

# Collaborative Online International Learning Practice as a Teaching Pedagogy in Higher Education: Japanese University Experience



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### Abstract

With the growth of collaborative online learning, more students are experiencing educational environments characterized by cultural diversity. This paper shall discuss recent COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) practices between Kansai University and International Islamic University of Malaysia from April 2016 to December 2017, and how these initiatives helped enhance academic discourses in a Japanese learning environment. Various experiential learnings in understanding culture and critical issues prevailing in Southeast Asia and Japan were also pinned down in this paper. Finally, this intends to encourage learners and instructors to set out an online academic partnership and adopt COIL as a teaching pedagogy which may be relevant in the rapidly expanding field of global education.

**Keywords:** Japan, online learning, ICT, international communication, social network, internationalization student.

## 1. Introduction.

COIL, Collaborative Online International Learning, is teaching and learning approach through use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to create virtual learning environments to provide shared courses across educational institutions worldwide. COIL Center at SUNY, the State University of New York, which pioneered this teaching pedagogy, has been providing a multitude of COIL courses across the world. Kansai University is the first institution in Japan to join COIL's Global Partner Network<sup>1</sup> to enable collaborations with the SUNY COIL Center.

The *ASEAN Studies* course offered by Kansai University Global Frontier (KUGF) Program intends to provide students a fundamental understanding of Southeast Asia through a cultural learning experience by studying the region's common historical, cultural, and regional identity. This is one of the many KUGF courses offered to boost the university's target in attracting more international students and is designed to embolden students from both Japan and overseas to engage themselves in a global interaction resulting to more socially relevant young citizens. *ASEAN Studies*, being an English-mediated course, is aligned with the university's endeavor in internationalizing its curricula. And it thereby pushes to enhance the student body's English-language communicative competence.

<sup>1</sup> Collaborative Online International Learning Center of Global Partner Network. The State University of New York. URL: <http://coil.suny.edu/index.php/page/global-partner-network>

Furthermore, it is also one of the courses offered in the university where a *Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)* project is being run-through. COIL is a relevant learning mode employing ICT tools maximized to engage academic activities among students enrolled overseas.

A colossal number of researches abound all relating to online learning cultures. They imply many range of discussions and analyses. But this paper will only focus on several issues of concern — 1) learnings gained by the students, instructors and 2) future development of COIL and global education at Kansai University. This will also emphasize the importance of building effective collaborative online partnerships between two different courses in a Japanese and a Malaysian university.

## II. COIL Practices: Japanese University Experience

As part of Kansai University's (KU<sup>1</sup>) commitment and efforts towards campus internationalization, *ASEAN Studies* class has employed a COIL-based collaboration with International Islamic University of Malaysia's (IIUM<sup>2</sup>) *Introduction to International Communication* class. Four (4) consecutive COIL activities have been steered since April 2016. The general objective of the COIL projects is to increase the Japanese and Malaysian students' awareness on stereotypes on different social issues created by the local mass media.

While the IIUM's *Introduction to International Communication* particularly aims to learn about the international issues associated with communication and mass media, the specific aim of the *ASEAN Studies* is to learn about Southeast Asian countries; geography, politics, history and cultures. However, with the recent COIL projects at hand, *ASEAN Studies* is more focused on **intercultural awareness** and **communicative competence** that are vividly manifested by voicing out student opinions — a process of learning about and understanding culture. Through these opinions, linguistic competence plays a central role and is very much associated with the learning of new culture. However, the focus has always been limited to Malaysia with this recent COIL projects.

The main activities engaged during the projects involved exchanging video presentations and having a one-time live video discussion (every

semester) using a communication tool, Zoom. Here are some of the basic highlights of our activities.

### A. Topics Discussed

- The Mass Media and the Portrayal of Islam;
- Japanese Culture and Identity;
- Refugee Crisis in Myanmar: The Rohingya Muslims.

*ASEAN Studies* has espoused issues on how Japanese perceive Muslims in Japanese society; the depiction of mass media on Muslims and Islam; and some pertinent reasons why Japan's willingness to accept refugees from the Middle East is beyond huge possibilities.

