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# Building Bridges Across Cultures: Using Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in the Sport Management Classroom

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Sport managers and sport industry professionals must understand how to operate in an ever-evolving, global sport marketplace. This can be initiated through education and curriculum development (LeCrom & Naylor, 2020). More specifically, a contemporary area within global learning being implemented in sport management curricula is collaborative online international learning (COIL). A project incorporating the principles of COIL involves a virtual exchange or telecollaboration whereby faculty members from separate institutions in different parts of the world use online technology to facilitate student engagement and increase intercultural competencies. In this study, a COIL project is conducted from creating learning outcomes, defining the details of the project, and determining the deliverables and evaluation rubrics. Banks's (1993) transformation approach is followed for the integration of multicultural content into a curriculum. The curricular setting for this project is an international collaboration between students in a sport and legal issues course (United States) and students in a business marketing course (Ecuador), with both groups focusing on the area of personal brand building of intercollegiate student-athletes.

Keywords: internationalization, COIL, sport management curriculum, multicultural

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# Introduction

Sport organizations across the globe have advanced their focus toward expanding in international markets. For example, the major professional sport leagues in the United States now regularly hold competitions in different countries around the world. Recently, an intercollegiate athletic contest between the University of South Carolina and the University of Notre Dame women's basketball programs was held in Paris (McDaniel, 2023). Davies and Ströbel (2022) found that sport industry professionals must understand the activities of sport organizations abroad to stay relevant and innovative in a dynamic, global sport marketplace. To this end, LeCrom and Naylor (2020) support the initiation of these efforts through education and curriculum development.

A high-impact educational practice that is gaining traction in the sport management curriculum is global learning. This practice is viewed as a pedagogical response to an increasingly globalized sport industry. While global learning in the form of study abroad programs have economic and logistical limitations, there are other methods to reach similar outcomes. For instance, collaborative online international learning (COIL) projects have served as an effective and economical solution to internationalizing curriculum and developing students' intercultural competencies (Hackett et al., 2023). COIL is an innovative pedagogy that combines the benefits of a foreign exchange experience with the use of technological tools to provide collaborative learning experiences. Additionally, it has been reported that COIL projects can have a positive impact on student achievement (Slavin, 1990), the development of employability skills (Chan et al., 2014), and openness to diversity (Cabrera et al., 2002).

In this study, a transformative learning approach (Banks, 1993) was followed to develop a constructivist view of how students learn throughout a COIL project. The curricular setting was a sport and legal issues course in the United States and a business marketing course in Ecuador. The specific focus across both groups was a collaboration in the area of intercollegiate student-athlete personal brand building. The International Communication (IntCOMM) Scale (University of Florida, 2014) was used to evaluate the COIL project for 84 student participants from the two countries. The goal of this project and subsequent study was to gain insight into the integration of global perspectives in sport management education and the effectiveness of COIL projects in promoting international communication and critical thinking skills.

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# **Literature Review**

## **Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)**

The State University of New York developed a COIL Center in 2006 and is largely responsible for the development of the term. Rubin (2017) found that COIL promotes collaborative learning for both educators and students. The main role of the educators in a COIL project is to agree on the structure of the activity and facilitate the interaction among students. This involves two or more educators, working at geographically separated institutions, connecting and collaborating online to design a shared syllabus for their students. Activities can include joint, online group assignments with co-created learning outcomes and a focus on subject knowledge as well as intercultural competency development. While a COIL project can be implemented within courses in a broad range of disciplines, it can also offer students an authentic international learning experience at their home institution rather than at an institution abroad (Hackett et al., 2023).

### Academic Internationalization

Banks (1993), a pioneer in multicultural education, found that a transformative approach that entails students and teachers making paradigm shifts is necessary to view the perspectives of different racial, cultural, and gender groups. The transformative learning approach also entails a constructivist view of how people learn (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). Through this approach, "taken-for-granted" frames of reference are made more inclusive, open, and reflective to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove true or justified and can guide action. The collaboration between multinational and multicultural students aims to provide a new frame of reference by learning about different cultures and highlighting the varying, daily realities. Hence, this study follows transformative learning theory to structure the COIL project within a sport management curricular setting. The processes of reflection, critique, and self-directed learning are pivotal as they encourage individual cultural awareness and the awareness of cultural diversity, which is crucial for the success of multicultural education (Makoelle, 2018).

