

Online International Collaboration in Economics: Technology, learning and multicultural experience

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1. Introduction and objectives

In order to enhance the multicultural experience of Spanish students in a bilingual Grade in a Spanish public University (Universidad de Oviedo, UNIOVI), we have carried out a project on collaborative online international learning (COIL) with an American higher-education institution (West Liberty University, WLU). The COIL experience consists in working together, in mixed UNIOVI-WLU small groups on a common economic topic, since the experience is developed in Economic Faculties from both Universities.

The project aims to promote students' intercultural skills and improve their capacity to work in multicultural teams using English as a second language. In the experience, all students are in contact with a variety of international students, since in both Universities local students are mixed with others coming from very different parts of the world. Therefore, the acculturation process of change as a result of the interaction of two or more cultures (Berry, 2005) is richer in this occasion than in the common case, allowing multi-dimensional transitions for local and international students (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016).

Project objectives can be summarised in three questions. The first one tries to find out the extent to which this online international experience resembles a real experience abroad for students. Secondly, the project aims at learning to what extent local students are forced to experience similar transitions to those experienced by foreign exchange students, even if the former do not physically move. Thirdly, the project considers exploring how students adapt to communicate in a L2 in collaboration with other native and non-native speakers, and the level of multicultural learning generated by this experience.

Finally, the project has a technological component to support the online collaboration. Using Moxtra as the application through which the group work was developed, allowed an effective monitoring of the experience. Having a detailed record of what groups were doing enabled researchers to assess different aspects of the experience, from group effectiveness to improvements in student's acculturation process and transitional dimensions.

2. Main features of COIL

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a new teaching and learning paradigm that promotes the development of intercultural competence across shared multicultural learning environments. Through the use of Internet-based tools and innovative online pedagogies, COIL fosters meaningful exchanges between university-level teachers and students with peers in geographically distant locations and from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (SUNY COIL Center, n.d., Ver. 1.4).

As its name states, the experience has some characteristic elements. Firstly, it is collaborative; courses are focused on teamwork and collaboration and team-taught by educators who collaborate to develop a shared syllabus that emphasizes experiential and collaborative student-centered learning. The performance has to be online, as the use of virtual tools allows working with partner at a distance, specially international. This cross cultural and cross borders element is crucial as one of the aims of this proposal is encouraging and supporting the development and implementation of intercultural skills. Finally, the experience has to promote learning. All the design and module development has to be integrated in the curriculum that students are following at their home institutions. Beyond improving intercultural skills and cross-cultural learning, the experience has to be based on shared learning objectives, specifically related with the content and aims of modules. Probably, this is the most compromising element of this proposal, where the shared collaboration between professors is crucial and deeply influence the success or failure of the experience.

In most cases students, the international component of the course takes place solely online, and the individual courses are, more often, offered with traditional face-to-face sessions taking place at both universities. Therefore, this method can be included between the blended formats of education. In any case, COIL modules can be distinguished from a typical online or distance learning course. A COIL course is specifically designed to link students who have different cultural and geophysical perspectives and experiences. A typical online course may include students from different parts of the world; however, a COIL course engages students in learning course content both through their own unique cultural lens and also by exchanging their cultural and experiential lenses as they move through the learning material together. By helping students to work together on the same course activities, sharing content and learning objectives, instructors are facilitating a cross-cultural dialogue that brings a global dimension to the course content (SUNY COIL Center, n.d., Ver. 1.4).

Also, COIL could be related with international mobility experiences as, to some extent, this experience could resemble a real studying-abroad period. In this aspect, it is similar to other virtual mobility proposals that try to make easier for students getting in contact with foreign higher education traditions without the cost of a real, Erasmus-style mobility. However, this capacity of technology and online communication to substitute the real experience is, at least, arguable. What is impossible to avoid is the technological component this educational proposal has. There is a minimum technological ability that both professors and students need to have in order to manage with communication tools, and both collaborating partners have to

be ready to teach COIL modules in a technologically enhanced way. In this aspect, this proposal has a lot of connections with Technology-Supported-(Collaborative)-Learning.

