International Multidisciplinary Collaboration on Four Continents: An Experiment in Fostering Diverse Cultural Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The essay is an empirical report of an international collaboration based on the principles and pedagogy of COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) among four educators from different countries and disciplines during the spring of 2021. The essay lays out the context of the virtual exchange, explaining the nature of the institutions involved, how it started, and how the collaboration was designed. It then discusses the two main phases for the students, namely the ice-breaker activities and the final (group) project, before presenting the course goals, Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), and assessment in a segment that is more faculty-oriented, as it explains how we envisioned what the students were expected to attain with the collaboration itself. Specifically, while the essay explains the SLOs in a final project that focused on urban development and society (and/or within it) during wartime or its aftermath, the course goals were achieved through the students’ collaboration in groups composed of members from the four different institutions. A virtual exchange with more than the standard pairing of two partners amplifies the goals of fostering an inclusive process in student collaboration efforts across languages and cultures, contributing not only to a climate of greater diversity, equity, and inclusion with the goal of overcoming biases and stereotypes, but also contributing to team building and problem solving through inter- and cross-cultural interactions.

Key Words
Diverse Cultural Perspectives, Fostering Diversity, Multi-institution A/synchronous Collaboration, Film Studies, English as a Second Language, Cultural Diplomacy, Architecture

1. Introduction

Structured as an empirical report, our essay shares the experience of the four authors who are faculty from different disciplines teaching across four continents, to show how the overall collaboration informed, and can inform, the inclusive process of student collaboration across cultures. Our spring 2021 collaboration was based on the principles and pedagogy of COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), uniting four institutions in Italy, Japan, South Africa, and the United States. Specifically, four educators teaching film studies, English as a second language, architecture, and cultural diplomacy/archeology, using English as a lingua franca, engaged diverse student bodies across different academic schedules and time zones to collaborate in a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities. To exemplify the principles and implementation of the collaboration, this article outlines the design and execution of the final project focusing on urban development and society during wartime or its aftermath, a project that connected the four disciplines and made the students reflect on how societies react in moments of crisis such as during conflicts. Such a reflection was especially important during a time of crisis as experienced during this global pandemic when inequalities and the lack of respect for diversity and inclusion were particularly salient in many societies.

In fact, as the global Covid-19 pandemic at its peak confined us in our homes, more often than not with a feeling of loneliness and isolation, we learned that this could be overcome through collaborative efforts negotiated, planned, and implemented in many cases during those long, isolated months throughout 2020 and 2021. It became common practice for colleagues to visit one’s classes to give a lecture or just be present for the sake of creating a world—in synchronous or asynchronous mode—without borders. However, as some may have learned from experience, collaborations—in particular international collaborations—are not always easy to manage for
several reasons: time differences, cultural differences, language barriers, personality, different interests and goals, and communication issues, to name a few. It can become even more challenging when—as in our case—multiple faculty from different disciplines, affiliated to institutions on different continents with up to fourteen-hour time differences, embark on a journey that exposes students to other cultures and languages while acquiring knowledge of their own curriculum. However, challenges faced in international collaborations should not only be welcomed and desired, but embraced because cross-cultural student engagement fosters not only intercultural communication (Bennett, 2013), which is fundamental in today’s world, but also cultural awareness, team-work skills, and problem-solving abilities, as well as an understanding of issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, while also providing diverse cultural perspectives on the world we live in. Our international collaboration was not only a moment of academic growth for our students, as they applied what they learned in their respective courses at their home institutions in a final project where the four different disciplines were united, but it was also an extraordinary moment of understanding the world through diverse cultural perspectives and lenses. Both a collaboration that unites people beyond borders and a final project where students reflect on times of crisis are particularly necessary nowadays as we risk facing further health crises, wars, food scarcity, and the consequences of climate change. Now more than ever we need students equipped with these soft skills. As educators, in our classes we constantly navigate issues related to identity, language and culture diversity, problems of equity and bias, equality and inequality, inclusion and exclusion, social justice and injustice, power relations, privilege and oppression, and certainly (cultural) stereotypes, and they become even more salient when we collaborate internationally. For this international collaboration, it proved useful for us to reflect upon what it means to embrace and understand (critical) multiculturalism (May and Sleeter, eds., 2010; Sloan, Joyner, Stakeman, and Schmitz, 2018) as a starting point. Our collaboration has been especially important as it exemplifies successful collaboration with more than one institution, especially in a world where networks and connections become increasingly important. When one thinks of COIL (see Chandra, Mukherji, Jagendorf-Sobierajski, Prusko, and Smolar, 2022), one usually contemplates two institutions in two different countries where two different languages are spoken. Often the two instructors or partners tend to be from the same discipline or from two similar ones such as architecture and design, biology and natural sciences, history and sociology, although it is recommended that one partners with disciplines that seem incompatible at first, such as engineering and languages, anthropology and chemistry, just to offer a couple of examples.

Every collaboration has a story behind it, and ours began well before the Covid-19 pandemic locked us out of our institutions and campus offices, forcing many of us to teach remotely or online (see Schultheis and Simon, 2015; Lindsay, 2016; Landorf, Doscher, and Hardrick, 2019), and as one knows, the global crisis we have had to deal with has opened the way to more collaborations than one would have imagined. This essay contributes to the field of global learning, international collaborations in higher education, and virtual exchanges, offering the context (what, when, how) of the collaboration, and the actual COIL design and realization of the project.

