

## **Collaborative Online International Learning: Connecting Chilean and American University Students Through Journalism-Based Virtual Exchange**

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### **Abstract**

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an instructional approach that connects geographically distant students and instructors through technology-mediated collaboration, enabling intercultural learning experiences embedded within existing coursework to create empathetic, informed global citizens. This paper reports on a COIL project implemented within a college-level English 101 course at a community college in the United States in partnership with two universities in Chile. Using a journalism-based unit, students engaged in cross-cultural interviews and collaborative inquiry, culminating in human-interest articles and multimedia reflections published in a shared digital space. The project was guided by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE rubric and emphasized curiosity, empathy, intercultural communication, and global awareness as key focus areas. The instructor employed a mixed-methods research design. Pre- and post-survey data were collected using Microsoft Forms from 13 American students (100% participation) and 5 Chilean students (30% participation). Quantitative findings indicated gains across multiple intercultural competence indicators, including increases in cultural knowledge and worldview awareness (approximately 14%), intercultural communication and empathy (approximately 5–6%), and attitudes of openness and curiosity (ranging from 3% to 18.5%, depending on the metric). Qualitative analysis of student reflections and open-ended survey responses further demonstrated growth in empathy, cultural awareness, and appreciation for global perspectives. Findings suggest that journalism-centered COIL projects can effectively support global learning outcomes in community college and early-college contexts while remaining scalable and adaptable across disciplines and secondary education age groups.

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## Introduction

Institutions of higher education, including community colleges, increasingly seek pedagogical models that promote global learning and intercultural competence while remaining accessible to diverse student populations. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), pioneered through the SUNY COIL Center, has emerged in recent years as a promising approach to on-campus and out-of-the class internationalization, allowing students to engage meaningfully with peers from other countries without the financial and logistical barriers associated with physical mobility. COIL is defined as a bilateral, technology-mediated exchange embedded within existing courses across two or more institutions, emphasizing collaborative learning, intercultural dialogue, and curricular integration (Rubin & Guth, 2015).

This paper examines the design, implementation, and outcomes of a COIL project connecting students in the United States and Chile through a journalism-based instructional unit. The project sought to address both global learning objectives and discipline-specific outcomes, integrating intercultural exchange into an English composition curriculum while supporting English-language development (oral and written) for Chilean participants. By situating intercultural collaboration within journalistic inquiry and storytelling, the project aimed to foster curiosity, empathy, and critical thinking while strengthening research, writing, source vetting and communication skills.

## Literature Review

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and related virtual exchange models are grounded in theories of collaborative learning, experiential learning, and intercultural competence development. According to the SUNY COIL homepage, “COIL Collaborations are developed by partnering professors from different institutions who want to enrich their courses with student interaction and collaborative learning” (coil.suny.edu). Rubin and Guth’s *The Guide to COIL Virtual Exchange* provides one of the most widely cited foundational texts for understanding COIL as a pedagogical framework. Rubin and Guth (2015) define COIL as a bilateral, technology-mediated exchange embedded within existing courses across institutions, emphasizing sustained collaboration between faculty and students rather than one-time virtual interactions. Central to their framework is the integration of intercultural learning outcomes directly into course design, ensuring that global engagement is treated as a core component of the curriculum.

Rubin and Guth (2015) further position COIL as a key strategy for internationalization-at-home, particularly in contexts where study abroad opportunities are limited by cost, accessibility, or student demographics, or, in the case of community colleges, not offered at all. By leveraging familiar online tools, COIL repurposes digital learning environments to foster intercultural dialogue, shared knowledge construction, and reflective practice. Prior research cited in their work suggests that when virtual exchanges are carefully scaffolded, students demonstrate gains in cultural self-awareness, perspective-taking, and communication skills, especially when exchanges are sustained over time and supported by structured reflection. Additionally, students feel more engaged with what they’re learning, leading to increased participation and confidence.

