Un(COIL)ing the Pandemic: Active and Affective Learning in Times of COVID-19

Cotoman, V., Davies, A., Kawagoe, N., Niihashi, H., Rahman, A., Tomita, Y., Watanabe, A. & Roesch, F

Un(COIL)ing the Pandemic: Active and Affective Learning in Times of Covid-19

Authors

Violeta Cotoman, Coventry University
Annabel Davies, Coventry University
Nanako Kawagoe, Hosei University
Hana Niihashi, Hosei University
Aisha Rahman, Coventry University
Yuki Tomita, Hosei University
Atsuko Watanabe, Kanazawa University
Felix Rösch, Coventry University

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected higher education globally. Overnight, entire degree programs had to be moved online. While this meant that also teaching and learning in political science and International Relations went into an "emergency e-learning" mode, as a recent teacher spotlight in *PS: Political Science & Politics* put it, moving online also offered opportunities. One such opportunity is collaborative online international learning (COIL) that enables students from different universities in different countries to work on one common project. As this paper argues, working together collaboratively online not only helps to mitigate the pandemic's physical restrictions and sustain a global space of learning but it also provides for a particular active and affective learning in an intercultural virtual environment that substantiates classroom experiences even in a post-pandemic higher education. To demonstrate this argument, this paper reflects on the experiences of a British-Japanese COIL project that investigated political responses to Coivd-19.

Covid-19 disrupted everyday life around the world, questioning even the most basic forms of human interaction. At the time of writing, nearly four million people had died of Covid-19 (CSSE 2021). Higher education (HE) was not spared either. When the pandemic was declared in March 2020, teaching and learning had to be quickly moved online, in some countries like the United States even in the middle of the semester. Globally, HE went into an "emergency e-learning" mode, as a recent teacher spotlight in *PS: Political Science & Politics* (Loepp 2021) ascertained. The pandemic may not have made teaching and learning impossible (Ba 2021, 171), but often "good enough" (Steele 2021, 187; also Becker et al. 2020) had to be good enough when everyone in the sector had to quickly adapt to new teaching methods and tools that many of us did not know just a few weeks before.

However, the teacher spotlight also implies (Hutchison 2021) that changes that the pandemic enforced on our teaching and learning has the potential to offer opportunities which would have been previously difficult to incorporate into rigid curricula. We – instructors *and* students – at a public university in central UK and a private Japanese university in Tokyo tried to come to terms with the pandemic and understand what is happening around us by studying together online how the pandemic affected countries around the world and how they responded to it. The resulting collaborative online international learning (COIL) project on which we worked during the fall semester 2020 is one such opportunity that can also enhance a post-pandemic HE. While online learning experiences, such as MOOCs and webinars, and the use of social media have been explored before (Esarey and Wood 2018; Kaempf and Finn 2021; Sabin and Olive 2018), COIL projects are still rarely used in political science and International Relations (IR). As this paper shows, however, COIL not only help us to sustain a global space of learning, enabling us to

mitigate the pandemic's physical restrictions, but it also provides for a particular active and affective learning in an intercultural virtual environment that substantiate classroom experiences.

COIL: for an Active and Affective Learning

Many recent pedagogical contributions to our disciplines confirm that active learning provides for the most meaningful classroom experiences. Being able not only to read about politics but also to perform it trains "higher level skills like 'apply', 'analysis' and 'evaluate'" (Gifkins 2015; also Rösch 2018, 68). In fact, students even develop a "multimodal literacy" (Holland 2016, 176), that is, a literacy that goes beyond textual competence, helping them to critique the current political status quo and to imagine politics differently. In doing so, students start to take responsibility for their learning (Lamy 2007, 112) that provides for a highly self-motivational experience because students can observe in real-time their knowledge, soft skills, and intellectual capabilities grow. In other words, active learning particularly takes place when students receive feedback through their own interactions, as "the more students are actively engaged, the more they can learn" (Holland, Sliwinski, and Thomas 2020, 3).