The first part of the essay lays out the Context, namely how our collaboration started and the characteristics of the four participating institutions, including the challenges to be overcome before beginning the collaboration in the spring of 2021. This first part also delineates the necessary

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1 «COIL is based upon developing team-taught learning environments where teachers from two cultures work together to develop a shared syllabus, emphasizing experiential and collaborative student learning» (Rubin, 2017, p. 34).
preparatory steps, offering insights into the aspects that one should focus on as partners decide on how to proceed. The second part of the essay is devoted to the *Two Phases of the COIL Journey for the Students*, breaking down the timetable of the collaboration and the design and actualization of the ice-breaker activities and the final project that culminated the collaboration. The part on the *Collaboration Goals, the Student Learning Outcomes, and the Assessment* presents the final stage of the collaboration, and it is faculty-oriented in that it focuses on the connection of the goals, outcomes, and assessment as designed by the partners, which should be kept in mind throughout the entire collaboration. Finally, after the essay concludes, we include the *Appendix* that contains the document laying out the final project’s guidelines that was shared with the students.

2. The Context

To properly relate the context of the project, it is first necessary to recount the history of the collaboration, followed by brief descriptions of the four institutions and their locations, the student body, the disciplines involved, and the issues that had to be addressed in advance. This examination of the different characteristics reinforces the understanding that collaboration between different types of higher education institutions should not be an obstacle to embarking on a collaboration with universities cut from the same mold, rather than seeking partners from ‘similar’ institutional types (i.e., technological colleges, public schools, or liberal arts colleges).

An international collaboration between four universities does not evolve from out of nowhere, but instead it has a history. In 2016, The University of Siena, in Italy, approached Akita International University, in Japan, to design COIL modules within a course centered around the concept of sustainability. The collaboration continued in this fashion for three years, before being joined by Farmingdale State College, part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system, in the United States, in the fall of 2019, after the two faculty from Siena and Farmingdale went through a SUNY COIL training together. Though the collaboration was put on hold in the spring of 2020, mainly due to the global Covid-19 pandemic emergency situation, informal communication among the three universities in Italy, Japan, and the United States continued throughout 2020, alongside a new affiliation with The University of Free State, in South Africa. This expanded the collaboration to four with the aim of designing and implementing a COIL project that went in a different direction from the previous ones. The University of Free State and the University of Siena were already partners in the iKUDU² project (under whose auspices the COIL collaboration happened in spring 2021 as well) consisting of eight universities—four in Europe and four in South Africa—collaborating through a COIL virtual exchange model. Within this project, fifty faculty and 2,625 students from South Africa and Europe received training in accredited courses in a virtual setting. This project was and is still focused on promoting the internationalization of the curricula through COIL.

Although the COIL collaboration outlined in this essay is not conventional since it involves four institutions instead of the traditional two, the authors envision that this type of virtual exchange could provide an example to other institutions that are seeking other ways to embrace different cultures and to open opportunities for students to engage internationally with other students at multiple levels and with multiple cultures at the same time, contributing to even greater flexibility, adaptability, teamwork, and problem solving.

As mentioned previously, the four institutions involved in this “COIL @ 4,” as we coined our collaboration during the spring of 2021, were Akita International University in Japan, Farmingdale State College in the United States, the University of the Free State in South Africa, and the

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² iKUDU means i=the + KU=animal that leaves footprints + DU = sand.
University of Siena in Italy. During our collaboration, Akita International University students (n = 17) were in their first semester of the first year in the English for Academic Purposes Department and were enrolled in an Academic Reading Course. The Farmingdale State College students (n = 22) were enrolled in an Italian Cinema course and were near graduation. The University of Free State students (n = 29) were enrolled in a Bachelor’s Architecture honors course, while the learners from the University of Siena (n = 17) were Master’s students studying public and cultural diplomacy. Not only were students from the four institutions at different stages of their education, ranging from first year students to Master’s level ones, but they also hailed from different disciplines, spanning from English as a Second Language (ESL) to cinema, and from architecture to diplomacy. Moreover, the institutions involved differ significantly from one another, and introducing them helps us better grasp the context.

Serving mostly the local population of the Greater New York metropolitan area, Farmingdale State College (henceforth, Farmingdale) is a technological college founded in 1912, that confers mainly Bachelor of Sciences and Associate Degrees, with select Master’s degrees. With its four schools—Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering Technology, and Health Sciences—, Farmingdale is a commuter college located on Long Island, one hour from Manhattan, with a student body of about 10,000. Most of the students from Farmingdale come from diverse backgrounds, many of them are adult learners, others are first-generation college students, and some are first-generation immigrants whose first language is not English. Most Farmingdale students come from the surrounding community, namely from Long Island or New York City, and many of them have full-time employment and are also enrolled as full-time students, often with family and children.

