



Exploring initiatives towards Social Impact contributing to better Quality Education: A Collaborative Online International Learning project between the University of Johannesburg and the University of Dallas, Texas

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ABSTRACT

This reflective paper examines the impact of a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project on journalism pedagogy and student development. The study aimed to assess how interdisciplinary, cross-cultural collaboration can enhance journalism education by contextualising global issues within local frameworks. The project, titled “Exploring Initiatives Towards Social Impact Contributing to Better Quality Education,” involved Journalism students from the University of Johannesburg (South Africa) and History students from the University of Dallas, Texas (United States). Framed under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), the collaboration explored sub-themes including inclusive infrastructure, food security, student accommodation, and work preparedness. Students interacted via Zoom and social media platforms to produce multimedia content, such as short documentaries, news packages, public service announcements, and photo essays. The methodology centered on students’ interpretation of the theme and their narrated experiences of behavioural transformation through the project. The findings revealed that COIL projects foster critical understanding of global issues within local contexts while promoting decolonial approaches to problem-solving. The project cultivated the ethos of a global village while respecting local particularities. Discussions highlight the value of interdisciplinary collaboration in journalism education, suggesting that such initiatives prepare students for interconnected professional environments. Recommendations include integrating COIL projects into journalism curricula to promote innovative, inclusive storytelling and cross-cultural competence. This research contributes to scholarship on journalism education by demonstrating how collaborative, technology-mediated learning can transform student perspectives and equip them with skills to address complex societal challenges through a decolonial lens.

Keywords: COIL, Journalism, Decolonial, Pedagogy, Quality Education

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of quality education in South Africa is inextricably linked to the complex and painful history of a nation. Once a weapon of oppression under apartheid—exemplified by the 1976 Soweto Uprising against the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction—education has also been

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championed as a tool for liberation and empowerment. Although the post-1994 era has significantly expanded access to schooling, a critical gap persists between access and actual quality. This is evidenced by high graduate unemployment, suggesting a misalignment between curricula and the demands of a modern economy, and reflecting the deep-seated, lingering effects of an education system historically designed to perpetuate inequality. It is within this context that Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education, is of profound significance. Achieving SDG 4 in South Africa requires moving beyond simple access to confront the legacy of under-resourced institutions and a curriculum that may not fully equip students for the future.

While the macro-level challenges to South African higher education are well documented, there is a gap in knowledge regarding the role of specific, innovative pedagogical collaborations in addressing these issues from the ground up. In particular, the potential of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) to foster a nuanced, student-centred understanding of "quality education" and its local manifestations remains underexplored. This study aimed to fill that gap by examining how an interdisciplinary COIL project can serve as a platform for students to critically engage with SDG 4, identify initiatives that promote student success within their own contexts, and develop the cross-cultural competencies essential for global citizenship.

To achieve this, a reflective qualitative analysis was conducted on a collaborative project between Journalism students at the University of Johannesburg (South Africa) and History students at the University of Dallas (USA). Framed by SDG 4, students explored sub-themes such as inclusive infrastructure, student wellness, and work preparedness within their respective institutions. Through interaction on digital platforms, they produced multimedia artefacts - including documentaries and photo essays - that documented their findings and shared solutions. This methodology allowed the study to focus on students' interpretation of the theme and their narrated experiences of transformation through collaboration.

This research provides, for the first time, a conceptual overview of SDG 4 and its particular challenges within the South African higher education landscape. Then it will detail the methodology and structure of the COIL project. Subsequent sections will discuss the findings related to students' comparative reasoning and problem-solving skills, the role of digital platforms in fostering cross-cultural understanding, and the implications of such projects for decolonising journalism curricula and preparing students for a globally interconnected professional environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research paper based on a COIL interdisciplinary project between the University of Johannesburg (Global South) and the University of Dallas Texas (Global North), sits at the intersection of three critical academic domains, namely; 1) The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) which looks at the reflective, evidence-based practice of improving teaching and learning, 2) COIL as a pedagogical approach to facilitating meaningful cross-cultural learning experiences, and 3) a Comparative Analysis of Quality Education as ongoing discourse on defining, measuring, and achieving quality in higher education across different geographical locations and economic contexts. Literature reviewed in this section fuses recent scholarship that connects these three areas with a specific focus on initiatives aimed at social impact.

