COIL, COILer, COILing: English Language Learners Participating in
Collaborative Online International Learning

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Abstract
This practitioner research in education paper is based on the experiences of two English language educators taking part in a collaborative online international learning project, otherwise known as COIL. Synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods were used for English language learners to meet and work with students from other countries. The collaboration took place virtually between two institutions of higher education, located on different sides of the globe, namely Mexico and Singapore. Students met to work in groups on a project, in an authentic situation to practice the target language. The experience provided students with intercultural and transnational learning through interaction, collaboration and taking ownership of their learning. With little or no experience of taking part in COIL projects, the practitioners investigated three key questions: 1. What are the benefits to students of taking part in international collaboration? 2. What are the challenges of such a project? 3. How do students cope with misunderstandings resulting from cultural and ethnic differences? Data was collected through the analysis of written online learning logs using thematic coding to create a survey given to participating students at the end of the project. The benefits, as well as the challenges, are considered followed by recommendations based on first-hand experiences and reflections to offer a practical reference for colleagues and educators who may wish to explore the feasibility of taking part in such a project.

Keywords: Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), English Language Learning, Institutions of Higher Education, Intercultural, Transnational

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Introduction

In many institutions of higher education (IHE) around the world, the English language department remains an important fixture. It is estimated that by 2050 half the world's population will be proficient in English as it continues to be the dominant language of global communication and increasingly, the language of instruction (Xue & Zuo, 2013). For the English language learner, the classroom is often monolingual, meaning students share the same first language (L1) and are learning English as a second or target one (L2). The motivation to use the target language in the classroom may be diminished due to various reasons including, but not limited to, lack of confidence, feeling artificial, and difficulty expressing ideas. Therefore, in such situations, creating authentic settings to practice L2 can be challenging.

As technology has developed, distance learning, digital learning and e-learning are reshaping education so that initiatives such as collaborative online international learning (COIL) have become increasingly possible. One of the first examples of COIL was instigated by the State University of New York (SUNY) when in 2010 the SUNY COIL Center won a grant to run a three-year project (SUNY COIL Center, 2013). Other notable institutions adopting COIL principles include University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP, n.d.), the Institute for Innovative Global Education (IIGE, n.d.) and The Ontario School of Art and Design University (OCAD U, n.d.).

This paper provides a definition of COIL, before describing the methodology employed for this practitioner research in education. Preparation and curriculum development are considered before discussing findings aimed at addressing the following questions: 1. What are the benefits to students of taking part in international collaboration? 2. What are the challenges of implementing such a project? 3. How do students cope with misunderstandings resulting from cultural and ethnic differences? Finally, the paper concludes by reflecting on the benefits of such projects, pre-course preparation, course pedagogy, successes, challenges and recommendations for future collaborative online instruction.

What is COIL?

Not to be confused with technology, COIL is an approach to teaching that brings together instructors and students who are distanced geographically, culturally and linguistically to communicate and collaborate using online tools (Rubin, 2015). Collaborative learning refers to a strategy where learners work in small groups towards a common goal. Through IHEs creating mutual partnerships with equal contribution, courses and assignments can nurture multicultural dialogue and experiential learning through blended and often student-led learning projects. Fundamental to COIL methodology is the balanced co-creation of projects, with each partner considering the other's perspective (Gray, Asojo, Lindgreen, Nolan, & Nowak, 2021; OCAD U, n.d.).

Increasingly, global competencies are considered essential skills for students to be able to critically reflect on local, global and intercultural issues, and to understand different perspectives so as to enhance collective well-being and sustainable development (OECD, 2018). Therefore, COIL may be deemed intrinsically inclusive, allowing students access to study abroad experiences without having to leave home, and unlocking opportunities for students who may face accessibility challenges due to disability (de Klerk & Palmer, 2022), marginalisation, or lack of funds to study overseas (Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016). COIL

projects can also be used as a precursor to successful physical international exchanges by preparing students and reducing the impact of culture shock (Matus-Mendoza, 2020).

The global pandemic caused by the Coronavirus, accelerated the adoption of COIL as IHEs grappled with restrictions on movement both locally and internationally, and were forced to move to online teaching and learning. Although connecting classes from different parts of the globe is not without technical and administrative challenges, students can benefit from intercultural and transnational learning through working in partnership with students from other cultures and countries on self-directed learning projects (Naicker, Singh, & van Genugten, 2021). At the same time, such projects create affordances to strengthen ties between institutions and educators (Asojo, Kartoshkina, Amole, & Jaiyeoba, 2019).