Akita International University (henceforth, Akita) is a Liberal Arts University situated in Akita, Japan, the northern part of the main island, 550 kilometers north of Tokyo. It is an isolated campus surrounded by green forests, with the nearest subdivision being five kilometers (slightly more than three miles) away. The university was established in 2004 as an all-English institution, the first of its kind in Japan. Currently, it has a student body of about 800, with about 25% being international students who come from Akita’s two-hundred partner universities. What makes Akita unique, apart from being an all English institution, is its study abroad program. Each student must spend one year abroad at one of Akita’s two-hundred active partner institutions from every continent. These partner institutions also send their students to Akita for the same period. Students first begin their academic career in the English for Academic Purposes program and are required to obtain a 550 on the TOEFL English proficiency test before enrolling in the Basic Education Program. There are currently two main streams of education at Akita, either the Global Studies Program or the Global Business Program. Graduates go onto to work in a diverse number of international corporations, with Akita boasting a post-graduation employment rate of over 95%, with a portion of the remaining 5% entering graduate school.

The University of Siena (henceforth, Siena) is one of the oldest European and Italian universities, founded in 1240, and it aims to maintain its vocation to offer a general higher education to its 18,000 students. It is structured in fifteen departments grouped in four areas: 1) life and medical sciences, 2) humanities and economics, 3) law and political sciences, and 4) experimental sciences. Nearly half of the students come from other countries in Europe and beyond, while the Italian students come from all throughout Italy. Siena offers seventy-four degrees: thirty-three Bachelor of Arts, thirty-six Master’s, and five Master’s one cycle/BA combination (five years). Among these extensive offerings, seventeen courses are taught in English and eleven courses have activated a double degree program. The international dimension of Siena benefits from 721
Erasmus agreements and 334 bilateral agreements outside the European Union, such as that with the University of Free State in South Africa. The University of Free State (henceforth, Free State) was established in 1904 and it consists of three campuses in the central province of South Africa. This public university numbers 37,000 students and the language of instruction has been English since 2016. It has nine schools: Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Health Sciences, the Humanities, Law, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Theology and Religion, and the Business School. Specifically, our collaboration was through the Department of Architecture, which enrolls 240-260 students annually and offers an undergraduate Bachelor program and postgraduate Honors, Master’s, and Doctoral programs. Underpinned by a critical inquiry into meaningful place-making, the Department of Architecture mainly focuses on the design of the building environment, therefore the students enrolled in the COIL collaboration entered with this formation and perspective.

Before explaining how the collaboration and the final project were designed, we lay out how we started, to enable others to follow the model we are proposing here. In initial meetings over Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams in the summer of 2020 and followed by exchanges over the free instant messenger app, WhatsApp, where we have had a dedicated group, we held the first discussions about the feasibility of COIL, the coordination of schedules for the COIL modules, and our courses. Specifically, we explained to each other the courses’ goals and student learning outcomes (SLOs), how our courses are designed in a normal semester (without a virtual exchange), the type of assessments we usually use, and the deadlines that we must follow based on our institution’s academic calendars. Each of the four institutions had very different schedules (including the beginning and the ending dates of the semesters), curricula, and student bodies. Eventually, we identified a viable timeframe for any sort of collaboration, and we agreed on a three-week window in April of 2021, though three institutions were able to start the ice-breaker activities—a highly recommended first step of any collaboration—at the end of March. This window was largely determined by the Japanese school system, whose academic year starts at the beginning of April. While the new-intake students that would participate in COIL were already on the Japanese campus, they had not yet been matriculated; regardless, they were eager and more than happy to participate earlier, giving us an extra week.

It needs to be noted that a successful COIL comes from the collaboration that occurs not only between the students, but that which occurs first and foremost among the (four) instructors who met, in our case, on a bi-weekly basis in January and February 2021, on a weekly basis in March, and three times a week during the COIL collaboration, after having already met as needed from the summer of 2020 onward. Certainly, with four institutions across the globe being involved, it was a challenge to find a reasonable time to meet for the synchronous meetings, but eventually we decided that eight o’clock in the morning Eastern Time zone in the United States gave us the opportunity to meet and speak easily through videoconferencing, being two in the afternoon in Italy and South Africa, and ten at night in Japan. Beyond regular one-hour meetings, we continued to communicate over conventional email and WhatsApp. Also, beyond organizing the timing (when to start and to end the collaboration based on the academic schedules), in the first meetings in January we defined other important logistical aspects: what platforms to use (Google Drive, Microsoft Teams, or the various institutional Learning Management Systems such as Moodle, Canvas, or Blackboard to name a few), what challenges we could envision based on the institutional traditions (some universities might have stricter policies on software usage), and the means of communication (Google Meet, WhatsApp, and emails, in our case).
During the first meetings, we also discovered the importance of establishing the relative weight of the COIL collaboration toward the final grades. The weight of COIL for the different institutions might become problematic in case of major discrepancy, such as in our case: at one institution COIL was worth 5% of the final grade, while at the others it was worth 10% or 30%. The value of the COIL grade could potentially impact on the students’ level of engagement and involvement in the virtual exchange, and it could lead to detrimental comparisons among institutions and courses. Another recommended part of the discussion that is best carried out in the very first stages of the virtual exchange is to be clear and honest about the expectations for the COIL collaboration: what are you looking for your students to acquire? Are you prepared to adjust your expectations based on the expectations of your colleagues? This requires negotiation, because as an instructor, you are teaching a specific course at your home institution while at the same time you are also plugged into a collaboration with others, and you have to negotiate the terms carefully to avoid imposing your model or assessment upon the others. During these first conversations, one could already experience diverse cultural approaches to teaching and learning that often mirrored those emerging later among the students, as the four instructors had to adjust, negotiate, and overcome diversities with a common goal of successfully concluding a multi-institutional virtual exchange. There is no doubt that coding and decoding behaviors and intercultural communication is part of the learning process, as one might discover different cultural perspectives among faculty and students. Certainly, a good collaboration is also matter of personality and the level of engagement in the project, and we four were lucky enough to get along very well, with our professional relationship blossoming into friendship as we were honest, open, and direct with each other as soon as a problem arose or might have arisen on the horizon and during our COIL journey. Every collaboration is different, and being aware of the context in which one collaborates and coordinates is necessary before beginning to work together. Knowing the nature of the institutions and the disciplines of the partners, together with the others’ schedules, assessment, technology (and its restrictions due to institutional mandates), expectations from a virtual exchange, and its value within the schema of the final grades are central factors to take into consideration before diving into the actual collaboration. Ours, which was divided into two main phases, is laid out in the next part and it will help explicate the practical aspects of collaborating across disciplines.

