

Providing opportunities for participation in intercultural activities through  
Collaborative Online International Learning: a case study of COIL between  
Chiba University and the University of Alabama

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Abstract

In this paper, we present an exploration of how to effectively introduce COIL between Japan and the U.S., where there are large time differences and semester discrepancies. While the time for synchronous activities was limited, asynchronous activities were devised using an LMS so that interactivity and collaboration would not be compromised by this limitation. On the contrary, we found that asynchronous activities were actually quite effective in overcoming significant language barriers between the students. Although it is difficult for non-native speakers to respond immediately to questions and answers, we found that asynchronous activities enable question-and-answer sessions with rich content. This initiative also shows that a large number of students can be exposed to COIL by combining smaller groups of students with different motivations within the large-scale setting.

Keyword:

COIL, US-Japan, collaborative learning, online, global issues, intercultural communication

From September 2019 to March 2023, the authors conducted a collaborative online international learning (COIL) with Chiba University and the University of Alabama. Both participants had never implemented COIL before, and this was the first time they had worked with each other. We first met in the fall of 2019. Chiba University and the University of Alabama have an overseas agreement with each other, and the project began when Dr. Takamitsu, who was looking for a COIL partner, met Dr. Kent through Dr. Wise's (Associate Provost, The University of Alabama) introduction.

This paper shares the various challenges to its implementation and our creative attempts to overcome these hurdles.

The term "COIL" was introduced by the State University of New York in 2006. Rubin argued that "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"<sup>1</sup>. Our project was conducted between a faculty member specializing in international political history at Chiba University in Japan and a faculty member specializing in German literature at the University of Alabama in the United States. The project was introduced at the University of Alabama in a course titled "Global and Cultural Perspectives," and at Chiba University in a course titled "Global Issues." Although the academic backgrounds of the students in these courses were somewhat different (students enrolled in the "Global and Cultural Perspectives" course at UA come from all academic disciplines, while students at Chiba University in the "Global Issues" course are all studying interdisciplinary studies), the overall content of the two courses was relatively similar. Due to a difference in the number of credits offered for these two courses at their respective universities, their scope was also different. "Global Issues" at Chiba University is a one-credit course and focuses on international relations, which is close to the area of expertise of the instructor, while the University of Alabama's course is three credits and covers both cultural and political topics.

One of the many benefits of COIL is that it can provide an opportunity for intercultural collaboration for students who are unable to go abroad due to financial concerns or for personal reasons<sup>2</sup>. However, one of the challenges of the COIL program is that its effectiveness is difficult to measure quantitatively. One of the few studies that has specifically measured the intercultural competence development of COIL projects analyzed the effect of COIL between U.S. and Dutch universities, as well as a control group. The results showed that beneficial effects of the program were only quantitatively confirmed in the group of student participants from the United States. The authors of the study speculated that the reason for the lack of effect among the Dutch students was that

the Netherlands had a variety of other initiatives to promote intercultural experiences in addition to COIL<sup>3</sup>. A different exploratory study found that students who followed a COIL course had a positive attitude toward international online collaboration, though they also found that diversity in communication styles might prevent steady learning progress<sup>4</sup>. We have started our own initiative on the assumption that, despite some difficulties, many students will be able to gain a global perspective at no cost if we use the various technologies available to students in our adoption of COIL. We believe that the COIL project will provide students who might not otherwise get the chance to study abroad with an alternative international experience that will inform their perspective in their future studies, careers, and lives. In both the United States and Japan, relatively few students participate in study abroad programs, and those who do rarely go abroad for long periods of time. According to Hacekett et al. both in Europe and the United States it is reported that on average only 10–13% of undergraduates have studied or worked abroad during their studies<sup>5</sup>. Even though all students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Chiba University are required to study abroad, much less than half of students participated in study abroad for longer than 6 months. Therefore, we approached COIL with the common goal of providing our students with a different kind of opportunity to interact and collaborate with students from another country, so that even students who do not get the chance to study abroad can still have the means to develop a more complex and understanding global worldview.

