

A Collaborative Online International Learning Case Study Between the University of Hawai'i Hilo and Hong Kong Baptist University

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Abstract

With continuous globalization and technological improvements, today's marketers need to effectively design marketing strategies for global markets that companies of various sizes can pursue. An effective way for students to gain this experience without spending money on travel is to conduct COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) classroom experiences. COIL was first established in 2006 and has grown in popularity for faculty worldwide, especially during COVID-19. The course intended learning outcomes for the "Services Marketing" course in College of International Education- Hong Kong Baptist University (CIE-HKBU) is for students to understand and to recognize the customers' needs and behavior, to integrate marketing strategies with operations and human resources, and design marketing framework for business. The course intended learning outcomes for "Marketing Management" in the College of Business and Economics- UH Hilo is for students to incorporate project management principles with their knowledge of marketing foundations. Students do multiple projects throughout the semester in various parts of the marketing process. To help students achieve these objectives from a global perspective, CIE-HKBU and the University of Hawaii created a unique learning experience for our students using the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) framework. Participants included university students from the University of Hawaii Hilo Bachelor of Business Administration Program and Associate Degree students in CIE-HKBU. Quantitative and qualitative analyses is in the follow-up assessment. Students from both countries benefited from this learning experience. Findings from students' reflections after the experience indicated deeper intercultural sensitivity in their marketing strategies and ability to view an issue from different perspectives. Students' responses that the activity enhanced their understanding of the subject objectives/ contents. Overall, the COIL activity strengthened the integration of multicultural learning experiences in both countries.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Intercultural Competence, Cross-Cultural Learning, Online Collaboration

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Problem

With the improvement in technology and application of the web, marketers need to understand more about the global environment. Businesses increasingly need to expand the business to overseas countries and/or work with overseas partners. Moreover, due to the outbreak of COVID 19 and some other financial constraints, not all students can have the chance to go to overseas countries for academic exchange programmers. COIL is an option that provides opportunities for students to contact overseas students, communicate and work together for a project or an activity.

1.2 The Importance of the Problem

The main goal of the COIL activity is to develop students' cross-cultural competence in the marketing field. The activity featured two presentations, one conducted at the beginning of the semester and one conducted at the middle-end of the semester. The first presentation featured each group of students introducing a product/service that is popular and only available in their country. UH Hilo students introduced products from Hawai'i and the US, HKBU students introduced products/services from Hong Kong and China. Students also introduced various holidays in each location, marketing campaigns popular with the Gen Z population, and consumption methods in their home country. For the second presentation, UH Hilo and HKBU then selected a product/service from the other student groups to design a marketing campaign to expand their country. For example, UH Hilo students creating a marketing plan and campaigns to bring Halidao Hotpot Restaurant to Hawai'i.

1.3 Describe Relevant Scholarship

COIL, established in 2006, stands for Collaborative Online International Learning (Rubin & Guth, 2015). "COIL projects allow for collaborative partnerships that span borders. For example, students from a university in Russia could be paired with students in the USA for partnership on a similar curriculum." (Minei, Razuvaeya,Dyshko, 2021)

"Students would have the opportunity to work through dissonant experiences. The opportunity to deal with dissonant experiences is essential in that dissonant experiences put students in challenging or uncomfortable situations... it forces students to examine their previously helpful assumptions" (Motley & Sturgill, 2013, p 184)

Moreover, "online collaborative learning theory provides a model of learning in which students are encouraged and supported to work together to create knowledge: to invent, to explore ways to innovate, and, by so doing, to seek the conceptual knowledge needed to solve problems rather than recite what they think is the right answer" (Harasim, 2012 as cited by Bates, 2015, para 1).

Although this project was not a semester-long, models were taken from semester-long COIL projects so extensive implementation plans can be studied. For example, the proposed implementation process includes "identify the depth of COIL roles, identify cultural differences, identify learning outcomes, design assessment, design learning materials, assess student cultural

sensitivity, offer ice-breaking activities, run the COIL assignment with reflections, and assess." (Alvarez, 2019, pg. 18-29.)

