International Journal of Excellent Leadership (IJEL)

www.ijel.org

International academic collaboration: The Reinserta case [1]

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to analyze the benefits of online academic collaborations between universities known as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning). These activities also contribute to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) especially objective 4 "Education" because education provides people with the necessary tools to get out of poverty and have a better future and objective 17 "alliances" linked to the collaborations between university and organizations. It is important to highlight the relevance to get in touch with real business and organizations to incentivize students to offer real solutions to problems. The project is a case study centered around the NGO Reinserta to which the students had to participate and develop a business strategic proposal related with consumers' behavior.

Method: The study is based on qualitative analysis conducted during one semester (August to December, 2021). The qualitative analysis was used interviews and observation techniques were applied to students from the subject of consumer behavior from two universities located in Mexico (27 students) and Spain (31 students).

Findings: The results show that through COIL activities, students have an approach to companies and their problems based in real business world operations. Working in international teams, they need to apply theory into practice, learn to work with different cultures and improve soft skills through teamwork. This study highlights the use of different tools and technological platforms to communicate between teams and to be able develop a project that will later be implemented by the company.

Implications for Research and Practice: The use of COIL in education can improve learning and immerse students in a context that the business and organizations are demanding. There is a market need for more global professionals that comprehend and incorporate the usage of technological tools and are able to deal with real companies and solve real business life problems.

Keywords: Education, COIL, technology, NGO, consumer behavior

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Introduction

The education field is a very agile sector and is currently in constant change. This sector has been transforming towards a more innovative education, (Tauber, 2018), by incorporating more technological tools and allowing, through different educational projects, for students to have international experiences without leaving the classroom (Hénard et al., 2012). To achieve this, initiatives such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) arise where international learning is promoted, putting into practice knowledge from different areas, with students from different nationalities (Schech et al., 2017).

COIL activities are also linked to the sustainable development goals (SDGs). These goals are related with the Global Development Agenda that was approved by the 193 member states of the United Nations in December 2015 and establishes a list of actions to facilitate the human development of the world's population. To achieve this development, 17 objectives (SDGs), 169 targets and 231 indicators were set that should facilitate the measurement of their degree of compliance by the signatory countries (INE, 2021). Within the establishment of these objectives, those linked to the theme of education (objective 4) and the objective of alliances to achieve these objectives (objective 17) stand out. Specifically, academic collaborations enhance and reinforce the achievement of the two objectives, which highlight the importance of how education provides people with the necessary tools to get out of poverty and have a better future and, on the other hand, it promotes the search for partners or actors who must participate. By the UNs own recommendations, it is essential to foster alliances to unite efforts and resources and make the SDGs a reality (UN, 2021).

When educational projects involve other actors, governments, companies, and citizens, the problems they seek to solve may have repercussions on society. NGOs, non-profit organizations, with very positive and charitable objectives, find it specifically difficult to develop projects due to the lack of resources (Regadera Gonzalez et al, 2018). Some COIL activities through collaboration between the parties, in this case, universities and NGOs, can not only promote learning within the students involved but also generate outcomes and results in favor of the NGOs objectives that will have a positive impact in society (Martinez, 2013).

The Relevance of "COIL" Projects to Enhance Students' Learning Experiences

COIL is a recent modality to increase international teamwork activities among university students without having to leave the attending university classroom. This virtual online-exchange experience, as suggested by some authors (Salinas Contreras & Sánchez Torres, 2020), allows students to interact with others from different geographical locations. These international collaborations require hours of planning and organization, in order for the students to be able to manage cultural differences, different learning processes, different schedules, and time zones, those elements are the basis for a real international learning experience (Gutiérrez-Peláez & Ellis, 2020).

COIL virtual exchange project (VEP) is conceived to be an online high-impact practice that engages students in global learning, facilitates access to co-construction of discipline-specific knowledge, and encourages exposure to different worldviews by engaging in cross-cultural interactions (Vahead & Rodriguez, 2020). That is the reason why it is becoming an increasingly common practice for universities to design academic projects based on COIL.

A multicultural learning experience through digital technology without traveling abroad, connects faculties to international collaborators to develop a project that students work on together with the use different online tools (Suny Coil, 2021; Colombari et al., 2021). COIL participating students are able to connect from home, the university or working place with their

teammates and professors using technology, digital platforms, and mobile devices (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020) to design strategic proposals which might enhance not only the academic and learning experience, but in some cases to be executed by companies and organizations in a real professional context (Renzulli, 2010).