COIL as a transformative pedagogy

Over the past few years, COIL has shifted from being a mere technological tool to an avenue for understanding a complex pedagogical framework that requires careful planning and assessment. Various scholars have been instrumental in moving the field beyond a focus on mere virtual exchange.¹ They argue that for COIL to be truly effective, it must be embedded in the curriculum and learning outcomes of both participating courses, rather than an add-on activity. This global model directly

¹ Jon Rubin and Sarah Guth, *The Guide to COIL Virtual Exchange: Implementing, Growing, and Sustaining Collaborative Online International Learning* (Taylor & Francis, 2023); Marzell I Gray et al., "COIL: A Global Experience for Everyone," *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 21, no. 4 (2021): 64–79; Robert O'Dowd, "From Telecollaboration to Virtual Exchange: State-of-the-Art and the Role of UNICollaboration in Moving Forward," *Research-Publishing. Net* 1 (2018): 1–23.

supports the project's aim, which is looking at a global problem, such as the quality of education, through a local lens of personal experiences, thereby ensuring that students from both the Global South and North engage with the topic of social impact from their specific socio-economic realities, challenging regimented views.² North-South partnerships present certain power dynamics, and scholars caution against replicating colonial patterns where Northern institutions are seen as powerful providers of knowledge and Southern ones as the weak recipients.³ The project between UJ and UTD was founded on mutual knowledge exchange, where both cohorts are experts in their own contexts and recognise that their shared power in the process was one of the elements that determined the success of the project.

Sharma and Nehajoan state that traditional internationalisation is costly and often exclusive.⁴ However, COIL promotes and provides a sustainable and equitable alternative. Although the research itself is conducted by scholars from wealthy nations, it identifies a significant dominance of research from high and upper-middle-income countries, with a notable absence of contributions from lower-middle and low-income economies. This project, a collaboration between a South African and a U.S. university, directly fills this gap by providing a case study from a Global South perspective (UJ) in partnership with the Global North (UTD). The project addressed this by showing how COIL can be used to provide equitable global exposure to students.

SoTL in Practice

SoTL requires researchers to measure what students learn during international virtual collaborations, such as the development of intercultural competence. One of the project's objectives was to show significant gains in students' ability to understand and navigate cultural differences.⁵ The project contributed to this SoTL by measuring changes in perspective with respect to definitions of quality education and social impact. This was done through the collection of data using reflective essay narratives. According to Naicker et al., well-structured COIL experiences promote critical thinking, comparative reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving skills directly aligned with the tackling of complex global issues, such as educational inequality.⁶ This is a core objective of one's social impact focus. Another area of interest in SoTL regarding such virtual collaborations is digital literacy and the divide. A significant SoTL concern is the digital divide.⁷ Research emphasises the need for equitable access to technology and bandwidth. This is not just a technical issue but a pedagogical one; course design must be flexible and accessible to account for differing levels of digital infrastructure between Texas and Johannesburg, turning a potential challenge into a learning point about global inequity.

Quality Education

The concept of quality education is debatable, with the West advocating for a more contextualised understanding. Scholars such as Jöns and Hoyler argue that world university rankings often privilege research output from the Global North through language and institutional finances and invariably marginalise the strengths of universities in the Global South, whose strength is in community engagement, local relevance, and social innovation.⁸ The COIL project in this study challenged this by placing a university from the South (UJ) as an equal partner in defining the discourse. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, focusing on quality education, became a valuable, shared

² Rubin and Guth, *The Guide to COIL Virtual Exchange: Implementing, Growing, and Sustaining Collaborative Online International Learning*.

³ Katherine Wimpenny et al., "Knowing, Being, Relating and Expressing through Third Space Global South-North COIL: Digital Inclusion and Equity in International Higher Education," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 26, no. 2 (2022): 279–96.