3. The setting of the project

The COIL project under study was developed by professors at West Liberty University in West Virginia (USA) and at the University of Oviedo (Spain). The degree taught at both institutions that allowed collaboration is the Degree in Business Studies. The fact that professors agreed to collaborate and that courses were taught in the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018 allowed designing a COIL module that suited both parts. The courses in which collaboration took part dealt with economic environment contents. In the Oviedo case, the specific course is The Economics of Spain and the European Union, corresponding to the second year of the English language track of the Business Administration Degree.

As regards the sociological characteristics of the students involved, the flexible structure of the WLU system allowed students with different majors (degrees), with varied ages and from international origin to be in the course. In Oviedo, the fact that the course is taught in English makes it a frequent election for exchange students who do not speak Spanish well enough to take courses in this language. This means that the student profile is rather different from the typical one in Spanish university courses, as the international students abound (in this case, over a third of them come from abroad). Erasmus-type students are also taking different major degrees at their home universities, which introduces an interesting source of diversity in the course. Some differences in student ages are also the consequence of exchange students being present in the course. Finally, the size of both classes is similar (30 students in UNIOVI, 25 in WLU). In short, COIL was supported by a fortunate situation whereby the course in Oviedo resembled that of WLU in terms of international composition, students' age and class size.

An important component of the project was selecting the content of the COIL module and the tasks to be proposed to students. After some deliberation it was decided that a feasible content could be driven by the study of Optimum Currency Area Theory and its application to the USA and the Eurozone. Thus, a selection of articles was made by professors, which served as common readings for all students and as the starting point for student work.

Students were arranged by professors in 12 different groups of between three and five students each (two or three students from UNIOVI and two students from WLU). Diversity within groups was also promoted, trying to have at least one foreign exchange student from each university in each group.

After introducing the students to the Moxtra software, which can be described as a flexible platform that allows sharing comments and material among group members, students were asked to carry out two ice-breaking, non-assessed activities, such as presenting themselves to the group and introducing their regions or places of origin. Then, an individual task was set consisting of working on one of the suggested articles and producing a long abstract for the group. Only then the core part of the project was carried out.

The central part of the COIL project consisted of preparing a narrated presentation on a specific topic chosen by each group under the supervision of professors. Among the topics selected by groups a popular one was the role played by labour mobility in each one of the currency areas. Other topics were the comparison of inflation in the USA and the Eurozone, the political support of the common currency, a comparison between Michigan and Greece, the historical process of the Euro and the USA influence on it, and the bailing out of national governments in Europe (e.g. Greece) vs. firms in the USA (General Motors). Presentations were available for all students through the virtual campus of the universities, and brief abstracts were showed in class. Finally, Oviedo students were asked to produce posters whereby the main points of their projects could be presented to the class in the last day of the semester.

4. Results

As regards the results of the project, the first consequence that is worth mentioning is the change in professors' tasks and the subsequent additional work. Designing the COIL module and, most of all, supervising its development, introduced an extra workload for professors. Students were excited with the project and actively participated in it despite the initial problems derived from the time difference between Oviedo and West Virginia. Additional problems that had not been envisaged were the technical difficulties for recording and reproducing sound in Power Point, as well as the large size of the final presentations.

In order to assess the COIL experience in depth, a questionnaire was given to Oviedo students, which allows obtaining their impressions. Questionnaire items were selected in order to know students' satisfaction, their sense of usefulness of the project, their perception of the intercultural experience, and their impressions about the workload introduced by it. Main results are presented in table 1. Main results show that students most positively value COIL regarding teaching innovation and the experience, while also considering it a demanding project. Among the least positive results it is worth mentioning the stress apparently caused by not being able to meet in person with WLU group members. Intermediate scores show that COIL allowed students to combine fun and learning. Also, the opportunity to work with a second language scores rather low, a logical result coming from a student group in all Spanish students and most foreign students were already studying in their second language, i.e. in English.