To achieve active learning, it is important to pair it with affective learning (Holland, Sliwinski, and Thomas 2020; Rösch 2018). Emotions can help students to develop multimodal literacy because being stimulated emotionally encourages students to care deeply (Steele 2017, 212; also Hutchison 2021) about their subjects. Being able to learn actively enables them to empathize with the assemblages of people and non-human living matter that are affected by the issues that they study. Many of them like gender inequalities, genocide, and war are unjust, challenging,

worrying, and even cruelsome, causing emotional reactions ranging from sadness and anger to fear and anxiety. Addressing and critically reflecting on these issues and negotiating their emotions towards them, however, is not confined to individual bodies but happens in exchange with these issues and in collectivity with their peers, turning learning into a collective space of affection. Emotions therefore constitute "alternative forms of insight" (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 118) that further help to raise interest, sustain (self-)motivation, and deepen students' engagement.

There are multiple ways to create collective spaces of affection to facilitate active learning. In political science and IR, simulations have become the method of choice (Frank and Genauer 2019; Harkness and DeVore 2021; Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg 2016; Mendenhall and Tutunji 2018). COIL constitutes a further such method; one that we argue offers particular profound active and affective learning experiences even under the pandemic. Before this argument is further expounded, we first provide a general summary of what COIL projects entail.

So far, COIL has been mainly used in literature, education sciences, and cultural studies. While there are many different ways to set up such projects, a recurrent set of elements can be discerned (Villar-Onrubia and Rajpal 2016, 78; Wimpenny and Orsini-Jones 2020, 5). First, they involve a cross-border element with students from different universities in different countries working on one common project. To do so, students engage online with each other synchronously and/or asynchronously by using social media, video communication, and online learning platforms. Second, as students work in groups across universities and across borders, COIL provides an intercultural element to their studies. This enhances their global perspectives to an extent that group work in individual classroom settings could not. Finally, such projects give

students the opportunity to take ownership of their learning. Students have to coordinate their groups, often working beyond the scheduled time in classrooms. In doing so, their abilities to work in intercultural teams are being tested, as students have to critically reflect on their perceptions and deploy different communication strategies.

Organizing COIL in this way enables an active and affective learning experience, as, first, it allows instructors and students to deepen their academic discussions by bringing them into conversation with their everyday. This is because COIL projects can focus on topics that are of relevance for students' lifeworlds. While simulations would also offer this opportunity, often they focus on institutions like the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union (Frank and Genauer 2019; Shaw 2020), which are not (yet) part of students' everyday. Embedding COIL in their everyday, therefore, assures particular interest from students and the cross-border cooperation gives them also the opportunity to widen their horizons and deepen their understanding of how politics impacts on their daily lives. Second, it also goes beyond active learning in mere collaborative learning scenarios because students not only have to coordinate their work across space and time but they also have to use different forms of communication. In a classroom group work, they could simply talk to each other without further use of technology. Furthermore, to arrange their group work productively, they have to take ownership of their learning, as it requires from students to mitigate and negotiate intercultural differences in a way that these differences can be voiced while not silencing their communalities. This finally means that in COIL projects affective learning takes places because, while working on their projects, students build a common space of affection that fosters "collaborative, nonhierarchical, and reflexive scholarly communities" (Hutchison 2021, 185). Cooperating with people whom one only ever met virtually,

whom one has to share a significant part of one's private life, and with whom one often has to communicate in a language other than one's mother tongue takes particular emotional involvement. They may range from anticipation and excitement to students being worried and maybe even frightened. However, working together towards a common goal enables students to create a shared space of togetherness that allows them to develop empathy for each other. While this does not necessarily mean that they become close friends, it allows them to deal with their emotions collectively and they learn to understand and acknowledge the positions of others as viable contributions to this process (Hutchison 2021, 186; Rösch 2018, 74).

Before discussing our project, a word of caution is in order: while COIL can make for a particular active and affective learning environment, it has its limitations. First, COIL requires significant preparation and commitment from the instructors. Therefore, it works best if instructors know each other, as was the case in our project. Second, COIL cannot be simply imposed onto courses. They have to be synchronized and deal about similar topics. At best, COIL is conceived of with the entire degree program in mind. This not only facilitates students' cooperation but they also can relate it to their studies and see benefits in engaging with the project. In this sense, it was easier for us as, due to Coronavirus restrictions, otherwise rigid curricula were relaxed. Furthermore, like with any other teaching method, the novelty of COIL wears off if employed too often. Having studied for more than a year online, we anticipate that students' interest in further online teaching is temporarily limited once all restrictions are lifted. However, incorporating COIL in an elective course adds to the learning environment by offering an experience that transcends normal classroom settings. Finally, COIL is not a substitute for international student mobility. Having the opportunity to study abroad, finding one's feet in a new environment, making new

friends, and maybe even studying in a different language is not only a very intense active and affective learning experience but it also instills intercultural competences to an extent that a COIL project could never achieve. However, COIL can be useful prior to going abroad to facilitate students' later transition.