⁴ Adya Sharma and Nehajoan Panackal, "Charting the Course of Digital Collaboration: A Bibliometric Analysis of COIL Literature," *Cogent Education* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2477369.

⁵ Ashika Naicker, Evonne Singh, and Tonnie van Genugten, "Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): Preparedness and Experiences of South African Students," *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 59, no. 5 (2022): 499–510.

⁶ Naicker, Singh, and van Genugten, "Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): Preparedness and Experiences of South African Students."

⁷ Wimpenny et al., "Knowing, Being, Relating and Expressing through Third Space Global South-North COIL: Digital Inclusion and Equity in International Higher Education."

⁸ Heike Jöns and Michael Hoyler, "Global Geographies of Higher Education: The Perspective of World University Rankings," *Geoforum* 46 (2013): 45–59.

framework for comparison. Analysis by Blicharska et al. explores how SDG 4 is implemented differently in the Global North (often focusing on inclusivity and lifelong learning) and the Global South (often focusing on access, infrastructure, and decolonisation of curricula).⁹ The COIL project used as a case study in this research used the targets of SDG 4 as a comparative tool for students to analyse their respective educational systems. Lastly, it is worth noting that there is a growing movement to redefine quality to include a university's civic mission and its contribution to social and economic development.¹⁰ This aligned with the goal of the COIL project under study. For UJ, this involved examining education's role in post-apartheid transformation. For UTD, it involved examining its role in the local community. Comparing these missions through COIL created a rich dialogue on the purpose of higher education.

COIL can be used as a vehicle for socially impactful SoTL. Literature connects these strands, positioning COIL not just as a learning experience for students but as a SoTL-driven intervention that can contribute to broader educational change. COIL decolonises pedagogy as witnessed in partnerships between North and South that are increasingly seen as instruments to decolonise curricula.¹¹ By engaging in dialogue, students co-created knowledge that challenged the dominance of Western standards and validated indigenous and local knowledge systems from the Global South. This was a profound form of social impact. Literature also critiques "soft" global citizenship and advocates for a "critical global citizenship" that involves understanding power, privilege, and a commitment to social justice.¹² A COIL project on quality education was an ideal vehicle to foster this critical consciousness, moving students from awareness to actionable understanding.

The last five years of scholarship provided a robust framework for the UJ-UTD COIL project. They confirm that such an initiative is at the forefront of pedagogical innovation. By grounding the collaboration in principles of reciprocal design, the COIL project had the potential to not only provide a transformative learning experience for students but also to generate valuable SoTL insights into how international partnerships can foster a more equitable and critically engaged understanding of global higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Design

This project prioritised the practical and actionable outcomes rather than adhering to a single philosophical stance. A qualitative research design was adopted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the collaborative learning process and its outcomes. It focused on capturing the depth of student learning, intercultural experiences, and collaborative processes. Methods included content analysis of student reflections, discussion forums, and the final project deliverables in the form of a news package, a photo essay, a short documentary and a public service announcement (PSA).

Participant Selection and Context

A cohort of 12 postgraduate students enrolled in the Applied Journalism. Their role was to be content producers, multimedia editors, and interviewers. The second cohort was 14 students enrolled in the History class. Their role was to conduct research, contextual analysis, and serve as historical advisors on issues around socio-economic disparities that hinder quality education. A criterion-based sampling technique was used. Participants were included based on their enrolment in the two academic courses, making it a convenient sample within a structured academic context.

⁹ Malgorzata Blicharska, Claudia Teutschbein, and Richard J Smithers, "SDG Partnerships May Perpetuate the Global North–South Divide," *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 1 (2021): 22092.

¹⁰ Alejandra Boni and Des Gasper, "Rethinking the Quality of Universities: How Can Human Development Thinking Contribute?," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 13, no. 3 (2012): 451–70.

¹¹ Armida De la Garza and Cliona Maher, "Decolonising the Film Curriculum through South–North Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Initiatives," *Film Education Journal* 5, no. 1 (2022): 34–40.