The funded pilot project coordinated by SUNY COIL Center included 21 US institutions and 25 participating international partners. In their report, the most commonly cited positive student feedback was access to different points of view which allowed participants to see their own culture from a different perspective. Other benefits were skills learned that included language, communicative competence and overcoming technophobia. There was recognition of the challenge of working within such projects, but this was counteracted by the experience of deep learning which was also described as fun (2013).

Research conducted by Naicker and colleagues (2021) investigated the preparedness of students to participate in transcultural projects. They concluded that working collaboratively helps students to become more open to learning about the traditions and religions of other cultures whilst becoming the drivers and creators of new knowledge through research, sharing and adapting. In the context of a design course, Asojo and colleagues (2019) noted that participants became more human-centred in their design approaches by realising the need to conduct culturally sensitive research and avoid stereotyping potential clients. Ramírez-Marín and colleagues explored the impact of COIL on cross-cultural competence in the context of foreign language learning. They found that through self-reflection students demonstrated "positive attitudes, respect, openness, curiosity, self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, perspective-taking, empathy, relationship building and interconnectedness" (2020, p. 115) all of which assisted interactions between learners from different cultural and linguistic settings.

However, research also highlights a number of considerations to setting up successful COIL projects. At an institutional level, support needs to be offered to provide time and resources to plan and implement international virtual projects (SUNY COIL Center, 2013). Peer educators need to carefully prepare the course structure and content as well as plan what they are willing to try, the technology they wish to use, and anticipate any problems (Asojo et al., 2019).

Student feedback from the SUNY COIL Center (2013) pilot highlighted problems with the workload, unclear guidelines for assignments, time differences between participating institutions and lack of time for students to work collaboratively on tasks. Naicker and colleagues (2021) stress the importance of continued involvement of educators to assist student participants with their ongoing development of digital literacy skills, and the need to follow up with students who have low rates of participation. They also suggest regular synchronous meetings with all students as a checking-in mechanism to encourage debate and address queries and challenges.

Therefore, well-orchestrated COIL projects may provide many advantages for learning whilst removing barriers to participation. Students benefit from international exposure, gain a global perspective, as well as strengthen their digital, teamworking and problem-solving skills.

Methodology

The collaborating educators were both drawn to the invitation to participate due to increased confidence in using online instruction methods as a result of the global pandemic. Having little or no experience with COIL projects, we were intrigued to experiment with new pedagogies and hence wanted to find out whether the experience of such projects would be beneficial and viable in the longer term.

The sample of students was purposively selected to meet the criteria of young adults aged between 17 to early twenties, studying English language before continuing their studies in higher education. Two classes of students were matched and selected to take part in the project that was embedded into the syllabus in each institution.

There were two stages to the data collection. The first was the analysis of the online learning logs that the participating students wrote after each synchronous meeting. Learners were encouraged to complete reflections based on three questions: A) What did you do during the session? B) What did you learn? C) How would you use this learning when you meet again?

Analysis of the learning logs allowed us to extract themes that were used to create a survey given to the participants at the end of the project. The survey offered a variety of question types using a mix of 10-point Likert-scale questions to find out the perceived level of enjoyment, language practice and challenge of working with students from another country; check box options where students chose the top three benefits and top three challenges out of six choices for each category; open-ended questions to allow for verbatim feedback.

Preparation

Answering a call to participate in training and developing a COIL project in the third quarter of 2021, the application form collected details such as location, the course taught, and the demographic of students. An important part of the initial process, this allowed the organisers to match participating peer educators based on the subject area they taught. Once matching was complete, academics were invited to make contact with their paired collaborators and attend an initial synchronous induction session over Microsoft Teams to meet the trainer, be introduced to the concept and history of COIL and discuss recommendations for joint work.

This was followed by five weeks of asynchronous learning and tasks, using the learning management system (LMS) Moodle to access theoretical content and upload weekly assignments. We were advised that being in an interdependent relationship with our academic peers, meant that we should work with each other without sacrificing or compromising our values, inferring we needed to be mutually respectful of each other's perspectives. The success of the course, therefore, depended on the two educators working together. Additionally, we were given assurances that if we encountered any problems, we could contact our trainer.