The Link Between Students and Organizations

The acquired knowledge at the university no longer seeks only to remain within the classrooms, but also to transcend outside of them (Battro & Denham, 1997), generating in turn, a more globalized education. Therefore, many universities are encouraging the creation of links with organizations and companies to help the student connect with the real world and help solve the challenges and problems that organizations and companies must manage, both in the public and private sphere (Hershatter et al., 2010)

Companies and organizations must continually solve problems and develop projects in favor of their objectives. These have identified the universities and the students as important agents for the creation of business proposals and are also seeking to achieve common purposes during that learning (Padilha, 2011) that not only look to benefit the company, but they can benefit the society itself.

Organizations, especially NGOs, often have budget and resources, difficulties to develop different activities and projects. NGOs work in favor of different needs in society, and as highlighted by Oxfam (2021), develop a social function because their projects cause positive changes in families, communities, or on the planet, and therefore, they see an important opportunity to connect with universities and students who can help them develop and work on those different challenges that they must face.

Student Skills Developed Through COIL

The student, throughout collaborative activities along the COIL methodology, not only puts the acquired knowledge into practice, but must also put the students in a multicultural environment (Schech, Kelton, Carati, & Kingsmill, 2017; Hurkett et al., 2018). In this context they must develop teamwork skills dealing with people from other countries in different languages and ways of thinking (Hurkett et al., 2018; Jie & Pearlman, 2018). At the same time, the student must be able to develop organizational, planning, and creative skills that can fit in with the proposed challenges. In many cases, these challenges are unrelated to their reality and daily life, which makes it even more interesting (Chamoso, 2004).

In these types of activities, the student must reinforce their communication skills, grammar and writing skills, empathy, and adaptation to change. In general, COIL activities have a very positive effect on reinforcing the student's soft skills (Williams, 2005; Schech et al., 2017) that are in high demand not only in the business world but throughout society.

It is important to highlight the time differences that students must face within the COIL activities and to solve that, they must find common schedules (Casas Cortes et al., 2021) and use communication channels and technological tools that can facilitate communication and allow them to work both synchronously as well as asynchronously. Along the same lines, and as highlighted by Vasquez (2021): "The use of platforms and technological tools are increasingly influencing our daily life, beyond talking about a technological revolution, it is necessary to achieve a literacy on the use of media, which allows learning and appropriation of technological elements as tools and not as outputs to tasks".

COIL activities involve different elements that reinforce learning and what is most relevant is

that the outcomes resulting from a final product/proposal for the organizations involved be applied in a real business. Students get to get in touch with real company needs, problems and it provides a way of training for the real world.

Method

Description of the Educative Activity

The activity consisted of proposing a solution to a challenge offered by the NGO Reinserta located in Mexico, which required the students to develop a strategic proposal in order to make a fundraising campaign and an event based on a university marathon to promote the NGO. The proposals were developed in multicultural teams, each team had to work in the developing of one of the two challenges before mentioned.

The NGO counts with two programs which try to improve the quality of life of children living in prisons and creating opportunities for young people who have been imprisoned. The students from Mexico and Spain had to conduct some exploratory research in order to understand how an NGO works, what are the difficulties and they had to study the Mexican culture and country situation regarding problematic the NGO trying to help.

The qualitative analysis was used in the study. The qualitative analysis was done related with exploratory analysis during the activity and interviews to experts and students. The period of the study was done from august to December 2021. There was a total of 27 students from Mexico and 31 students from Spain who participated in the study.

The Objectives Pursued With the COIL

The proposed objectives for the project were:

a. To be able to understand, communicate, and work in multicultural partnerships in which students share academic and business perspectives.
b. To know labor and sociological aspects of other cultures, which opens perspectives that go beyond the current context.
c. To learn a collaborative form of online international learning by participating in shared tasks on a collaborative platform.

Student Profile

During the first academic period of August-December 2021, students from different business-related degrees, in the subject of consumer behavior of Technological of Monterrey, in Mexico, had the opportunity to participate in an international collaboration with students from the degrees of Marketing and communications and Publicity and Public Relations from the Pontifical University of Salamanca, in Spain, in the subject of consumer behavior. Both parties worked within the framework of the guidelines established by the Global Classroom of the Technological University of Monterrey, with a duration of six weeks.

Defined Challenge

The challenge consisted of creating a Strategic proposal related to the challenge presented by the Training Partner, the Mexican NGO "REINSERTA".

The project is centered around the development of a solidarity event and a fundraising campaign.