¹² Vanessa Oliveira De Andreotti, "Soft versus Critical Global Citizenship Education," in *Development Education in Policy and Practice* (Springer, 2014), 21–31.

COIL Project Design and Implementation

The project was structured in four phases conducted over 7 weeks.

Phase 1 focused on laying the foundation and teambuilding. Students recorded one-minute videos sharing their profiles and introducing themselves using the Padlet application. The second activity was a two-hour icebreaker session through the Zoom video platform, facilitated by both instructors. Students were informed about COIL, the purpose and expected outcomes of the collaborative project. During this session, students were randomly divided into breakaway rooms where they re-introduced themselves, shared their understanding of the quality education theme and discussed ways by which they could best approach it as a team. Deliverables in this session included forming cross-disciplinary, international teams made up of 4 groups, each with students from the journalism and history disciplines.

Phase 2 was a joint synchronous workshop on ethical considerations around vulnerable groups, specifically related to interviews and historical source analysis. At this stage, teams had already selected their specific sub-topics and pitched them to facilitators. History students contributed to the historical context and scholarly resources while journalism students analysed news articles, data sets, and identified angles to the multimedia stories. All students contributed towards the actual storytelling, and all content and visuals used for each story were the students' original work. Teams collaborated synchronously and asynchronously to merge historical narratives with contemporary journalism into final products. The first team produced a public service announcement raising awareness of inclusive and quality education by showcasing the experiences of three students: one visually impaired, another deaf and the last one who uses a wheelchair. The video highlighted how accessible learning environments, technology and pathways assist physically abled students to succeed academically. Each interviewee emphasised the importance of physical and technical resources in their academic success. Team two produced a short documentary looking at how residence life provides more than accommodation for students. Their findings showed how such spaces are academic in nature in that students partake in academic, physical and mentally stimulating programmes. The third team shot a news package that focused on industry partnerships from both universities that contribute to graduate employment opportunities. The fourth team produced a photo essay that looked at student welfare initiatives at both universities, which are aimed at bridging the gap between financial hardship and academic success, allowing students to have basic needs such as food parcels, leading to a better mental state and ultimately contributing to their academic success. All four projects were submitted by WeTransfer due to file sizes. At the end of the seven weeks, students watched each other's productions and provided peer-reviewed feedback. Students also submitted reflective essays in which they reflected on the project itself, their own contribution to the collaboration, and the impact the project involvement had on their perceptions of what constitutes quality education. Students also reflected on their intercultural communication skills, knowledge of SDG 4 and its complexities, technical or digital collaboration skills, and their understanding of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The qualitative collaborative project between 12 Applied Journalism students from the Department of Communication and Media and 14 senior students from the History Department at the University of Texas, Dallas, lasted for 7 weeks. Both lecturers from the two academic institutions of higher learning served as facilitators, co-creating knowledge with students. There were three virtual Zoom meetings in weeks 1, 4 and 7. Students worked independently on the project during weeks 2, 3, 5 and 6. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted separately with each cohort at the midpoint and conclusion of the project. Participants discussed challenges in collaboration, insights gained from each other's disciplines, and perceptions of the project's value. Final project digital productions were evaluated using a rubric that looked at the depth of historical analysis, journalistic storytelling quality, and effectiveness of the integrated narrative between the two disciplines and institutions. A thematic analysis was conducted based on the students' critical reflections on their personal and professional development throughout the project. This involved familiarisation with the data, generating codes, developing themes, and defining them to identify patterns.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings resulting from the qualitative analysis of student submissions, reflective journals, peer-to-peer feedback, and the final collaborative projects from the COIL project between the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD). The analysis revealed four primary thematic findings that illustrate the project's results in terms of cross-cultural understanding, critical analysis of social impact initiatives, the development of 21st-century skills, and the challenges inherent in such collaborations.

Geographic and Socioeconomic Context on Educational Initiatives

A central finding was the profound influence of local context on the conception and implementation of educational social impact initiatives. The UJ students, operating within the South African context, predominantly focused on initiatives that addressed fundamental issues of access and equity. Their case studies frequently highlighted projects dealing with infrastructure deficits, digital divides, and language-of-instruction barriers.

