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## Collaborative Online International Learning Experiences as tools to reduce stereotypes through Cross-Cultural Education

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### ABSTRACT

In today's increasingly interconnected world, intercultural education has become essential to foster mutual understanding and cooperation, especially in countries where the internationalization of students is more complicated. When studying different cultures in business, we realized that there are many stereotypes and biases due to all the load of information and history that each of us has. As a professor of international business, I have had the privilege of participating in numerous intercultural experiences. I will share one particularly experience that not only broadened my horizons but also highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and empathy; not only in me, but in the students.

My research was to understand the cultural factors that influenced educational outcomes using collaborative online international learning (COIL) experiences. I have worked on several occasions using COIL doing role-plays where students interpreted a culture different from their own to identify cultural and business differences. In the last experience, I faced something that changed my perspective, I worked with a Canadian university that told me that due to intercultural stereotypes and their culture of respect, the roleplay cannot be done.

We decided to change the role play and do the project playing their own culture. The outcome of the collaboration was excellent. The students got to learn from working with other students from a different culture. They learned the importance of respecting their own culture, they changed their perspective on stereotypes and diversity. They are more prepared to face an international experience and an intercultural team in their workplace in the future.

**Keywords:** Educational Innovation, higher education, online, diversity, experiential learning, cross cultural education

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### INTRODUCTION

In countries where the internationalization of students is more complicated, the intercultural education is playing an important role nowadays. For international business students, it is vitally important to know how to develop in intercultural contexts, so reducing stereotypes and biases is very relevant. We all have prejudices, biases and stereotypes, although many of them are unconscious. However, we should not act based on them. Stereotypes block our critical capacity and make it easier for us to have prejudiced attitudes, which can trigger practices of discrimination and intolerance.

For this reason, the COIL methodology was used to carry out remote activities with international students. This methodology has an important role, since it helps students meet, work with, and understand colleagues from other countries and learn to work with them, understanding their way of thinking, speaking, without judging and with an open mind. Students can afford to have an international experience without having to travel; they can learn about other cultures without this affecting their economy, which is very important for Latin American students. It is important to understand that for Latin American students, and particularly Mexican students, it is very difficult to travel to have an international academic experience.

The hypothesis that will be worked on in this paper is that the internationalization of students through the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) methodology helps reduce stereotypes and cultural biases. Also, in this study it was measured the development of the diversity competence for the business students using qualitative and quantitative data.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

"The growing international student movement has contributed significantly to creating more interaction between different cultures in the world than ever before. International students are among the most important sources of cultural diversity within countries in modern times. Diversity may also be one of the most important reasons that create competition and creativity, especially in universities." [1] My research is based on the understanding of cultural factors that influenced educational outcomes using collaborative online international learning (COIL) experiences; in particular, to determine if it a tool to reduce stereotypes.

The COIL methodology, collaborative international online learning, was developed in the United States with the aim of improving the levels of internationalization of its students.

The methodology was developed by Jon Rubin in the state of New York, which was incorporated into the State University System (SUNY) and was quickly used worldwide due to its ease of implementation.

The methodology has four main phases:

1. Icebreakers and team building.
2. Discussions, organization and research to prepare students to carry out the project.
3. Collaboration project where students work remotely on an experiential deliverable.
4. Final presentation and reflection of both the project itself and the experience lived.[2]

I have worked on several occasions using COIL doing role-plays where students interpreted a culture different from their own to identify cultural and business differences. In the last experience, I faced something that changed my perspective, I worked with a Canadian University. Due to intercultural stereotypes and their culture of respect, the roleplay cannot be done. According to Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, "In the face of complex global challenges, Canada will continue to champion diversity, acceptance and compassion on the world stage. We cannot build a better world unless we work together, respect our differences, protect the vulnerable, and put people at the heart of the decisions we make." The Canadian student were not able to represent another culture or country in a role play in order to prevent stereotyping or cultural bias. This showed the Mexican students another perspective on how to respect and take care of their own culture and the culture of others.

It is important to understand the concept of stereotype. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, "Stereotype is a pervasive and persistent human tendency that stems from a basic cognitive need to categorize, simplify, and process the complex world. This tendency is a precondition for social bias, prejudice, and discrimination." [3] As an university professor, being responsible for the education of future generations and professionals that will be the leaders of companies and governments, it is vital to understand the meaning of stereotypes and engaging different ways to reduce them.

"Intercultural stereotypes often lead to misunderstandings or even cultural conflicts in communication, as they interfere with the rational assessment of individuals from one national culture and the products, perspectives and practices associated with them. Although there is a considerable literature on stereotypes in general and on intercultural stereotypes, there is clearly insufficient scholarly works to provide concrete and conceptual insights into how to minimize or overcome stereotypical attitudes in practice." [4] All people have a load of information due to their culture that in many cases leads to bias or stereotyping others. "The cultural context is crucial, for stereotypes to operate in relation to societal and ideological systems." [5]

By supporting students to understand their differences makes them have a broader and more open perspective on others. The first difference they faced was that of language, for a Latin American student it is essential to know how to speak English to be able to develop professionally, so the experience was one hundred percent in this language. It is an advantage for native speakers because the language barrier is reduced.