### B. Facebook Discussion Page

KU and IIUM students created short video clips and uploaded them to the created Facebook discussion page. This space provided opportunities for students — both from Malaysia and Japan, to introduce themselves before pitching the discussions, questions and comments posted by the members of the two groups.



Figure 1. Facebook Page of Kansai University and International Islamic University of Malaysia in Spring Semester, Academic Year 2017 — 2018.

### C. Video Presentations

IIUM students created videos discussing the image of Japan in Malaysian mass media. In Spring 2017, they created videos focusing on the refugee children's plight during the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. On the other hand, KU students created videos discussing the Muslim and Islam images perceived from the Japanese mass media portrayals. In Spring 2017, KU students discussed several reasons why Japan has limitations opening its doors to refugees from the Middle East.

### D. Live Online Discussions

Reinforcement of the issues and views discoursed in the Facebook page is necessary for KU and IIUM students. Live communication on a specific date and time agreed upon (by the two groups) provided better spaces for interaction. This proves to be a suitable learning venue for clarifications and identifications of other concerns

<sup>1</sup> KU-COIL Workshops and Symposiums. Kansai University Division of International Affairs. URL: <http://www.kansai-u.ac.jp/Kokusai/english/>

<sup>2</sup> International Islamic University of Malaysia. URL: <http://www.iium.edu.my/>

not conversed or tackled in during the course of written discussions. The two parties decided to use Zoom which is known for its reliability, thereby limiting the chances of disconnection. Disruptions during live discussions upset the communication flow of the two learning groups.

### III. Students' Experiential Learnings

COIL activity is part of the grading requirements in completing the *ASEAN Studies* course. Assessment is done by asking the students to write a reflection paper about the COIL activity. The feedbacks from the students can be summarized in three important themes:

#### A. Academic Discourse Engagement

The reflection papers have revealed that as most students enrolled in the *ASEAN Studies* class are freshman and sophomore students, they have their limitations in terms of international exposure. The class has manifested a great deal of academic discourse on critical issues faced by the ASEAN region. While Japanese students are very much active to learn geography, culture and history of Southeast Asia — a new region to learn about to most of them; but they have their own shares of unfamiliarity within the own culture. Evidence of this process of own identity awareness emerged when Japanese students engaged themselves in unfamiliar or newer forms of discourse and their ideas collide with non-Japanese students' expectations, intervention or inquiry.

#### B. Re-Discovering Own Culture

After each COIL activity, Japanese students have mentioned that they gained recognition of the differences and similarities of other cultures from their own — either a celebration of the uniqueness of Japanese culture; or a further critical awareness on why such culture or perspective exists in the Japanese societies, in general. Moreover, it is in these moments that Japanese university students assert their opinions and explain why certain notions exist, while making use of social network and technologies, and as they put their everyday electronic media into action.

#### C. COIL as Social Interaction

The COIL activity exemplifies how an educational method creates knowledge, culture, and social interaction together, and how media production can foster students' abilities to creatively communicate, alternatively represent, and impact others. The collaborative video production is a medium through which young students develop "critical literacy" and recognize their potentials for leadership and for peer-to-peer-mentorship. The COIL project illustrates how important it is to create an academic environment where students can learn to lead in demonstrable and powerful ways.

### IV. Instructional Learnings in Pedagogy

As the primary instructor in this COIL collaboration, the COIL activity is an insightful academic practice which responds to my professional interest in the place of English language education within the scholarship on online learning. I find the practice engaging as this vividly exemplifies a positive way of learning culture as it emerges during the online interactive sessions. This practice is promising in a sense that it discusses several areas of inquiry associated with cultural contact. They are (1) cross-border education; (2) the growth of new forms of knowledge from the issues of identity and media; and (3) the range of social networks and their use in education.

