

Classroom Collaboration Without Walls

by *Cara M. Tuzzolino and Xóchitl Soriano*

While September isn't the start of the calendar year, it does begin the academic year for most instructors, providing us with the opportunity to open more than just the doors to our respective classrooms; it also affords teachers the opportunity to try a new technique and to test drive a new lesson plan. In this article, we are pleased to describe an international online collaboration between a U.S. classroom and a Mexican classroom that provided both sets of students the opportunity to practice English without having to hop on a plane—and to counter the political rhetoric in the United States regarding Mexico.

The formal name for this collaboration is SUNY COIL—Collaborative, Online, International Learning. A COIL classroom exists when two instructors in two countries agree to create a shared curriculum with a set of collaborative activities that pairs students in one country with students in another country. The students work collaboratively using digital technology as the media of instruction, but the main purpose is to develop cultural awareness between cultures (<http://www.aplu.org/members/councils/research/cor-meetings/cor-2014/2014-coil-collaborative-online-international-learning.pdf>).

In our case, Xo's classroom contained 40 native-Spanish-speaking students who were studying in the University of Guadalajara's B.A. program to become EFL teachers; however, only 13 students decided to volunteer for the project. Cara's classroom, on the other hand, featured 13 English language learners from countries including China, Korea, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Colombia, and Pakistan who were studying in a pre-college, intensive English program, and all of these students agreed to participate. Our resulting 13 pairs of students worked really nicely together.

Our online course was scheduled for spring 2016, and we spent many months in training and preparing the curriculum. From August to September 2015 we participated in SUNY's six-week training program, which readies instructors to develop the flexibility and cultural awareness to work with instructors outside their home countries, and must be completed before a partner can be selected. Once the program has been completed, the site contains profiles of instructors in countries all around the world in a variety of fields, including nutrition, sustainability, art, archeology, and more, who are looking to partner their students with students in another country. The anecdotal evidence is that English seems to be the language of instruction, though certainly partnerships exist between, say, a U.S. classroom of Spanish language learners and a Mexican classroom of native Spanish speakers.

Next, we were accepted into a program sponsored by Santander Bank and run by the SUNY Global Center <http://coil.suny.edu/>. The program combined six weeks of online training using Blackboard with an intensive five-day workshop in Cuernavaca, Mexico, resulting in a curriculum for both classrooms. We spent fall 2015 tweaking the curriculum.

The course began in February 2016 with students as a classroom group recording welcome messages and uploading these short videos to the private Facebook group we created. Students were encouraged, but not obligated, to become Facebook friends with their partner and comment on one another's pages. The U.S. students had vacation shortly after, so they posted photos and captions of themselves during their vacation for their Mexican partners to comment on. When vacation arrived in April for the Mexican students, both sets of students reversed the posting and commenting.

Next, students created questions and interviewed their partners using Skype (the classroom meeting times overlapped one hour each week, which we used for Skype sessions). Cell phones, iPads, computers, and webcams were pressed into service while the students conducted their interviews; the instructors helped the students with error corrections and revisions. Next, the students chose from different social media platforms to illustrate their interviews. These included <https://storybird.com/>, <https://www.pixton.com/>, and <https://www.glogster.com>. Students wove the content of their interviews into the illustrations they chose from these platforms, and then shared the results with their partners. We used Blackboard for the students to post their reflections about the assignments.

Figure 1. Donald Trump's Opinion about Mexicans

After several weeks of getting to know each other, including other collaborative activities, we felt the students were ready for a more in-depth assignment. The final collaborative activity featured a cartoon about Donald Trump and his comments regarding Mexicans (Figure 1). The activity for the cartoon invited the students to analyze the message behind it. We prompted the students with some questions, then had them come up with their own questions. Students used Skype to interview their partners and typed up the interviews for a final assignment.

One of the requirements for COIL participation is that both teachers had to visit their partner classroom, and we greatly enjoyed this opportunity. In 2016 Cara traveled to Guadalajara in March and Xo went to NCC in April. Both visits were very successful because we had a chance to get to know the students in person. We were able to gain a better understanding of each other's culture and academic settings.

While SUNY COIL focuses on higher education, the principles behind a collaborative, online, international learning environment are relevant at all levels of instruction. Our students needed to communicate and negotiate in English. Also, they needed to ramp up their technology skills—and they got to do all this without leaving their respective classrooms. Not only are these skills that transfer easily for college-level students, but also are helpful for ELLs in K–12 who are navigating new classrooms, new students, and new instructors while strengthening their English language skills.

Comments from NCC and UdG Students

- Talking to someone on the Internet and seeing their face at the same time was so fascinating.
- I loved it too because now I know that we share many likes and both you and I could talk for hours about interesting things about each of us.
- I think it was a very useful experience for me because I could practice listening, speaking and writing, and at the same time I could learn about a different culture.
- COIL has been such a positive experience; since we started using technology to communicate with our friends in New York. Interaction with other scholars helps students to improve their development using a new way of learning; therefore, COIL should be used in all ELT classrooms.
- COIL was an interesting opportunity to interact with people from other countries. I felt confident at all times with the students from New York, and was nice helping each other practice the language. I even found we had more things in common than just the language! I definitely would like to participate again.

Assessment

At the conclusion of the eight weeks, we assessed the students' cultural awareness and comfort level with working with students outside their native countries. Despite differences in languages, time zones, learning styles, and classrooms, the students realized they had quite a lot in common. For half of our shared 26 students, English was not their L1, but they managed to communicate with each other without too much interference.

By the end of the semester, the students had developed friendships that no wall can ever block.

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