1.4 Hypothesis and their Correspondence to Research Design

Here is how the HKBU-UH Hilo COIL collaboration accomplished each step:

1. Identify the depth of COIL roles: HKBU instructor contacted UH Hilo instructor for COIL collaboration. There were some role definitions and collaboration between the syllabus.
2. Identify cultural differences: The project's purpose is to identify cultural differences and understand how marketing can alter products, pricing, distribution, and promotions to better suit potential customers from other countries.
3. Identify learning outcomes:
 1. *Below are the defined learning outcomes for UH Hilo students.* Understand the management of marketing efforts beyond the foundations of marketing by focusing on execution.
 2. Practice important concepts like customer profiling, segmenting, targeting, positioning with regards to new brands and innovations, and existing products/services.
 3. Incorporate the 4 P's of marketing (price, promotion, product, and place) to ensure advertising messaging and communications are effective, considering social media and customer service strategies.
 4. Utilize various market research tools to create a marketing strategy and a comprehensive plan.
 5. Understand how to manage marketing plans and execute strategy effectively, collaboratively, and on time.
4. Design assessment: Assessments were designed separately by the instructor, with different weights for assignments with the two groups of students. For UH Hilo students, the project was worth 30% of their total grade.
5. Design learning materials: Each instructor designed lecture materials to explain basic marketing principles (The 4 P's of marketing, SWOT analysis, Gantt chart, and more) along with project guidelines. Instructors then shared their project guidelines.
6. Assess student cultural sensitivity: In this case, the instructors completed cultural sensitivity assessment at the project's conclusion. The paper will reflect on what assessing cultural sensitivity before conducting COIL collaborations would be effective.
7. Offer ice-breaking activities: Due to class schedule limitations, the courses could not meet via Zoom to conduct ice breakers. This paper will discuss what the lack of ice breakers brought as limitations.
8. Run the COIL assignment with reflections: Part 1 and 2 of the COIL projects accompanied by feedback from both student groups. UH Hilo students received feedback from HKBU students regarding what projects were most effective in expanding a Hong Kong product into Hawaii/the US.
9. Assess: Post-project assessments completed by both HKBU and UH Hilo students. Results discussed below.

For starting a COIL project during the academic year 2020-2021, the Hong Kong lecturer under Hong Kong Baptist University (College of International Education) tried to send emails to universities with COIL experience. A few universities responded, and the lecturer tried to understand the concerns and ways to implement the COIL activity for each university. Communication between CIE lecturer and University of Hawaii lecturer was mostly via email. Though there were some misunderstandings in between, the overall process was progressing quite smoothly, and lecturers could respond to each other promptly.

2. Method

The objective of the study is to understand students' perceptions on the impact of the Internationalization activity have on their cultural competency, digital competency and whether students believe the Internationalization activity can help to improve their career prospects. The research will also provide key strategies to conducting a COIL classroom in vastly different time zones.

2.1 Participants Description

For HKBU (CIE), the objectives of the internationalization activity were to fulfill the "course intended learning outcomes," namely to "select strategies for competing effectively in the marketplace by recognizing the customer needs and behavior," "integrate marketing strategies with those in operations and human resources" and "design the 8Ps framework for managing the business".

For UH Hilo (CoBE), the objectives of the internationalization activity were to fulfill the "course intended learning outcomes," namely to incorporate project management principles with their knowledge of marketing foundations. Students were able to do research on products from Hong Kong, conduct a SWOT analysis based on expansion into the US market, and executing Gantt chart schedules to complete marketing campaign materials.

According to the Internationalization Advisory Committee of Hong Kong Baptist University, the university tries to enhance the Internationalization experience of students. "The world we are living in is intrinsically digitalized, globalized and multicultural in nature."

Virtual exchange is an excellent opportunity for (students) to study in a cross-cultural environment, prepare for global challenges, develop digital competency, and improve (their) career prospects."

Students could understand more about how to apply the marketing theories to a real-life scenario through the activity.

Participants included university students (Marketing major) from the University of Hawaii Bachelor of Business Administration and Associate Degree students from College of International Education, Hong Kong Baptist University (Division of Business: Marketing concentration).

The students from the University of Hawaii chose Hawaii/US-based products or services, such as theme parks (Polynesian Cultural Center), camper vans, and fried chicken (Chik Fil-A), for the Hong Kong and Chinese markets. Marketing students in CIE need to design marketing strategies suitable for expanding the proposed businesses into Hong Kong and/or the Chinese market for those products or services.

On the other hand, CIE students also selected products or services originating from China or Hong Kong, such as traditional Chinese cakes, China-produced electric cars, and Sichuan spicy hot pot, and US students need to design promotional plans suitable for the US market.

This activity adopted the peer-review method. "This strategy allows students to review one another's work and provide positive and constructive feedback to facilitate improvement." (Active and Collaborative Learning | University of Maryland-Teaching and Learning Transformation Center, n.d.)

Students exchange ideas by uploading videos for their proposals.

They gave each other verbal and written feedback. The groups would then base on the feedback they received to improve and modify their marketing strategies.

The two parties voted to select the best marketing plan for the other party. CIE students voted for the best idea suggested by Hawaii students. Hawaii students also selected the best idea from the CIE students.

The HK lecturer gave students the activity requirements and guidelines for evaluation during the first two lessons. The whole activity carried out during week 3 to week 9 with video recorded for students' marketing proposals' presentations.