The challenges are detailed below:

a. Odd Teams: REINSERTA Event, develop a University Marathon.

b. Even Teams: Fundraising design for a post-covid fundraising campaign.

Used Materials

The project was progressively developed and for this, various materials were used by the participating universities. Among them were classroom, computer and projector, videos, PowerPoint presentations and a report of the proposals written in word created by the students from both universities through the use of technological platforms.

Technological Platforms Used

a. Padlet: The platform was used as a student socialization platform.

b. Slack: This platform was used as a means of communication between teachers and students in chat format.

c. Google Sites: A web page was created with the general of the project.

d. Miro: The platform is an online collaborative whiteboard platform that enables distributed teams to work effectively together, from brainstorming with digital sticky notes to planning and managing agile workflows (Miro, 2021)

e. Google Drive: This platform was used to work synchronously and asynchronous. It was also used as the channel to deliver the proposal.

f. Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate were used for synchronous meetings between teachers, students, and training partners.

Figures 1 – 4 show a sample of the technological platforms that were used and that have been described in this section.
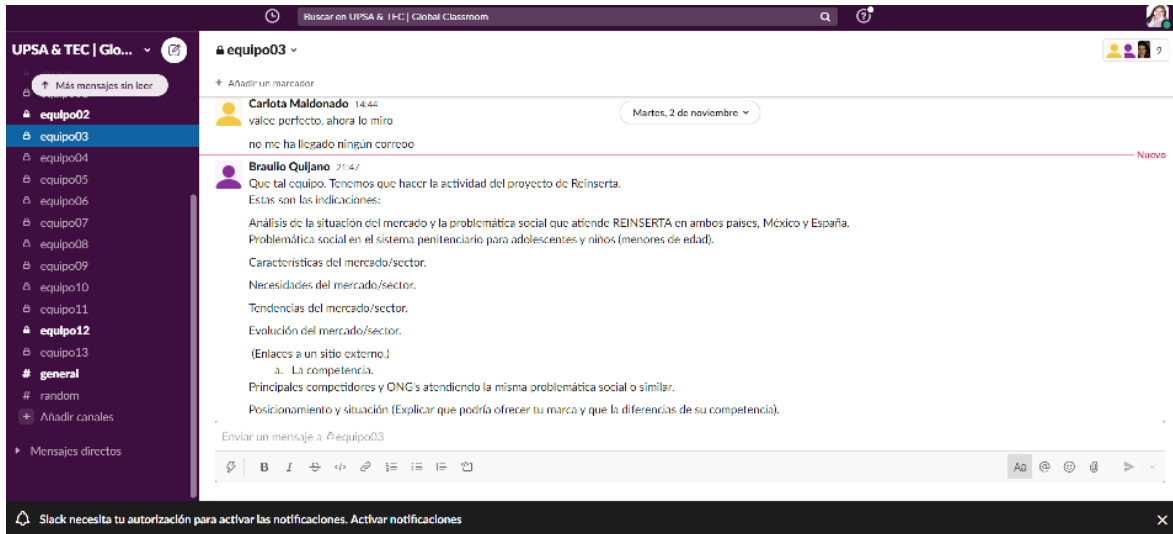
Figure 1
Padlet Platform With Students Interacting
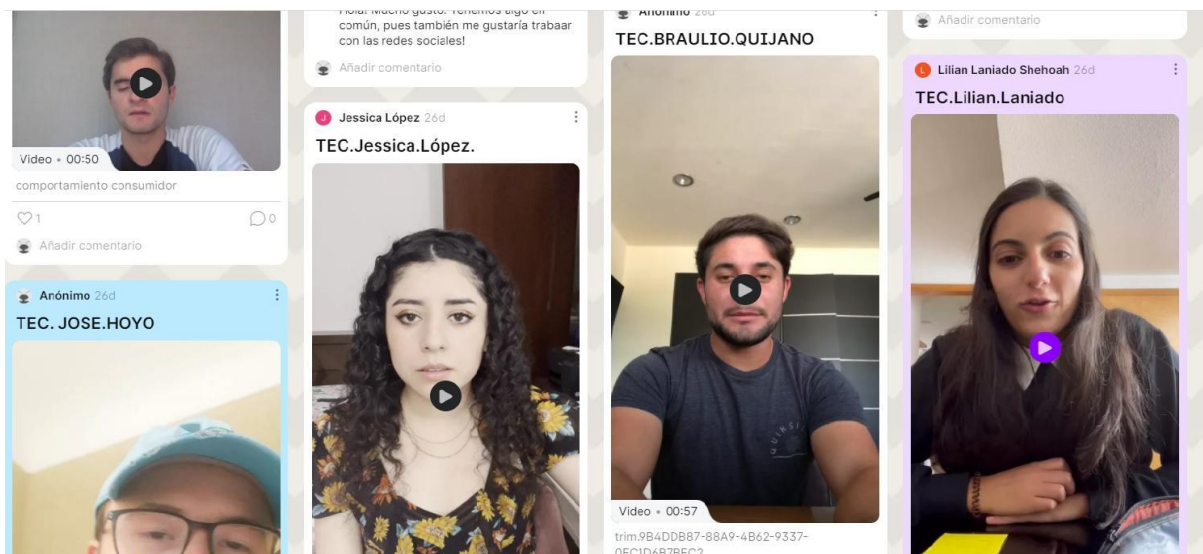
As seen in figure 1, Padlet was the platform used as a media for interactions between students. These interactions were done through uploaded videos of the students and post through public messages.

