

Internationalisation in a Covid-world

**Fostering 21st Century Skills in a Collaborative Online
International Learning (COIL) Project**

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Abstract

The concept of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) offers students the opportunity to learn and work together with peers from different geographical and cultural backgrounds in a virtual setting and thus gain international experience at home. This article refers to a COIL of Coventry University and Hochschule Ruhr West, in which a project-based approach was integrated with the overall goal to organise and hold an international virtual student conference. The students contributed to the virtual conference in working on a self-chosen subject-related task and an organisational task in culturally diverse teams. The focus of the COIL was to strengthen competencies for the working world of today and tomorrow (21st century skills), such as competent handling of digital tools and the ability to communicate and collaborate appropriately in a diverse team. We outline the concept and goals of our COIL and examine on the basis of a student self-assessment to what extent learning objectives were achieved and what lessons we learned from the project.

Zusammenfassung

Das Konzept des Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) bietet Studierenden die Möglichkeit, in einem virtuellen Umfeld mit Teilnehmenden mit unterschiedlichen geografischen und kulturellen Hintergründen zusammen zu lernen und zu arbeiten und so internationale Erfahrungen von zu Hause aus zu sammeln. Dieser Artikel bezieht sich auf ein COIL der Coventry University und der Hochschule Ruhr West, in dem ein projektbasierter Ansatz integriert wurde mit dem übergeordneten Ziel, eine internationale virtuelle Studentenkonzferenz zu organisieren und durchzuführen. Die Studierenden trugen zur studentischen Konferenz bei, indem sie eine selbstgewählte fachliche Aufgabe und eine organisatorische Aufgabe in kulturell diversen Teams bearbeiteten. Im Mittelpunkt des COIL stand die Stärkung von Kompetenzen für die Arbeitswelt von heute und morgen (21st century skills), wie z. B. der kompetente Umgang mit digitalen Werkzeugen und die Fähigkeit, in einem diversen Team angemessen zu kommunizieren und zusammenzuarbeiten. Wir skizzieren das Konzept und die Ziele unseres COIL und untersuchen anhand einer Selbsteinschätzung der Studierenden, inwieweit die Lernziele erreicht wurden und welche Lehren wir aus dem Projekt gezogen haben.

1. Introduction

The concept of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) portrays an educational approach as a means for academics and higher education institutions to deliver curricular internationalisation experience at home (McKinnon, Smith, & Thomson, 2015). In particular, this approach offers students from diverse geographical and cultural background the opportunity to come together and jointly engage, learn and work in a virtual environment (Guth & Rubin 2015). Following the definition of de Wit (2013, para. 9) COIL »combines the four essential dimensions of real virtual mobility: it is a collaborative exercise of teachers and students; it makes use of online technology and interaction; it has potential international dimensions; and it is integrated into the learning process.« In times of isolation, travel restrictions and uncertainty, COILs could be seen as a critical vehicle for academics and universities to create innovative educational content that allow students between different countries to engage in collaborative interactions in pursuit of development of intercultural and digital competencies.

This article wants to elaborate how a COIL project can integrate internationalization into a course and how it can serve to address and acquire central 21st century skills. Our considerations are based – in addition to the cited research sources – on the experiences obtained from a COIL project between Coventry University (CU) in United Kingdom and Hochschule Ruhr West (HRW), University of Applied Sciences, in Muelheim, Germany, that took place during the winter semester 20/21. We integrated a project-based approach in letting students organise and hold a virtual student conference with a focus on »Strategic Management in Turbulent Times«. We will introduce our ideas related to the design, organisation and implementation of our project. Furthermore, we will present and critically discuss our survey data obtained from the COIL participants and examine to what extent the learning objectives were attained and present the challenges that have emerged. In conclusion, a critical reflection of lessons learned and possible improvements for future COIL projects will be offered.