In addition to its pedagogical potential, COIL scholarship has increasingly examined issues of equity, power, and faculty labor within virtual exchange initiatives. Figarotti, Subbarao, and Bagatella’s article, *An Unspoken Truth: Faculty (In)Equity in the Context of Invisible Violence*,

highlights how structural inequities can shape COIL partnerships. The authors argue that while virtual exchange is often framed as inherently equitable and positive for all parties, disparities in institutional resources, workload expectations, and recognition of faculty labor can reproduce forms of “invisible violence” within international collaborations. This perspective is particularly relevant for projects involving community colleges and institutions in the Global South, where differences in institutional capacity, compensation arrangements, and student participation requirements may affect project implementation.

Together, these works underscore the importance of intentional design, transparency, clear communication, and reflexivity in planning, developing, implementing, revising, and reporting on COIL projects. They suggest that successful virtual exchanges such as COIL require not only technological infrastructure but also careful attention to communication styles, curricular alignment, faculty collaboration, and ethical partnership-building. In response to these considerations, the present study embeds intercultural learning objectives within a journalism-based instructional unit and acknowledges structural constraints—such as uneven participation and differing institutional expectations—rather than treating them as incidental challenges. Further post-study research and reporting will focus on instructor communication methodology, strengths, challenges, and evaluation.

Assessment of intercultural learning outcomes in COIL contexts is frequently guided by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE rubric. The rubric operationalizes intercultural competence across three core domains: attitudes (curiosity and openness), skills (intercultural communication and empathy), and knowledge (cultural self-awareness and worldview frameworks). Prior studies (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2016; Wade et al., 2022) employing the VALUE rubric emphasize that measurable, meaningful gains in intercultural competence are most likely when students engage in substantive, sustained interaction with culturally different peers and are prompted to reflect critically on those interactions.

By situating the present COIL project within the theoretical frameworks articulated by Rubin and Guth and the critical equity lens advanced by Figarotti et al., this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship examining how virtual exchange can be implemented realistically, responsibly and effectively in diverse educational contexts. Despite growing interest in COIL, limited research has examined its application in community college and Early College settings, particularly through discipline-specific pedagogies such as journalism. While other studies have focused on the concept of “online journalism” in international virtual collaboration spaces (Larrondo et al., 2021), there are currently no published studies on COIL-specific journalism-based projects. This project addresses that gap by demonstrating how technology-mediated interviewing and storytelling paired with inquiry-based collaboration can function as impactful tools to help shape students into global citizens. The journalism-centered design further extends existing literature by demonstrating how discipline-specific pedagogies can serve as vehicles for intercultural learning, particularly within community college and Early College environments. Journalism pedagogy, with its emphasis on inquiry, ethical storytelling, source evaluation, and audience awareness, aligns naturally with COIL’s focus on dialogue, perspective-taking, and meaning-making across cultural contexts. When supported by digital platforms, journalism-based COIL projects leverage technology not merely as a delivery mechanism but as a catalyst for global learning and intercultural engagement, creating end-of-project deliverables that resonate with relevance and skill-building capabilities far beyond the completion of the COIL unit.

## **Project Context and Design**

The COIL project was implemented during a fall academic term within an English 101 course at a suburban community college outside Washington, D.C. (U.S.A.) serving a diverse, majority-minority student population; over half of the student body identifies as African American or Hispanic. Participants included 13 American students enrolled in an Early College cohort program (ages 16–17) and concurrently enrolled in secondary education. Partner institutions included two Chilean universities—a large technical institute and a regional public university—whose students participated voluntarily as part of their English language learning efforts.

Project goals differed slightly by institution while remaining complementary. For American students, objectives included developing cultural competency, practicing journalistic research, interview, and composition skills, and cultivating global citizenship and critical thinking. For Chilean students, the primary focus was improving spoken and written English proficiency within an authentic academic context. Shared goals included navigating intercultural communication through digital platforms, problem-solving across linguistic and cultural differences, and producing collaborative, public-facing work.

The instructional unit centered on cross-cultural interviews and human-interest storytelling. An initial lecture on journalism tenets, terms, and sources, as well as background on Chile, was attended by both American students (in-person) and Chilean students (via Zoom). After this introduction, students were paired across institutions and introduced to one another through a shared digital platform. Over approximately two and a half weeks, students collaborated twice during in-class Zoom meetings, complemented by out-of-class texting and Zoom communication, to plan and conduct interviews, research cultural contexts, and draft journalistic narratives. One additional lecture was provided after the first meeting, also attended by both groups of students. Final products included written articles and short video reflections published on a shared Padlet site functioning as an online magazine.