The UH Hilo gave students the activity requirements and guidelines for evaluation during the first week of class. The students received three guidelines for Part A, Part B, and Part C. Students selected their Hawaii-based/US product in Part A, created an introduction presentation for their product in Part B, and selected/created a marketing presentation for the Hong Kong/Chinese product they've selected.

CIE and Hawaii students provided verbal and written feedback to each other. Students modified their ideas based on the feedback and then did the final presentation (being recorded).

2.2 Measurement Approaches

Guiding questions provided by HKBU (CIE) for the students included:

- Select a Hawaii originated product/service for the HK/China market (product/service suggested by Hawaii students)
- Identify the target customers for the product/services.
- Suggest marketing strategies to attract the target customer/s (students may need to adopt different strategies for different groups of customers)

There are two roles for the students. The first role is the marketer. Being trained to be marketing professionals in the future, they need to understand the characteristics of the product or service suggested by students at partner universities. They are required to design marketing strategies of products or services to fit the needs of the target market/s.

The second role for the students is the "critic."

Students also need to take up the "critic" role to comment on the ideas generated by students at partner universities and give them some constructive feedback for improvements.

As critics, students also gave some feedback about the presentation skills to the partner students. Presentation is one of the key skills for a successful marketer.

Besides feasible and creative ideas, the student must have good presentation skills to equip oneself to take up a professional marketing career in the future.

3. Results

Instructors distributed a simple survey for two classes after the COIL activity, and the following are the results. Students' subject competency levels were also measured pre and post-activity.

3.1 Student survey results

- (1) The Internationalization activity assisted my understanding of the subject objectives.

Feedback from students		
Strongly agree	CIE students 45%	Hawaii students 35%
Agree	36%	48%
Neutral	18%	13%
Disagree	NIL	4%
Strongly disagree	NIL	NIL

Table 1.

(2) I gained insightful knowledge on my partner university, their students and culture.

Feedback from students		
Strongly agree	CIE students 45%	Hawaii students 18%
Agree	45%	48%
Neutral	9%	17%
Disagree	NIL	17%
Strongly disagree	NIL	NIL

Table 2.

(3) I am more comfortable now working with foreign firms or on foreign job assignment because of this activity.

Feedback from students		
Strongly agree	CIE students 55%	Hawaii students 9%
Agree	27%	44%
Neutral	18%	43%
Disagree	NIL	4%
Strongly disagree	NIL	NIL

Table 3.

The feedback of the students was quite positive. 81% of HK students and 83% of Hawaii students believe that the activity assisted in their understanding of the subject objectives. 90% of HK students and 66% of Hawaii students believe that the activity helps them to gain insightful knowledge of the partner university and overseas culture. Furthermore, 82% of HK students and 43% of Hawaii students believe that they are more comfortable working with foreign firms and partners after the activity.

For the positive feedback (especially question one and two), studies by Minei, Razuvaeva, Dyshko shared similar results. Students “felt excited and a bit nervous at the same time but was so happy to have an opportunity to communicate with native speakers and learn more about their ways of life, value, hopes and expectations.” “Students indicated development of cultural sensitivity. They showed personal growth in respect and recognition that cultural differences exist, as well as an ability to adapt their designs to Nigerian values.”_(Minei, Razuvaeva, Dyshko, 2021)

Moreover, “non-monetary return of investments in COIL assessed by the teachers and students at DUT is very high (above 4, i.e., 4.1 for teachers, and 4.7 for students on the Likert’s scale 1-5), while its correlation with the independent variables in the model is also high (between 53% and 62%). This shows that teachers’ and students’ satisfaction with COIL are high, as well as the level of their positive experience, when it comes to sharing ideas and knowledge in cross-cultural environment. Both teachers and students are satisfied with the project’s outcomes (i.e., the idea of joint presentations and recordings) and they believe in continuing collaboration with partner universities within COIL or similar projects. (Bauk 2019)

For CIE students, over 80% of them believe that the activity helps them to understand more of the subject objectives/ subject contents as well as the culture in another country. They also have more confidence when working with overseas partners. It appeared that the percentage for CIE students is higher compared to Hawaii students. One of the reasons may be for CIE students, this kind of Internationalization activity is the first activity they experience (similar nature) whereas, for Hawaii students, they got similar experience beforehand so the impact for CIE students is greater.

For the third question about working with foreign firms in the future, 44% of the Hawaii students agree and 43% of Hawaii students are neutral with the statement. Other studies also share similar responses as the Hawaii survey. For example, for the studies by Vahed, Anisa, Rodriguez, Krista (2020), stated that “students were unsure or disagreed about the overall impact a COIL VEP had on their personal behavior, such as skills and knowledge they will use in the future (p=0.21); and an experience that affected their future career (p=0.17). “(Vahed & Rodriguez 2020)

In HK, two quizzes have been arranged for the CIE students. The first quiz was arranged in week 5 (beginning of the COIL activity). Another quiz was held during week 9 (by the end of the COIL activity). Quiz contents are coverage is different, the two quizzes need to test students’ ability to understand and grasp the keep marketing concepts.

