consequences of colonialism, both historically and in its present-day forms. We have argued that in film studies programmes, the study of co-productions, and the engagement with online distribution platforms and documentary, have particular potential to take advantage of these features of COIL, providing for a deep and meaningful teaching and learning experience.

It has been said that decolonisation is ‘both an attitude and a practice aimed at re-humanising the world, which opens up the possibility of a better future’ (Chasi, 2021: 42). We would like to end our article on that positive note. After all, the possibility of the mutual enrichment of different knowledges and cultures is the reason why the epistemologies of the South exist. As de Sousa Santos asserts, the point is not to search for completeness or universality, but rather to strive for a higher consciousness of incompleteness and pluriversality. With its focus on images, sounds and stories, film studies is ideally placed to engage with these epistemologies, and to raise and disseminate the pluriversal consciousness through COIL partnerships.

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## **Declarations and conflicts of interests**

### **Research ethics statement**

Not applicable to this article.

### **Consent for publication statement**

Not applicable to this article.

### **Conflicts of interest statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

## Filmography

*Children of Men* (GB/US/JP 2006, Alfonso Cuarón)

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