Facilitated COIL conversational model: a virtual exchange between a private university in the US and a teacher college in South Sudan

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Abstract

This practice report explores a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) course focused on awareness and esteem development for women teachers in South Sudan and volunteers associated with a US-based university. Pedagogy of hope was utilized as an educational tool for implementation and evaluation. Assessments of this COIL course focused on data from exit tickets and a final writing assignment. Self-perceptions of the participating teachers were analyzed based on their sense of preparedness, confidence, comfort levels with the class, and any impact the course had on teachers' sense of teaching as a personal calling. Practitioners and teaching professionals interested in international virtual exchange will find key takeaways related to building partnerships starting with low-stakes initiatives and using COIL to help ignite advances in digital maturity in South Sudan.

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1.   Introduction

The Sister School Project (the project) is a university-to-college partnership, initiated by a US-based philanthropist in the fall of 2020. The project utilized COIL. COIL helps connect professors and educators from one higher education institute to another in a different country or setting (SUNY COIL, n.d.). COIL is a team-teaching model where learning environments are joined together by joint activities and through collaborative learning (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020; Guth, 2013). This project aimed to provide new ways to develop cultural awareness and esteem development for women in South Sudan by utilizing a shared syllabus to guide the joint activities. The aims of this project were to practice leadership and promote teacher education using each project member's role as a global citizen by using COIL to share cultural experiences and perspectives.

The project team, which includes university professors, K-12 educators, students from a university in the US and teachers and students from a Jesuit Mission teacher college in South Sudan, used dialogue to identify the greatest need to support teachers in training at the teacher college: women's empowerment. Therefore, the project team developed a COIL course to facilitate an online, asynchronous five-week awareness and esteem development course for the women pre-service teachers in training at the teacher college (see Appendix A for the content of the course). This practice report describes the context of the project, the objectives of both the project and the COIL course, the design of the COIL course, the evaluation of the COIL course which focused on data gathered from the exit tickets and final writing assignments, and the conclusions and implications for future online intercultural exchange.

2.   Context

2.1.   The US-based university

The US-based university is a Catholic, Jesuit university with a commitment to strengthening scholarly productivity and to advancing institutional focus on research and scholarship. With this commitment in mind, the overall project followed the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) tradition of educational research because it was intentionally designed to investigate international,

online instructional strategies both to improve our own practices and to share with others interested in our approach.

SoTL is a systemic inquiry into educational development which features a few common elements. First, SoTL focuses on an investigation of classroom practice (including online environments). Second, SoTL uses systematic and intentional methodology resulting in a scholarly product that can be publicly disseminated and built upon by other interested colleagues (Linder, Elek, & Calderon, 2014). Specifically, this SoTL project focuses on the practice of COIL which has begun to fill the need for sustainable development (i.e. online facilitation of learning without the need to travel), innovations in international education (i.e. creating more capacity and availability for global citizenship educational opportunities, SUNY COIL, n.d.), and access and equity for faculty and students who have financial or travel limitations. COIL is a collaboration between students and professors providing opportunities for global experiences to enhance intercultural student interactions. For this project, the US-based university focused on utilizing the proven COIL approach (see Coventry University, n.d.; SUNY COIL, n.d.) to provide students, faculty, and alumni opportunities for global engagement. While SoTL and innovations in international education have seen increased interest in the US among Jesuit institutions of higher education because of their alignment with the four Universal Apostolic Preferences (i.e. see the 2021 edition of *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*), that interest has yet to translate into a multitude of scholarly pursuits within Jesuit institutions. The project received institutional review board approval from the US-based university to conduct educational research as part of the initiative. All authors of this article are also members of the project team.

2.2. The teacher college

The South Sudan primary teacher education college prepares teachers for teaching and learning for love, peace, and development. Three main programs are supported at the teacher college: (1) the two-year *pre-service program*, (2) the four-year *pre-service program*, and (3) the four-year *in-service program*. There are two other schools under the teacher college: a vocational secondary school and a kindergarten. Table 1 shows the various educational programs run by the teacher college and the number of students enrolled in 2022.

The two-year *pre-service program* is designed for students who have completed secondary school and desire to be teachers in post-conflict South Sudan. Students ages range between 19 to 30 years old. The four-year *pre-service program* is a certificate program launched in 2021 for students with at least eight years of primary school education who have expressed a desire to be teachers. In the first three years, students learn subjects such as mathematics, English, biology, chemistry, physics, agriculture, geography, history, and Christian religious education. In the fourth year,

students learn about subjects related to teaching and the teaching profession, including a scheme of work, lesson planning, administrative skills, classroom management, curriculum studies, basic counseling skills, and teaching methodologies. At the end of each program, students sit for the South Sudan national secondary school certificate examination as well as the pre-service teachers' certificate examination.