#### Challenge 1: Time Difference and the Semester Discrepancy

The first major challenge was the time difference and the semester discrepancy. The state of Alabama in the U.S. is on Central Standard Time, which is 14 hours behind Japan in summertime and 15 hours behind Japan in wintertime. Classes are held on a fixed timetable for each, and for this reason it was considered difficult to implement a fully synchronous COIL project. Therefore, in 2019, as a first attempt, we decided to exchange videos recorded in each class, show them to the students, and then give each other feedback. An additional constraint we faced was the discrepancy between our semester schedules. At the University of Alabama, the fall semester begins in late August and ends in early December, while the spring semester is from January to April. On the other hand, Chiba University's main terms are from April to July and from October to the following January. This means that the COIL initiative between existing classes could only be implemented during the two-month period from October to November. Introduction to Global and Cultural Perspectives at the University of Alabama is taught in both the fall and spring semesters, while Global Issues at Chiba University is a first-year specialized

compulsory course in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and was placed in Term 2 (June-July) as of the 2019 academic year. Due to this discrepancy, we decided to petition Chiba University to have the “Global Issues” course moved to Term 4 (October-November) in future semesters. Since this could not be done immediately, we decided to attempt our first trial with a different large lecture course taught by Dr. Takamitsu in Term 4 at Chiba University.

Dr. Kent prepared a video with her class featuring several University of Alabama students posing questions about life in Japan to Chiba University students. The video was presented to the class at Chiba University taught by Dr. Takamitsu. The questions from the American students that could be answered with a “yes” or “no” were filmed in the classroom with students raising their hands to give their opinions. Additionally, Dr. Takamitsu asked a few of her students to prepare a more detailed response to some of the questions from the American students. These detailed responses were also included in the video. This method ensured a certain degree of interactivity and was a valuable opportunity for University of Alabama students who had never been to Japan to experience the real Japan. Most of the University of Alabama students’ overseas experience is in Mexico and the Caribbean, with a few students who have been to Europe, but very few who have been to Japan. The University of Alabama offers a minor in Japanese language, but relatively few students pursue it long term as a field of study. Only about 60 students study it for one year, about 15 continue for a second year, and only a small handful continue for a third year or beyond. Those students at UA who do have foreign language experience have studied either Spanish or French. On the other hand, Chiba University students have been studying English since at least the first year of junior high school, and are capable of preparing short presentations in English. This was an opportunity for them to put their skills to use and to think anew about issues that are not particularly conscious in Japan. For example, the University of Alabama students asked the following question: “How does the Emperor System affect the lives of Japanese people today? Is its impact significant?”. These are questions that the average Japanese person is not very aware of in their daily lives. The course at Chiba University was a general education course with about 100 students, and the instructor asked all the students to think of answers to these questions as an assignment. From among them, she selected a few and asked them to prepare a presentation in English. The instructor then divided the issues into “impact on modern life” and “impact on traditions and culture,” and visualized the opinions of the 100 students by having them raise their hands to indicate them. This allowed the University of Alabama students to understand the diversity and distribution of opinions among the Japanese students. The video was filmed using the services of the

Chiba University Academic Link Center. This service provides staff from the Center to visit the classrooms and shoot the videos. Although the editing of the video must be done by the faculty member, by delegating the filming to the Academic Link Center staff, the instructor was able to concentrate on the progress of the class.

Through this trial, we were able to discover the possibilities and significance of implementing COIL by overcoming time differences. However, since the course at Chiba University where the trial was conducted was moved to the second term (May-June) due to curriculum reform, we had to find a different course at Chiba University to continue the project in 2020. For the time being, we decided to continue our COIL collaboration by establishing a new special lecture course in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Chiba University. In the meantime, and in order to resolve the semester gap for the introduction of COIL in the “Global Issues” course like we had originally intended, we applied to the Academic Affairs Committee of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Chiba University for permission to move the semester for that particular course. This was officially approved, and the “Global Issues” course was moved to Term 4 (October-November) beginning in the 2021 academic year.