2. A Virtual Conference on »Strategic Management in Turbulent Times«

2.1 Idea of the COIL project

This COIL project was jointly designed and executed by Prof. Dr. Isabel Lausberg from HRW and Sathees Kunjuthamby, Lecturer at CU, an institution which is highly experienced in conducting COIL projects (e. g. Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal 2016). The first contact and expression of interest in April 2020 was followed by a number of online meetings with exchange and discussion of ideas for a COIL project. This was supported by Kristina Kähler's counselling, a staff member from the HRW didactics team, who helped to transform ideas into a more structured format leading to a COIL proposal document centred around the idea of a virtual student conference as the scope of the project.

Because COIL projects are digital in nature, the pandemic is not a major restriction for such projects. On the other hand, COIL is not a product brought to light due to the pandemic. Rather, our COIL demonstrates that internationalisation in teaching and learning is not ought to be discouraged during the Covid-19 pandemic, it offers opportunities that may not have been in the focus of consideration before.

Compared to a pre-pandemic situation the digital infrastructure at the universities had already improved and was very well set up when we started, and the students were much more practiced in using the relevant tools than before. In other words, digital work became a matter of routine at the universities during the pandemic which is a facilitator for COIL-projects.

With the conference as a specified and public end product we integrated a project-based learning (PBL) approach (Krajcik & Blumenfeld 2006) into our COIL project. The student-centered approach aims at students working collaboratively in a defined period of time (usually weeks or months) and driving their own learning process through inquiry and the use of various strategies to achieve a common goal (Bell 2010). (For a review of the PBL literature see Kokotsaki, Menzies & Wiggins 2016.)

The students contributed to the virtual conference in working on two tasks: a self-chosen subject-related task and an organisational task. The first task required each group to conduct a strategic analysis of a company of their choice, to develop a strategy proposal in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis and

to examine its implications. The second task of our COIL required all groups to take on an additional responsibility which was related to an organisational department leading to the development of the virtual conference (e. g. marketing, IT support, moderation of the conference or a session).

2.2 Objectives of the COIL project

The objective of our COIL was to address 21st century skills which the changing labour market will perhaps demand more quickly than originally expected – accelerated by the digitalisation of almost all work areas by Covid-19. Our COIL as a format is coherent with the COIL literature and previous projects, noting that with the addition of the project-based learning (PBL) approach of putting together a virtual academic conference, we were responding to the »new normal« where remote participation and virtual conferences were picking up momentum. The virtual conference component makes our COIL different from the conventional COIL projects prior to Covid-19. In line with the demand of the OECD for fostering 21st Century Skills in higher education (Binkley et al. 2012), we pursued the following four objectives for the COIL project (in accordance to Schnabel 2017).

1. Improving digital skills, i. e. the ability for competent handling of digital tools, information and data.
2. Improving communication and collaboration skills, i. e. the ability to communicate and collaborate appropriately and constructively in diverse environments and teams.
3. Improving problem solving skills, i. e. the ability to solve a given task with organisational skills and to develop innovative solutions.
4. Improving perseverance and motivational skills, i. e. the ability to motivate oneself and to work independently and responsibly on a given task, including flexibility and tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity.

In addition to the aforementioned competencies, subject-specific competencies were put in the focus of the project, in particular:

5. Improving methodical skills, i. e. the ability to apply strategic management frameworks and to derive possible conclusions based on a scientific analysis.

This project focused at improving the ability to apply strategic management methods to a »real world« business case, to think analytically as well as to

support, appraise and identify solutions to key strategic management issues in the context of a worldwide pandemic.

2.3 Course of the COIL project

2.3.1 Framework and Timeline

Initially, it had to be determined which students were to be the target group, how the module could be integrated into the curricula and how the different semester times of the two universities could be brought into line. Whilst HRW decided to integrate the project into a regular module for students enrolled on the Business Master programmes, CU offered this COIL to students studying on the MSc Project Management and MSc Advanced International Business programme as an extracurricular activity. 41 students were recruited in total, consisting of 25 HRW and 16 CU students.

