

EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING (COIL) IN MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of the transition in which the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is immersed and the acquisition and improvement of certain competencies, digitalization, interculturality, and internationality or teamwork among others, more and more teachers are involved in this process of teaching innovation working with innovative methodologies such as Collaborative Online International Learning. Based on this COIL teaching methodology, this exploratory work in progress aims to analyze the positive aspects and barriers encountered in its implementation for teachers and students in the context of marketing subjects. To this end, a cross-collaborative activity was planned, consisting of market research between the students of two educational centers, the University of Brittany Sud, Lorient, France, and the University of Jaén, Spain. The results were obtained through focus groups carried out with different participating groups, coordinators, students, and companies.

Keywords:

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), Teaching Innovation, Internationalization, Interculturality.

1. Introduction

Since the transition to a new education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) began with the so-called Bologna Plan 1999, within a political and strategic context of education, different lines of work have been defined with the setting and revision of objectives in the various ministerial councils. Among many other aspects, the search for transversal competences such as integration and equal opportunities, entrepreneurship and employability, sustainability objectives, innovation in teaching methodology, greater digitalisation and interconnection between universities, both students and teaching staff, thus taking advantage of international employability. In this way, teachers must complete different tasks for student development such as 1) sharing and transferring knowledge, 2) motivating them for development and learning and 3) preparing them for a global environment. This involves professionals carrying out cross-border collaboration and the development of cross-cultural competences and inclusion in global employment among students.

More recently, the ministerial conference held in Rome, EHEAROME (2020), redefines and reinforces the objective of a more inclusive, innovative and interconnected higher education. Inclusive with the quest, on the one hand, for quality education that serves all purposes also in times of crisis, to overcome social inequalities. All students will have equal access to higher education and will receive support to complete their studies and training.

Innovative, in the field of teaching, introducing new learning methodologies, as well as new teaching methods, assessment and practices, closely linked to teaching research, which entails updating knowledge, skills and competences to respond to the challenges and develop the opportunities that the new decade will bring. This means innovating in content and modes of delivery in order to respond to the growing needs for innovative and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork and problem-solving skills, as well as entrepreneurial attitudes.

In addition, the conference proposes greater networking through increased cooperation and mobility for the development of intercultural and linguistic competences, a broader knowledge and understanding of the world, enabling all students to acquire international and intercultural competences through internationalisation of curricula or participation in innovative international environments at their home institutions, and to experience some form of mobility, whether in physical, digitally enhanced (virtual) or combined formats.

This redefinition of challenges and objectives set in Rome (2020) leads European teachers to new ways of working both in new global curricula, as well as greater teaching innovation by applying new, more collaborative and motivating teaching methodologies using digitalisation as a basis. A 'European teacher' is therefore required, a professional educator working in a European context, educating future generations of European citizens in a global context (Schratz 2014; Symeonidis and Impedovo 2023). As Kolber (2022) points out, teachers have no choice but to teach beyond the boundaries of their local context and have a broad competence in global issues. Thus, teachers themselves have to broaden their professional awareness through their own cultural and international experiences (Fuchs et al., 2022; Symeonidis and Impedovo, 2023).

With regard to the student body, this educational transition in which we are immersed seeks **to** create international opportunities based, to a greater extent, on the concept of Erasmus+ mobility, i.e. creating opportunities for students to accumulate academic and professional knowledge and international experiences (Keshishi et al., 2023). It should be noted that companies, given globalisation, are continuously looking for internationally, interculturally and linguistically competent employees who are able to work successfully in an intercultural environment (Appiah-Kubi and Annan, 2020).

In this context, the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) teaching projects have arisen. This methodology, based on new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and developing the digitalisation skills of students, allows teachers to carry out active and collaborative learning between students from different universities located in different parts of the world, thus giving them the possibility to communicate and learn online, allowing them to transmit linguistic, internationalisation and intercultural skills to students, which will enable them to perform their skills and knowledge in global companies and environments in the future.