Political Responses to Covid-19: A British-Japanese COIL Project

To further substantiate these claims, this section discusses the COIL project between the mentioned British and Japanese universities.

Students participating in our project were asked to form groups to investigate responses to Covid-19 in a country of their choice with the aim to produce an online presentation. These presentations served as the basis for discussions during our weekly joint live sessions. Each group consisted of students from both universities with students not only coming from Japan and the UK but also from other countries in Europe, (South) East Asia, and Africa. As there were seven groups in total, the countries chosen by students did not only allow us to get a comprehensive overview geographically, as students had chosen African, European, East Asian, Oceanian, and South American countries, but presentations also covered a wide range of responses to Covid-19. We learned about countries that managed to contain the virus relatively well like New Zealand and South Korea but we also studied why other countries like Brazil were heavily impacted by the pandemic. Students also prepared presentations on countries that pursued different strategies like Sweden. While there were few specific instructions, apart from general questions to help organize work and structure presentations, all groups covered a range of social, economic, and political contexts in their selections by following a number of core themes

investigating historical and cultural contexts alongside political, economic, and societal impacts of the countries' responses. Additionally, out of their own accord and inspired by Black Lives Matter demonstrations, groups particularly researched the impact of the virus on social, cultural, and ethnic minority groups, ranging from homeless communities and Black communities to indigenous communities in their chosen country.

To coordinate the work on their presentations, students communicated both in person and online, using a combination of platforms. Both universities coordinated an Open Moodle platform to host the project and to serve as a research repository. Initial communication was carried out through e-mails, but students quickly opted for social media and messaging apps like Instagram, WhatsApp, and Line, as they offered an easier method of communication. Additionally, many groups used live documents through Google Drive to share their drafts and facilitate immediate feedback. Some students partook in Zoom meetings within their groups to practice their presentations and to ensure that members felt comfortable with their delegated parts in the presentation. This also allowed for any constructive criticism within the groups and their members were able to train their time-keeping skills to make sure their presentations did not go over the allocated times. In the research-phase that span over the course of a month, students faced the challenge of the situation and responses changing on a daily basis and as a result relied heavily on digital secondary sources such as news reports, governmental resources, NGO publications, and magazine articles. Students also had to think critically about the sources used due to the changing situation and a limited amount of peer-reviewed material. The final month of the semester was set aside to deliver the presentations via Zoom, followed by in-depth

discussions. Each week, two groups presented their research results in an online/blended combination and one group decided to pre-record their presentation.

Working on this project across borders was not without challenges. Common hurdles which the groups reported were largely concerned with communication and included language barriers, poor internet connections, communicating across the nine hour time difference, and a lack of familiarity with group members. Groups who opted for communication on social media also had to navigate differences in technological cultures in order to find a common platform. While the groups used social media to communicate more fluidly, this was hindered by the large time difference which caused feedback delays. Coordination of work was also more difficult than in a normal project due to the short introduction time between group members. Furthermore, students had to balance the project on top of their other studies all while their own lives were affected by the pandemic. As participation in the project was almost entirely online, students had to ensure that they kept motivation for the project while not having the possibility of physical face-to-face meetings to encourage commitment. Students also faced language barriers in their everyday communication while working on their projects and many students had to support each other in overcoming a fear of public speaking to deliver their presentations in a language that often was not their mother tongue.

Active and Affective Learning through COIL?

To test if our COIL project enabled students to build an active and affective learning environment, we conceived of an online survey that students were asked to fill out at the end of the project.[1] The survey ran between December 16, 2020 and January 15, 2021, giving students one month to

find the time to reflect on their experiences. While students were given space in this survey to express their thoughts in their own words, the majority of the survey was based on a five-point Likert scale to (dis)agree with a set of statements. Of the 59 students that had initially signed up for the COIL project, 41 students (69.5%) engaged with the survey. Since not all students answered the survey, results only provide an indication. However, they still allow to infer trends about active and affective learning in COIL projects.