Each week we were given theoretical content to read or watch via the LMS followed by a task the peer educators completed together but needed to upload separately along with a

screenshot of our virtual meeting. The course was not onerous in terms of time commitment, where the biggest challenge was finding a mutually agreeable time to meet online due to the 14-hour time difference. The scaffolded approach of the course and weekly content and activities posted on the LMS allowed us to get to know each other by exploring our similarities and differences. We then moved on to gathering information for the partnership based on pre-set questions that covered student demographics, goals and technology. As we progressed through the weeks, we started to develop the learning outcomes (see Table 1) and syllabus (see Table 2). The chosen topic was fairy tales on the premise that story-telling is found in all cultures and, therefore, all the student participants would have experiences and knowledge to share.

Name Teacher 1	Name Teacher 2
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Subject Teacher 1	**Subject Teacher 2**
English for Academic Purposes / Creative Arts	English as a Second Language level 8
Topic COIL course	
Arts Focus: Students will be introduced to a variety of subjects, materials and projects related to the arts	
Objectives of the topic	
1. Arts appreciation 2. Cultural exchange 3. Reflective critical thinking	
Learning Outcomes Teacher 1	**Learning Outcomes Teacher 2**
1. Students will become familiar with a range of arts-based vocabulary	1. Students will be introduced to arts-based topics
2. Students will develop cultural awareness and be able to reflect on similarities and differences	2. Students will develop cultural awareness and be able to reflect on similarities and differences
3. Students will develop their critical reflective writing skills as part of the cycle of improvement	3. Students will develop their critical reflective writing skills as part of the cycle of improvement

Table 1: Objectives and learning outcomes developed during the online meetings between the academic peers.

Course Creation

The academic peers were both English language teachers; one was based in Mexico and the other in Singapore. The course in Mexico was part of a high school programme in English as a second language. The fifteen participant students were Spanish speakers, aged 17 to 18 years old and were in their final year before starting university. The course in Singapore was a pre-sessional English language course for students preparing to join diploma or bachelor's degree courses in the arts. Twenty Chinese and Korean students aged between 16 and 22, were living away from home.

As collaborators, we agreed to use a project that was already embedded in the syllabus for one of the courses. The project design included synchronous and asynchronous components to allow students to collaborate on their projects. The synchronous meetings took place across six sessions, from January to March 2022, over an eight-week period, taking into account school breaks, public holidays and exams. The final outcome involved students working together in groups to present a fairy tale. This could be a story they created or adapted from an existing fairy tale but were instructed to give the story a contemporary twist. The groups could choose how they would present their narrative, for example, by creating an animation, using slides with a voice-over or acting out the story.

We used the format suggested during the COIL training course, following a sequence of sessions that included ice breakers, comparison and analysis and collaboration. The ice breakers, designed to be light-hearted, focussed on pair or group activities playing name games and exploring cultural similarities and differences. In preparation for the final presentation, students compared and analysed fairy tales from their own culture before exploring the elements that are commonly found in myths and legends, such as a hero, a villain, a kingdom and a problem. The last two sessions were used to guide students through their collaborations and work on their brief to create or adapt a chosen fairy tale. To ensure the groups were meeting to develop their ideas they had to present storyboards that outlined the development of the plot before they made their final presentations.

The academic peers discussed a number of choices for technologies and platforms to use. The final choice of software was pragmatic, dependent on what was available within the two institutions and which would be the easiest to set up; the choice of LMS was between Moodle and Google drive for posting and uploading materials, and Google Meets or Zoom for the video conferencing platform. Google Drive was selected as outsiders of the institution could be invited to access shared drives without having to enlist the help of the ICT team. The additional benefit was the availability of collaborative tools such as Google slides, docs and Jamboard. Zoom was preferred as the teleconferencing platform because of access to breakout rooms which allowed students to work in groups during synchronous sessions. Student participants could choose how they would collaborate to complete asynchronous activities after each session. Most groups opted to communicate using Instagram or WhatsApp.

As we developed the syllabus (see Table 2) we anticipated possible problems which included the likely impact of the 14-hour time difference on attendance, especially since synchronous meetings had to take place outside the mandated classes. This challenge could have further impacted the students' ability to work collaboratively and manage their time when communicating asynchronously. A further anticipated issue, was one institution used the Google suite, which meant some students at the other IHE would possibly have to create a Gmail account to be able to access the Google drive used for posting materials and uploading work. Additionally, we could not assume that all learners knew how to use the collaborative features of the Google suite.