Table 1. Teacher college educational programs and student details

Programs	Male	Female	Total
Pre-service (2 years)	15	10	25
Pre-service (4 years)	57	38	95
In-service (4 years)	108	26	134
Total	180	74	254

Over 90% of primary school teachers in South Sudan have no formal or professional training (Republic of South Sudan, 2019). Therefore, the four-year in-service program serves teachers who are currently teaching without formal training or professional qualifications. The in-service program, taking place every Saturday, serves to equip teachers with basic knowledge of the curriculum of South Sudan along with professional skills, competencies, and best practices in education. In addition, whenever the schools are in a short recess, teachers are invited to choose a central location where a one or two-week intensive program can be arranged to reduce the distance teachers have to walk because of the lack of public roads and transportation options. During longer recess periods in the months of January, June, and December, a three-week intensive program is usually held.

The aims of the teacher pre-service and in-service education programs at the teacher college serve to:

- improve the quality of teachers to improve the quality of primary education in South Sudan;
- produce teachers who can contribute to the development of South Sudan;
- develop a creative, analytic, reflective, and critical attitude in all teachers; and
- upgrade the teachers' general education and professional competence to interact with the community to foster the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values of the children and the community, responding to and contributing to the development of war-affected areas in South Sudan.

Table 2 shows the courses generally taught in all four programs. Most graduates of the teacher college teach in the local primary and secondary schools in the Gok state. Most graduates have been

appointed heads of schools of various primary schools in the region. The college boasts of 15 such heads of school. Other graduates have found jobs with the local government authorities because they can read and write. Additionally, various nongovernmental organizations have employed the teacher college graduates as heads of programs and project leaders who foster community building and gender equity issues.

Table 2.   Teacher college common core courses for teacher education

Common Courses	
Mathematical Sciences	Language and Literacy
Production Skills	Cultural Studies
Physical Education	Professional Studies
School Practice	Community Service
Educational Administration and Management	Peace Education
Foundations of Education	
Life Skills (e.g. sanitation, HIV/AIDS awareness, sexual maturity, gender issues, child rights, etc.)	

2.3.   Contextual realities in South Sudan

According to the principal at the South Sudan teacher college and facilitator of the COIL course in South Sudan, the nation of South Sudan is recovering at a slow pace after decades of war, violence, intertribal conflicts, and revenge killings. It is not an exaggeration to say many men, women, and children have suffered from the trauma that war imposes. The decades of war also constrain education infrastructures such as schools, libraries, laboratories, books, and computers, especially in the region where the teacher college is located. Since most primary school lessons are held under big trees or temporary shelters, students have no access to basic resources.

Even though the English language is the medium of instruction, a lot of teaching takes place in the local language, Dinka. As a result, the English language proficiency of rising students is low and, therefore, the level of mastery of English language skills such as writing, reading, speaking, and listening are extremely low throughout the South Sudan population. At the teacher college, there is an English language policy to encourage students to develop their listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills. However, the language deficit affects the level of comprehension of the teacher education common core courses among the teachers in training.

In a war situation, even though students register to attend classes in each school, attendance is not guaranteed. Inconsistency in attendance means most students who are said to have completed

secondary schools may have only attended school for 90 days out of the 200 days required, therefore many students in South Sudan fail to demonstrate the language skills necessary for reading and comprehension in English.

According to the principal at the South Sudan teacher college and facilitator of the COIL course in South Sudan, life is very difficult in South Sudan. The youth have no work, are uneducated, and have little hope for the future of the new nation, subject to ineffective leaders. Despite this gloomy reality, the teacher college gives hope to primary school pupils, secondary school students, parents, and the state educational officials and stakeholders. The teacher college is the only tertiary institution in an area with over 25,000 students in primary and secondary school. This context informs the importance of the teacher college and its current courses and will frame the experiences of those who participated in the COIL course described herein.