### Internationalization of Sport Management Curriculum

Higher education institutions in the United States have focused their efforts on globalization and internationalization as high strategic priorities. Weese (2020) contends that sport management programs have not kept pace with internationalization efforts even though sport is one of the fields where globalization has had a significant impact. Weese outlines eight suggestions for the internationalization of sport management programs. Of those suggestions, the two that most influenced the current study were: (1) developing partnerships with two or three international sport management colleagues and offering a joint sport management course through an alternative delivery mode, and (2) supporting student participation in international study abroad programs. The development of a COIL project creates the opportunity for faculty from different countries to collaborate and for universities to offer a viable financial alternative to costly study abroad programs (Rubin, 2017).

# Methodology

### Participants

The selection of participants was done through a non-probability, convenience sampling technique. Overall, a total of 84 students took part in the COIL project. The students from the United States (n = 47) consisted of 26 undergraduate and 21 graduate students from two sport law courses at an institution located in the Southern United States. For the participants from Ecuador (n = 37), there were 20 undergraduate students from an advertising project management course and 17 graduate students from a marketing management course. Each of the four courses included in the COIL project focused on the topic of personal brandbuilding of intercollegiate student-athletes.

#### Instrumentation

The study employed the IntCOMM scale to evaluate the effectiveness of the COIL project. The questionnaire was administered through QualtricsXM to collect data from the 84 students participating in the COIL project. Fourteen items were selected from the IntCOMM scale with discrimination levels ranging from .53 to .69 ( $\alpha$  = .90) after testing. By using the IntCOMM, the study aimed to measure the students' ability to communicate effectively with members from other cultures. Effective communication included the traits of sensitivity, production, awareness, adaptability, and acceptability (University of Florida, 2014).

#### Procedure

In order to equip students with effective, cross-cultural communication skills and the ability to collaborate across disciplines, the researchers followed a series of steps. First, the instructors from the United States and Ecuador collaborated to formulate a set of learning objectives that outlined the desired outcomes of crosscultural communication and professional task accomplishment. Next, a mock scenario was created where three volunteer clients established their brand-building needs. Following this step, an executive summary of the needs of the clients and background information was distributed to the students for preliminary analysis. The students were then randomly assigned to groups of four to six with one student selected to guide the discussion in preparation for the Zoom workshop session. Synchronous Zoom sessions were facilitated by the instructors with the activity led by the students. Each activity included icebreaker questions that required students to engage in cross-cultural communication. Instructors then assigned consulting questions for students to solve through collaboration whereby students were expected to use material from their course in order to create a solution for the mock client needs. Upon the conclusion of the workshop, the IntCOMM was utilized to appraise student performance on each of the five traits and other relevant areas. Lastly, data analysis was conducted to identify areas that needed further support to enhance cross-cultural communication. Two sessions were conducted, one for undergraduate students and the other for graduate students. By adopting this approach, educators provided a learning space where students can develop essential cross-cultural communication skills, which are becoming increasingly critical in an interdependent and globalized world.

#### Results

Students were asked to recall their expectations and concerns in a set of five questions (see Appendix A) on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all concerned*) to 5 (*very concerned*). Spanish-speaking students (n = 37) reported an average concern score of 2.47 (SD = 1.46) regarding their ability to communicate in English during the COIL activity. Overall, both the American and Ecuadorian participants reported a slight concern with regard to their ability to collaborate with students from another country in a classroom setting (M = 2.62, SD = 1.36). However, the American and Ecuadorian participants did report a slightly higher level of anticipation for virtual interaction with students from another country (M = 3.80, SD = 1.19). When asked to report on their experience with the COIL project, American and Ecuadorian participants reported relatively high opportunities for discussions with students from other countries (M = 4.18, SD = 0.83). The American and Ecuadorian students revealed that the COIL project provided a meaningful opportunity to develop virtual, social relationships with students from other countries (M = 4.10, SD = 0.88).

