



Environmental Journalism Training from the Gobi to the Grand Coulee: Reflections on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in Mongolian and U.S. classrooms

Derek Moscato
Western Washington University

Bayarmaa Boldbaatar
National University of Mongolia

Ariunzaya Norovsuren
National University of Mongolia

The emergence of the teaching approach known as collaborative online international learning (COIL) has gained prominence during the past several years, especially since most classrooms globally have adapted to technological changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The philosophy that underpins the COIL paradigm is straightforward: University students are better off for learning international and intercultural perspectives, and classroom innovations now afford learners the opportunity to engage with peers across borders and around the globe. As journalism professors, we were compelled by COIL's focus not only on learning outcomes, but also processes that stressed creativity, collaboration, and communication. As a team, we were already working together on mass communication research focused on newspaper coverage of air pollution issues in Mongolia and the United States.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that we'd eventually turn our attention to the journalism classroom. Global political, social, and environmental issues, which are often by default connected to professional and scholarly understandings of journalism, inevitably present an opportunity for binational or multinational deliberation. The COIL paradigm in particular offers pathways for "patterns of productive social, personal, and academic negotiations and cross-cultural literacy

building" (Aksakalova & Chatterji, 2023, p. 159).

In addition to understanding the logistics and implementation of a COIL program, one of our collective goals was to more holistically understand the potentiality of this method in the context of mass media and journalism in our own countries. COIL has been relatively well studied in nation-specific contexts, including Japan (Shoji & Okura, 2024), Mexico (Goto & Gutierrez-Gomez, 2024), Norway (Jenssen *et al.*, 2024), South Africa (Naicker, 2024), and the Middle East (Fulco & Goldsmith, 2024). At the same time, it has garnered discipline-specific attention from researchers examining its impact in the domains of public health (Jenssen *et al.*, 2024; Nowak, Gray, & Gibson, 2024), sustainability and architecture (Snider & Gilbrecht, 2024), and interpersonal communication (Mansoori, 2024).

Yet much less has been written about how COIL can be used within the fields of mass communication and media. There are several challenges that are unique to the mass communication field. Our discipline is, of course, writing- and language-focused. Another challenge is that newsroom and professional communication norms are often unique to individual nations or geographic regions. Finally, media professional practices are highly experiential and often face-to-face enterprises.

Our foray into a shared environmental journalism classroom thus served as a catalyst for increased internationalization of coursework, and an increasingly global outlook for our journalism students. As an innovative form of digital, virtual, experiential exchange, there was excitement about the opportunities for collaboration between professors and students, particularly with different national and cultural contexts. Our immersion in the COIL approach was centered on three key learning objectives. First, we aspired to curricular innovation and interactivity in the classroom. Through COIL, the hope was to provide our students with new contexts and settings for learning, and to emulate the different and sometimes surprising learning environments that students might encounter post-university in their professional lives. The COIL program offered this in droves, fostering for students the ability to engage with new opportunities and challenges.

For example, our binational visual storytelling assignment, using the Google Earth application, brought students together from both countries to produce visually immersive environmental media projects. Students were tasked with understanding, and communicating, sites of interest in both countries, such as Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, the Gobi Desert, and Khustain National Park in Mongolia; and Joshua Tree National Forest; Glacier National Park; and Mount Denali National Park in the United States. They were also encouraged to examine or highlight economic or resources sites such as the Oyu Tolgoi copper mine in Mongolia, or Erenhot, the largest land port on the China-Mongolia border. One of the upsides of this process is that students learn about the policies and places of another country not in the abstract but in relation to geographies they already know. For the fledgling environmental writer, it's easier to understand the intricacies of Lake Hövs-göl or Hustai National Parks in relation to Yellowstone or Crater Lake, and vice-versa.

Secondly, we sought out a compelling, hands-on venue for global citizenship. To this end, we provided a broad internationalization dimension whereby students could learn more about the institutions, public policies, and citizen interests in which such environmental journalism takes place. Specific assignments and cases helped students understand internationalization more broadly. How could we provide students with more system-wide thinking about such topics as cultural competency, national history, economic flows,

and shared national or cultural values.

A case in point was the students' collaborative work on feature stories. This time, the US-Mongolia groups were tasked with outlining feature stories related to big picture issues that are jointly felt in both countries such as outdoor recreation, wildlife conservation, energy policy, and waste management. It spurred on the kind of comparative research and analytic writing that fosters wider thinking and more robust reporting. The best work occurred when the knowledge and experience was proximate and materially informed. An especially engaging air pollution collaboration, for example, drew from students' experiences with the topic in their home cities.

That process served as an entry point to bigger things. Even as the semester ended for our U.S. students, our Mongolia students carried onward by writing up the planned stories, which included comparative analyses of the urban air toxicity issue and destructive mountaintop coal mining practices in the hinterlands. In turn, the Mongolian students' papers were reviewed by professors from both countries, culminating in a video providing feedback and celebrating the conclusion of their work.

Thirdly, we strove to deliver marketable and more robust skills for students. As journalism professors, we typically aim to help our students become better scholars but also better professionals. COIL offered a pathway for international learning opportunities while giving students the confidence to engage those from beyond their borders. As journalism professors do, we used real-world media examples to demonstrate not only the *what* of environmental reporting, but also the *how*. This focus on professional practice soon evolved into learning about both cultural and media literacy. A truism of many scholarly and professional disciplines – including journalism, mass media, and public relations – is that practitioners need to be prepared for an increasingly globalized workplace and economy. This requires enhanced knowledge of country-specific contexts, but also skillsets related to global modes of intellectual, political, economic, and ecological exchange.