## **Methodology**

A mixed-methods practitioner research design was employed to assess the impact of the COIL project on student learning outcomes. Data were collected through pre- and post-surveys administered via Microsoft Forms. Surveys included Likert-scale items aligned with the AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE rubric as well as open-ended questions designed to elicit qualitative reflections.

Participants included all 13 American students enrolled in an English 101 course (100% response rate) and 5 Chilean students (approximately 30% response rate). Surveys were administered to American students prior to project implementation in mid-October and following project completion in mid-November. Chilean students completed a post-project survey only, due to differences in curricular control and participation requirements.

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively by comparing pre- and post-survey averages and calculating percentage changes across key metrics. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, with student responses coded for recurring themes related to cultural awareness, empathy, communication strategies, and perceived value of the exchange.

## Findings

Analysis of pre- and post-survey data from American students revealed measurable gains across all assessed domains of intercultural competence. Average scores related to cultural knowledge and worldview awareness increased by approximately 14%, indicating improved understanding of global contexts and cultural frameworks, particularly related to politics, history, beliefs, values, economics, and communication styles of members of other cultural groups. Additionally, students who actively seek to improve their understanding of similarities and differences between cultures also increase 14%. Measures of intercultural communication and empathy demonstrated gains of approximately 5–6%, suggesting moderate but meaningful development in students' ability to interpret and respond to perspectives different from their own.

Attitudinal measures related to openness and curiosity showed variable but notable increases, ranging from approximately 3% to 18.5% depending on the specific item. It should not be discounted that the reason some questions related to openness and curiosity only showed small gains is that Montgomery College has a diverse racial, ethnic, and geographic population, with a high percentage of students coming from immigrant families; therefore, it can be hypothesized that these skills were already present in many students. The largest gains were observed in students' reported willingness to ask questions about other cultures (18.5%) and to engage collaboratively with culturally different peers (9.1%).

## Qualitative Results

Qualitative analysis supported and enriched the quantitative findings. Pre-project responses from American students often reflected limited prior knowledge of Chile's geography, culture, population, and history, as well as included generalized assumptions. Pre-survey responses demonstrating this limited knowledge included:

- "I don't really have any general impressions of Chileans, because, if I am being honest, I didn't even know the country existed until this class."
- "They are South American but that's about all I know."
- "I don't have any [impressions of Chile] except that they make good food."
- "I have a friend from Chile; however, he was born and raised in the U.S., so he has no Chilean cultural values."

Students were, however, interested before the project started in trying to make connections between their cultures and Chilean culture. Response demonstrating this included:

- "People from both my culture and the Chilean culture speak Spanish."
- "My culture shares the Catholic belief with Chile. Soccer is also a shared interest, as well as being very family-oriented."
- "Based on my understanding, they have very strong family ties and a lot [of] respect for their elders. The same goes for us, we are known for our hospitality and for always respecting and prioritizing our elders."

Post-project reflections from the American participants, in contrast, demonstrated increased cultural awareness, empathy, and nuanced understanding of social, historical, and educational contexts. Students frequently referenced learning about daily life, educational systems, occupations, and historical events in Chile, as well as gaining appreciation for the challenges of learning and communicating in a second language.

For instance, one student reflected on culture's influence on value systems:

Speaking with students from Chile helped me see how cultural context shapes people's values, priorities, and daily experiences. For example, I noticed differences in how we approach education, social life, and communication, which made me reflect on my own assumptions and broaden my understanding of global perspectives.

Another student remarked on how their perspective was affected:

This experience allowed me to gain insight into what living in another country might look like. I already knew that other countries are different from the U.S., but this experience allowed me to actually experience how different things are. I gained perspective on the way gender plays a role in Chile and the way it plays in the U.S.

Language appreciation was also mentioned as a key gain from this experience:

I always knew learning a new language was hard but it taught me a lot to see how they're learning English and how hard they're working on it.

