

Getting Started with Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): A Practical Guide

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What is COIL?

Virtual Exchange (VE) refers to the use of technology to facilitate collaborative learning across geographical contexts (O'Dowd 2021; Stevens Initiative 2023). Developed by the State University of New York with National Endowment for the Humanities funding, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) involves faculty from various countries co-creating learning components such as a shared project built into their syllabi. COIL is useful for any discipline, including the natural and social sciences, and is particularly relevant for political science. It can be a valuable learning experience that supports equity, particularly for students who experience financial or practical barriers to study abroad.

Why is COIL a Good Fit for Political Science and Comparative Politics in Particular?

- COIL may be used to illustrate concepts and theories of comparative politics through meaningful engagement.
- COIL is flexible and can work in almost all types of classes/modalities and across disciplines.
- COIL can be a short (e.g., 2 or 3 weeks) or longer component of a course, and range from a short series of discussions to semester-long projects.
- COIL can complement other types of global learning and motivate students to study abroad.
- COIL can be a tool for incorporating diverse perspectives, decolonizing political science, and be useful for helping students recognize and consider preconceived attitudes.

- COIL can increase students' global competencies, and skills that are useful in the modern job market; participation could be added to students' CVs.
- COIL can lead to long-term collaborations with colleagues abroad.

How Do I Get Started?

- 1) Find a good partner– [SUNY COIL can help](#). SUNY COIL includes a partnering fair, among many other resources. The partnering class does not have to be political science as long as there are common themes. Two courses can have different content and share only the COIL assignment.
- 2) Another resource is the [Stevens Initiative](#), which supports COIL between the USA and the MENA region. It offers faculty training and funding opportunities, some of which are supported by the [Aspen Institute](#), among other donors.
- 3) Start small - Consider a short series of discussions between your students to start with, rather than a massive project. This will lessen the burden on you, the faculty member, and by extension the students, until valuable lessons are learned and skills are acquired.
- 4) Consider that your students might have to arrange meetings despite having a large time zone difference. Minimize the impact of this difference through your selection of a partner or the types of synchronous or asynchronous activities you choose.
- 5) Faculty and students need to be able to communicate so language has to be taken into consideration.
- 6) The partners do not need to be teaching in the same time block, but if this is possible to schedule, it is highly beneficial.
- 7) When considering the project topic and the online modality, consider that students in the COIL may live in or come from non-democratic countries and may not be able to fully or safely participate.
- 8) Ask your department chair and teaching and learning center if they offer support for COIL, such as a knowledge community or stipend for developing or running a COIL.
- 9) Before beginning the COIL, discuss intercultural competencies and other expectations related norms in interacting with students from the partner countries, which could include considering income disparities, cultural or religion norms, etc.
- 10) Explain to students the rationale for participating in a COIL and the ways that they will benefit, such as being able to list cross-cultural collaboration as a skill on their CVs.
- 11) Be flexible and work to mitigate unexpected challenges, such as interpersonal conflicts, cultural or political sensitivities, or students' time limitations or apprehensions.
- 12) Suggested activities include:
 - a) Synchronous Zoom sessions and guest lectures;
 - b) Ice-breakers;
 - c) Collaborative projects (e.g., A project designed to address a development challenge);
 - d) Students interviewing each other;
 - e) Discussions and shared blogs around current events in both countries;
 - f) Structured discussion of a film, reading, podcast, exhibit, etc.;
 - g) Study groups;
 - h) Sharing of items or photos that represent one's culture;
 - i) Any project relevant to the topic of the course–e.g., nutrition assignment, engineering problem, etc.

- 13) Find a platform that is accessible to instructors and students in both countries. Examples might include Pebblepad, Padlet, Wix, Flipgrid, Blogger, Hypothesis, Discord, etc.
- 14) Consider having a debriefing session with students for example through a discussion or written reflection to improve the COIL for future students.
- 15) Consider studying how COIL impacts student outcomes (e.g., Benstead et al. 2024).

Potential Challenges to Consider

- 1) Gaps in partner faculty motivation and goals;
- 2) Language skills;
- 3) Time difference between faculty partners' classes;
- 4) Consider equity and accessibility when designing the COIL experience;
- 5) Technology access and literacy; and,
- 6) Privacy concerns specific to the use of specific platforms (e.g., Google) in certain countries.

Suggestions for Departments and Administrators

- 1) Because COIL is a time-intensive activity for faculty to develop and implement, it should be supported with financial stipends, time releases, and mentorship.
- 2) Provide training on potential ethical challenges that might arise in the COIL content and help faculty develop their skills in guiding students through a cross-cultural experience in a way that amplifies its positive benefits and minimizes challenges.
- 3) Hire a COIL coordinator for the campus, or offer a course release to a faculty member to be in this role.

Works Cited

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