In terms of the former, our results indicate that students are enabled to take ownership of their learning in COIL projects. Most students (92.3%) agreed with this statement in our survey and 40 students (97.6%) thought it added positively to their student experience. In fact, one student highlighted "the freedom to do our own research" as to what was most beneficial about this project and another one thought that their group

> managed quite well the communications and work ... We made sure for a period of 4 weeks to have at least 1 meeting per week to talk about progress and whether any difficulties were experienced. We helped each other and prepared for the presentation by training online via Zoom.

That active learning took place can be further assumed as 39 students (95.1%) agreed that the project helped them to understand different perspectives and that in their learning they could use different modes of communication. Most students (97.6%) also thought it enhanced their abilities to learn online. Indeed, one of the indicators that students experienced active learning is the wide variety of communication channels that they used to arrange the group work. As

mentioned before, we used Zoom for the presentations and students communicated via a variety of social media and messaging apps. Most notably Instagram (58.5%) and WhatsApp (56.1%) but Line (39%) and Facebook Messenger (24.4%) were also commonly used. Some even used TikTok (7.3%), Snapchat (2.4%), and WeChat (7.3%).

Also with regards to affective learning, the survey results paint an overall positive picture. A majority of 35 students (85.4%) felt that their ideas were valued during the group work and only one student (2.4%) disagreed. Most (95.1%) responded positively to the statement that working in groups across continents improved their interpersonal skills and added to their intercultural understanding. While they noted in their comments that working with students from a different university and different cultural backgrounds was challenging, agreeing that their interpersonal skills and intercultural understanding improved indicates that they were able to build a space of affection in which they learned together. Several comments further suggest this conclusion. One student remarked that by "communicating with students from other countries, I discovered differences in learning and culture", while another one wrote that "coming together with different students" was the most enjoyable part of the COIL group work. Indeed, it is this intercultural aspect that students seemed to enjoy most. For example, one "liked to work with other students from a whole different background … and from the other side of the world" and another student enjoyed "[b]eing able to connect with students across the world to come together for a common purpose."

Conclusion

Introducing a new teaching method is not without its risks, as Brent Steele (2017, 213) cautioned, and also our COIL project encountered some of them. Of the initially seven groups, one group struggled to work together and their presentation did not materialize. Certainly, working across nine time zones made collaborating difficult, as some students noted in the survey. Working on an extra-curricular activity in the midst of a global pandemic also has to acknowledge that some students might be personally affected in a way that it requires their full attention. Such problems of disengagement could have been avoided if the project would have been credit-bearing (Villar-Onrubia and Rajpal 2016, 80), but needing to react quickly to a pandemic and to constantly evolving teaching and learning environments and ensuring an "ethics of care" (Ba 2021, 171; Hutchison 2021, 185; Martel et al. 2021, 173) that we have for each other as a community of learners prohibited this option.

Overall, however, COIL offers opportunities for active and affective learning if used strategically and sparingly to enhance the overall degree. As responses to our survey indicate, as a result, our COIL project furthered students' multimodal literacy. It improved students' "learning across a multi-faceted skillset including respect, self-awareness, critical cultural adaptation, and relationship building" (Wimpenny and Orsini-Jones 2020, 19). While it took considerable efforts from students to do the necessary research for group presentations, they rose to these challenges and the groups produced deep, insightful analyses of their chosen cases. Students also noted in the survey that working across continents and with people from different cultures was eventually rewarding, as it helped them to widen their intellectual and personal horizons and to deepen their intercultural competence. In the end, the COIL project allowed us – students and instructors – to build a common space of affection in uncertain times.

References

Ba, Oumar. 2021. "When Teaching is Impossible: A Pandemic Pedagogy of Care." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (1): 171-72.

Becker, Manuel, Felix Leßke, Enrico Liedtke, Eva Hausteiner, Christiane Heidbrink, Jakob Horneber, Tim Huyeng, Shushanik Minasyan, Hendrik W. Ohnesorge, Maximilian Raths, and Penelope Wessel. 2020. "Rückblick auf das erste 'Corona-Semester'. Ergebnisse einer semesterbegleitenden Untersuchung der Task Force Digitale Lehre des Instituts für Politische Wissenschaft und Soziologie der Universität Bonn." *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 30 (4): 681-96.