Conversely, UTD students, from the U.S. context, more often analysed initiatives centered on technological integration (for example, adaptive learning software, digital archives) and curriculum augmentation (for example, project-based learning modules, financial literacy programs). This stark contrast provided both cohorts with a powerful, concrete understanding of how socioeconomic realities dictate strategic priorities in educational development, moving the concept of "quality education" from an abstract ideal to a context-dependent challenge.

Critical Evaluation of Impact Measurement

Initially, student projects tended to descriptively report *what* an initiative did. However, through guided collaboration and comparative discussion, a significant evolution occurred towards a more critical analysis of *how* impact was measured and sustained. Students began to interrogate the long-term viability of projects, moving beyond surface-level success metrics (for example, the number of students enrolled) to explore deeper outcomes such as:

- **Sustainable Models:** Differentiating between once-off projects dependent on funding and self-sustaining social enterprises carried out on a minimal to no budget.
- **Community Involvement:** Assessing whether initiatives were designed *for* or *with* the target community, with students identifying a strong correlation between community ownership and long-term success.
- **Scalability vs. Depth:** Debating the trade-offs between scaling an initiative widely versus achieving deep, transformative impact in a focused geographic area.

This critical lens was directly fostered by the binational dialogue, as students were able to use their partner's context as a comparative point to question and validate their own assumptions about effective impact measurement.

Applied and Digital Fluency Skills

The project successfully served as a practicum for applied skills. UJ Applied Journalism students leveraged their skills in digital storytelling, conducting virtual interviews with initiative founders, and creating multimedia presentations (a short documentary, news package, photo essay and public service announcement) to communicate their findings effectively. UTD History students applied their skills in primary source analysis, historical contextualisation, and argumentative writing to situate contemporary educational challenges within broader historical narratives of policy, inequality, and social change in their respective countries.

Furthermore, all students reported a significant enhancement in their digital fluency. They gained practical experience with collaborative online tools (such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Padlet, and shared cloud drives) for project management, asynchronous communication, and co-creation across

time zones. This not only fostered technical competence but also the adaptability and patience required for remote, international teamwork.

Challenges of Asynchrony and Cultural Communication

The findings also illuminated significant challenges that impacted the collaboration dynamics. The primary hurdle was the time zone difference between South Africa and Texas, which severely limited opportunities for real-time synchronous communication. This placed a greater burden on asynchronous methods, which sometimes led to delays in feedback and required a higher degree of self-directedness from student teams.

Secondly, students initially encountered challenges in cross-cultural communication styles. Reflections noted early misunderstandings related to different approaches to directness, meeting facilitation, and even expectations around response times to messages. However, these challenges themselves became valuable learning opportunities. As the project progressed, the students developed greater metacognitive awareness of their communication habits and cultivated a more intentional, patient, and explicit style to ensure mutual understanding.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that this COIL project achieved its core objective of fostering a deeper, more critical understanding of social impact in education through a binational lens. The collaboration moved students from passive learners to active analysts, capable of contextualising educational challenges, critically evaluating solutions, and effectively collaborating across cultural and digital divides.

The findings from the COIL project titled *"Exploring Initiatives Towards Social Impact Contributing to Better Quality Education: A Collaborative Online International Learning Project between the University of Johannesburg and The University of Dallas, Texas,"* offer a rich tapestry of insights that resonate deeply with established theoretical frameworks while simultaneously addressing critical gaps in contemporary educational and professional practice. The outcomes transcend mere isolated results, reflecting instead broader trends and imperatives in global education, workforce development, and the study of social impact. This discussion situates the findings within relevant scholarship, elucidates their implications for pedagogical innovation, and charts pathways for future research and practice in international collaborative learning.