The students also responded to items from the IntCOMM scale, encompassing the following dimensions: adaptability, production, acceptance, sensitivity, and cross-cultural awareness (see Table 1). Each item was rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Within the domain of adaptability, participants exhibited a considerable degree of flexibility when interacting with individuals from different cultures (M = 4.28). Nevertheless, some participants indicated a preference for socializing with peers from their own culture (M = 2.82). Regarding the domain of production, participants demonstrated a high level of confidence in their ability to adapt to diverse cultural environments (M = 4.24) and effectively communicate and interact with individuals from other cultures (mean scores ranging from 4.10 to 4.22).

Additionally, students reported being adept at clearly articulating their viewpoints to individuals from different cultural backgrounds (M = 4.17). In terms of the domain related to acceptance, participants exhibited positive attitudes toward collaborative group work with students from other countries (M = 4.27) and expressed enjoyment in engaging in a joint project with international peers (M = 4.28). Furthermore, students demonstrated a profound appreciation for cultural differences (M = 4.52). In terms of sensitivity, participants conveyed a sense of comfort in engaging in conversations that might involve cultural differences (M = 4.39). Moreover, students displayed a strong interest in learning about other cultures (M = 4.49) and exhibited openness to being taught about various cultures by members of other countries. Regarding cross-cultural awareness, participants demonstrated moderate engagement in international relations (M = 3.95). Nonetheless, students displayed a significant level of enthusiasm for learning about other cultures (M = 4.55).

In summary, the findings suggest that the COIL activity positively influenced attitudes and beliefs related to international communication, fostering adaptability, cultural acceptance, sensitivity, and awareness. The American and Ecuadorian students reported feeling comfortable and confident in engaging with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds during the COIL activity.

In addition to the qualitative data collected from the American and Ecuadorian students, each group was given the opportunity to address their experience with the COIL project through an open-ended section. The main takeaway from the student testimonials was that the COIL experience provided an opportunity to interact with people from different countries, learn about their culture, and share their own culture. The ability to meet new people and work together on a project was also mentioned as a positive aspect of the COIL project. Many of the students appreciated the chance to gain a new perspective on life in other countries and hear different viewpoints from people with diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the COIL experience was seen as a unique opportunity to learn about the customs, norms, and traditions in other countries. The international aspect of the experience was also highlighted as something that made the COIL experience stand out for the student participants. Table 2 details some of the most representative quotes from the COIL participants.

Upon completion of the COIL project, both the American and Ecuadorian participants (N = 84) were asked to respond to a satisfaction item on a scale ranging from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 7 (*very satisfied*). The results indicate an average

Questions	Mean	Std Deviation
<b>Adaptability</b> 3.8/5.0 (flexibility, high tolerance for ambiguity and cultural difference cultural misunderstandings)	nces, and m	anagement of
I demonstrate flexibility when interacting with members of another culture.	4.28	0.77
I prefer to socialize with people of my culture.	2.82*	1.10
I feel comfortable discussing international issues.	4.20	0.86
<b>Production</b> 4.2/5.0 (active listening, conversational reflection, conveying a clear message with intent, decoding skills, collaboration, and effective interactions)		
I am confident that I can adapt to different cultural environments.	4.24	0.79
l am able to communicate effectively with members of other cultures.	4.10	0.80
l am able to interact effectively with members of other cultures.	4.22	0.76
I can clearly articulate my point of view to members of other cultures.	4.17	0.80
Acceptance 4.4/5.0 (open-mindedness and cultural reception)		
l like working in groups with students from other countries.	4.27	0.81
When working on a group project, I enjoy collaborating with students from other countries.	4.28	0.75
l appreciate differences between cultures.	4.52	0.72
<i>Sensitivity</i> 4.4/5.0 (empathy & cultural sensitivity, the capacity for unbiased perception)		
I feel comfortable in conversations that may involve cultural differences.	4.39	0.69
l appreciate members of other cultures teaching me about their culture.	4.49	0.75
Cross-Cultural Awareness 4.3/5.0 (engagement in international relations)		
l often ask questions about culture to members of other cultures.	3.95	0.97
l enjoy learning about other cultures.	4.55	0.70