3.   Objectives

The rationales for the overall project were threefold: (1) education is an economic engine, (2) teachers are the most important resource, and (3) as Chubbuck (2007) notes, global institutional partnerships focused on education for justice need to serve the ideals of US Catholic universities. The role of educators is crucial in development education and global learning and the demand for educators capable of facilitating high quality instruction is universal in a global economy (Bourn, 2021; Sachs, 2015). According to UN Sustainability Goals numbers four and five, sustained global efforts are needed to (1) ensure quality education and lifelong learning from preschool through at least secondary education, and (2) achieve gender equality and empower women and girls to have equal economic and social rights (Sachs, 2015). Women bring a unique set of attributes with the potential to enrich the experiences of all learners (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2001). In South Sudan, women teachers have a key role to play in social change, and in promoting hopeful futures that can lead to less violence and trauma within the country. The intentional efforts of this COIL project sought to create global connections with people willing to support one another, help strive toward the UN Sustainability Goals, and fulfill the mission of Jesuit institutions to serve the most vulnerable (Brackley, 2005; Sachs, 2015). This COIL project sees these sustainable development goals and mission orientation as an opportunity to help align such educational efforts.

One aim of this project was for all participants to better appreciate their role as global citizens to help eliminate gender discrimination across borders and culture by sharing perspectives through teacher education. A second aim was to assess the learning outcomes from the COIL course. The collaborative

perspective at the heart of COIL emphasizes learning outcomes pursued by all participating parties (SUNY COIL, n.d.). The specific learning outcomes of the facilitated COIL conversational model course titled *Awareness and Esteem Development* were twofold. At the completion of the five-week course, the project team would (1) apply reflective practices as a means for professional and personal growth, and the women teachers in training in South Sudan would (2) be better prepared to participate in an interview for a teaching position.

4.   Project design

4.1.   Planning

We designed this project as a partnership using the principles of COIL to fill the need for sustainable global leadership development in three distinct ways. First, COIL provides a model for online facilitation of learning without the need to travel. This model was particularly important considering the need for continued global connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, COIL is an innovative approach in international education, creating wider capacity and availability for global citizenship educational opportunities (SUNY COIL, n.d.). Third, access and equity for faculty and students who have financial or travel limitations are addressed by using COIL. While innovations in international education, like COIL, have seen increased interest in the US (see Coventry University, n.d.; SUNY COIL, n.d.), that interest has yet to translate into a multitude of specific teacher training pursuits. The intersection of COIL and teacher training begins to explore the idea that everyone brings valuable resources to the education community.

The specific COIL conversational model we developed for this project built upon the work of Appiah-Kubi and Annan (2020) and Guth (2013), who found having conversations is key to COIL project success. As noted by Appiah-Kubi and Annan (2020), "an environment that supports diversity of perspectives helps students to talk, and it is the talking through which much of the learning occurs" (p. 114). Due to lack of resources and technology limitations within South Sudan, the project team had to develop creative ways to facilitate conversation. After multiple conversations with the principal at the South Sudan teacher college and facilitator of the COIL course in South Sudan, it was determined all interaction would be asynchronous with the teachers in training. Therefore, videos of US-based women teachers were produced and posted to a Google classroom for the South Sudan facilitator to display during a 2.5-hour afternoon class with the women teachers in training. The videos were produced, recorded, and edited with the volunteer help of a local journalist. The journalist asked a set of predetermined questions to each of the four pre-K to Grade 12 women teachers who were familiar to the project team. The questions followed the weekly content of the course. Prior to the

teachers in training engaging in group discussion, they watched each video multiple times to initiate the formative conversations among the women at the teacher college.

The course was co-designed by project team members to help the women teachers in training to build confidence in who they are as individuals and as teachers. They were invited to practice self-awareness and self-esteem-building skills by engaging in conversation about professional education issues impacting girls and women. The course used ideas from Catholic Social Teaching (Brugger, 2004; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000) and introduced students to the Jesuit Charisms (Dunfee et al., 2017; ICAJE, 1986) to foster the development of their esteem and empathy as teachers.

4.2. Implementation

The awareness and esteem development COIL conversation course was implemented over a five-week period in September and October of 2021. The course facilitator in South Sudan and the women teachers in training met every day after classes Monday to Friday between 4:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. to watch videos, engage in discussion, and role play. Appendix A provides the activity sequence, including details of the topic, objective, and activity facilitated for each week. We used two activities to assess student learning: (1) weekly exit tickets, and (2) a final writing assignment focused on the importance of practicing hope within an educational system by recovering any lost sense of connectedness and solidarity as teachers. Specifically, students were asked to choose an education sector decision-maker in their country and write a letter to them. The persuasive letter to the decision-maker would seek specific actions toward practicing a *pedagogy of hope*. By practicing the pedagogy of hope, teachers in training could bring together what they had learned over the previous five weeks to generate meaningful actions to foster hope for local educators.