Stage	Week	Learning Outcomes	Task/Activity
1: Ice Breaker	1.	Students will get to know each other and break the ice in order to develop rapport and confidence working with each other.	Name chain game. Think of an adjective that begins with the same letter as the first letter of your name. Split the students into groups of 8 students. What's in a name? Students in groups of 5. They speak and answer the following questions: ● who gave you the name? ● a nickname? ● what does it mean? ● Why were you given it? ● do you have any other names? **Homework** Learning log (template)
	2.	Students will get to know each other through cultural exchange. The activities will help to raise awareness of similarities and differences.	Cultural Norms 1. Animal Noises. What is the noise attributed to different animals in different cultures: cat, dog, frog, wolf, pigs 2. Home drawing. Students draw a plan of their home to share with each other. **Homework** ● Find a childhood fairy tale or fable to share in the next meeting. ● Learning log (template)
2: Comparison & Analysis	3.	Students will reflect on the similarities and differences between their cultural backgrounds through the medium of fairy tales	Parallel Documents 1. In their group, the students tell their chosen story to each other. Discuss similarities & differences. As an entire group summarise similarities & differences. **Homework** Learning log (template)
	4.	Students will analyse the components of a fairy tale and work collaboratively to create or adapt a fairy tale.	1. Group discussion. What elements make a fairy tale? 2. Ways of telling a story. 3. Groupwork: Brainstorm ideas for their own fairy tale: adapt or invent. **Homework** ● Create a storyboard using e.g. Google slides, jam board… ● Learning log (template)
3: Collaboration	5.	Students will communicate ideas using a variety of visual mediums	1. Present storyboards Students continue to work on their projects. Teachers are available for advice. **Homework** Learning log (template)
	6.	Students will reflect on the process of working across cultures and the challenges of group work using virtual mediums. Students will develop tolerance, empathy and cultural awareness.	Fairy Tale Presentations 1. Describe the process 2. Story presentations. This could be a video, comic book etc. **Homework** Learning log (template)

Table 2: The syllabus developed during the preparation stage

To encourage student engagement, learners also completed a learning log each week, where they reflected on their experiences by answering the following questions: What did you do

during the session? What did you learn? How would you use this learning when you meet again? The learning log provided the peer educators insights into the successes and frustrations of working on the intercultural collaborative project.

In addition, at the end of the project students were sent a survey using Google forms to reflect on their experiences. Three questions were designed using a Likert scale to ask how much they enjoyed working with students from another country, how much they felt they practised using English and how challenging it was to work with students from another country. The following two questions asked learners to choose three benefits and three challenges of taking part in the COIL project from a list of suggestions which were generated based on comments written by students in their weekly learning logs. The final two questions were open-ended, asking students what they thought the educators could do to help them more and what they would do differently if they were involved in a similar project in the future.

Findings and Reflections

From the educators' perspective, although there were a number of challenges, the experience was positive. It was fun to do something different which helps maintain motivation for teaching. Providing a genuine multicultural experience, where not only the use of L2 was needed but also a better understanding of different approaches towards work and collaboration was satisfying. The experience stretched our technological abilities as educators as we learned to use and manage the software more confidently. Rarely having the opportunity to co-teach, the experience also provided opportunities to learn from each other as co-collaborators, providing food for thought about approaches and teaching methods.

Survey Feedback

Survey results were collected from 18 of the 35 participating students. Most of the responses were from students based in Singapore, in part due to mistakenly restricting access to students outside the College at first. Thirteen students enjoyed the experience, four selected the middle option, whilst one student did not like the experience at all. All the respondents felt they had practised using their English to differing degrees. Responses to the question about how challenging it was to work with students from another country were very mixed.

Responding to the benefits and challenges of involvement in the project, students could choose three out of six possibilities for each category. In figure 1, the top three benefits of taking part in the project were using English to communicate (15 responses), having a different experience (13 responses) and finding out about different cultures (12 responses). In figure 2, the top three challenges of being involved in the project were the time difference between Mexico and Singapore (13 responses), using English to communicate (11 responses), problems with technology (9 responses), closely followed by teammates not completing their tasks (8 responses).