The COIL project started in mid-November 2020 and provided a mix of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. »Official« interactions covered two synchronous virtual classes, coaching sessions, the rehearsal and the final virtual student conference, whilst the introductory event, recording of the group presentations and the peer-review were conducted asynchronously. Students engaged in further interactions through group online meetings at their own pace and interest. Figure 1 gives an overview of the events that were critical to organize the virtual student conference of the COIL project.

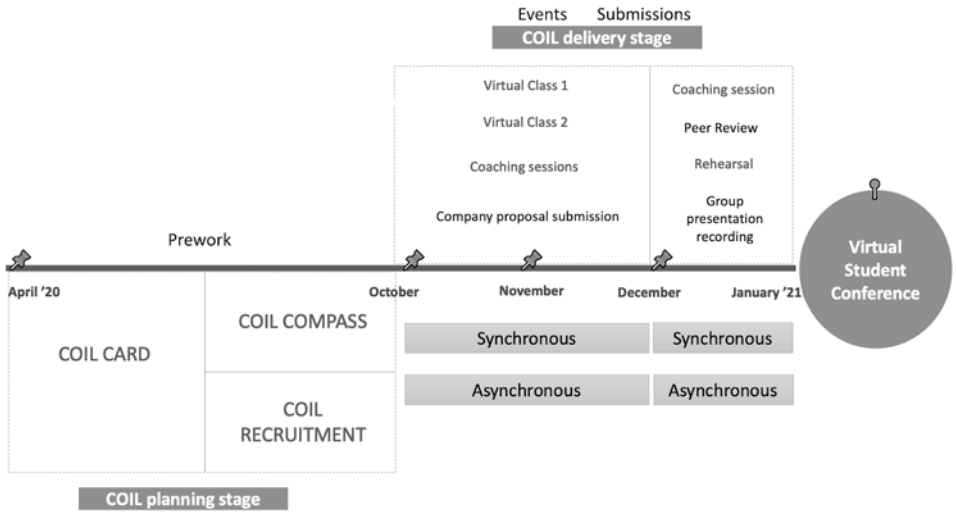


Figure 1: COIL timeline

2.3.2 Digital Tools

In the course of the pandemic, lecturers and students had already gained experience with a broad range of digital tools and both universities had built up a comprehensive digital infrastructure. To drive virtual exchange and communication as well as an international learning experience, we used a variety of different software and technology applications for which students from Germany and UK had ready access to and were free to use (Rubin 2017). With the digital communication and collaborative working tools HRW and CU students were able to be present in real time and thus engage with their peers, share and benefit from different perspectives within their group and outside their group, establish and build common goals and produce outputs jointly (Patterson et al. 2012). For our synchronous sessions (i.e. virtual classes and coaching sessions) we started with MS Teams and had Cisco Webex as an alternative option (which proved to be a good idea when we had technical issues). In addition to the mandatory virtual classes groups were setting up virtual team meetings to work on their group and organisational projects using the digital tools as mentioned including Zoom. HRW's internal Moodle was used to keep all COIL participants informed. Padlet served for the introductory activities, whilst the project management software Asana was used by all eight groups to manage and coordinate the different set of tasks and responsibilities related to the virtual student conference.

2.3.3 Project Start, Icebreaking and Teambuilding

Prior to the first virtual session, a »welcome pack« was issued to all students consisting of a detailed communication of how we were moving forward, a »COIL card«, a »COIL welcome video« and a »COIL compass«, with the latter setting all participants upon a course of collaborative learning and how we were going to achieve this within the three months of the COIL project duration. In order to create a sense of belonging and build the start of a collaborative learning journey, all participating students were requested to complete two introductory tasks prior to the first virtual synchronous interaction. These activities were taken up again in the first joint virtual session and served as an icebreaker for a dialogue within the groups.

To assure diversity in the teams (following the argumentation of Deardorff 2006; Guth & Rubin 2015; Villar-Onrubia and Rajpal 2016), both in terms of nationality and gender, students were pre-allocated and as a result teams consisted of two CU students and three to four HRW students respectively leading to a total of eight gender and nationality-mixed groups.