3. The Two Phases of the COIL Journey for the Students
This part lays out not only the timetable of the project, but also the two main phases of our collaboration for faculty and students, namely the ice-breaker activities and the final project, that was carried out by groups of students from the four institutions. Knowing the various steps taken in the design and the actualization of the two stages can help possible partners to design their own collaboration based on software accessibility, institutional schedules, or content area of the disciplines or courses involved. In the case of our virtual exchange, with the window of opportunity available for COIL being limited, it was decided that the virtual exchange would be conducted in two distinct phases plus a final assessment stage. The first was an ice-breaker activity using Padlet (https://padlet.com/), whose deadline was seven days after the beginning of the collaboration for the four institutions, while the second involved the main collaboration project around a central theme, carried out using Google Drive provided through Farmingdale as the project hub for faculty and students to collaborate, with a deadline within a couple of weeks after the end of the ice-breaker activities. It was (and is) especially important to discuss the final project well before the start of the collaboration as one would need to establish not only the type of project (research paper, presentation, etc.), but also the content and the overall theme, to ensure that all students
involved could carry out the assignment based on the knowledge acquired in their courses in ESL, Italian cinema, architecture, and cultural diplomacy. In our case, it was decided early on to feature a video project focusing on cinema since films are a versatile means of representation, and flexible enough to be used in many different contexts and disciplines, which many students enjoy even outside the classroom.

Specifically, for the ice-breaker activities, Padlet provided the central location for all students to produce and share a one-minute self-introduction video through which they described themselves, their studies, their personal likes and dislikes, and, ultimately, their favorite film since the group project would be centered around a cinematic theme. Padlet also allowed the students to comment on any of the videos that were uploaded onto the main Padlet page. This platform was chosen for its ease of use, and also because the students did not need to activate an account unless they chose to. The Padlet main page was created by one of the instructors through a free account, and the link was distributed to all students in the collaboration. However, those who did not activate a free account on Padlet were required to sign their comments on the other students’ videos to avoid appearing as anonymous. If Padlet is used, one should insist that students leave their names (or chosen names) and institutions at the end of the comments, especially if the assignment is graded, as was the case for some of us. For example, in the case of Farmingdale, the COIL portion was worth 30% of the final grade, broken down thusly: Ice-breaker activities on Padlet, including video and three replies to three students from the other institutions (5%); Group video project (20%); Exit survey through Google Forms (5%). The collaborating institutions were free to decide how to break down the COIL grade, and what to assess and what not to assess. For example, not every institution required the students to complete an exit survey, which is why it is not taken into consideration in this essay as part of the overall collaboration.

Once each of the students received the link to the Padlet page, the creation and uploading of videos could begin. Beyond creating self-introductory videos, students were also required to comment on some of them across different institutions (they could not comment on their peers from the same university), and this assignment alone created eighty-five videos (one per each student plus the instructors who followed the same model) and even more comments that brought to life a community of international students who clearly enjoyed exchanging stories and information about themselves. Through the ice-breaker activity, for instance, students might discover that they like watching similar movies and TV series, listening to the same music, reading the same novels, loving the same food, or enjoying similar activities in their free time. From this ice-breaker activity students can learn that across different continents, countries, languages, and cultures, college students are more similar to one another than imagined, consequently challenging biases and stereotypes related to diversity with the goal of informing values of equity and inclusion.

After the ice-breaker activity (that could extend beyond one week/module), we switched to the main, final project. Since the students had all participated together in the ice-breaker activity on Padlet, they were then divided into twelve teams or groups associated with twelve separate folders in Google Drive so they could begin collaborating. We assigned roughly seven students per team: six groups were made of two students from Farmingdale, two students from the Free State, two students from Siena, and one student from Akita, while the others followed a similar equilibrium of mixed students coming from the four institutions. The students were assigned to the teams by the instructors randomly, but privileging an equilibrium in numbers of female and male students. Once the groups were formed, the students could access a folder devoted to their teams in Google Drive, where they found the instructions for the final project and its completion, a document with
information about time zone differences, and a document about *Getting to know your team* to be filled out by the students. The first step was in fact for the students to introduce themselves to the other teammates and to exchange contact information and other information such as field of studies or interests. The students were instructed to only use the folder in Google Drive to communicate. The students’ next step as a group was to use the Google Doc to agree upon a film that they would collaborate on and create a presentation about. At this point, the students already had available the instructions for the project, and each instructor went over it with their students independently during their class time. The instructions for the project are available in the Appendix, and it is recommended that one reads this before continuing the article.

