

Small Talk in Zoom Rooms: Intercultural Awareness Through Virtual Exchange (COIL)

Candice Muñoz, Ph.D.

Mott Community College, International Institute

TOPIC

Virtual exchange or COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) projects provide low-cost meaningful intercultural experiences and interactive instruction using a variety of technology tools. This poster session focuses on the beneficial aspects of these projects, tips for finding exchange partners, designing VE projects, and creating interactive instruction methods using a variety of technology tools.

QUESTIONS

How can I provide COMM students with interactive/direct experiences with culture during COVID restrictions? Will adding a COIL virtual exchange project be beneficial to my students?

COMM VE PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- Create a set of cross-cultural experiences that includes synchronous & asynchronous experiences for 60-70 students.
- Provide students with content specific and theoretical based prompts that connect classroom knowledge with real life experiences.
- Create low-cost opportunities that utilize various technology tools that are already provided by our institutions.
- Create opportunities for students to apply & observe during their experiences and get them to reflect afterwards.

MCC COMM COIL PROJECTS

- In my COIL projects, 60-70 students from Mott Community College (U.S.A.) & Tampere University (Finland) participated in a 4-5-week virtual exchange project each semester.
- Our focus was on mediated communication and the connections to 1) culture, 2) listening, & 3) communication competence.
- We used a variety of tech. tools to accomplish different goals: Zoom, Google Docs/Jamboard, Padlet, WeChat, Instagram, etc.
- We coordinated both synchronous & asynchronous (formal & informal) activities for students to interact & connect.
- Our goal was to give students direct experiences, connect the experiences to course content, and to guide students through observations & reflections.

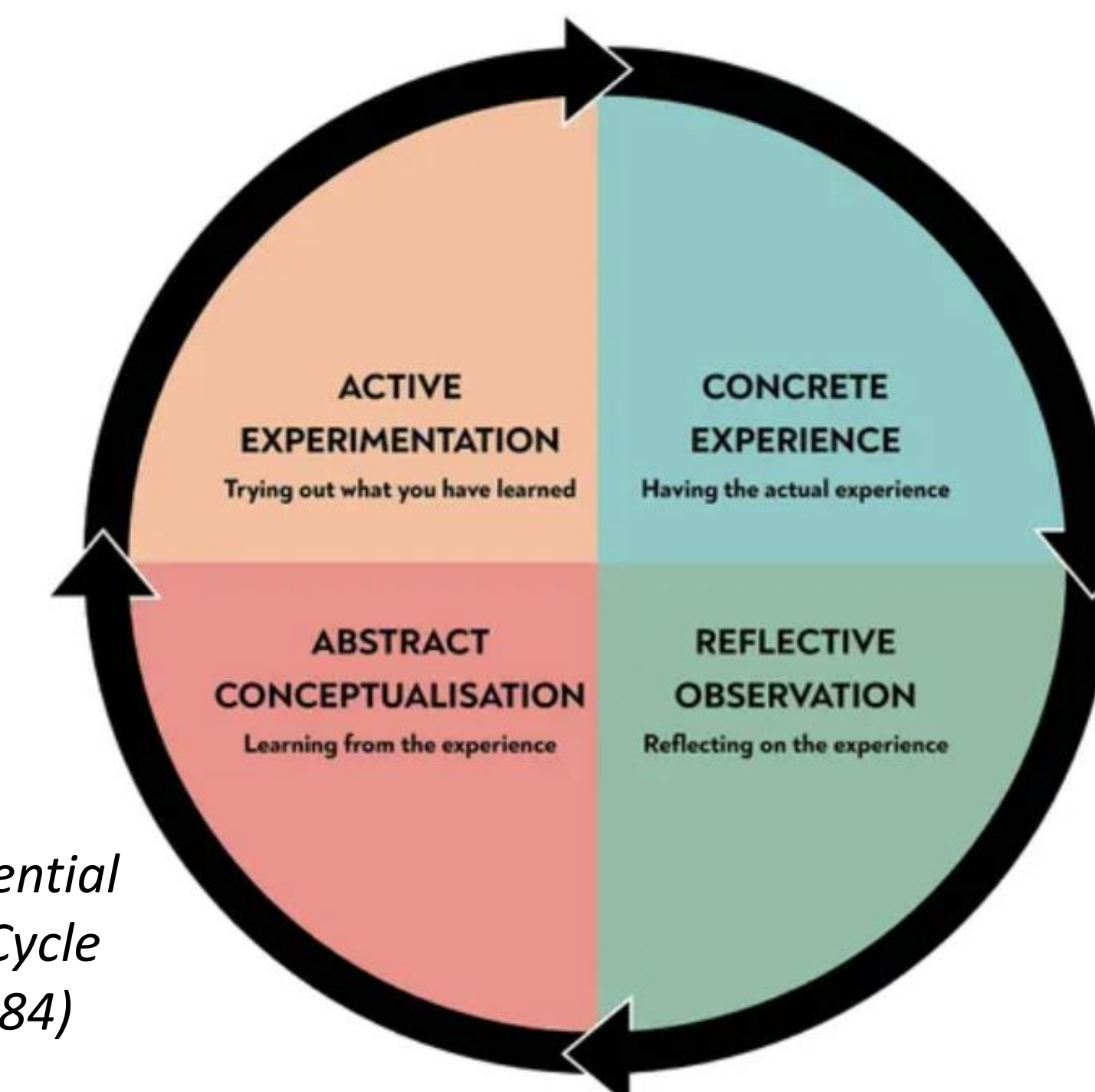
“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