2.3.4 Student's Tasks

As mentioned above, the students were given two different tasks: the subject-specific task in the form of a substantive, scientifically sound contribution to the conference and the organisational task in contributing to set up and manage an international conference.

For the first task, students were asked to choose a company and a method to conduct a strategic analysis. To support all groups with their group project, we created a project proposal document, prompting groups to collaboratively draft their ideas, share and discuss their perspectives on how to address the group project task. All group proposals had to go through an approval process before they could start working on their final confirmed group project.

For the second task we requested each group to apply for an organisational department (not pre-defined) and deliver a five-minute pitch on why we should give them the responsibility. As a result, eight organisational groups were created covering essential and yet challenging duties and responsibilities: overall planning, detailed planning (conference day), moderation, IT, internal and external marketing, case film and legal. These organisational departments were suggested by the groups and approved by us in view of its currency, feasibility and importance.

In order to fulfil the tasks and thus achieve the intended objectives, students had to carry out specific learning activities, which were assessed formatively.

2.3.5 Coaching Sessions and Peer-review

In addition to the instructions in the two synchronous sessions both lecturers offered voluntary coaching sessions during the asynchronous phases in order to offer formative feedback (see argumentation of Biggs & Tang 2011 and Hattie & Timperley 2007). The coaching sessions provided the students an opportunity to critically discuss their work, their learning process and their acquisition of skills with the lecturers and to ensure that their contribution meets the necessary standards for presenting at an academic conference.

As a further instrument of quality assurance and as formative assessment of the students learning processes, a peer-review was introduced. After the first recording of the conference contributions, each group was asked to evaluate two presentations from other groups according to a predefined list of criteria.

2.3.6 Virtual Conference and »Best Paper Award«

The final interaction was the virtual conference held by the students. All teams presented their work to the COIL course and to the public via a livestream over HRW's official Youtube channel as an online presentation (pre-recorded). These were assessed with the same pre-defined catalogue as in the peer-review process. The alternative idea of a poster presentation as part of a guided ›gallery walk‹ was not chosen by the students.

The president of the HRW, Prof. Dr. Susanne Staude, opened the conference, and an external key note speaker added insights into business management practice. The conference offered two tracks, one focussing on Technology & Entertainment, and the second one on Tourism & Health. For each track the best contribution was honoured with a »Best Paper Award«. Additionally, every participating student received – in recognition of his or her performance and commitment – an official COIL certificate of achievement.

3. Evaluation and Lessons learned

3.1 Design of the Survey and Evaluation

To evaluate whether and to what extent this COIL project has contributed to the learning objectives set at the outset of the project and whether major changes are required for future COIL projects, we gathered data from the students via a questionnaire, which was designed roughly based on a survey from the Centre of Global Engagement, Coventry University. The self-assessment contains 24 questions with pre-defined answer categories and 7 open questions plus information on gender, country, age and consent to be cited anonymously. A total of 32 students took part in our evaluation on the day of the conference. Of these, 26 filled out the questionnaire completely.

In addition to typical Likert scales, in which we asked the students to self-evaluate their competence acquisition (expressions of agreement: Strongly agree – agree – neither nor – disagree – strongly disagree), we were particularly interested in the answers related to the open questions. We asked about the (personal and digital) challenges, benefits and added values, the most important learning and suggestions for future COIL projects.

The answers were analysed in a rule-guided manner using qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (Mayring & Fenzl 2019): First, categories were developed inductively along the material for each open question and from these a category system was developed. In an iterative process, these categories became more and more specific and rules for the allocation of text passages based on indicators were established. We opted for a rather rough level of abstraction in order to be able to make statements even with the relatively small group of 26 student. For example, in the answers to question 1 (»What was the most important thing you learned from this course?«), the category teamwork/collaboration was assigned to the passages in which the team or teamwork was explicitly mentioned or described (e. g. »everyone«, »working with others«, etc.), in which conditions, activities or occurrences of teamwork were described and/or in which either a positive or negative value was attributed to teamwork.