Aligning with and Extending COIL and Global Learning Literature

The findings of this project robustly support and extend the core tenets of the existing literature on Collaborative Online International Learning and the broader internationalisation of higher education. Scholars such as de Wit and Rubin have long argued that virtual exchange initiatives possess the potential to democratise international education by making cross-cultural learning accessible to students who might otherwise be excluded from traditional study-abroad programmes.¹³ This project affirms that potential while demonstrating that COIL's value proposition extends far beyond mere logistical accessibility. The evidence generated here suggests that well-designed virtual exchange can move decisively beyond superficial cultural exposure to foster critical cultural awareness and genuine collaborative knowledge construction among students separated by geography, history, and lived experience.

The first significant finding is that participating students developed a profound appreciation for how socioeconomic context fundamentally shapes and constrains educational priorities - exemplifies with remarkable clarity what the eminent Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire termed "situativity." In his seminal work, *"Pedagogy of the Oppressed,"* Freire articulated a vision of education that cannot be divorced from its social, political, and material reality. For Freire, authentic learning requires that students become critically conscious of the world they inhabit, understanding that

¹³ Hans de Wit, "Internationalization in and of Higher Education: Critical Reflections on Its Conceptual Evolution," in *Internationalization in Higher Education and Research: Perspectives, Obstacles, Alternatives* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 17–31, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47335-7_2; Jon Rubin, "Embedding Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) at Higher Education Institutions," in *Internationalisation of Higher Education*, 27th ed., vol. 2, 2017.

knowledge is always situated within specific historical conditions and power relations.¹⁴ The binational structure of this COIL project, bringing together South African and American students, functioned as a powerful pedagogical mechanism to "de-centre" each participant's perspective. South African journalism students, grappling with the legacy of apartheid's educational inequities, were compelled to articulate those realities to American peers whose understanding of educational access emerged from a different historical trajectory. Conversely, American history students, confronting questions of student debt, food insecurity on campus, and differential access to resources, found their assumptions about universal educational experiences challenged and complicated. This mutual de-centering, this forced confrontation with one's own taken-for-granted assumptions about how education works and what it means, constitutes precisely the kind of cognitive dissonance that transformative learning theorists such as Mezirow identify as essential for perspective transformation.¹⁵ The process is critical for developing the kind of global citizenship articulated by organisations such as Oxfam and UNESCO, which emphasize not merely knowledge about the world but the capacity to understand one's positionality within global systems of power and privilege.

Furthermore, the development of digital fluency, asynchronous collaboration capabilities, and adaptive communication skills documented in Findings 3 and 4 aligns with striking precision with the competencies identified by the World Economic Forum in its annual Future of Jobs reports.¹⁶ These reports, drawing on extensive survey data from major employers across multiple sectors, consistently highlight competencies such as complex problem-solving, technology design and use, and social influence as increasingly essential for the 21st-century workforce. The WEF's emphasis on "soft" skills—empathy, active listening, negotiation, cognitive flexibility - finds direct expression in the collaborative processes this project required. Students could not simply exchange information; they had to negotiate meaning across cultural and temporal boundaries, reconcile different communication styles and expectations, and produce coherent collaborative outputs despite never sharing physical space. This project demonstrates compellingly that COIL is not an academic add-on, a luxury for already privileged students, but rather a vital practicum for preparing all students for the global, digital, and fundamentally collaborative nature of modern professional environments. The skills developed through this project - working across time zones, adapting communication for diverse audiences, using technology to bridge rather than merely transmit - are not ancillary to disciplinary learning but constitute core professional competencies that employers increasingly demand and that traditional classroom settings often fail to cultivate.

Contributions to Decolonial Pedagogy and Curriculum Transformation

Perhaps most significantly, these findings contribute to the emerging and urgently needed scholarship on decolonial approaches to international education and curriculum transformation. Decolonialism challenges the assumption that knowledge production naturally flows from the Global North to the Global South. Traditional international education, including many study-abroad programmes and institutional partnerships, has often inadvertently reinforced these colonial epistemologies by positioning Western institutions as sites of knowledge and non-Western contexts as sites of data collection or exotic experience. However, this COIL project deliberately structured collaboration to disrupt such hierarchies.