After a thorough review of the literature (Carrillo-Labela, 2023; 2024) it has been possible to find positive and negative aspects in the application of this collaborative methodology, as well as limitations and possible future lines of study, such as the need to deepen its applicability in a business context where there are few studies applied from a commercial perspective, despite the fact that one of the objectives of companies is internationalisation, thus demanding professionals who obtain such skills and competences.

The aim of this ongoing study is to discover the benefits and advantages of applying this COIL methodology in a global commercial context. To this end, market studies have been carried out with students from different countries. Specifically, we have worked with students of the Master's Degree in International Trade at the University of Bretagne-Sud, Lorient, France, and fourth year students of Statistics and Business at the University of Jaén, Spain.

The collaborative activity consisted of each group of students selecting a company from their home country and analysing the market research needs of that company in the country of the other group of students. In this way, each group carried out a market study in their country of the company selected by the group from the other university. The Spanish group carried out a market study of the French company ADD Technologies in Spain with the aim of expanding its market, and the French students analysed the olive oil market in France for an olive oil consultancy firm and the consumption of ecological and sustainable oils, or oils produced in an environmentally friendly way, and their degree of acceptance among French consumers. At the end of the activity, the Spanish students presented their work to the tutor students and the French company and the French students presented their study to the tutor, students and the Spanish company. This activity was carried out during the first four-month period of the academic year 2023-2024 and the exhibition in March 2024.

2. Literature Review

In order to carry out this work in progress, a review of the literature Collaborative online international e-learning (COIL) has been carried out and the importance of digitalisation for its application and the achievement of competences such as interculturality and internationalisation can be observed.

2.1. Collaborative Online International e-learning: merging competences digitalisation, internationalisation and interculturality.

Digitisation is one of the objectives of the EHEA and supports the internationalisation of teaching staff and students in higher education. In recent years, e-learning has become part of the daily pedagogical routine throughout the education sector and in all areas of education. As a result of the support of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the COVID-19 situation, teachers and students have been forced to use online distance learning and it is now easier to implement various types of distance learning not only at national but also at international level, both objectives of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Aškerc Zadavec, 2023). Several studies support the contribution of technologies as a tool for internationalisation both in the classroom and at home (Mestre-Segarra and Ruiz-Garrido, 2022).

Moreover, together with digitisation, another of the objectives sought in this new European framework is the achievement for our students of the internationalisation of higher education, i.e. to integrate an international, intercultural or global dimension into the functions of higher education. Internationalisation should not be seen as a goal in itself but, rather, as a process, aimed at enhancing the quality of education and research (De Wit, 2011) and, therefore, a vehicle for achieving broader, globalised goals (Jones, 2013).

A strong relationship between digitisation and internationalisation has been observed since digitisation enables international learning that can lead students and teachers to a greater

inclusion of international and intercultural dimensions in the (formal) curriculum, which can contribute to internationalisation, globalisation and interculturality, supporting innovative and collaborative learning called Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), the subject of our study.

In this global and digitised environment, the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) active learning methodology has emerged as an objective of the EHEA. COIL is an innovative approach to learning that offers academics and students the possibility to communicate and learn online and to collaborate with peers internationally (Naicker et al., 2022). It is a virtual exchange and thus an international mobility that takes place through technology without having to physically move and allows students to interact and communicate for educational purposes (O'Dowd, 2018).

COIL has become an interesting approach to bridging learning on an international scale (Liu and Shirley, 2021). At the core of COIL pedagogy is the idea that education should be global, connected, fast-paced, distributed and hybrid (Levine and Van Pelt, 2021). It can be seen as a type of virtual exchange in which learners and instructors engage each other in projects and can develop intercultural skills and personal skills despite being far apart (Appiah-Kubi and Annan, 2020).

Collaborative International Online Learning (COIL) has been adopted in recent years as an innovative and cost-effective pedagogical approach to provide teachers and students with global learning opportunities (Liu and Shirley, 2021), making it an innovative and collaborative teaching methodology capable of transmitting transversal competences such as interculturality and preparing students for a global market.