Coding guides were created for each question, which were used by two student assistants to intersubjectively check the assignment of text passages to categories. In this way, we were able to ensure objectivity – even if one hundred per cent agreement is and will never be the goal (Mayring & Fenzl 2019, p. 637).

3.2 Achievement of Learning Objectives

The first thing to note and what pleases us most is the fact that overall the students were satisfied with their learnings and with our COIL project. Nearly all of the students would take part in another COIL project (figure 2), which motivates us to continue with our concept – with some adjustments if applicable (we come to that later on):

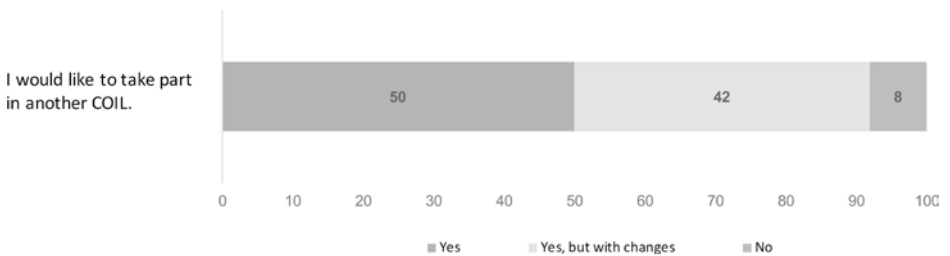


Figure 2: Intention to participate in another COIL

With regards to the learning objectives of our COIL project, students perceive that they acquired the competencies we have targeted. Here we present excerpts from the questions with predefined answer categories with reference to our learning outcomes (see figure 3, assessment of the closed questions):

1. Digital skills

85 % of the students indicated that they were able to enhance their skills in handling digital tools for collaborative working and almost 90 % stated that they became more confident to work in a virtual setting.

2. Communication and collaboration skills

Through the COIL project the students got to know how people from diverse cultures communicate and learned about different approaches to working on a professional project. 80 % of the students agreed to the statement that the COIL project gave the opportunity to learn how to communicate appropriately in a diverse team and 65 % agreed that it gave the opportunity to learn how to collaborate constructively in a diverse team. Most of the students also felt that they had the opportunity to deal constructively with a diversity of knowledge (77 % agree).

3. Problem solving skills

For the preparation of the conference, a multitude of organisational issues had to be solved and hurdles such as technical and legal issues had to be overcome. Interdependencies and mutual dependencies became apparent and it became clear that a high level of coordination was necessary for the success of the conference. With this experience almost 90 % of the students perceived that the project has improved their organisational skills (e. g. time and project management) and the ability to develop innovative solutions (73 % agree).

4. Perseverance and motivational skills

The PBL approach aims at students working independently and taking responsibility for their tasks. Along with the high degree of autonomy we gave the students in our project, we expected the learning motivation to rise. In the evaluation 81 % of the students reported an increased motivation to learn and an improved ability to work independently and responsibly (93 % agree).

5. Expertise in Strategic Management

Learnings considering the subject-related competencies were an improved ability to apply strategic management methods to a business case and to substantiate strategic management decisions (72 % and 73 % agree, not visualised in figure 3).

3.3 Further Insights from the Evaluation

A closer examination of the open questions of our survey reveals two aspects that stand out in most of the answers, therefore we will concentrate on them in the following: teamwork/collaboration and (cultural) diversity. These categories were the most frequently mentioned concerning e. g. the question for the *greatest learning effect*. The answers provide evidence that the students have learned especially in terms of collaborative working (31 %), e. g. how important motivation and communication are for successful teamwork or projects (10 % each) and that working with (culturally) diverse people needs awareness of intercultural differences (21 %). For example, one student reports that he learned,

»how to work with people from different cultures. I found out that German people can sometimes be too honest and that can make them seem as rude even though they are not«

The COIL project...
(gave me the opportunity to learn...)