3.2 Ancillary Analyses

It was noticed that the overall marks for students improve. Though there may be various reasons, it appeared that the Internationalization activity to a certain extent, helps to enhance students marketing knowledge and how to apply the theories to a real-life scenario.

QUIZ result of CIE students	Quiz result Mean	Standard deviation
Quiz ONE (before the COIL project)	8.07 (out of 10 marks)	1.07
Quiz TWO (after the COIL project)	8.6 (out of 10 marks)	1.66

Table 4.

In Hawai'i, individual assignments were conducted with students before and after the COIL project to assess individual student's understanding of marketing campaign execution and process.

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT result of UH Hilo students	Quiz result Mean	Standard deviation
Individual Assignment ONE (before the COIL project)	78 (out of 100 marks)	17.007

Table 5.

4. Discussion

The activity helps to enhance the knowledge of students regarding the subject contents and application. It was an eye-opening experience and gave students some chance to interact and communicate with overseas students.

One drawback was that the students are difficult to communicate in a real-time manner (the time difference between HK/China and Hawaii is 18 hours). In the future, it will be better to arrange schedules so that students can have a live presentation in front of overseas students and have a real-time Q&A / dialogue/ communication with each there. That will further help improve students' presentation skills and enhance the communication and interaction between both parties.

Secondly, the lecturer can also revise the question so both Hawaii students and HK/China students could work together on the same project in the future. Time difference and class regulations play a huge factor in the inability of students to communicate. UH Hilo students were only able to meet during their class time, close to midnight at HKBU. Students, especially from the UH Hilo/US counterpart university, students were able to give qualitative feedback and attributed their lower ratings to expectations of communicating with HKBU students.

The third suggestion includes retrofitting the internationalization activity to an elective (instead of a compulsory course) in HKBU. It was only an elective at UH Hilo. This could lead to students choosing whether they want to enroll in the course or not. This is because not all students are comfortable with the COIL requirements and technological knowledge they need to equip before the courses. However, this could have led to lower ratings with UH Hilo students as students may have higher expectations than in the course.

Some studies also reflected similar situations.

For the studies by King (2020), the report states that "Mexican students did not choose to take the binational online course (it was mandatory). Student feedback made it very clear that the Mexico-based students were very upset about how the course was implemented into their plan of study."

Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus (2016) suggested that "the course should be a voluntary course for credit, similar to a study-abroad program so that both groups of students have a tangible gain to show on their transcript."

For the role of facilitator, Naicker, Singh & Genutgen (2021) suggested "as facilitators, the roles as the guide by the side during the collaboration became more pronounced to assist students with barriers by providing ongoing digital literacy skills support, contact with students' partners with low participation rates and weekly facilitators briefings to circumvent challenges. To ensure students with a lesson on intercultural awareness and digital literacy guidance."

The role of lecturer/facilitators can also be improved to provide students with more support to enhance the overall effectiveness of the COIL activity. Here are the final strategies for lecturers to become better facilitators:

- *Learn and create a presentation about the other university's culture. This could be a two-way communication process with the other university student discussing various cultural topics from the presentation.*
- *Have students come up with a list of questions for the partner university's students to answer. This can be done asynchronously and create a "Pen Pal" connection that could be beneficial later on in the project.*
- *Have students create audio/video presentations for both parts of the project. It was helpful that UH Hilo students introduce US products extensively and bring in marketing campaigns through video/audio presentations.*
- *Have students also create short biographies or video introductions including their name, major, interests, and future career interests.*

5. Conclusion

In terms of culture, the activity widens students' horizons. For example, camper vans are quite popular in the United States and are not popular in HK. It is a common way of dining in HK/China for hot pot, but students from Hawaii University may not hear of "hot pot" before the activity. Some other cultural practices are also quite new to the foreign party. HK/China and Hawaii students reflect that the activity opens their eyes and helps them view an issue from different perspectives. On the other hand, some HK students also reflected that it is difficult to modify the strategies based on partners' feedback due to different regions.

In terms of technology, students in HK/China and Hawaii University are familiar with technology usage. The web connection is also fine for the three regions, and they did not encounter major difficulties in the technology and web connection aspects. Students used various technologies like Zoom, Google Meet, and PowerPoint in order to communicate their campaigns.

In terms of course objectives and course contents, students illustrate their creativity and suggest some feasible and interesting ideas during the activity. The author felt that it is a pleasant experience to listen to students sharing, and it also widens the horizon of lecturers, besides students.

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