The students were directed to watch the chosen films independently or with their teammates and to take notes about three different elements that they needed to identify, namely (1) urban development, (2) society, (3) wartime or the aftermath of wars, analyzing how they are depicted in the chosen film. The goal was for them to share ideas on the depiction of these elements and keep the notes on a Google Doc in their team folder in Google Drive, so that the instructors could follow the development of the project. After watching the film and taking notes, the students were instructed via email (each instructor informed their own classes) to meet remotely (they needed to provide the recording of the synchronous meeting and upload it in their folder in Google Drive, an extra step that was not included in the original instructions available in the Appendix) and begin creating an outline for their slides deck (PowerPoint, Google Slides, or similar program) presentations. There was no limit to the number of slides that they could use, but the presentation was limited to ten minutes with a minimum of about six minutes depending on the number of people in their team. Once the projects were completed, the instructors watched and assessed them without sharing them with all the teams due to time constraints; however, we realized that it could have been profitable to share the projects among all the students and to let them watch and comment upon some of the other groups’ projects.

As mentioned earlier, the main project stemmed from the initial icebreaker in that it was centered around the theme of films, since we asked the students to share their favorite film of all time. Due to the diverse subject areas taught at each of the four universities, the assignment was designed to take each of the subject areas into consideration, but to minimize the amount of background knowledge that the students needed in order to collaborate. The faculty created a list of twenty-six films that contained elements that could draw from areas the students were studying, which is available in the Appendix in its entirety. The instructors initially listed six-eight films each that were then discussed together, resulting in the provided list. Each of the films in the list contained elements of 1) urban development, 2) society, and 3) war or aftermath of war. Each of the elements present in the film needed to be discussed and presented by the students in the form of an online live recording of a slides deck presentation. Among the recommended films to choose from, together with further films which the students could choose on their own upon receiving the approval of the instructors, the twelve groups decided to focus on the following eight, with several groups choosing the same film:

1. *Metropolis* (Germany: Fritz Lang, 1927)
3. *Agora* (Spain: Amenábar, 2009)
5. *Inception* (USA: Christopher Nolan, 2010)
To prevent students from using too many video clips from the chosen film in the presentation, the total amount of time allowed for film clips was a maximum of two minutes in addition to the actual presentation time allotted per each student (at least one minute of presenting orally per each student). Once they had finished creating their slides deck, they were advised to rehearse the presentation together as a group before recording it through Zoom, Google Meet, or other video-conferencing platforms. Specifically, regarding the video-project to be submitted, each group was required to record the presentation as a group (rather than individually and subsequently editing the various clips together), download the recording received through the video-conferencing platform, and upload it onto their Google Drive folder.

As the two phases of the collaboration serve as an example of designing a virtual exchange, its structure, and content that can certainly vary based on the institutions and the partners involved, it is necessary to keep in mind throughout the collaboration its goals, the students learning outcomes (SLOs) and the assessment that one plans to use to grade the projects, as they are strictly connected and motivate the different parts of the collaboration. The next and final part of the essay lays out and reflects upon the concluding cycle of the assessment, and it represents the last stage of the virtual exchange.

4. Collaboration Goals, Student Learning Outcomes, and the Assessment
This last part of the article focuses on goals, SLOs, and assessment to show how these parts are connected, and how the ice-breaker activities lead to the final project through their reference to a favorite film to share with the others, while the final project contributes to overall SLOs. In terms of collaboration goals, as faculty we primarily wanted the students to go through a multicultural experience where they would be confronted with different cultures, mindsets, and team issues, so they could learn how to overcome bias and stereotypes, accept differences across cultures and languages, acquire greater flexibility, and work on adaptability, problem solving and team building. Such goals are difficult to assess, yet one could notice how this kind of virtual exchange can foster greater cultural maturity in the students, eventually leading them to realize that the world is smaller than they thought, that they are closer and less different than imagined, and that it is possible to overcome challenges, bias, and stereotypes.

In terms of SLOs for the final project, we required that the students design and create a digital presentation where they examined a few themes in a chosen film, supporting their choice. In their projects and presentations, students were asked to describe how the chosen film incorporated the themes, to explain how the themes were exemplified in the film itself, to select specific scenes from it supporting their points, and to discuss the scenes utilizing the knowledge that they had acquired in the courses at their home institutions.