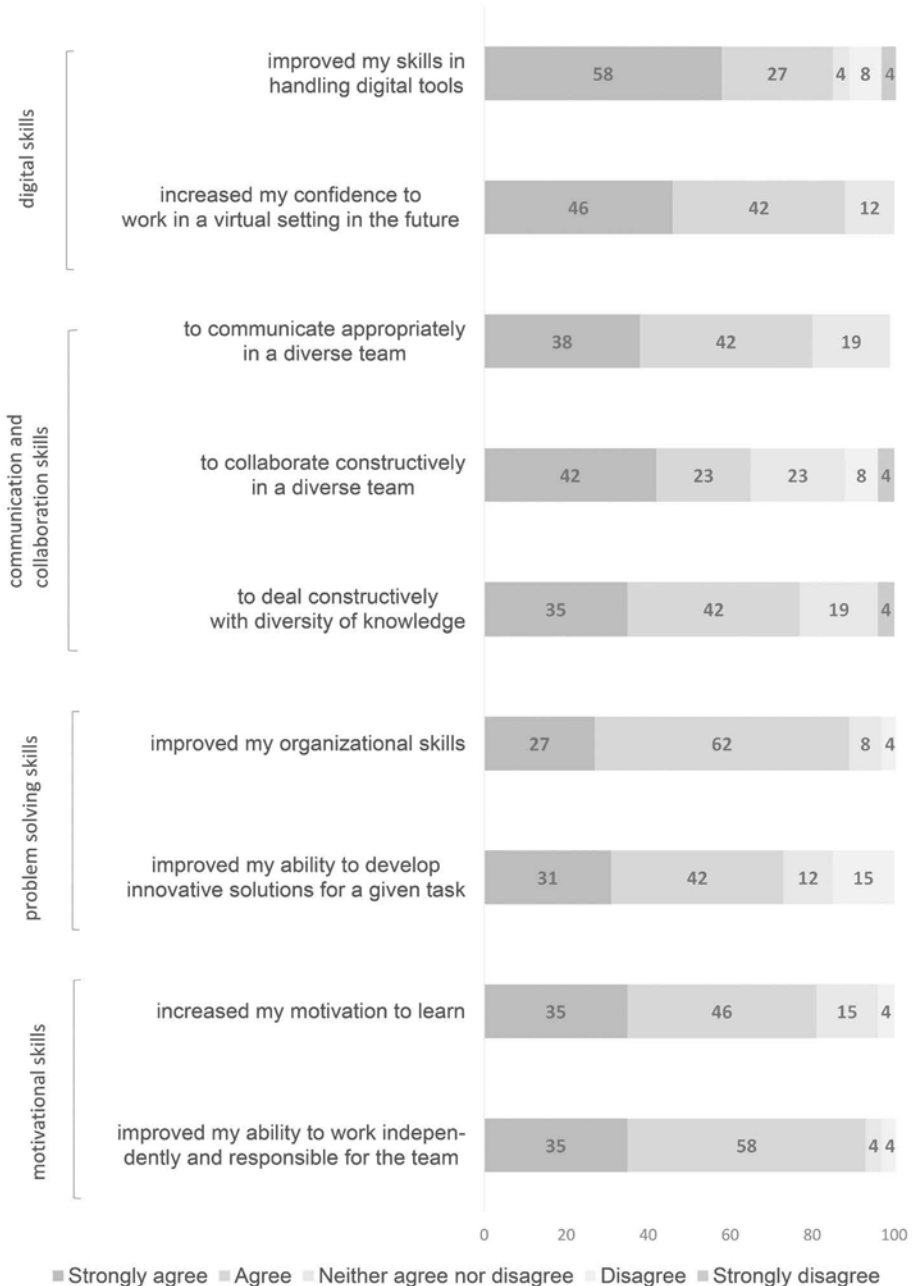


Figure 3: Assessment of closed questions (excerpts)

Teamwork/Collaboration

Considering the *impact on future professional activities* 27 % of the students described effects in the area of »dealing/ evaluating diversity« and 19 % (plus motivation 8 %) of the students experienced learning effects related to teamwork.