Regarding different scores given by different groups of students, an interesting result comes from comparing students with a major in Business Administration and those studying for a different degree. BA students value relatively less the usefulness of COIL for practising a second language, the fun of the project and the general satisfaction. Curiously enough, BA students score significantly lower than non-BA in the item representing the effort of COIL vis-à-vis other continuous assessment parts of the course, but at the same time BA students score significantly higher than non-BA students in the item representing that COIL was stressing for not being able to meet in person.

Table 1. Students' evaluation of the COIL experience

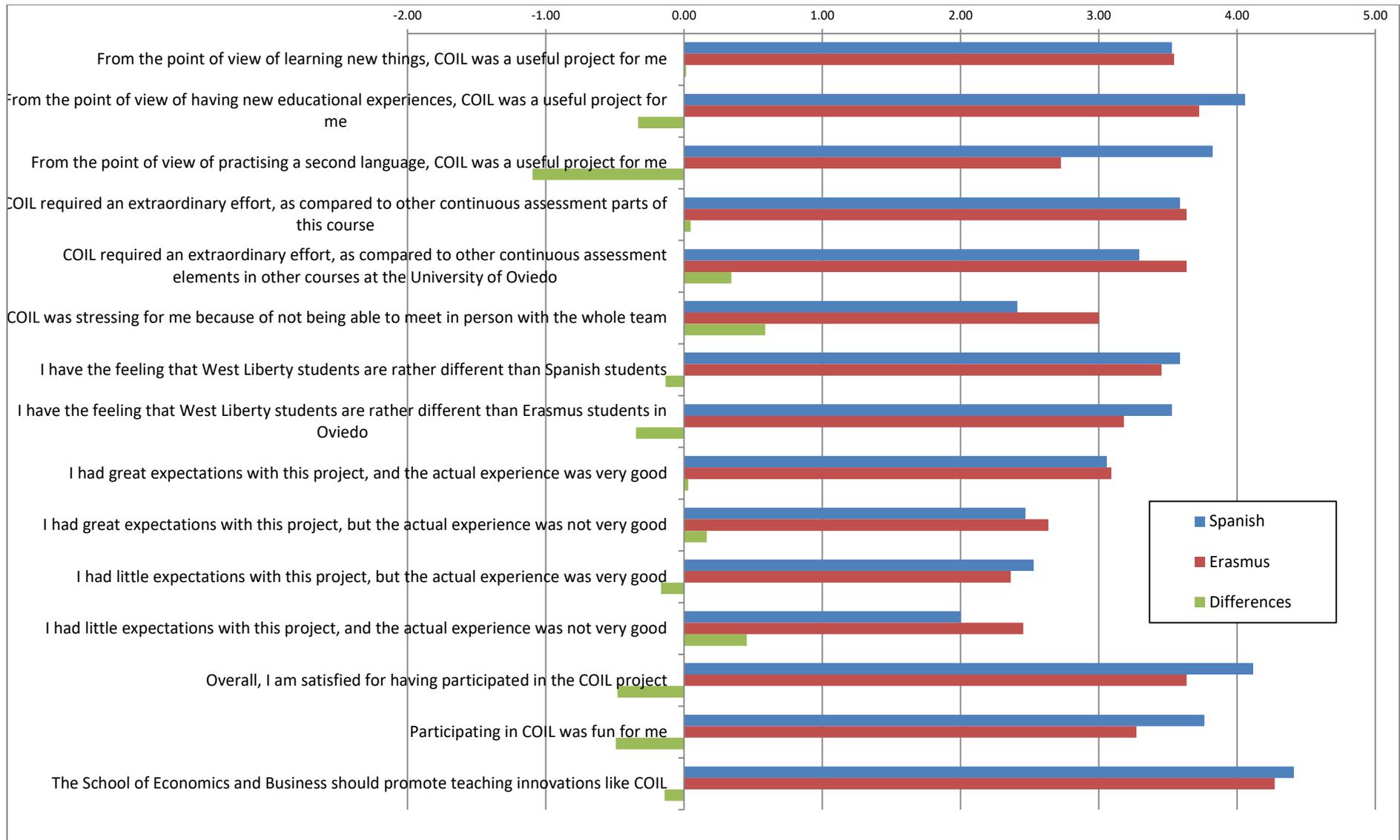
Items ranked from highest to lowest average values of students' agreement	Mean scores from a 1-5 scale
The School of Economics and Business should promote teaching innovations like COIL	4.36
From the point of view of having new educational experiences, COIL was a useful project for me	3.93
Overall, I am satisfied for having participated in the COIL project	3.93
COIL required an extraordinary effort, as compared to other continuous assessment parts of this course	3.61
Participating in COIL was fun for me	3.57
From the point of view of learning new things, COIL was a useful project for me	3.54
I have the feeling that West Liberty students are rather different than Spanish students	3.54
COIL required an extraordinary effort, as compared to other continuous assessment elements in other courses at the University of Oviedo	3.43
From the point of view of practising a second language, COIL was a useful project for me	3.39
I have the feeling that West Liberty students are rather different than Erasmus students in Oviedo	3.39
I had great expectations with this project, and the actual experience was very good	3.07
COIL was stressing for me because of not being able to meet in person with the whole team	2.64
I had great expectations with this project, but the actual experience was not very good	2.54
I had little expectations with this project, but the actual experience was very good	2.46
I had little expectations with this project, and the actual experience was not very good	2.18