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### Table 1. International Communication Attitudes and Beliefs (IntCOMM) Survey Results

1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Neutral, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly Agree \*Reverse

US students	EC students
"After this experience, I know that I need to prepare myself better for the global sport industry. I do not know another language or another culture. This is the first COIL project that I did, and I enjoyed it. The students from Ecuador were very nice and they shared a lot of information about their country."	"The COIL experience allowed me not only to have a cultural exchange with other people but also help me to grow professionally This opportunity enriched my knowledge by capturing information from my peers and improved my communication skills to achieve an optimal professional branding solution for a real client. It was completely worth it to be a part of this process."
"I really enjoyed getting to learn about their culture down in Ecuador. It was very different from American culture, and I found it really captivating as all the members would piggyback off one another to tell us about their country."	"I feel very confident in my English and leadership/ communication skills, it was nice holding and dominating the conversation. My personality managed to smooth over any awkward silences."
"I liked learning about the other cultures outside of the US because sometimes we can think that the world is only what we know but it expands so much farther."	"I appreciated connecting with students from a different university in a different country and culture."
"What I like the most is that the students were willing to learn our culture in the United States, and it was also fun to get to talk to them about their issues in their country. Here in the United States, I see we are extremely blessed to be in this position to learn from them and them learning from us."	"It was very nice know new people, and also that they tell us about their cultures, because even if we know something about their countries, it is better when someone of the country tells us about it because for me it is more real and I can go out of the stereotypes."

#### Table 2. Testimonials on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

satisfaction score of 5.86 (SD = 1.30). Furthermore, 87% of students reported being *somewhat satisfied*, *satisfied*, or *very satisfied* with the COIL experience.

# Discussion

COIL has several benefits that make it an attractive educational practice for promoting intercultural competence among students. One of the benefits of COIL is the ability to break stereotypes. Through virtual exchange, students from different countries can interact and learn from each other, which helps them to challenge their stereotypes about other cultures. This exposure to diverse perspectives can broaden their understanding and help develop an appreciation for cultural diversity. In addition, the information shared between the American and Ecuadorian students is filled with the norms and traditions lived through the eyes of a student in their countries and institutions. Learning from different cultures promotes tolerance and respect for others, which can be useful in encouraging peaceful coexistence among people from different countries. Through COIL, students can develop the ability to empathize with people from different backgrounds and understand their perspectives, leading to more harmonious relationships.

COIL also promotes dialogue and offers opportunities for team building between students from different countries. Students collaborate on projects, share ideas, and learn from mutual experiences. This not only helps develop communication skills but also helps students appreciate and understand the value of different cultures. In addition, COIL enhances personal development, including communication and teamwork skills, and increases cultural awareness and competencies. Students can develop the ability to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds, which can be useful in the workplace and in personal relationships that are important in a globalized world.

Another benefit of COIL is its ability to develop long-lasting relationships between communities and promote global citizenship and understanding. COIL can create opportunities for students to develop relationships with people from different countries and backgrounds, which can lead to a better understanding of different cultures and ways of life. This understanding can lead to a greater sense of global citizenship. COIL can equip students with essential skills to thrive in a globalized world. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, it is important for students to have a global mindset. A project of this nature can broaden their horizons and expose them to different ways of thinking, which can be helpful in preparing them for future opportunities.

COIL is an innovative educational practice that offers numerous benefits for students. However, this approach also presents several challenges that must be addressed to ensure its effectiveness. One of the primary challenges is the potential for a language barrier. Participants in a COIL project may speak different languages, which can hinder effective communication and understanding. This challenge can be addressed through language training or translation services, but it requires extra effort and resources on the part of the facilitators.