Additionally, two authors on cultural differences, Hofstede and Hall, were reviewed. Hofstede's cultural framework focuses on six dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, short vs. long-term orientation, and restraint vs. indulgence. It emphasizes how these dimensions influence behavior, values, and beliefs within a culture.[6] On the other hand, Hall's cultural framework emphasizes context, communication styles, space and time. It emphasizes the importance of non-verbal communication and the role of context in understanding cultural differences. [7]. This is important because it is the starting point for the students, to learn the theory of the cultural differences before facing them. It is important for students to gain knowledge on how their own culture is perceived and the differences that it has compared to another culture.

At my university, Tecnológico de Monterrey, students must develop several competences throughout their bachelor's. One of the transversal competences is Diversity, the student recognizes diversity as an enriching element of its personal and professional work, based on human rights, in an interdisciplinary context. For this, it integrates knowledge of diversity and human rights, applying integration and co-creation techniques, for openness, interest, disposition, and inclusion towards diversity.

To Combine the knowledge of the cultural context with frameworks, being aware that the students must develop diversity competence and the use of the COIL methodology to reduce stereotypes is the key to this research. I will present the methodology that was used and its results.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research was carried out for five weeks with Mexican business students and Canadian business students. The activity was carried out with fifty-six students, following each of the steps of the COIL methodology. At the end, the diversity competence was evaluated with an observation rubric and a qualitative analysis of the comments that the students included in their final and quantitative reflection was carried out through a survey.

During implementation, the following innovative elements will be used that will facilitate and improve the teaching-learning process, following the COIL Methodology (Collaborative Online International Learning):

- **Icebreaker:** First approach between the students of the Tecnológico de Monterrey and the students of the foreign university. Using a technological platform of online boards, each of the students is asked to talk a little about themselves through a series of simple questions. Which allows each person to express themselves and others can get to know them and tell them what they consider interesting or the affinities they find between them.
- **Preparation Phase:** This phase has two objectives, understanding the culture of their negotiation counterpart and by selecting the best techniques of negotiation according to the situation. In teams, they wrote a report that describes the cultural dimensions or behavioral issues that are highlighted in the cross-cultural conflict. As a whole team, they decided on whatever five dimensions they feel might present a challenge, keeping in mind their own cultures (for example, power distance, individualism/collectivism, low vs high context communication, etc.). They proposed strategies that the team could employ to address each of these cultural differences. The goal is to work toward understanding the other culture and find an adequate solution to the problem. Finally they determine a negotiation strategy and completes the corresponding planning worksheet.
- **Role-play:** They carry out a negotiation through zoom, where each team represents a country. The video must be in English and reach a positive solution to the conflict.
- **Individual Reflection:** The last activity carried out is an individual reflection that allows us to know how the students felt, what they learned and what they take away from this process. This allows students to express themselves in a more fluid and transparent way as it is written and confidential.

At the end of the COIL activity, the activity is evaluated through a rubric on diversity, which is divided into five performances; outstanding, solid, basic, incipient and undelivered. I describe the rubric below:

- **Outstanding Level:** Optimally manifests an appreciation for diversity, communicating and interacting effectively with other people with an ideal openness to different knowledge and different cultures; respecting, in a comprehensive manner, human rights as an essential element of coexistence.
- **Solid Level:** Consistently expresses an appreciation for diversity, communicating and interacting appropriately with other people with an appropriate openness to different knowledge and different cultures; appropriately respecting human rights as an essential element of coexistence.
- **Basic Level:** Expresses in a restricted way an appreciation for diversity, by communicating and interacting in an elementary way with other people with a partial openness to different knowledge and different cultures; respecting, in an acceptable manner, human rights as an essential element of coexistence.
- **Incipient Level:** Poorly demonstrates an appreciation for diversity, communicating and interacting inappropriately with other people without being open to different knowledge and different cultures, or partially respecting human rights as an essential element of coexistence.

The hypothesis was measured and validated through a survey to the students in order to determine if it was accepted or not. In this survey, students were asked if their perspective of the culture of the foreign country changed. They were also asked if they had any type of bias before performing the activity and if it changed. Finally, when carrying out the activity the stereotype they had regarding the culture of the foreign student was reduced.

### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

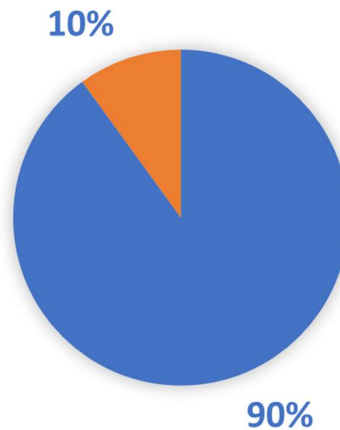
During the development of the activity, an active participation of all the students was observed. It was a great incentive to be able to observe that all the students in the sample were excited to participate with their international counterpart, despite the language barrier.