In this COIL course, the implementation of the pedagogy of hope, originally introduced by Paulo Freire (2004), was based on Hooks's (2003) interpretation of relating hope to praxis. She suggests the pedagogy of hope be built on interactions encouraging reflexivity, dialogue, and criticality that are grounded in the reality of the time. Additionally, as Bourn (2021) argues, Freire may not have been "proposing an education for hope, but promoting a kind of education in hope" (p. 70). Therefore, we utilized pedagogy of hope in this COIL course by structuring the activities the teachers in training engaged in with the opportunity to dream with hope of social, economic, political, and educational structures counter to their current reality.

To assess learning we specifically chose assessment for learning activities. Assessment *for* learning is distinct from assessment *of* learning because it focuses on the sustainability of the learning for

use in professional settings. We drew on the work of Boud and Soler (2016) to design formative assessment tasks that help the teachers in training reflect on their learning as it applied to their professional status. The course is a supplement to the current teacher in training curriculum at the teacher college, which is why we chose to use the letter writing assignment as the final project. The teachers in training who participated in the course received a certificate of completion from the US-based university.

5.   Evaluation and discussion of outcomes

For the purposes of this practice report study, we focused our evaluation on the systematic inquiry into student learning based on the data gathered from the exit tickets and final writing assignment. Appendix B provides the six questions and response options for the exit ticket questions.

Analysis of the exit tickets showed on average the ten women students who completed the course experienced a strong and consistent sense that teaching represents a calling. This sense of calling remained at approximately the same level throughout the five-week COIL course (i.e. mean scores for all five weeks were greater than 4.7). Students' sense of preparation (e.g. how prepared they felt for the day's lesson) increased throughout the program with a mean score of 3.64 in the first week (on a zero to five scale), to 4.8 in the final week. Interestingly, students reported that their sense of self-confidence remained functionally flat throughout the program with all participants indicating they felt *completely confident* or *confident* across each of the five weeks. An average of five participants each week indicated they felt *completely confident*.

Our analysis of the final writing assignments showed a positive reaction to the pedagogy of hope as an educational practice (Freire, 2004; Republic of South Sudan, 2019) with several respondents encouraging meaningful, documented steps toward implementing this model. Several respondents indicated that current classroom control approaches, notably the use of corporal punishment, demonstrated norms within the South Sudanese education system that ran counter to the pedagogy of hope approach. Further, unhealthy gender norms within South Sudanese culture directed at women teachers and students were highlighted as counter to the themes within pedagogy of hope. Concepts such as liberation for women teachers and students, as evidenced through governmental action, were detailed in many of the final writing assignments that were structured as open letters to the South Sudanese Ministry of Education. Practical challenges were also highlighted, including concerns about student and teacher mobility due to distance from the educational site, the quality of roads, and access to appropriate student uniforms, which act as security for who could potentially be either recruited to fight or become targets in intercommunity revenge killings.

In this context, these findings suggest the increased sense of preparation in advance of engaging in conversations about teaching may prove to be part of the additive value of this COIL course to the South Sudan teacher college curriculum. Given the current curriculum already in place at the college, the COIL course seems to provide an added inspiration and perspective for the students as noted by the increased sense of preparation over time in the exit tickets and the highlighted sense of hope in the writing assignment. In the context of the written assignment, the resonance of the pedagogy of hope cannot be understated. Themes arose from this exercise related less to self-confidence and more to notions of self-advocacy. Hope leads to liberation and a distinct desire for measurable governmental intervention as noted in the letters to the Ministry of Education. Future research should explore the impact teacher preparation courses, like this COIL course, can have on securing employment as a teacher, retaining teachers within the profession, and the ways in which teacher preparation courses translate to student success in the classrooms they lead.

6.   Conclusions and implication

The overall project has provided unity and understanding among all the project participants as evidenced by the findings related to the learning outcomes of the COIL course for the teachers in training and this multi-authored article for the project team. As noted by the principal at the South Sudan teacher college and facilitator of the COIL course in South Sudan, for the teachers in training, by listening to each other's points of view and empathizing with the experiences of one another, the teachers have crafted a stronger sense of teamwork. A notable change is the ease with which the teachers openly contribute their ideas in the classroom. In the context of cultural norms, it is uncommon for a female student to talk before their male classmates. A difference has been observed among the participating teachers who are now the most active students in the classroom. An additional major change was noted during the two months of teaching practice. Given the normed use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure in South Sudanese schools, participating teachers demonstrated creative and effective methods that help pupils see the negative consequence of their actions, thereby using what the Republic of South Sudan (2019) report describes as reflective practice. The teachers were able to reflect on their learning and apply a pedagogy of hope as they dealt with different pupils' problems (Charney, 2015).