Bleiker, Roland and Emma Hutchison. 2008. "Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics." *Review of International Studies* 34 (S1): 115-35.

Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE), John Hopkins University. 2021. "Covid-19 Dashboard." Available at: https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html (accessed: June 18, 2021).

Esarey, Justin and Andrew R. Wood. 2018. "Blogs, Online Seminars, and Social Media as Tools of Scholarship in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (4): 811-19.

Frank, Richard W. and Jessica Genauer. 2019. "A Classroom Simulation of the Syrian Conflict." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52 (4): 737-42.

Gifkins, Jess. 2015. "What Is 'Active Learning' and Why Is It Important?" *E-International Relations*. Available at: https://bit.ly/381iGZt (accessed: December 9, 2020).

Harkness, Kristen A. and Marc R. DeVore. 2021. "Teaching the Military and Revolutions: Simulating Civil-Military Relations during Mass Uprisings." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (2): 315-20.

Holland, Jack. 2016. "Visual Literacy in International Relations: Teaching Critical Evaluative Skills through Fictional Television*." International Studies Perspectives* 17 (2): 173-86.

Holland, Martin, Krzysztof Sliwinski, and Nicholas Thomas. 2020. "Is Affective Effective? Measuring Affective Learning in Simulations." *International Studies Perspectives*. Online first: doi.10.1093/isp/ekaa005.

Horn, Laura, Olivier Rubin, and Laust Schouenborg. 2016. "Undead Pedagogy: How a Zombie Simulation Can Contribute to Teaching International Relations." *International Studies Perspectives* 17 (2): 187-201.

Hutchison, Emma. 2021. "Toward an Ethic of Care and Inclusivity in Emergency E-Learning." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (1): 185-87.

Kaempf, Sebastian and Carrie Finn. 2021. "Teaching International Relations through the Format of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)." *International Studies Perspectives* 22 (1): 1-24.

Lamy, Steven L. 2007. "Challenging Hegemonic Paradigms and Practices: Critical Thinking and Active Learning Strategies for International Relations." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40 (1): 112-16.

Loepp, Eric D. 2021. "Covid-19 and Emergency e-Learning in Political Science and International Relations." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (1): 169-71.

Martel, Stéphanie, Serena Rourke, Sydney Wade, and Munro Watters. 2021. "Simulating 'Normalcy' in a Global Pandemic: Synchronous e-Learning and the Ethics of Care in Teaching." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (1): 173-75.

Mendenhall, Elizabeth and Tarek Tutunji. 2018. "Teaching Critical Understandings of Realism through Historical War Simulations." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (2): 440-44.

Rösch, Felix. 2018. "The Power of Dance: Teaching International Relations Through Contact Improvisation." *International Studies Perspectives* 19 (1): 67-82.

Sabin, Jerald and Andrea Olive. 2018. "Slack: Adopting Social-Networking Platforms for Active Learning." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (1): 183-89.

Shaw, Carolyn M. 2020. "The Unexpected Gift: 'Oh, and You'll be Responsible for the Model UN Program'." In *Pedagogical Journeys through World Politics*, ed. Jamie Frueh. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 243-52.

Steele, Brent J. 2017. "Recognising, and Realising, the Promise of The Aesthetic Turn." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45 (2): 206-13.

Steele, Brent J. 2021. "When Good Enough is Good Enough: Department Chairing during Covid-19." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 (1): 187-88.

Villar-Onrubia, Daniel and Brinder Rajpal. 2016. "Online International Learning: Internationalising the Curriculum through Virtual Mobility at Coventry University." *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 20 (2-3): 75-82.

Wimpenny, Katherine and Marina Orsini-Jones. 2020. "Innovation in Collaborative Online International Learning: a Holistic Blend." In *Radical Solutions and eLearning. Practical*

Innovations and Online Educational Technology, ed. Daniel Burgos. Singapore: Springer,

1-25.

---

[1] The survey was conducted on JISC Online Surveys. All quotes in this section are from this survey. The survey was voluntary and responses were recorded anonymously.