A student perspective: making the most of participation in a COIL practice

An interview with Marlous Schouten

Marlous Schouten is a fourth-year student of Facility Management at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. As a student, she participated in several practices for Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and reflects on these learning experiences. She also worked on the Ikudu project, a collaboration between five European and five South African universities to create capacity for COIL at South African universities.

1. Which COIL practices did you participate in?

"I first participated in a COIL with Mexico. We jointly created a magazine that focused on cultural similarities and differences. My next COIL had two components. In the first component, we collaborated with universities in Japan, the USA and Switzerland. The topic was how companies contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In the second component, we worked only with Switzerland, with students of Facility Management and Food Technology to develop a sustainable catering concept."

2. What did you learn from them?

"It takes a while to get used to collaborating with students that you will never meet physically. It is more difficult to get to know each other because you cannot meet informally like you do with your fellow students at home, in between sessions.

Working with students from a different and culture and discipline really added value, also for my professional skills. Usually, you work with students who think and work in the same way, within the same programme. COIL was different and led to really interesting perspectives from other disciplines and conversations that were new and challenges.

In my programme of study, education is delivered in Dutch. I was therefore a bit apprehensive about communicating in English. I was not used to speaking English in a professional context, but in COIL you cannot escape it. The more you engage in conversation and work together, the easier it gets. I now feel that I am well prepared to use English in my future profession.

I also learned a lot about myself. For example, how I react to certain situations and how I work together with others. And certainly, also what it takes to work with students with different cultural backgrounds."

3. You also worked with lecturers to design and run COIL practices in the iKudu project. What did you take away from those activities?

"First of all, you learn to see things from a lecturer's perspective. You see how much time it takes do design and facilitate learning, which as a student you do not realise. I also observed how complicated it can be to build a logical structure and sequence for a COIL and to transform ideas into attractive and meaningful assignments for the students. I found it interesting to follow the process from a COIL idea to the reality in the classroom.

I also saw that 'icebreakers', which I did not always think very useful as a student, are actually really important for connecting students. Also, some of the smaller assignments are important within the whole structure.

For the students, it helps to include a session to get familiar with the software that is used in a COIL. We used Padlet, which is pretty easy to use but some students at the partner university struggled with it. Not every university has access to the range of software tools that we have. You also need to have a discussion about issues of privacy at an early stage because it may prevent problems later on.

We had not realised that connectivity would be such an issue during the pandemic. At one time, we had a meeting at which none of the South African lecturers or students showed up. Later, we found out that electricity had been cut off in most of the Durban area and that nobody could connect to the internet.

Many South African students, who were not on campus, could not switch on their video and that really had an impact on the collaboration. At the same time, I think that some students would not switch their cameras even if they could, because they have a different idea of interaction."

4. What should lecturers include in the design and execution of COIL to make student learning a truly collaborative process?

"It all starts with the design and setting. In one of the COIL practices that I participated in, students in the USA were not motivated to collaborate because it was too early in the day for them. They did not switch their cameras on and I suspect that they were still in bed. The early time was chosen because we also worked with Japan and we had to work with time zones in two directions. This was too ambitious and not really workable. So, already the time of day can influence the collaboration process.

Lecturers should give students the time to get to know each other. Like I said, icebreakers are really important. It is also important that students have the opportunity to collect background information, not only about each other's countries and cultures but also about educational systems and educational cultures. In some cultures, students are used to working in teams, but in others students mostly follow lectures in big halls. In my university, groups are small and interaction between lecturers and students is fairly informal. At other universities there can be much more hierarchy. It helps if lecturers organise informal sessions to discuss other topics than just the subject of the COIL. These informal sessions improve relationships between students and are quite helpful. After all, in COIL you do not meet in the corridor and you cannot have a spontaneous coffee in the student café.

Teams should be small and carefully composed. Diverse teams make the work more interesting. Facilitate that students give feedback to each other at regular times. This helps to make them feel engaged.

And make sure that students work together on a joint product. Just presenting local results to each other is not enough. When students do not really need to collaborate to finish an assignment, COIL is not used to its full potential. Grading joint products by both lecturers is a powerful learning experience."

5. What have you observed about collaborative processes between lecturers?

"Like students, lecturers should take the time to get to know each other and their universities. So, it is more than a pity that during the pandemic, lecturers cannot get together physically to design a COIL practice together, because I think this leads to better designs.

Sometimes, lecturers are like students in that they leave things to the last minute. When things go wrong, lecturers may retreat into survival mode. They will feel more responsible for their own students than for the students of the partner. This means that you lose the added value of COIL.

Also, keep it simple and manageable for your first COIL and do not involve too many partners at first. You can always extend later. Start small and build on what works well."

6. What should universities do to prepare their lecturers to facilitate COIL?

"Learning by doing is not always the best way to approach COIL. Lecturers need to understand the added value of COIL and that it is not a 'stand-alone' activity. It is related to other activities for internationalisation.

It makes a big difference if lecturers who embark on a first COIL are assisted or coached by more experienced lecturers. The university can facilitate that by appointing coaches. Educational advisors can be a great help with learning outcomes and assessment. I am glad that the grants for virtual international collaboration by the Dutch Ministry of Education acknowledge this. But we need to see how this works out. It is also a strong point that these grants provide hours for lecturers, which are often lacking in institutional strategies for COIL."

7. How would you advise students to make the most of their participation in a COIL practice?

"I would advise them to be flexible and open minded. Do not stick to the way you usually do things. Sometimes you may wonder why you are doing certain activities, and only afterwards, when you reflect, you realise how much you have learned. We kept reflective journals in which we documented expectations, progress and a flashback at the end. This made visible how much we learned.

Also, just enjoy this opportunity for learning in a very different way, with people that you would not have met otherwise. Working with students from different countries is also good for your network. When I was looking for an internship abroad, it was very helpful that I have a network from the COILs that I participated in."

Marlous was interviewed by Jos Beelen in January of 2022