3. Methodology

This ongoing study has an exploratory character whose objective is to know the benefits and barriers found in the application of this COIL methodology in a commercial context, for which a collaborative cross market research activity has been carried out between the students of both educational centres, University of South Brittany, Lorient, France and University of Jaen, Spain. Subsequently, a *focus group* was carried out, a qualitative methodology for obtaining results from the members of the three groups: company, coordinators of the activity and participating students. The novelty of this work is the incorporation of company managers. Table 1 shows the structure of the sample.

This work was carried out in several phases: 1) Recruitment of companies and students in both universities 2) Initial meeting where each company asks the group of students from the other country about the needs of the market study. 3) Presentation of the company and the objectives of the market study. 4) Weekly or fortnightly meetings between both groups of students to see the evolution of the study. 5) First meeting with the companies to analyse the evolution of the objectives. 6) Weekly or fortnightly meetings between both groups of students to see the evolution of the study. 7) Final presentation of the study.

For the selection of the sample, we worked with fourth year students of the Degree in Statistics and Business of the University of Jaen and students of the Master's Degree in International Trade of the University of South Brittany, Lorient. In order to equalise the groups, four students with a B2 level of English were selected from each group.

For data analysis, the *focus groups* were transcribed verbatim and organised by categories of participants, and the results were coded by thematic groups, considering the frequency and intensity of the different responses.

Table 1: Sample Structure

SAMPLE	
Coordinators	1 internal coordinator of the University of Brittany Sud, Lorient. France. 1 internal coordinator University of Jaén, Spain.
Companies	1 consultancy company in the agri-food olive sector. 1 company
Alumni	4 Master students in international trade University of Brittany Sud, Lorient, France. 4 students in the fourth year of the Statistics and Business degree at the University of Jaén, Spain.

Source: Own elaboration

4. Main expected results

This ongoing study aims to find out the positive and negative aspects of the applicability of this collaborative COIL methodology as a support for new global teachers. To find out if through the application of this methodology our students are able to have initiative, motivation, degree of satisfaction and interconnection after its applicability. Furthermore, to find out if this methodology allows them to improve their linguistic, internationalisation and intercultural competences in order to improve their professional projection in global companies, competences of great interest for today's teachers.

Some results to be highlighted from the student's perspective: it can be said that the participation of the companies was motivating for the involvement of the students in the project. It was motivating not only to present and collaborate with company managers, but also to interact with students from other universities, making proposals and coordinating meetings in English.

The students were aware of the importance of getting to know other cultures, other languages and other ways of working with students from other universities (internationalisation and interculturality). In addition, it allowed them to socialise, and by mutual agreement they created their WhatsApp group to communicate with each other, along with email and face-to-face meetings.

As difficulties we can highlight, the initial difficulty in understanding the contents What is a market study? key points of a market study, perhaps due to a coordination error, difficulty in linguistic interaction and consensus on the content and setting dates for meetings and planning, as well as dates for the presentation of the work.

From the teaching staff's perspective, positive and motivating aspects were found, such as being able to work in collaboration with members of other universities and the awareness of the opportunity that this methodology offers for their training as European teachers, offering the possibility of acquiring knowledge about other European education systems, curricula and cultural diversity among other teaching aspects.

Barriers were also observed, such as difficulties in finding students with an adequate level of languages and with the capacity and predisposition for Inter-European work, as well as a greater workload added to the planning of the subject.

Regarding the companies as a negative, there was some initial complexity in the search for companies, but, finally, they were the object of motivation for the participation of students and obtained a high degree of satisfaction after their participation, being able to contribute their experience and knowledge in the preparation of market studies and were able to contribute their experience and knowledge in the preparation of market studies.

5. Conclusions

From this work in progress, it can be concluded, in an incipient way, that the teaching staff must continue to delve deeper into overcoming the barriers encountered by students, such as language barriers, time differences for coordinating meetings, adequate assessment and implementation in the different curricula, technological differences, technological knowledge barriers, greater time spent by the teaching staff in preparing material and groups, as well as different predisposition or training of the different groups, among other barriers.

The participation of the companies has allowed the marketing students to learn how to carry out an international market study, given the real needs expressed by both companies. As well as deepening their transversal competences, they also broadened their commercial knowledge through the design and application of an international market study.

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