Figure 2

Slack Platforms With Students and Professors Interacting

As seen in figure 2, the Slack platform was used as an interaction media. Its usage is similar to WhatsApp (to send messages and chat), instead that the personal telephone number is not necessary to be given. It worked with the institutional email of each student.
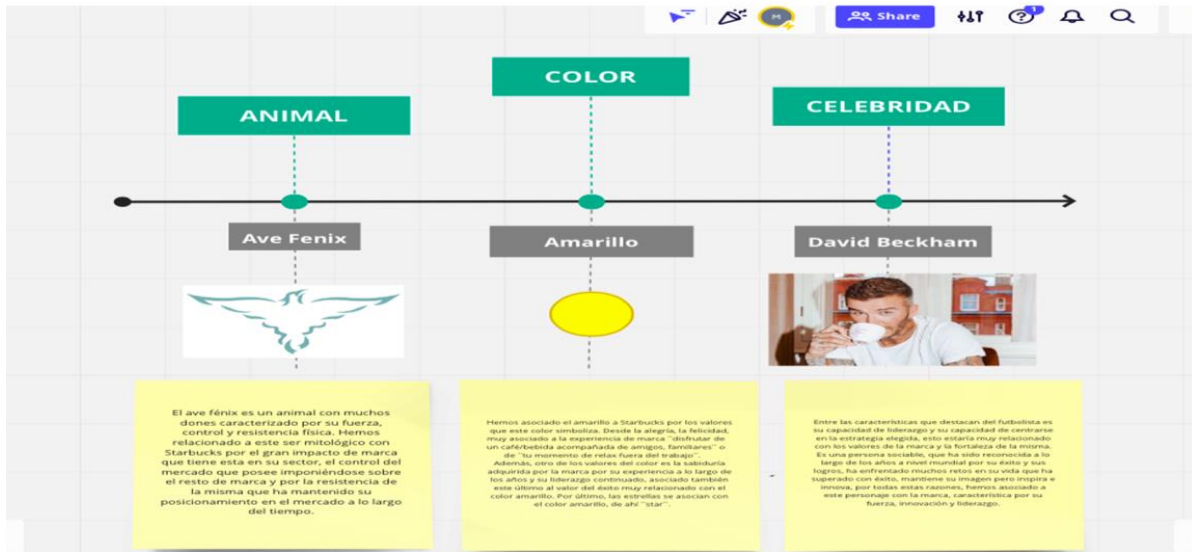
Figure 3

Web Page With Information of The Educational Project For Students

As seen in figure 3, a specific web page was created for the project. It has all the information and instructions for the students.

Figure 4

Miro, Interactive Platform to Work Between Teams to Create Brainstorming

As seen in figure 4, Miro helped students on the brainstorming of the different ideas for the business proposals they needed to develop.

The Educational Activity Implementation Process

The COIL was developed with different stages of collaboration. The stages developed were the following: Icebreaker, Collaborative work, Considerations.

1. Icebreaker

a. The students through the Padlet platform presented themselves through a video. The rest of the students could leave comments and greet them. This was done at the beginning of the project so that the students could get to know each other.

b. In a synchronous session, the students, teachers, and Reinserta connected through the zoom platform to learn details about the organization and learn about the project they had to organize.

2. Collaborative work: Challenges

Students in their multicultural teams must develop three stages for the project:

a. Discovery and evaluation of the market and social environment of the reality served by Reinserta. (Comparative analysis between Spain and Mexico).

b. Consumer analysis of Reinserta: Analyzing it through empathy and user person maps.

c. Design of the value proposition according to the assigned challenge (I. University career, II. Post-covid fundraising and III. final presentation).