One student analysed his teamwork as follows:

»I learned that not everyone has the same ambitions and that it is very important to pass on your motivation to others in order to create a successful project. Here I have definitely learned that open communication is important and it is also necessary to communicate when you are dissatisfied with the situation of the group«

The finding that the topic of collaborative working was mentioned by far the most frequently (43 %) when asked about their greatest *personal challenges during the COIL project*, indicates that we need to scrutinise this further in future COIL projects. In other words, more efforts need to be put in place in order to support the students to achieve the intended learning objectives. This could be facilitated by providing, for example, additional learning materials such as videos offered on Moodle, roleplays, questionnaires, checklists and reflecting teamwork sessions (Meijer et al. 2020). Yet, the *changes that would have improved the students learning* is connected to this topic, too: 31 % of the students wish to improve the teamwork, especially via strengthening the motivation and responsibility/ accountability of each team member. Students supported the idea of ensuring equal conditions. In our project, at HRW the COIL was integrated into a module with credit points and grades whereas at CU students participated voluntarily to learn from this extracurricular activity. It seems to be that this constellation was not ideal, however research in COIL shows that providing equality in contents, knowledge level, learning outcomes, time and conditions is a rarity.

Intercultural Aspects

When asked about the greatest *added value* of our course, our findings report that the possibility of an »international experience« (28 %) has been cited as the most important factor. This is gratifying, since the intercultural component is a central characteristic of COIL.

Nevertheless, in the next COIL we want to focus even more on this aspect to give more students the possibility to develop intercultural skills – facing the fact that »intercultural competence is not automatically acquired nor is mutual under-

standing reached simply in the presence of diversity« (Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal 2015, p. 76). One student suggested the following:

»In our group it worked out quite well but if there would be given the space for more exchange and interaction with the entire group the international aspect would increase massively (e. g. partner exercises, discussions, tandem models, peer to peer discussions, space for exchange on a certain topic/business case/model, etc.)«

Considering improvements for our next COIL project, a component such as reflecting journals (Lozza & van Felten 2019) could help students to reflect and critically discuss their learnings arising from engaging in intercultural contacts and collaboration (Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal 2015).

4. Conclusions

Embedding COIL in the curriculum offers opportunities to benefit from knowledge pluralisation between each other and from international experience without the need to leave the country. Thus COIL can be seen as an instrument that makes it possible to create meaningful student experiences and nurture a »globalised working life« (Kunjuthamby et al. 2021). In our understanding, COIL is not limited by subject boundaries, but can be applied in and between different disciplines, e. g. in the humanities, engineering or natural sciences – collaborative work by students is productively conceivable in many contexts.

The pandemic has brought about an almost revolutionary acceleration in the spread of digital tools for communication and collaboration. This has been beneficial to our – and other – COIL projects, and in particular has made the project much easier to implement. Especially in times of Covid-19, COIL thus offers a straightforward way to bring internationalization experiences into teaching and learning. On the negative side, the pandemic has thwarted mutual visits (which can and should be part of COIL projects) and getting to know each other more

deeply on a personal level. When travel restrictions are lifted again, COIL projects can be further enriched by getting to know the collaborating country and the university site more closely, as well as by deeper personal contacts. In providing a complete picture of our COIL, it should be mentioned that the workload in such a project is quite high – this applies to both students and teachers. In particular, the necessary coordination work for the development of the project, for the organisation of the conference as well as the evaluation and assessment required a high time commitment.

We knew from the start of our COIL that we are pushing the envelope, but we were confident that our students would contribute with meaningful solutions to realise the virtual student conference if we could create a suitable learning environment. With that we provided students a space to work creatively and collaboratively irrespective of different time, geographical and linguacultural backgrounds.

Our experience with this COIL has given us confidence to design future COILs, and it has made us understand that with a greater awareness of pitfalls in teamwork, collaboration and communication, we can further increase the value for our students. As part of an approved DAAD grant »HRW goes COIL« the project will be continued in the next semesters.

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