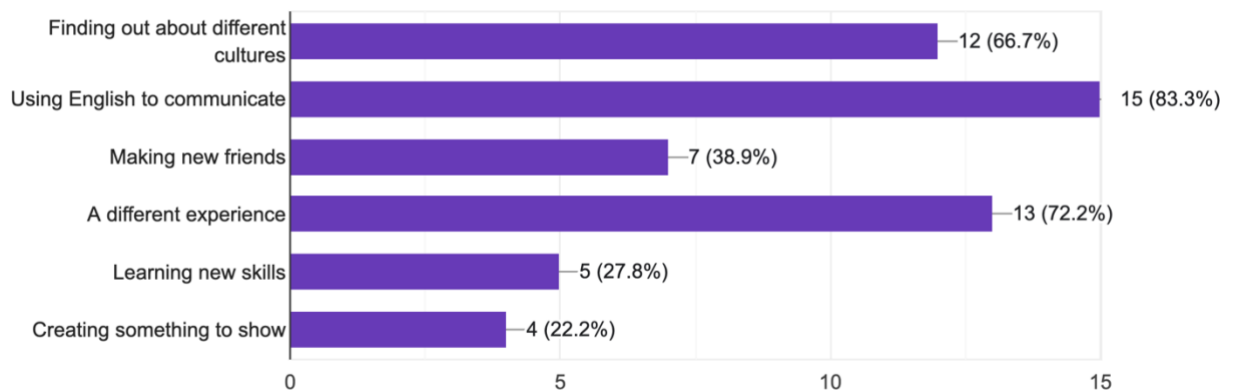Choose 3 benefits of taking part in the COIL Project.
18 responses

Finding out about different cultures — 12 (66.7%)
Using English to communicate — 15 (83.3%)
Making new friends — 7 (38.9%)
A different experience — 13 (72.2%)
Learning new skills — 5 (27.8%)
Creating something to show — 4 (22.2%)

Figure 1: The perceived benefits of participation in the COIL project

Choose 3 challenges of taking part in the COIL Project.
18 responses

The time difference between M… — 13 (72.2%)
Using English to communicate — 11 (61.1%)
Not enough time to complete th… — 4 (22.2%)
Unclear about what we needed… — 4 (22.2%)
Team mates not completing the… — 8 (44.4%)
Problems with technology — 9 (50%)
no — 1 (5.6%)
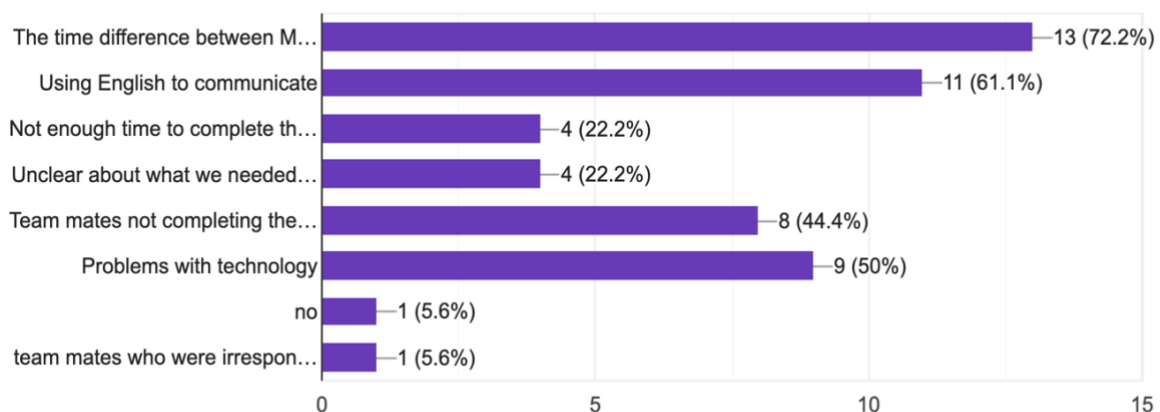team mates who were irrespon… — 1 (5.6%)

Figure 2: The perceived challenges of participation in the COIL project

Verbatim feedback regarding what the teachers could have done to help students more encompassed the desire to have clearer instructions, provide more support to help students participate and check that the groups were collaborating with each other. Student self-reflection included the realisation that they needed to communicate more, do more research to complete the project and manage their time better; all vital study skills habits at IHE.