Students also displayed an increased knowledge of Chilean cultural values, as well as curiosity to learn more:

- "I see Chile as a place full of kind and hardworking people who are a lot like us."
- "I have a lot of newfound respect for the country and its people. I had no idea the true extent of the country's dark history and am glad it's now a safe place to live for Chileans and immigrants."
- "I could know more about the past political regime. The 1973 coup is something that I had never heard about and I could know it through the COIL experience. Consequently, I searched more about the topic as well."

Students also emphasized the development of empathy and patience in navigating language barriers, noting that collaborative problem-solving and flexibility were essential to successful communication, actively reflecting on intangible skills they developed, such as empathy, sensitivity, and mindfulness:

I try to act in a supportive way that recognizes the feelings of other cultural groups by being mindful of the way they might perceive things and being patient with what they might not know... COIL enhanced this for me because I was able to be patient with my partners and recognize when they were struggling with their English. I was able to act in a supportive way and let them know they can take all the time they need.

Apart from each person being sensitive to different aspects of their own life, recognizing how someone else feels about their cultural group is a big part of empathy. I find it crucial to read a person's body language to analyze signals that may not be communicated through what they say... When a person shares their story, they are being vulnerable with you, and the least you can do is be respectful towards their feelings.

Through this project it was frustrating at times trying to get good answers from my partners since we couldn't properly understand each other, but through trial and error we found methods of communication that allowed for us to work together and

understand each other... I never once faulted them for not being able to understand me since I was constantly empathizing with their side of the situation.

In the COIL experience, I read the article [about an earthquake in Chile] which talked about a family that stayed in their country even when it was having a natural disaster, because they wanted to support their community...I was very impressive [sic] with this statement, as it is very hard to see this sense of community among other countries.

Many participants reported increased motivation for future intercultural engagement and expressed support for expanding similar virtual exchange opportunities. Students were expressive about the benefits they gained from this project, especially concerning social and emotional intelligence skills:

The main benefits are gaining a broader worldview and building empathy. Talking with students from another country challenges assumptions, encourages curiosity, and helps me see issues from multiple perspectives. It also improves communication skills and cultural understanding, which are valuable for both personal growth and future professional experiences.

...hearing from university students from another country is a unique way to get to know new people...most of us do not have the chance to talk to people from other countries, but interacting with people the same age as us is even more special. There are things to connect on, but also learn about each other, and I think it creates memories that last longer than traditional icebreakers.

I made some new friends! I've spoken a little with my partner after the project and think it would be cool to visit in Chile one day. I was also able to practice some of my Spanish speaking and learned about the country from experts, considering they live there.

Students were enthusiastic about the possibility of expanding COIL projects in future classes at Montgomery College, asserting that the project held value in increasing their knowledge, communication skills, and breadth of their perspectives:

...opportunities like this allow students to enhance their knowledge of other countries and allow them to experience and learn from people different from them. It also allows them to grow in skills they need for the future, like communication skills. This experience allows students to get outside their comfort zone and learn something new.

I would definitely recommend it [COIL]. Virtual exchanges are a low-cost, accessible way for students to connect with people from around the world. They help broaden perspectives, encourage cross-cultural learning, and make global issues more relatable. Plus, they provide a unique experience that can't be fully captured in a textbook.

I would recommend that MC [Montgomery College] continue developing cultural exchange opportunities like this in a heartbeat. In our behavioral health and sociology classes we're learning that acknowledging cultural differences is significant so you can better understand the values and life experiences of those different to you.

Chilean participants reacted similarly to their participation in the project, responding in a resoundingly positive way about the impact their work had on their communication and English skills, as well as their preconceptions about American students:

I was surprised by how much the U.S. university students knew about other countries, including Chile. I didn't expect them to be so curious and open-minded. Their interest in our culture and their friendly attitude really surprised me in a positive way.

I really appreciate the opportunity to meet new people in other countries, and I think I can say that I've made a new friend. I'm very happy to be able to share ideas, interests, routines, and projects.

I feel that I've gained new perspectives, because now I feel more confident speaking the language, and it sparked my curiosity to keep learning about their culture.