The expectation for the development of diversity competence in business students is 75% of them at a solid level. This would be a good result regarding the hypothesis. When evaluating this activity with the observation rubric, 94% of the students obtained a solid level, 6% obtained an outstanding level. Which reflects an excellent result in this aspect. Since in previous courses where this internationalization activity had not been carried out through the COIL methodology, this level had not been reached. It is important that students work with different students from different nationalities in order

to develop not only the diversity competence but also a multicultural mindset; because, as stated before, for Latin-American students, it is very complicated to travel abroad due to economic and social factors.

In the final reflection, the students expressed "having changed their perspective of a Canadian student" since they had stereotyped him as an American student, generalizing North American culture. By carrying out this activity remotely for only five weeks, they were able to realize that they are culturally different and that the foreign students were very open and perceptive to learning more about Mexicans and their culture, as well as their way of working. They also realized that the stereotypes they had of Mexicans, such as lateness or lack of professionalism, were demolished.

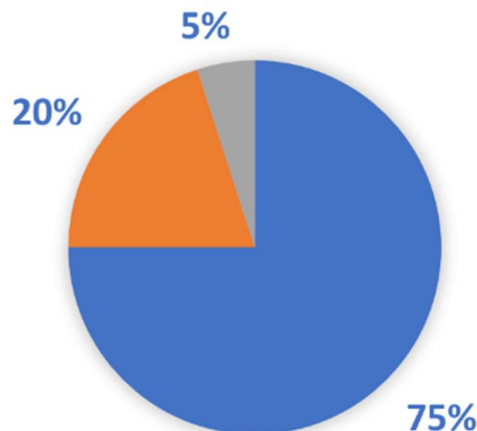
At the end of the collaboration between Mexican and Canadian students, a survey was performed in order to get more information on the results of the COIL, particularly on reducing stereotypes as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Reduction of stereotype

90% of students answered that by carrying out the activity, the stereotype they had regarding the culture of the foreign student was reduced. 10% of students stated that there was no change on the stereotype.

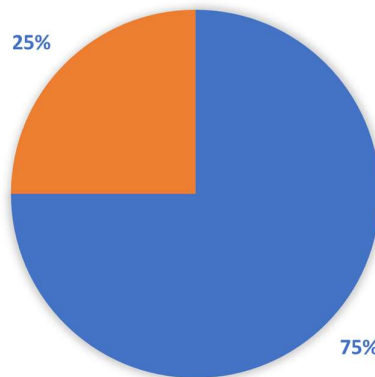
The second question was how the perspective of the culture of the foreign country changed, 75% answered that their perspective of the foreign student culture changed, 20% answered they already knew the culture, so there was no change; and 5% stated that there was no change, as shown in figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The perspective of the culture of the foreign country

The third question was if the student realized they had cultural bias before. 75% of the students stated that they realized they had a bias before doing the activity, as shown in figure 3.

Combining the survey and the reflection papers, they realized that they did not notice they had cultural stereotypes or any type of bias until they faced this type of activities and realized that they had to go deeper in cultural analysis. They had not realized the cultural differences between North American countries, nor were they aware of the stereotypes that exist about Mexican culture, despite the globalization of social networks and the media. Nowadays the students are more aware of the importance of knowing the culture of the other party in a business negotiation, understanding that there are cultural differences that needed to be considered to reduce stereotypes and biases.



**Figure 3.** Students with cultural Bias

By conducting this research, the hypothesis that the internationalization of students through the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) methodology helps reduce stereotypes and cultural biases was proven. Also, in this study it was measured the development of the diversity competence for the business students using qualitative and quantitative data.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this type of international collaboration activities allows students to have an international experience that, even if it is at a distance, provides them with great learning regarding the reduction of stereotypes and diversity awareness. Definitively, the COIL methodology helps reducing stereotypes and promoting intercultural understanding. Through both qualitative and quantitative data analysis, it was evident that students who engaged in COIL experiences demonstrated a significant development in diversity competence.

The qualitative data showed that the experiences of the Mexican and Canadian students were positive and they increased their awareness of cultural differences, increased their communication skills, for Mexican students, communication in another language. And most important, appreciation for a diverse perspective.

The quantitative analysis helped to complement the qualitative results. It demonstrated significant improvements in the students' ability to perceive their bias, but the most important, to understand and engage their cultural differences and stereotypes in order to reduce them.

This methodology is relatively new and there is not much research on its effectiveness; it is necessary for universities to integrate it into their curricula for business students, especially those who study international business. COIL empowered students with more skills, attitudes and competences that are needed in the globalized world. These types of activities help to have a perspective of global citizens and more prepared to develop professionally in a multicultural environment.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest".

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