The final presentation was made synchronously with the students, teachers, and Reinserta. The students had to present their proposal in 10 minutes with a video (5 minutes) and where all the members of the group had to participate. Subsequently, there will be room for doubts and questions. Figure 5 shows the recording presented.

Figure 5
Final Presentation Through a Record Video

Figure 5 shows an example of the final presentation of one the team projects. It was requested to pre-record a video with the proposals. The video was presented the day of the final presentations. Reinserta was invited to attend this event and to evaluate all the proposals.

3. Considerations

In the considerations stage, the students had to leave a video on padlet, commenting and reflecting on the learning experience. They were also asked to leave a message for their peers.

Evaluation of Results

The feedback received from students, partner university professors, and Global Classroom coordinators is very encouraging and positive. The examination and activity realized was extended and had a long-term duration. The hours worked on the project by the teachers are estimated to be 38 hours, the hours worked by the students are approximately 12 hours. This, according to the certificate issued by the Internationalization office of Tec de Monterrey.

In order to evaluate and measure the impact of the activity, a final survey was conducted between all student participants. Additionally, it was requested to all teams, to fulfill a co-evaluation form, to check each student involvement and compromise to develop the project. Finally, the teachers graded each team proposal. A special mention was given to the two best proposals, the professors asked Reinserta to select the best proposal in each category: 1. Fundraising campaign and 2. Organize an event-university marathon.

The learning experience has allowed students to leave their regular classroom and face a more complex work situation where they had to not only develop an academic project based on challenges but also had to learn to deal with cultural differences, communication, and coordination difficulties. This is something that enriches the student by having to undergo a reality environment which happens in all companies and organizations that operate internationally.

Involving a training partner allows students to be motivated in the development of their proposals since it will be implemented by the Reinserta organization, so it has a real application. Technological platforms and tools enhance and reinforce learning since the student does not need to leave their environment to have an international learning experience.

Discussions and Conclusions

The implementation of academic activities based on the COIL model allows students from different cultures, skills, and personalities to connect and interact. COIL VEP encourages intercultural awareness; use of digital technologies to manage group dynamics, collaboration in different time zones; effective and respectful communication across cultures and between disciplines; and builds coping and resiliency skills in unfamiliar and challenging situations (Vahead & Rodriguez, 2020; Williams, 2005).

On the other hand, this type of collaboration means that the teachers involved in the activity also had to design a work plan that can homogenize knowledge, ways of learning, and ways of working to carry out an educational project. The use of technological tools given by both teachers and students reinforces the rise and trend of taking advantage of these resources to develop international projects. This is like other studies mentioned such as Vezub (2010): "Training spaces can constitute an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices, their work with students, to restructure knowledge". The activity allows not only to cover the objectives of the subject that each professor had, but it also helped to connect students located in different part of the world and being able to work in asynchronous and synchronous time through different technological platforms. Nowdays, it is quite common that business companies need to develop international project with not necessarily knowing well the market. In this case, the multicultural teams allow that Spanish students understand the Mexican market with the help of the local Mexican students.

Having been able to involve a real organization, with specific problems, allows students to design proposals that will be implemented by the organization (Lecaros et al, 2020). The activity does not only promote an educational activity that take place showing students the importance of NGOs is society and the support they do to society problems as mentioned before (the purpose of Reinserta), on the other hand the NGO obtains the benefit of getting different strategic business proposals from the students' teams. As findings to highlight, both parts students and Reinserta found, this activity quite constructive for learning and helps to connects humans with society problems.

In these types of academic collaborations, students develop valuable personal skills not only in the academic and business environment but also valuable in learning to work as a team. Skills such as empathy, good communication skills, organization, creativity, and resilience could be highlighted (Ramirez et al., 2021). The students commented that it was a challenge to organize and to coordinate tasks and duties with students located in another time zones, there were also cultural differences, and they identify different ways of working methods and communication issues. At the end, all teams agree that this activity make it possible to feel, how the real business world is, where it is usual to work and develop projects in different parts of the world.

It is increasingly common for professionals to solve challenges that involve other environments, speak in different languages and be able to react to the constant changes that are suffered in globalized societies (Xu, 2021). This type of academic activity reinforces these capacities within the training of students. This activity also helped the teachers to learn and develop new methods and activities of learning were also cultural and educational techniques complement.

Acknowledgements

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