Virtual Exchange or (COIL Collaborative Online International Learning) offers students low-cost/low-stakes opportunities to engage in meaningful intercultural experiences. COIL projects can include activities & concrete experiences that focus on discipline specific content, promote intercultural awareness, and enhance global learning in a short amount of time.

Student Quote: “It was the first time I got to talk with a person from Finland and it was a lot different than I thought it would be. For example, it is considered normal to know more than one language and possibly more than 2. Plus, I thought that it was odd that saunas are very common there and most people in my group had one.” (American Student/MCC – Fall 2021).



The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984)



COIL RESOURCES (TIPS & STRATEGIES)

Here are some resources for learning about COIL, attending trainings, finding partners, designing your own COIL project, and exploring research related to virtual exchange and Collaborative Online International Learning.

Start by getting an overview of COIL/Virtual Exchange:

- Erasmus - Evolve Project: What is Virtual Exchange? <https://youtu.be/oFB7ooV6lWQ>

Overview/"How-To" for COIL: (American Council on Education)

- <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Connecting-Classrooms-Using-Online-Technology-to-Deliver-Global-Learning.pdf>

Organizations for COIL Resources & Finding Partners with Partnering Fairs:

- SUNY COIL <https://coil.suny.edu/>
- UNICollaboration <https://www.unicollaboration.org/>

Consider attending a COIL conference:

- IVEC International Virtual Exchange Conference <https://iveconference.org/>

CONNECTIONS TO KOLB

After learning about mediated communication and the three specific topics (culture, listening, & communication competence), our students spent time reflecting on their experiences and discussing their observations.

- **[Concrete Experience]:** Students participated in a scheduled event/activity each week that included direct experiences with our VE partners.
- **[Reflective Observation]:** Each class spent time noting their observations about the topic for the week (together as a whole) and as individual classes.
- **[Abstract Conceptualization]:** At the end of the project, students completed assignments to discuss the connections between their virtual exchange experiences and class content. In addition, they were asked to discuss what they learned from the experience.
- **[Active Experimentation]:** At the end of the semester, many students mentioned how the virtual exchange project made them more interested in learning more about other cultures and thinking about aspects of communication competence.

PROJECT RESULTS

Here are a few things that my students discovered along the way. These items emerged as themes in their reflective assignments at the end of the project. General findings included:

- Finnish students were more comfortable with silence and used less small talk. American students were generally more uncomfortable with the silence and spent more time trying to “carry the conversation.”
- American students reflected on their perceptions of anxiety related to what they thought the intercultural encounters would be like. Although they discovered some cultural differences (holidays/traditions/food/college overalls), they also discovered many similarities (hard rock music, donuts, traditions, etc.) along the way.
- There were several “teachable moments” along the way connected to listening, intercultural comm. barriers, and the culture-specific knowledge.

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