#### A. Cross-Border Education

*Cross-border tertiary education refers to the movement of people, programs, curricula, projects, research and services in tertiary (or higher) education across national jurisdictional borders (OECD, 2017<sup>1</sup>).* COIL has provided me a teaching experience on cross-border education. COIL is a subset of "internationalization at home" initiative and may be part of any future inter-university research projects, academic exchanges and other learning initiatives. There is a recognition that the Internet and virtual learning platforms have become an integral part of education in Japan--learning without having to fly out from the home university-- and have shaped the learning process of the *ASEAN Studies* students. This personal learning is supported by Roth<sup>2</sup> when he pointed out that *transitional processes from face-to-face to online teaching and learning and new institutional e-learning policies may take different shapes and he suggested that the impact of online learning and teaching is intrinsically related to the general culture of learning.*

#### B. Growth of New Forms of Knowledge on Identity and Media

The topics discussed during the COIL projects include Japanese identity, Southeast Asian images, Islam, refugee crisis and national security. These outlined themes are directly concerned with the complex issues discussing social identities and cultural differences between Japanese and Southeast Asian perspectives. The discussion of identity and culture obviously should be more than the ones we had. It is interesting to note that during the courses of our discussion, further critical thinking is desired with many raised

<sup>1</sup> OECD (2017) Developing capacity through cross-border tertiary education. Retrieved 3 November 2017. URL: <http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/39169515.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Roth, K. (2006) Deliberation in national and post-national education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 38(5): 569-589.

broader questions about the changing nature of identities, be it Japanese or Southeast Asian.

### C. Social Networks in Education

*Social networks have escaped the boundaries of professional and formal practice. Now, they have been taken up by diverse populations, including the peer activities of youth. A generation is growing up in an era where social network is part of their lives (Jenson & Droumeva, 2017<sup>1</sup>).* At COIL, it has been proven that social networks are an excellent platform in engaging students to discussion and peer learning. It is interesting to note that while digital media and networks have become embedded in our everyday lives, these could provide a wide array of educational learning experience in terms of interacting with other university students outside Japan. COIL practices conducted in the *ASEAN Studies* class have highlighted an effective educational tool engaging knowledge production, communication, and creative expression.

### V. COIL: Future Developments Towards Internationalization at Universities

As for future COIL projects and collaborations, establishing partnership with the International Islamic University of Malaysia is an essential ladder in building relationships with institutes of higher learning in the ASEAN region. Successful and continuous COIL projects with IIUM may serve as working stencil to effectively encourage potential partnerships to forge into institutional collaborations.

Student mobility at Kansai University remains at a relatively growing stage, but has grown at an unprecedented pace in the past years. To maintain its momentum, COIL activities could be essential initiatives in introducing to Kansai University students how academic discussions are conducted outside Japan. COIL could be a fitting provision of how tertiary education abroad functions. Potentials could range from academic partnerships, research collaborations or field visits. A lot of gains can be gleaned from what has been accomplished the past four COIL-enhanced projects. While COIL seems to be a promising educational initiative, it has its difficulty in terms of preparations and communications with partner universities. The biggest one entails recognizing the importance of taking flexible yet plausible approaches and attitudes towards the project. The more is necessary during the conceptualization process where this would certainly require time, effort and patience.

Finally, it is also essential to emphasize that it is imperative not to underestimate the difficulty

<sup>1</sup> Jenson, J., & Droumeva, M. (2017). Revisiting the media generation: Youth media use and computational literacy instruction. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 14(4), 212-225.

of persuading university faculty members. A lot of awareness and exposure must be done which include modifying the attitudes, behavior and perceptions of the teachers on online collaborative learning practice.

### VI. Conclusion

Since Kansai University started the COIL initiatives in Japan and being one of the few ones practicing them, the university may invest on peddling “Japanese culture” as the university’s main strength. Japanese culture, as a field of study, is one of the most sought cultures in the world. Graham and Mayes<sup>2</sup> pointed out that *cultural identities incorporate areas such as curriculum, interaction, collaboration, pedagogy, language, and assessment. They are frequently raised in research literature but are not often addressed satisfactorily.* Given this finding, *ASEAN Studies* proves how Japanese culture and identity is a marketable field of study sparking interests among international students in their home countries. Finally, Kansai University should maximize the fullest potential of this digital media culture and in providing a well-rounded global education in the coming years. And Collaborative Online International Learning could serve as one of its finest benchmarks.

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