Successes

On reflection, the students saw the experience as positive even if it was somewhat uncomfortable at times. All but one group managed to create a presentation of their adapted fairy tale for the last session where we met synchronously. Adaptations included a sci-fi version of Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel who rescues herself without the help of a man, and the three pigs who collaborate to outwit the wolf in the story of the Three Little Pigs. The software used to create presentations was varied and included the use of Microsoft PowerPoint, Google slides, PowToon and Zoom to create videos. The exposure to different cultural contexts helped some to practise and build their confidence using the English language.

Challenges

Flexibility is a necessity (SUNY COIL Center, 2013). For example, time differences were one of the biggest hurdles with a 14-hour difference between Singapore and Mexico. For synchronous sessions, we agreed to meet for one hour at 7 pm on Thursdays, Mexico time and at 9 am on Fridays, Singapore time. In addition, we had to extend the duration of the project due to unforeseen commitments at one or the other IHE. Since times for synchronous meetings were outside the usual college timetable, they may have impacted attendance which was sporadic for some students. Other learners may have lacked commitment to the project as an unassessed component, whilst a few students were working to support their studies and did not have the time for extra activities outside of college obligations and assessments. Connectivity was a further issue for some if they did not have access to stable Wi-Fi connections off-campus.

On a cultural level, differences in background and expectations led to some challenges with group dynamics. The Asian students were linguistically weaker, which may have impacted their confidence in communicating with their North American peers. During synchronous sessions, shyness was exhibited by not turning on video cameras and remaining muted during group activities in the breakout rooms. Peer academics needed to enter each breakout room to coax some students to make themselves visible and speak to each other as well as facilitate the initiation of conversations and responses. In some instances, frustrations led to a culture of blame; in one group members reprimanded each other for not completing tasks instead of looking for solutions to resolve such issues.

Recommendations

There are a number of considerations that may improve the experience for students. Peer academics who may not have the technical skills needed to work collaboratively using virtual mediums or who have little experience in acting as a facilitator to groups using project-based learning need to be given time to develop these skills. Tapping into existing technology used by institutions may help educators to become more familiar and confident in the use of software providing a reason to explore and extend technical skills. At the planning stage avoid being over-ambitious and attempt to use existing curricula as much as possible to avoid increased workload for educators.

From the student viewpoint, it is important to ensure everyone is aware of how to use the technology and its capabilities, a conclusion reached in a study by Marcillo-Gomez and Desilus (2016). Sourcing or creating instructional videos that can be viewed before or during

the early stages of the project might be of help. It is often assumed that Generation Z is intrinsically tech-savvy. Even though they may be confident in using technology, that does not necessarily mean students are prepared for online learning experiences (Akcil & Bastas, 2021) and know how to maximise the use of the tools used for a COIL project. One student lost work due to a computer crash so, for example, reminding students to back up their work or ensuring it is stored remotely on a cloud is vital.

It may be prudent to identify a common understanding of teamwork and establish guidelines for student interaction (SUNY COIL Center, 2013); what it is and useful strategies to work effectively in groups. This may address student feedback that instructions were not always clear and the desire for greater support. Team members could be assigned roles, such as scribe, coordinator, or presenter. Assigning group roles has been attributed to encouraging accountability and holding each other to account for incomplete work or tasks. In their study, Hirshfield and Chachra (2015) concluded that assigning group roles helped to disrupt stereotypical and gendered biases by asking students to rotate roles throughout the semester. This may help students who are less confident to strengthen their communication skills as well as overcome preconceptions about cultural traits.

Conclusion

COIL projects provide opportunities for students to work across cultures and gain intercultural awareness. Students can gain study abroad experiences from their own homes, opening prospects to learners who may otherwise be excluded. Peer educators should take the time to get to know each other so they can collaborate with mutual respect. To promote meaningful experiences, learning outcomes need to be considered before developing the curriculum to ensure activities set out to achieve objectives. Spend time with the student groups, firstly to provide training in the technologies that will be used and secondly, to help them develop rapport and a mutual understanding of the aims and expectations of group work and the project. Defining roles may help learners to be accountable and understand their responsibilities to the group so that when they encounter issues, they can work to resolve them rather than adopt a culture of blame. Ultimately, students should come away having an enriched intercultural and, hopefully, fun experience.

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