Meanwhile, for our planned collaboration in 2020, Chiba University arranged special lectures on the topics of “Pandemic and International Organizations,” and “Politics of the Middle East and US-Japan Relations” in the fall and spring semesters at the University of Alabama, respectively. These topics were chosen because they constituted subject matter areas of overlap between our two courses. The students at Chiba University prepared presentations in English on the themes, presented them using Zoom, and received feedback from students at UA. This was our first attempt at a synchronous Zoom session. To account for the time difference, students in the United States participated in a Zoom call in the evening (outside of normal class hours), so that the Japanese students could participate in the morning (to account for the 14-hour time difference). After the Zoom call, the presentations recorded in the Zoom were also posted on the LMS platform Moodle. This allowed students to use the Moodle discussion board forum to address any questions that could not be answered during the Zoom call time due to time constraints. This recording was also useful for getting feedback from UA students who were unable to be on the Zoom call due to scheduling conflicts. There was learning on both sides in terms of how UA students would perceive the achievements of Japanese students working in groups on global issues such as pandemics. The UA students’ confidence in international organizations was particularly noteworthy, and contrasted sharply with the critical examination of the capabilities of international organizations in the presentations by the Chiba University students.

In 2021, we were finally able to introduce COIL in the “Global Issues” course, as we had originally planned back in 2019. Chiba University had about 90 first-year students, and the University of Alabama had about the same number of students across multiple class levels, mostly first-year students. This was the third year of our COIL initiative, and we decided to try a slightly more complex activity. First, we divided the approximately 180 students into 20 mixed groups (Japanese and U.S.) for group work. Then, a guest speaker who worked on the WHO Health City Project and local decarbonization projects in Japanese local government gave a recorded video lecture, which was shared on Moodle. Half of the groups discussed the WHO Health City Project, and the other half discussed local decarbonization projects. Since this discussion was conducted asynchronously using the “Discussion” function on Moodle, it was difficult for some groups to make progress in the discussion. However, for those groups that did well, it was a valuable experience to realize that measures that are effective in urban areas in Japan are not effective in Alabama, where access to car transportation is highly necessary for most people in daily life.

Since several students in Dr. Takamitsu’s graduation thesis seminar at Chiba University were also keen to participate in a COIL project during this semester, we developed an additional component to our collaboration to allow for their participation. These students were recorded while reporting the abstract of their thesis for their graduation projects in English. Two of the students excelled in video recording, editing, and photography skills, and worked independently to create 10-minute video presentations. These recordings were posted on Moodle, and questions were solicited from UA students using the Moodle discussion forum. Afterwards, we arranged a live question-and-answer session on Zoom, using the same time arrangement from previous synchronous Zoom sessions. UA students who asked particularly astute questions on the Moodle discussion forum were asked to pose their questions to the Japanese students during the live Zoom Q&A. During the live Zoom, the Japanese students gave a brief, 5-minute summary of their thesis. Then the UA students who were chosen as questioners were given the opportunity to ask the Japanese students their question. This method contributed to enhancing the quality of the question-and-answer session by allowing students time to fully examine the questions beforehand. Questions that were not addressed in the Zoom session were answered on Moodle later.

Since the students of that year were exceptionally outstanding, it was difficult to continue this work on a student-led basis every year, but in 2022, a graduate student assisted in filming and editing the students’ presentations. During 2022 we were also able to obtain the participation of students supervised by other Chiba University faculty. Although this

time the question-and-answer session was conducted only asynchronously, efforts were made to assign UA students to watch and provide feedback for those presentations whose subject matter was close to their majors, which made the question-and-answer session more meaningful.

#### Challenge 2: Differences in Motivation by Student

This initiative focused on providing opportunities to a large number of students and aimed to introduce the program to large classes. The purpose of introducing COIL was to increase student exposure to international and intercultural experiences, given the limited number and duration of students who can study abroad. Chiba University's "Global Issues" is a required course that about 90 students take each year. The University of Alabama's Introduction to Global and Cultural Perspectives also has a total of 60-90 students in its three sections each year. However, the large number of students also means that there is a large difference in student motivation. Assuming the same load for all students would limit the range of activities that could be introduced. Therefore, we decided to design a class in which many students would be stimulated by COIL, while offering more demanding activities to the more motivated students.

As mentioned above, Chiba University had to establish a new special lecture course that was designed just for COIL in 2020. The course had about 10 participants, and UA students provided feedback on the English presentations prepared by Chiba University students. In response to this, starting the following year, we decided to arrange smaller groups of highly motivated students from within the UA "Global and Cultural Perspectives" class to participate in more intensive group work with the 10 students from Chiba University. At UA, the more motivated students who would participate in the more in-depth COIL project for the semester were sought out on a volunteer basis. As an incentive to participate, and to offset the increased workload expected of these students with regard to the COIL project, this small group of student volunteers from UA were not required to submit a final project for the course like the rest of their fellow students. The COIL project grade would serve as the students' semester final project grade. The rationale for this was that the work students put in towards the COIL project was equivalent to that of a final semester project. This would allow for all students in the course to be graded fairly despite having different levels of participation with the COIL project. The number of students from Chiba University was six for "Politics of the Middle East and US-Japan Relations" and four for "Pandemic and International Organizations". The design was to have the entire UA class of about 60 students provide feedback on the English presentations by this mixed team of motivated participants, and to have a

low-impact COIL program going at the same time for those UA students who were not in the small group.