As mentioned previously, the COIL project involved creating a digital project that was designed and developed throughout a couple modules/weeks. Students were required to justify their choice of film and how it featured (1) urban development, (2) within a society, (3) during war or in the aftermath of wars. In analyzing the films, students were required to describe and analyze the three elements, connecting them to each other and discussing them with the goal of creating the basis to interpret similar films in the future. Through such a project, the students were given the tools and skills to code other films featuring similar elements that could also be recognized and interpreted.
As Stuart Hall theorized (1997), the act of coding and decoding images follows determined patterns, so having a project where students from different cultures confronted one another with different ways of interpreting films can add a layer of learning and understanding different cultures and, consequently, a better grasp of diversity. There is no simple way to assess the degree that students can become more sensitive towards people from different languages and cultures and whether they can become more respectful of diversity while fostering equity and inclusion for a more just world. However, as instructors we are confident that a COIL project can make students more aware of a world without borders, since such a project has the potential to open students’ eyes, pushing them beyond their comfort zones.

Certainly, the SLOs were evaluated through a simplified assessment that was centered around a main rubric. However, we soon realized that the different partner universities come from different assessment cultures, and since in previous years assessment was interpreted differently by different instructors, this time we decided to employ a common rubric to assess the assignments. Because of their familiarity with utilizing rubrics, Farmingdale and Akita took the lead in creating a rubric that was discussed and adjusted with the other two instructors. Students were familiarized with this rubric ahead of time, however it was left up to each faculty to decide how the rubric would be used to determine the grade for each student. From the experience of the COIL @ 4, assessment cultures are an area that needs to be worked out openly and comprehensively in order to make the collaboration between the learners as seamless as possible.

An examination of each case illustrates the considerable variation in stances toward assessment. In the Farmingdale course, the assessment strictly followed pre-established rubrics, with each assignment being worth a certain percentage adding up to 100%. Students were assessed throughout the semester with assignments evaluating the learning progress of the class content, with the COIL project being assessed towards the end of the semester. The total grade was broken up into: In-class participation and activities (8%); Computer back-up plan and Meet the class (2%); Reaction papers on the readings (30%); Blog/Discussion Board on film analysis (30%); and Applied Learning Project/COIL (30%). The COIL project was worth 30% of the final grade because the course fulfills the Applied Learning graduation requisite at Farmingdale. Every assignment was graded through rubrics with grades from zero to 100, with 60 being the lowest passing grade. Numeric grades were translated into final letter grades from A to D (the minimum) and F (failure).

The assessment in Siena was more holistic, being open to the evaluation of each student beyond percentages and numbers within a fixed grid. While the COIL constituted 30% of the final grade, it was not compulsory for all students; those who decided not to take the COIL option had to fill the gap with additional readings and related assessments. Although assessment in Japan takes on a variety of forms, in the English for Academic Purposes Department at Akita, the majority of assessment is accomplished through the use of rubrics, and specifically, in the COIL course, the grade given to the students represented a total of 5% of the final grade.

In the case of the Free State students, the COIL project was weighted as 10% of the Urban Settlement (HURB) module that explored urban diversity, multiplicity, difference and complexity as design tools. Individual and group work—in this case, COIL—took place during five of the 26 academic weeks that ran from February until November (two weeks were added to the standard three for the ice-breaker activities before Akita entered the collaboration). The purpose of the History of Urban Settlement module during which COIL was carried out was to help the students...
to cultivate a caring and responsible attitude towards, and comprehension of, the urban context, its development and situated experience. Urban complexity—both fragmented and layered by spaces, times, persons and life-worlds—is essential to understanding the making of place, so the module assessment was carried out with continuous evaluation through rubrics for individual and group assignments, including COIL.

Naturally, the assessment was carried out at the end once the projects were completed and submitted. In the last phase, each group uploaded the final presentation in MP4 format onto their assigned Google Folders. As part of the assignment, students were also asked to self-reflect on their experience, providing each faculty with more insight into how each of the students contributed to the overall project. This included outlining what parts of the script they contributed to and which slides they were instrumental in making. This self-reflection was a Google document created for the whole group where members could read about and verify each other’s claimed contributions. The directions provided in the folder are shared below:

Dear Scholars! Thank you for your efforts in the COIL project! You did it! We are sure that there were a lot of difficulties in getting it all finished, but hard work and hard effort paid off. COIL 2021 is complete!

So, we would like to know what you did, or how you contributed to your group’s finished presentation. Below there is a form to fill out.

1. Please write your name in the ‘Name’ column.
2. In the column devoted to ‘Group coordination,’ please write information that tells us about your own efforts. Please write what you did to help coordinate the efforts of your group. This means: did you help set up meetings? Did you help coordinate schedules?
3. In the ‘Information and slides preparation’ column, please write what you contributed to the information gathered and to the creation of the slides. What did you research about? What did you write for the script? What slides did you make or help make?

You can write as much as you need to, but please remember this is about what you did. Please focus on your own contributions.

Don’t forget! You must put your slides and your final presentation in the Google folder of your group. If your slides are elsewhere, then you must provide a document that gives the links to the slides. Your final recording must be in the Google Drive folder.

We decided to employ this self-reflection, believing that the responding students would complete the information honestly, because all team members could review what their fellows claimed to have contributed to in terms of group organization and information and slide preparation. The decision to make this a public self-assessment within the groups was based upon the realization that students could have collaborated outside the Google Drive folder, making it difficult for the instructors to assess their level of teamwork, which was worth 30% of the COIL project grade.