Another challenge of COIL is internet connectivity. Students participating in COIL projects must have access to a reliable internet connection to participate fully. Poor internet connectivity can lead to communication disruptions, delays, and frustration. In some cases, students may need to invest in better internet access, which can be a financial burden depending on the geographic locale. Coordination of schedules is another challenge of COIL projects as students from different time zones may find it challenging to coordinate their schedules to participate in online meetings and collaborative activities. This challenge can be addressed through careful planning, flexible scheduling, and effective communication among all participants.

Finally, COIL can be time-consuming for both students and instructors. The project requires significant planning, coordination, and implementation efforts. Students may need to spend additional time outside of regular class hours to participate in online meetings and to complete collaborative assignments. Instructors may also need to invest extra time to facilitate the project and provide feedback to students. However, the benefits of COIL often outweigh the challenges, making it a valuable and worthwhile educational practice for those who are willing to commit the time and effort.

# **Conclusion and Limitations**

The multilingual, multicultural, and multidisciplinary collaboration among the 84 students from the United States and Ecuador was a remarkable experience. COIL builds bridges by connecting students and instructors from different countries to collaborate on projects as part of their coursework. The study expands on the existing literature on creating a multinational environment and cultivating international understanding and global awareness. It aims to bridge theory and practice by implementing theoretical concepts in a practical, controlled setting. Education and curriculum development are essential for sport managers and industry professionals to understand how to navigate the ever-changing global sport marketplace. Global learning, a widely recognized and impactful educational practice, is gaining momentum in the field of sport management as a response to a world society centered on social justice. In this particular study, a global learning initiative, COIL, was applied within the framework of sport management to enhance intercultural competencies through a virtual exchange or telecollaboration. While the combination of disciplines and the uniqueness of the participants in this COIL experience limits the generalizability of the results, future studies would benefit from pre- and post-test evaluations of the participants in order to identify variations or growth.

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# Appendix A.

# Survey Instrument Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

Dear student, you are receiving this questionnaire as part of a pilot program on COIL International Collaborative Courses. Your feedback is important and appreciated. Your responses will be used to research the use of this methodology and improve the student experience. Your responses are completely anonymous.

Thank you for your participation.

- 1. Before the COIL Activity I was concerned with my ability to communicate in English? [1 Not at All 5 To a great extent]
- Before the COIL Activity I was concerned with my ability to collaborate with students from another country in a classroom setting? [1 Not at All - 5 To a great extent]
- 3. Before the COIL Activity I was looking forward to the opportunity of interacting virtually with students from another country? [1 Not at All - 5 To a great extent]
- 4. To what extent did the COIL Activity provide you with meaningful opportunities for discussions with students from other countries? [1 Not at All - 5 To a great extent]
- 5. To what extent did the COIL Activity provide you with a meaningful opportunity to develop virtual social relationships with students from other countries? [1 Not at All - 5 To a great extent]
- Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with this pilot experience on Collaborative International Courses COIL? [1 Very Dissatisfied, 2 Dissatisfied, 3 Somewhat Dissatisfied, 4 Neutral, 5 Somewhat Satisfied, 6 Satisfied, 7 Very Satisfied]
- 7. Please indicate the level of your agreement with each of the following statements [1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Neutral, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly Agree]
- 8. I demonstrate flexibility when interacting with members of another culture.
- 9. I prefer to socialize with people of my culture.
- 10. I am confident that I can adapt to different cultural environments.
- 11. I am able to communicate effectively with members of other cultures.
- 12. I like working in groups with students from other countries.
- 13. I feel comfortable in conversations that may involve cultural differences.
- 14. When working on a group project, I enjoy collaborating with students from other countries.
- 15. I often ask questions about culture to members of other cultures.
- 16. I enjoy learning about other cultures.
- 17. I appreciate members of other cultures teaching me about their culture.
- 18. I am able to interact effectively with members of other cultures.
- 19. I appreciate differences between cultures.
- 20. I feel comfortable discussing international issues.
- 21. I can clearly articulate my point of view to members of other cultures.

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Testimonials: What did you like most about this COIL experience? What could we do to improve this COIL experience?

Gender: What is your gender? [Woman, Man, Non-binary, Other]

How do you describe yourself? [American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Asian America, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, Other]