The finding that students not only defined problems within their own contexts but shared solutions across borders within a decolonial framework represents a significant departure from conventional international education models. South African students were not positioned as informants providing raw material for American analysis or were American students positioned as experts offering solutions to South African problems. Instead, the project created conditions for mutual learning,

¹⁴ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herter and Herter, 1970).

¹⁵ Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning Theory," in *Contemporary Theories of Learning* (Routledge, 2018), 114–28.

¹⁶ World Economic Forum, "The Future of Jobs Report 2025," 2025, https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf?_gl=1*10qm76n*_up*MQ.*_gs*MQ..&gclid=Cj0KCCQjwiVjQBhCYARIsAMjts3LHukXEKCU8vfiBBGJ7UJ5-CaqANj9HD2WQGmwQ6VjF7YWINiRnXoYaAmr8EALw_wcB&gclid=0AAAAAoVy5F6ET23g5VWPjJPxEpj4Er0gN.

reciprocal knowledge exchange, and collaborative problem-solving that honoured the specificities of each context while building bridges between them. The multimedia deliverables - short documentaries, news packages, public service announcements, photo essays - became artefacts of this decolonial approach, representing not final answers but ongoing conversations, not definitive statements but situated perspectives.

This approach resonates with what decolonial theorists call "pluriversality" - the recognition that multiple ways of knowing, multiple understandings of quality education, multiple solutions to shared problems can coexist without being ranked in hierarchical relation to one another.¹⁷ The project demonstrated that students are capable of holding these multiple perspectives simultaneously; learning from difference without needing to resolve it into sameness, building solidarity across historical divides while respecting the specificities of each context. For journalism education in particular, this finding has profound implications. Journalism, as a discipline, has historically been shaped by Western models of objectivity, neutrality, and professional detachment. Decolonial approaches to journalism education challenge these assumptions, asking whose perspectives are centred, whose stories are told, whose knowledge counts as authoritative. This COIL project provided journalism students with direct experience of alternative possibilities, demonstrating that storytelling can be collaborative across difference, that solutions can emerge from dialogue rather than imposition, and that the global village requires not one voice but many voices in conversation.

Implications for Institutional Practice and Future Research

The findings of this project have significant implications for institutional practice in higher education. For universities seeking to meaningfully internationalise their curricula, COIL offers a scalable model that reaches students who cannot access traditional study abroad due to financial, family, or work obligations. The University of Johannesburg and the University of Dallas, Texas demonstrated that meaningful international collaboration does not require expensive travel programmes or complex logistical arrangements. What it requires is thoughtful design, committed faculty facilitators, and institutional support for the kind of deep collaboration that this project exemplified. For journalism programmes specifically, this project suggests pathways for curriculum transformation that prepare students for a media landscape that is simultaneously global and local. The skills of cross-cultural communication, collaborative storytelling, and critical reflexivity that students developed are precisely the skills that 21st-century journalism demands - the capacity to report across borders without reproducing colonial dynamics, to tell stories that honour complexity while remaining accessible, to collaborate with communities rather than simply extracting information from them.

Future research should build on the findings of this project by examining the long-term impact of COIL participation on students' professional trajectories and civic engagement. Do students who participate in such projects demonstrate greater capacity for cross-cultural collaboration in their subsequent careers? Are they more likely to seek out diverse perspectives and engage with global issues in their professional practice? Do they carry forward the decolonial sensibilities developed through such projects into their work as journalists, educators, and citizens? Longitudinal studies tracking COIL participants over time would provide valuable evidence for the enduring significance of these pedagogical interventions. Additionally, research should examine the institutional conditions that enable or constrain successful COIL implementation, exploring questions of faculty development, technological infrastructure, and administrative support. Comparative studies across different institutional types, disciplinary contexts, and global regions would illuminate the contextual factors that shape COIL outcomes and help identify best practices to scale such initiatives.