After the self-assessment was completed, every instructor went through the digital projects individually. Eventually, the students were not assessed as a group, but individually, since every instructor evaluated their own students. We used a shared grid where we registered our students’ grades, which were later discussed collegially during a synchronous meeting to make sure that the grades were consistent, especially with regard to the overall project evaluation, including the exploration of the three elements, the accuracy of the analysis, the originality of the presentation and its appearance, the organization of the slides, and the language, although we were more lenient with the last aspect in recognition that the large majority of the students were not English native speakers. Specifically, the SLOs were evaluated in the Inclusion of the three components/thematic elements (15% of the final project grade) and in the Accuracy of the components, namely the
analysis (15% of the final project grade), while the remaining 70% was spread out between Team work (30%), Originality of the presentation and its appearance (15%), Slides’ organization (15%), and Accuracy and level of formality of the language used (10%). We especially granted a large share of the grade to the team work aspect to make sure that the students were exposed to continuous contact and interaction in order to reach the collaboration goals. The decision to allow the four instructors to assess their own students and the projects independently—though still discussing the grades before releasing them to the students—was reached based not only on the different assessment methods, and the different student body profiles, but also because students might have complained about group grades if they felt that not every student in the group contributed equal levels of investment and engagement. With regard to the final assessment and the grades, a major issue could be the overall importance granted to COIL in each individual class, namely either 5% versus 10% or 30% of the final grade. It would be preferable to have the COIL worth the same amount for each university, but this can be a difficult goal because of divergent course structures, different institutional demands, academic freedom, planning, etc.

One should be aware that there might be some challenges that the students can encounter during a COIL project, especially related to time differences, varying English proficiency, cultural differences, or everyday responsibilities that instructors could also face and need to be prepared to discuss among themselves. However, beyond issues related to time differences and language barriers, a virtual exchange among more than two institutions can contribute to reaching goals related to intercultural interactions, learning about other languages and cultures, overcoming bias and stereotypes, refining team building and problem solving, and acquiring a greater level of cultural maturity, flexibility, and problem-solving ability, with team work contributing prominently to attaining these goals.

4. Conclusion

There are some points that can be outlined in the conclusion and discussed as possible challenges and outcomes of a COIL project. Foremost, it is important that the students understand what is expected of them. This must be seamless throughout the entire process, ensuring that the information and instructions are made available to the students before starting the ice-breaking activities and revisited throughout the whole virtual exchange. Moreover, it is recommended that the instructors review the directions in class and in their Learning Management Systems (Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, Brightspace, etc.). Once the students begin collaborating in the chosen platform (for us, it was Google Drive), they should already know what they are required to accomplish and by when, as the deadlines should also be disseminated via email in the forms of reminders. It is highly recommended that this information is shared and repeatedly conveyed to students on a regular basis, therefore it is suggested to establish the deadlines ahead of time and adhere to them without allowing individual deviations in terms of postponing or rescheduling; failure to inform the other instructors has the potential to create major issues and disruptions. If deadlines are moved by one faculty partner without informing the others, this can lead the students to become confused. Every decision must be evaluated and agreed upon by all collaborating faculty. For us four, instant messages such as WhatsApp were a fundamental tool, though a fourteen-hour difference between countries might become a challenge once the deadlines are imminent, slowing down decision-making if one needs to wait for a colleague to see the message many hours later.

The assessment rubric should be provided to all students before the COIL project starts, so they are aware of the valuation of the project. It is the duty of the instructors to explain what the rubric
entails. It is essential to agree collegially upon the rubric(s) and to understand it/them carefully before disseminating it/them among the students.

The outcomes of the COIL project must be clear for the faculty and students. Months before embarking on the COIL journey, the faculty must agree upon the goal of COIL so that all objectives are also clear for the students. The failure to align goals has the potential of creating major issues among the faculty and the students. A clear assessment of a final project through rubrics is highly recommended and encouraged. One should realize that, although intercultural interactions are difficult to assess through a formal rubric, one of the main goals for a virtual exchange collaboration through COIL is for the students to engage interculturally and cross-culturally, with the final project being seen as a means to elicit such engagement and reach the established SLOs. One of the challenges in completing the collaboration may lie in the nature of the final project itself in terms of applying a chosen theoretical framework and the need for knowledge of multiple subject matters, as it requires input from all students, providing them with agency, and forcing them to leave their comfort zones and to learn from their peers. Furthermore, the outcomes of the assignment should be linked to the students’ engagement in the project in order to give them agency for individual contributions.

Culturally, there could be challenges that might need to be negotiated among faculty and students in terms of cultural and/or language differences. As instructors, one should be prepared to use such challenges as teaching moments to discuss cultural differences and problem solving, while also explaining to students that one learns from differences, helping them understand how diverse people think and work, and how we code behaviors differently based on identities, experiences, cultures, languages, etc. Certainly, a virtual exchange like this one can help both faculty and students negotiate differences in order to find solutions to problems that might arise, to overcome practical issues such as meeting times, time differences, cultural diversity, language barriers, and distribution of tasks for a final project, and the final production of the actual assessment, including the self-assessments, therefore it is a highly recommendable experience for seamlessly fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom.