The most notable finding was in the sizable increase in the teacher participants' sense of self-preparedness in advance of each session throughout the program. Possible areas of future research may be related to these perceptions of teacher preparation and how they may translate to long-term student success for those enrolled in their classrooms. This success may take the form of student attendance, student retention from grade to grade, or academic performance over time. While

dedication to the calling of teaching started and remained high throughout this course, the theme of self-advocacy as indicated from the writing assignment may translate to future research on teacher retention. Whether for research purposes or as an open line for discussion, one question for further exploration is, what tools of self-advocacy translate to longer tenure for highly dedicated teachers and why?

As noted in this practice report, efforts toward building a cross-cultural partnership for educational advancements using the COIL model show promise. Three key takeaways useful for practitioners and teaching professionals interested in international virtual exchange are shared in this report. First, this report offers insight into partnership building (i.e. use dialogue to identify greatest need) for US and Eastern African-based educational institutions with a common mission orientation. Second, starting with targeted, low-cost activities gives energy to the partnership team with the power of quick wins (i.e. a five-week, asynchronous course) providing a crucial form of reassurance for the university and college partners. Finally, as South Sudan continues to make progress in its digital maturity and technological advancements, the use of COIL can help ignite further innovation-based growth.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Awareness and Esteem Development Course Activity Sequence

Topic	Objective	Activity
Week 1: The Power of You - Solidarity We are *one human family* whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Becoming a teacher is important and is a calling.	Get to know one another and practice reflection by asking questions that help reveal the solidarity between us.	· Watch video from instructor · Group activity - Get to Know One Another · Exit Ticket
Week 2: The Power of You - Human Dignity Every person is precious, people are more important than things, and the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the *life and dignity* of the human person. Teaching is a vocation that enhances life and dignity.	Share ideas about different educational experiences that enhance the life and dignity of people and practice self-awareness by responding to questions.	· Watch video from instructor · Group activity - Question and Answer Exercise · Exit Ticket
Week 3: Navigating Relationships Women & Men for and with Others means that we are called to share our gifts, pursue justice, and have concern for the poor and marginalized in our community.	Practice ways to build esteem by participating in role playing and engaging in dialogue.	· Watch video from instructor · Group activity - Dialogue Role Playing · Exit Ticket
Week 4: Do the Right Thing Even if No One Else Does The process of discernment helps us practice looking up at the light, rather than down at the dark, even when things are hard. The charisms of Forming & Educating Agents of Change encourages us to teach, through our role modeling and through our lesson, behaviors that reflect critical thought and responsible action on moral and ethical issues.	Strengthen self-esteem by talking with peers about decisions and practice looking for the way that is full of light.	· Watch video from instructor · Group activity - Talk About Decision-Making · Exit Ticket

Week 5: Be Brave and Courageous Practicing a pedagogy of hope means believing that hope must be secured in practice, in action. In your own life and in your teaching practice, you are encouraged to embody this integration of love and need for securing social change. Your thinking and commitment to the best in humanity can inform your engagement with your future students.	Assess progress on raising awareness of self as a teacher and building confidence in the professional skills needed to be a teacher by participating in a practice interview and reflecting on what was learned over the last 5 weeks.	· Watch video from instructor · Group activity - Practice Job Interview · Exit Ticket · Complete Final Writing Assignment

Appendix B
Exit Ticket Questions

1. During your class session today, what was your comfort level?
   - Response options: Likert scale 1-5, 5 = Completely comfortable, Comfortable, Somewhat comfortable, 1= Not at all comfortable
2. After your class session today, what is your confidence level going into your teacher internship?
   - Response options: Likert scale 1-5, 5= Completely confident, Confident, Somewhat confident, 1= Not at all confident.
3. How prepared did you feel for today's lesson?
   - Response options: Likert scale 1 - 5, 5 representing the highest level.
4. A calling implies a deep-seated belief that teaching is the only profession that makes sense for you to pursue. To what degree do you feel that teaching is your calling?
   - Response options: Likert scale 1 - 5, 5 representing the highest level.
5. What's one important thing you learned in class today?
   - Response option: Narrative.
6. What would help make today's lesson more effective?
   - Response option: Narrative.