Collaborative work through asynchronous exchanges between Japan and the U.S., where time differences are large, is not technically difficult with the use of Google Drive and other tools, but we found that the students in these small teams still faced challenges in developing their joint presentations across time, culture and language barriers. As a result of these challenges, it took a great deal of motivation on the part of the instructors to keep students participating at an active level. The following year, a graduate student TA was introduced on the Chiba University side to serve as a facilitator for each team, but they had considerable difficulty in this role. Ultimately, and despite these challenges, the students appreciated that they had learned a lot from the collaborative, cross-spatial work in COIL, which they had never experienced before. The Middle East is a geographically and culturally distant but important region from both Japan and the United States. By reporting each other's media coverage of the Middle East, the students were able to develop a multifaceted perspective on the region.

#### Future Prospects

We believe that collaborative learning is the hallmark of COIL, and our project focused on Japanese and U.S. students developing their skills and perspectives together through collaborative work.

The combination of the U.S. and Japan is not necessarily suitable for COIL due to the large time difference and the discrepancies between academic calendars. However, the similarities between the two societies cannot be ignored, and make a COIL collaboration worth pursuing. Both the U.S. and Japan primarily use a single language, most citizens have a less well-developed understanding and appreciation of other cultures. By contrast, in Europe most people often acquire multiple languages, travel significantly, interact with various ethnic and religious groups and experience international cultures from very early ages as a basic part of simply living in the environment<sup>6</sup>. Both societies share a commonality in that English and Japanese are the dominant languages in their respective countries and are the general language of instruction from primary to higher education. Both American and Japanese students might often be unaware of the significance of globalization in their daily lives. Japan is in a transitional stage toward a multicultural society and has yet to reach a consensus about whether Japan should be a multicultural society. Although the U.S. is as a multicultural society, many students from the mainstream culture do not have a great deal of long-term exposure to or in-depth knowledge about minority cultures.

Students who participated in the smaller mixed teams ultimately reflected that it was a valuable experience, as many had never worked with students from other cultures in either the U.S. or Japan. Both universities have some international students, but undergraduate students do not often take the same classes as international students. Currently, there are not many Japanese students at UA, and most students do not have the opportunity to visit Japan.

We are also thinking about how to enable more students to experience COIL while reducing the burden on instructors. While COIL is inexpensive to implement and thus does not present financial obstacles to participation, it does create a significant workload for instructors if it is to be conducted successfully. Because there is no financial cost associated with COIL for the students, it was easy for them to drop out or stop participating actively and enthusiastically, and a great deal of energy had to be devoted to encouraging students to continue taking these courses at Chiba University. Therefore, in the future, rather than creating a course just for COIL, we would like to adopt a design that changes the intensity of the load according to the students' motivation within existing classes in both Japan and the U.S. It would be better to select highly motivated students from both Japanese and U.S. classes, conduct mixed Japanese-U.S. group work, and have the remaining students participate by providing feedback on the results. In addition, we are considering the following two new activities. First, to arrange for UA students to interview Chiba University students for their own final projects. The second planned activity is for Chiba University students to watch UA students' final projects and rank them in terms of their ease of comprehension for non-native speakers. Although English and Japanese are the dominant languages of their respective societies, there is a significant difference in that English is the lingua franca while Japanese is not. We would like to use this as an opportunity for UA students to recognize the advantages of their native language being a lingua franca, and to develop skills in consideration for non-native speakers.

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<sup>2</sup> Findlay, A., King, R., Stam, A., & Ruiz-Gelices, E. (2006). Ever reluctant Europeans: The changing geographies of UK students studying and working abroad. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 13 (4), 291-318. [https:// doi. org/ 10. 1177/ 0969776406 065429](https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776406065429)

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