6. Appendix

**Project:** COIL presentation

**Theme:** Urban Development and Society during Wars or in Their Aftermath

**Deadline:** April 28, 2021 (USA: 10:00 am; Italy: 4:00 pm; South Africa: 4:00 pm; Japan: 11:00 pm)

**Objective:** To make a slide deck presentation with your group/team based on the theme of *Urban Development and Society during Wars or in Their Aftermath*

**Guidelines**

*Decide ONE film as a team and watch it.* (There is a list of recommended films at the end of this document).

Look for the elements of: (1) urban development, (2) society, (3) during war or in the aftermath of wars, and how they are depicted in the film.

****You may also choose a film that is not listed, but this will need approval from your professor. The film that you watch MUST have the elements of (1), (2), and (3) as listed above.
When you watch the film, take notes and share ideas using the Google docs folder you have been provided. DO NOT use other areas to store your documents. Please keep these notes in the Google docs in the folder devoted to your team. It has been made as a place where all students in your team can access. Your assessment is also based on what has been shared in this folder.

Create a storyline
Since you have to create a digital presentation whose final product is an MP4 file, start with an outline of what you want to cover creating a storyline that you can use as a central idea that goes through your entire presentation. Make sure that your group all agree on this storyline. It will help you make your presentation slides.

Create a presentation
Google Slides is available, since it is part of the Google Suite, and all team members can access it at any time.

Make sure that you all work as a team on the presentation in the creation of the slides. Since we are hosted in Google Drive, the best software would be Google Slides so you can work on it at different times, however you can also utilize PowerPoint, Prezi, or alike. Teamwork is part of the assessment, so you need to produce a presentation that is made by all members, not a presentation that is made by individual members, and put together at the end. You can have as many slides as you like.

Your presentation needs to be a certain amount of time.
**The absolute time limit is 10 minutes.** The minimum time is based on the number of group members. For example, if there are six (6) members in your group, then you need a minimum 6-minute presentation. If you decide to include a short video excerpt, then the maximum TOTAL time for outside source video clips is one (1) minute. The video clip(s) will be in addition to the minimum time, but not to exceed the maximum 10-minute presentation time limit.

Record your presentation. BUT practice it first!
Once you have your presentation done (with Google Slides, PowerPoint Prezi, or alike), make sure to practice it.
You are required to record your presentation together—using Zoom, Google Meet, or alike, or some other software that you can all meet on and present with.
How to do it? You need to find a time to meet over Zoom, Google Meet, etc; then one of you shares the screen to display the presentation while also recording it. Once you are done, you stop recording and the file will be sent to the person who called the meeting and/or who started recording. Reach out to your professors to know more about the various steps and to seek suggestions and help.

Assessment
1. Teamwork (30%)
   a. All members contributed to the development and delivery of the presentation as also demonstrated in the collaboration in Google Drive.
b. Each member speaks for at least 1 minute.

2. Inclusion of the three components/thematic elements (15%): (1) urban development, (2) society, (3) during war or its aftermath.

3. Accuracy of the components, namely the analysis (15%).

4. Originality of the presentation and appearance (15%).

5. Slides (15%): organization.

6. Language (10%): accuracy with the grammar and level of formality.

**Recommended films:**

1. *Agora* (Spain: Amenábar, 2009)
2. *Attila* - miniseries (USA: Lowry, 2001)
4. *The Fall of The Roman Empire* (USA: Mann, 1964)
5. *The Last Legion* (Italy: Lefler, 2002)
7. *Thirty seconds over Tokyo* (USA: Mervyn LeRoy, 1944)
8. *I live in Fear* (Japan: Akira Kurosawa, 1955)
11. *Inception* (USA: Christopher Nolan, 2010)
15. *Metropolis* (Germany: Fritz Lang, 1927)
17. *The grave of the fireflies* (Japan: Isao Takahata, 1988)
18. *Their Finest* (USA: Lone Scherfig, 2012)
19. *Open City* (Italy: Roberto Rossellini, 1945)
20. *Shoeshine* (Italy: Vittorio De Sica, 1946)
22. *Germany Year Zero* (Italy: Roberto Rossellini, 1948)
24. *Accattone* (Italy: Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1961)
25. *Hands over the City* (Italy: Francesco Rosi, 1963)
26. *1917* (UK: Sam Mendes, 2019)

**REFERENCES**


**BIOGRAPHIES OF THE CONTRIBUTORS**

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(MA equivalent) in languages from the University of Florence. She co-edited a volume on *Passato e presente nel cinema italiano. Storia e società sul grande schermo* [*Past and Present in the Italian Cinema: History and Society on the Silver Screen*] (Vecchiarelli, 2022). With Francesca Calamita (University of Virginia), she is co-authoring a textbook of Italian in two volumes: *DiversITALY: Elementary Italian with Inclusive Language and Gender Equality* (Kendall Hunt, Vol. 1 published in 2022; Vol. 2 forthcoming 2023).

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**Carlo Citter** is an Associate Professor in medieval archeology at the University of Siena, in Italy. He is the department’s delegate for international relations, vice-chair of the Medieval Europe Research Community, and chair of the European Liberal Arts Network. He also teaches computer applications for archeology at the Sapienza-University of Rome Ph.D. school. His main research focus is on medieval and post-medieval landscapes.