



COIL – Virtual mobility without commercialisation

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Collaborative online international learning – COIL – offers an alternative to the much-hyped MOOCs, and one that is less commercial and more interactive, with a strong focus on internationalisation of the curriculum and of teaching and learning. Much, if not all, of the debate in higher education seems to be focused these days on massive open online courses, or MOOCs, which according to several people should be considered nothing less than a revolutionary new model for higher education teaching and learning.

In the meantime, a slower burning addition to international teaching and learning is already taking place with much less attention – ‘virtual mobility’, as it is called in Europe, or ‘collaborative online international learning’ (COIL), as it is more correctly referred to in the United States.

While in MOOCs the teaching stays more or less traditional, using modern technology for a global form of delivery, in COIL the technology is used to develop a more interactive and collaborative way of international teaching and learning.

If one follows the divide between globalisation and internationalisation in higher education, MOOCs fall more into the former category and COIL into the latter, with a strong focus on the internationalisation of the curriculum and of teaching and learning.

And while at first glance MOOCs present this idea of being free of charge but increasingly seem to have become part of the wider commercialisation of higher education, COIL has more in common with the non-commercial, cooperative, international dimension of higher education.

Virtual mobility and COIL

The term ‘virtual mobility’ has emerged from documents from the European Commission as well as from other European entities and institutions of higher education over the past few years. It relates to the increasing attention being paid to forms of mobility other than physical mobility, exchange and-or study abroad.

It is connected to a desire to focus on the large majority of students who are not mobile, the ‘internationalisation at home’ movement. In other words: how to make it possible for non-mobile students to develop an international dimension to their teaching and learning.

Others see it more as a way to realise international, collaborative experiences. This focus on the mobility dimension of online learning, as expressed in the name of ‘virtual mobility’, in my view ignores the potential of international online learning as an integral part of the internationalisation of university curricula and teaching and learning.

The term ‘collaborative online international learning’ combines the four essential dimensions of real virtual mobility: it is a collaborative exercise of teachers and students; it makes use of online technology and interaction; it has potential international dimensions; and it is integrated into the learning process.

The COIL movement in the US started some five to six years ago in a small way, with a one-day conference in 2007 at Purchase College in Westchester, and since 2010 it has become integrated into the international mission of the State University of New York (SUNY) and linked as a [unit](#) to the SUNY Office of Global Affairs.

Its annual conference attracts an increasing number of participants from all over the US and abroad. Participation is still very small compared to other international education conferences, but I am sure that it will expand and that we will see an increase in the number of sessions dealing with this subject at major international education events around the world.

Why COIL is important

What makes COIL such an important addition to the many forms of physical mobility and to the internationalisation of curricula and teaching and learning? In the first place, it provides opportunities for students (for instance, part-time students) who cannot or do not want to go abroad for a semester or longer, but would like to have an international teaching and learning experience.

Through interaction with students and teachers from other countries they receive different perspectives on their subject and on learning and teaching, which they would find it hard to obtain otherwise.

In the second place, COIL offers the opportunity and makes it necessary for students and teachers to work closely together – an opportunity that in many cases is missed in physical mobility, where students and teachers do not collaborate inside and outside the classroom.

To give an example: in a one-semester joint minor programme between the school of economics and management at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and universities in Paris and Barcelona, students work on real-life projects for businesses and organisations in the three cities – for instance, on how to increase younger people's access to museums or how to improve student accommodation in the cities.

Students start the programme with a one-week visit to Amsterdam, where they get to know one another (including staying in fellow students' homes), their teachers and the companies. Then they work together via social media in small online groups on the assignments and at the end come together again for a week to discuss their results and compete for the best analysis.

Students, teachers and companies are excited about the results and the interaction. And the whole process combines short study abroad with online learning.

In the third place, COIL draws attention to the specific national and cultural approach to a subject as well as to the way it is taught and learned.

To give another example: in an online course on sports management between my school in Amsterdam and one at SUNY Cortland, the different approach to sport in the US and Europe, as well as the different way the subject is taught, becomes clear and makes students think differently about the subject.

It is positive to see that both in practice and in policies there is increasing attention being paid to virtual mobility, or collaborative online international learning.

As the COIL conferences show, there is still a lot to learn and several models are possible.

But in a less headline-grabbing way than MOOCs, and one that is more integrated in the teaching and learning process, an important new dimension to internationalisation is evolving and should receive similar attention to MOOCs.

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