That philosophy of being global learners catalyzed our more regular interactions, including shared lectures, student discussions, and mutual observations of news broadcasts and stories. But it also drove some new modes of learning that we weren't expecting related to culture, language, and national customs. In the lead-up to the exchange, U.S. students learned from a

Mongolia Studies professor about customs, traditions, and socio-cultural practices. Though Mongolian students were arguably more familiar with American lifestyles and culture, they embraced the challenge of practicing their English in Canvas discussions and informal e-mail banter. That was the soft power aspect of COIL that we weren't expecting.

So after our first-time COIL venture, how did we as professors feel about the process? For our students, COIL provided an opportunity to learn with greater depth about content and case studies in another country, and to use that learning process as a lens for reporting and writing about other global contexts. For example, our U.S. students exposed to the issue of the Gobi Desert's drought and desertification issues, including public deliberation and national policymaking, could apply that knowledge to other biomes across Central Asia, North America, and Africa. Similarly, they would be able to see issues of desertification in the U.S. specifically through different lenses, including the perspective from those nomadic herders who live and cultivate the land. Similarly, the opportunities and challenges facing the United States' national parks system could be contrasted with the growing system within Mongolia.

But there was also an important outcome for we as faculty that went beyond learning content. We hoped for compatibility in terms of timing and logistics. The rigorous schedule of most academics means they often have very little bandwidth for changes to their classroom plans, so having a partner that might have some wiggle room to accommodate last-minute changes or adjustments would be essential. Indeed, time zone issues sometimes hampered our own planning ambitions as professors, but also student groups. How many of us enjoy work meetings after 6pm, or before 8am? This speaks to larger questions related to institutional relationships and support. The campus systems needed for a successful COIL offering, ranging from technology to pedagogy, can be broad but also deep. For those diving into the COIL paradigm for the first time, it's wise to recognize a myriad of potential challenges related to logistics, language, learning differences, and these can arrive on top of the usual challenges we face in our regular classrooms.

So was that extra work, and the occasional headache, ultimately worth it? For our crew, it was an emphatic yes. Despite time zone and scheduling differences, we persevered through organization, flexibility, and even some good humor when the logistics weren't

working out. It helped that we shared significant interests in terms of the material that was taught. Our outlook prioritized national and regional contexts, global futures, and the prospect of cross-border or trans-Pacific responsibility. Given the precarious nature of collaborations in academia – research, teaching, or administrative – we worked hard to manage a serious collaboration while prioritizing collegiality. As partners, we recognized the importance of being communicative, enthusiastic, and willing to roll with the punches. We took the time to celebrate successes, share laughs, and have a bit of fun. The ability to stay upbeat in the face of logistical challenges was and is paramount for all parties involved. Like any curricular innovation, the COIL paradigm payoff is commensurate with the support it receives from a community of enthusiastic teachers and learners.

References

- Aksakalova, O., & Chatterji, T. (2023). Combating isolationism through coil virtual exchange. *Writing on the wall: Writing education and resistance to isolationism*, 151.
- Al Mansoori, K. (2024). Research on the impact of COIL projects in enhancing students' public speaking skills. *US-China Education Review*, 14(2), 81-99.
- Fulco, C., & Goldsmith, L. (2024). Internationalizing Middle Eastern politics (MEP): A study of the educational potential of collaborative online international learning (COIL) for Middle East politics pedagogy. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 20(1), 101-118.
- Goto, K., & Gutierrez-Gomez, Y. (2024). Research globally, learn globally: An innovative course-based research project through collaborative online international learning (COIL) among nutrition students from American and Mexican universities. *Pedagogy in Health Promotion*, 10(1), 56-62.
- Jenssen, U., Bochenek, J. M., King, T. S., Steindal, S. A., Hestvold, I. V., & Morrison-Beedy, D. (2024). Impact of COIL: Learning from student nurses in Norway who collaborated with US students. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 35(1), 74-82.
- Naicker, A. (2024). Sustaining opportunities and mutual partiality through collaborative online international learning in South Africa. *Policy*

Futures in Education, 22(3), 327-336.

Nowak, A. V., Gray, M., Omodara, D., & Gibson, L. (2024). Development of a US/UK collaborative online international learning (COIL) partnership for undergraduate education in public health. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 7, 1-17.

Shoji, S., & Okura, N. (2024). A collaborative online learning activity (COIL) between Japan and United States of America on culture and language studies. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 15(1), 9-15.

Snider, M., Monna, S., & Gilbrecht, A. (2024). Teaching sustainability in architecture through collaborative online international learning. *An-Najah University Journal for Research-A (Natural Sciences)*, 38(2).

Derek Moscato is a professor in the Department of Journalism at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. Bayarmaa Boldbaatar and Ariunzaya Norovsuren are professors in the Department of Journalism at National University Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar. In addition to their COIL venture for the environmental journalism classroom, the three are working on a collaborative research venture focused on coverage of air quality issues in Mongolia and United States media.

© Derek Moscato, Bayarmaa Boldbaatar and Ariunzaya Norovsuren, 2025. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License