In conclusion, the findings of this COIL project between the University of Johannesburg and the University of Dallas, Texas demonstrate the transformative potential of well-designed virtual exchange when grounded in sound pedagogical principles and oriented toward genuine collaboration

¹⁷ Japhy Wilson, "The Insurgent Universal: Between Eurocentric Universalism and the Pluriverse," *Nordia Geographical Publications*, April 13, 2022, 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.30671/nordia.116150>; Paola Minoia and José Castro-Sotomayor, "Education and Socio-Environmental Justice in the Pluriverse: Decolonial Perspectives," *Globalizations* 21, no. 2 (February 17, 2024): 303–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2024.2316880>.

across difference. The project not only achieved its immediate objectives - enhancing students' understanding of quality education, developing their cross-cultural competencies, producing collaborative multimedia artefacts - but also illuminated pathways toward more equitable, more decolonial approaches to international education. As higher education institutions worldwide grapple with questions of relevance, equity, and global engagement, projects like this offer compelling evidence that another kind of international education is possible: one that democratizes access, honours multiple ways of knowing, and prepares students not merely for global competition but for global solidarity.

The findings of this COIL project are highly relevant and timely. They confirm the efficacy of the COIL model as a high-impact educational practice that:

- **Builds essential global competencies** aligned with workforce needs.
- **Fosters a critical, context-aware approach** to social impact and sustainable development, moving beyond naive optimism to engaged, pragmatic understanding.
- **Provides authentic preparation** for the complexities of digital and cross-cultural collaboration that define the modern world.

This project demonstrates that such collaborations are not merely an exchange of information but are crucial laboratories for developing the next generation of critically-minded global citizens and professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The success and challenges of the COIL project provide a robust foundation for enhancing future iterations and contributing to the broader field of virtual exchange. The study recommends the following points for Practice:

- **Co-Design is Crucial:** Faculty from both institutions must collaboratively design all aspects—syllabus, activities, assessments—to ensure balance and reciprocity. Design early tasks to be low-stakes and relationship-building (e.g., a shared Padlet on educational experiences, a collaborative playlist). Gradually build towards more complex, graded collaborative output.
- **Prepare for Discomfort:** Facilitate discussions on power, privilege, and positionality explicitly. Create a safe but brave space for difficult conversations. Acknowledge theoretically that a COIL project is a "negotiated space" where different knowledge systems (Global North/South, Journalism/History) meet. Drawing on postcolonial theory, explicitly task students with co-creating a third space of understanding that respects and integrates their diverse perspectives rather than having one dominate.
- **Focus on Collaborative Outputs:** The social impact is amplified if the student collaboration produces a tangible output (e.g., a joint policy brief, a comparative analysis report, a public blog series) that can be shared beyond the classroom. Dedicate a portion of the final grade to the *process* of collaboration (e.g., peer evaluations, reflective journals, contribution to shared documents) rather than solely the final product. This values the development of soft skills.
- **Contribute to SoTL:** Document the process, gather robust data (surveys, interviews, reflective analysis), and publish the findings. This adds to the academic understanding of how such partnerships can work effectively.

By implementing these recommendations and following these research avenues, the project can evolve from a successful isolated module to a model of best practice for critical, collaborative, and globally engaged education.

CONCLUSION

This COIL project yielded several key conclusions. The collaboration demonstrated that students developed a critical, context-dependent understanding of educational social impact, moving from

descriptive analysis to evaluating the sustainability and measurement of initiatives. The project effectively served as a practicum to develop essential 21st-century skills, including digital fluency, asynchronous collaboration, and adaptive communication. Furthermore, while significant, the challenges of time zones and cultural communication styles provided authentic learning experiences in navigating global virtual work. Ultimately, the project confirmed that such a binational, interdisciplinary setup is a powerful mechanism for fostering the critical and collaborative competencies required of global citizens.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The relatively small, course-specific sample size limited the generalisability of the findings to broader populations. Differences in internet reliability and access to technology between the two international cohorts created inequities in the collaborative experience. There was a potential for bias in the interpretation of qualitative data since instructors were also researchers. However, the use of multiple data sources (triangulation) was intended to mitigate this. Reliance on self-reported data in surveys and reflections may have been subject to social desirability bias (that is, students reporting what they believe the instructors want to hear).

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