An interesting result comes from comparing Spanish students and foreign exchange students in Oviedo. The latter have produced relatively lower scores regarding satisfaction with COIL. Therefore, the added value of this project seems to be inferior for foreign students who already are experiencing an international, intercultural life experience during their semester or year abroad. Conversely, Spanish students are relatively more satisfied, have had "more fun", and COIL has given them a useful opportunity to practice a second language. Table 2 and figure 1 shows scores for Spanish and foreign students, where these features can be approached.

Table 2. Spanish vs. foreign exchange students' evaluation of the COIL experience

	Spanish	Exchange students	Diffs.
COIL was stressing for me because of not being able to meet in person with the whole team	2.41	3,00	0.59
I had little expectations with this project, and the actual experience was not very good	2,00	2.45	0.45
COIL required an extraordinary effort, as compared to other continuous assessment elements in other courses at the University of Oviedo	3.29	3.64	0.34
I had great expectations with this project, but the actual experience was not very good	2.47	2.64	0.17
COIL required an extraordinary effort, as compared to other continuous assessment parts of this course	3.59	3.64	0.05
I had great expectations with this project, and the actual experience was very good	3.06	3.09	0.03
From the point of view of learning new things, COIL was a useful project for me	3.53	3.55	0.02
I have the feeling that West Liberty students are rather different than Spanish students	3.59	3.45	-0.13
The School of Economics and Business should promote teaching innovations like COIL	4.41	4.27	-0.14
I had little expectations with this project, but the actual experience was very good	2.53	2.36	-0.17
From the point of view of having new educational experiences, COIL was a useful project for me	4.06	3.73	-0.33
I have the feeling that West Liberty students are rather different than Erasmus students in Oviedo	3.53	3.18	-0.35
Overall, I am satisfied for having participated in the COIL project	4.12	3.64	-0.48
Participating in COIL was fun for me	3.76	3.27	-0.49
From the point of view of practising a second language, COIL was a useful project for me	3.82	2.73	-1.10

Figure 1. Spanish vs. foreign exchange students' evaluation of the COIL experience



5. Concluding remarks

The COIL module done by Oviedo University and West Liberty University students on Optimum Currency Areas Theory and its application to the USA and the Eurozone cases is the first COIL experience in the School of Economics and Business in Oviedo and, thus, it was worth taking time to assess its results. The evaluation carried out via specific questionnaires shows a notable level of student satisfaction with the project, arising mainly from the teaching innovation and from the intercultural experience. At the same time, differences observed between Spanish students and foreign exchange students in Oviedo (about one third of the class) show the relatively higher value of online international collaboration for national students who so far have not benefitted from a real intercultural experience. The added value for Erasmus-style students in Oviedo is relatively low, a logical consequence of their current process of acculturation during their year abroad.

6. References

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