My impressions of the United States have changed in a positive way...I realized people there can be very friendly and open. I also understood their culture better, and I feel more connected and interested in learning more about the country.

Chilean students overwhelmingly recommended that their universities continue to partner with COIL institutions, citing the impactful real-world experience this project provided them on their higher education journeys:

- I would recommend this opportunity to anyone that can be part of it. It helps to be more aware of your level of English and it also gives you the opportunity to talk to a native speaker.
- Yes, I would definitely recommend the school continue to develop virtual cultural exchange opportunities like this. They allow students to connect with people from other countries, practice another language, and learn about different cultures in a real and meaningful way. It also helps build confidence, empathy, and global awareness. Experiences like this make learning more engaging and open new opportunities for the future.
- Of course. It's always beneficial for students to learn about the world and other cultures, and to practice a foreign language in real-life situations.

Further evidence of the positive impact this project had on the Chilean students was their 100% affirmative response rate in selecting at least one option to the question, "As a result of this experience, would you consider any of the following activities in the future as a means of increasing your intercultural knowledge, skills, and or attitudes to different cultures?" All respondents chose one or more of the following answers:

- Keeping in touch with the U.S. university students they met during the project
- Volunteering their time to work with the American community in Chile
- Traveling to the U.S. in the future
- All of the above

## Discussion

Findings from this study align with existing research on COIL and virtual exchange, reinforcing the potential of technology-mediated collaboration to promote intercultural learning when embedded intentionally within coursework. The journalism-based framework appeared particularly effective in encouraging inquiry, perspective-taking, and reflective

storytelling, allowing students to engage with cultural differences through authentic, purpose-driven tasks.

Challenges identified during implementation—including time zone differences, language barriers, competing responsibilities, and late changes to institutional partnerships—also served as learning opportunities. For example, both Chile and the U.S. change their clocks for Daylight Savings Time, but Chile's occurs in September, while the United States' time change occurred in the middle of the project in November; the website "World Time Buddy" proved a helpful resource to input countries and dates to determine exact time matches. Language barriers between the students caused one assigned pair to get off to a rocky start, as the American student thought the Chilean student was laughing at them, while the Chilean student, upon investigation, was nervous about the project, and her laughter was an involuntary reaction. Additionally, compensation packages differed greatly, with the American professor being compensated for her work as a COIL fellow through a formal program at Montgomery College, while the Chilean professors participated voluntarily with no institutional financial support. Finally, the original project was between Montgomery College and DUOC, but a day before the project was supposed to launch, DUOC brought on another university, Universidad de Bio-Bio, which caused some last-minute reshuffling to the partnerships. Addressing these challenges required adaptability from both instructors and students and highlighted the importance of clear communication, scaffolding, and institutional support. Ultimately, these challenges proved minor and did not impact the implementation of the project in any major way; in fact, by adding additional Chilean students, many of the American participants were able to engage with multiple interlocutors, contributing to richer, more multifaceted projects.

The project's implementation within an Early College and community college context highlights the accessibility of COIL as a global learning strategy for students who may not otherwise have opportunities for international engagement. At the same time, limitations such as small sample sizes and uneven participation as well as unequal compensation among international partners should be considered when interpreting results. Further study with larger sample sizes and across disciplines other than English is recommended.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study demonstrates that journalism-centered COIL projects can effectively foster intercultural competence, global awareness, and communication skills among undergraduate students in diverse educational contexts. By integrating virtual exchange into existing curricula, institutions can provide meaningful international learning experiences that are scalable, cost-effective, and inclusive.

Implications for practice include the value of extended project timelines, increased pre-project cultural preparation, and explicit instruction in intercultural communication strategies. Future iterations of the project may expand participation, incorporate additional disciplines, and explore longitudinal impacts on student learning. As higher education continues to prioritize global learning and equity, COIL offers a flexible and impactful model for connecting students across borders through collaborative, inquiry-based pedagogy.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

Artificial intelligence assisted in language refinement for this paper, but abstract creation, literature review research, project creation, qualitative and quantitative research, data analysis, and Slides presentation were completed solely by the author of this paper.

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