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# Internationalization: a Key Factor for a Comprehensive 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education

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## Abstract

Our world keeps spinning and bringing about change at all levels, change that also affects education. There was a time when connectedness among neighboring countries was highly valued so several strategies to do so were set up. However, these days we are watching how too many people are forced to leave their home and seek refuge somewhere else, how European countries do not feel comfortable within the Union and vote themselves out, etc. Students live in this world, they are witnessing those crises and educators have the responsibility to show them that a better world is possible, and, above all, that they are an integral part of the solution. After presenting a review of experts' opinions on the topic, using internationalization as a tool to achieve that goal is proposed. By taking advantage of the opportunities that internationalization in education offers, a generation who will work towards a world where the UN SDGs are a reality, not a just an ideal, can be raised.

**Keywords:** education, challenges, COIL, internationalization

## 1. Introduction

This paper does not set out to provide a definition of internationalization. Such a challenging task has been thoroughly tackled by Jane Knight in 1997 and in 2003; Hans de Wit, Fiona Hunter, Laura Howard and Eva Egron-Polak in 2015; and Uwe Brandenburg, Hans de Wit, Elspeth Jones and Betty Leask in 2019, to mention just a few of the experts working on the topic. The goal of this work is to present internationalization as a powerful tool that educators can use to achieve a well-rounded, motivating and comprehensive learning process for their students in a globalized, rapidly changing world. First, to fully understand the reasons why internationalization is regarded as so important in education, the definition of several terms considered relevant when discussing internationalization will be presented. Those concepts are identity, culture, and intercultural. Then, the chosen definition of internationalization will be introduced to get into the benefits of incorporating internationalization into curricula. Finally, by means of a practical example, one of the most accessible strategies to make classes international without asking students to leave their desks will be shown.

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## 2. Basic concepts: identity, culture and intercultural

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture – Volume 1 (RFCDC) states that “*identity*” denotes a person’s sense of who they are and the self-descriptions to which they attribute significance and value. Most people use a range of different identities to describe themselves, including both personal and social identities’ (<https://rm.coe.int/the-conceptual-foundations-of-the-framework-reference-framework-of-com/16809940c1>). In the same volume, the notion of “culture” is analyzed. According to the RFCDC, any given culture may be construed as having three main aspects: the material resources that are used by members of the group (e.g. tools, foods, clothing), the socially shared resources of the group (e.g. the language, religion, rules of social conduct), and the subjective resources that are used by individual group members (e.g. the values, attitudes, beliefs and practices which group members commonly use as a frame of reference for making sense of and relating to the world). The culture of the group is a composite formed from all three aspects – it consists of a network of material, social and subjective resources. The total set of resources is distributed across the entire group, but each individual member of the group appropriates and uses only a subset of the total set of cultural resources potentially available to them. (<https://rm.coe.int/the-conceptual-foundations-of-the-framework-reference-framework-of-com/16809940c1>) Bearing that in mind, the RFCDC builds their understanding of the term ‘intercultural’ on the assumption that all groups and their cultures are dynamic and change over time as a result of political, economic and historical events and developments, and as a result of interactions with and influences from the cultures of other groups. They also change over time because of their members’ internal contestation of the meanings, norms, values and practices of the group. (<https://rm.coe.int/the-conceptual-foundations-of-the-framework-reference-framework-of-com/16809940c1>).

The RFCDC believes that if we all participate in multiple cultures, but we each participate in a unique constellation of cultures, then every interpersonal situation is potentially an intercultural situation. [...] intercultural situations arise when an individual perceives another person (or group of people) as being culturally different from themselves. (<https://rm.coe.int/the-conceptual-foundations-of-the-framework-reference-framework-of-com/16809940c1>) This is where internationalization, understood as “*the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education*” (Knight 2003 2), comes into play. Despite all the challenges the world is facing these days, internationalization is the bridge that can bring us back together.

### 3. From Erasmus Programme to Erasmus+

Thirty-six years ago, the European Union launched the Erasmus Programme, now called Erasmus+, “to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe” ([https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/about-erasmus/what-is-erasmus?pk\\_source=website&pk\\_medium=link&pk\\_campaign=hp&pk\\_content=hp-hero](https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/about-erasmus/what-is-erasmus?pk_source=website&pk_medium=link&pk_campaign=hp&pk_content=hp-hero)) and to bring all citizens in Europe closer together. With an estimated budget of €26.2 billion for its 2021-2027 program, Erasmus+ regards students and staff mobility as its “essence and the backbone” of the program, since through this mobility “participants gain self-confidence and soft skills, discover different cultures and build networks of interpersonal and professional relationships with people from other countries” (<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/factsheets-statistics-evaluations/programme-and-country-factsheets/country-factsheets-2021/erasmus-in-spain-in-2021>).

Physical mobility is, without a doubt, the best way to get to know other cultures and to build bridges between what, on paper, may seem to be quite different countries. Nevertheless, as it will be presented later, there is another internationalization opportunity students can tremendously benefit from, which does not require any physical mobility, being, therefore, more accessible.

### 4. Internationalization and challenges

Jane Knight and Hans de Wit (2018) point out that “internationalization not only touches on relations between nations, but even more so on the relations between cultures and between realities at the global and local levels” (3). However, in some academic environments, internationalization is sometimes read as a sign of status. Altbach and Hazelkorn (2017) explain that “Prestige and reputation have become dominant drivers rather than pursuance of quality and student achievement, intensifying social stratification and reputational differentiation” (10). What is more, as Betty Leask and Ariane de Gayardon (2021) clearly state, internationalization has been turned into a business supported by the most powerful national and supranational governments (predominantly, but not only, in the Global North) seeking the best outcome for their economies, with little attention to the bigger picture, the possibilities of advancing the global common good through the internationalization of higher education for society.(324) This approach to internationalization benefits neither students, nor staff in their joint learning process. Internationalization should be used as a tool to connect the world, to achieve, as Brandenburg, de Wit, Jones and Leask (2019) propose, the UN SDGs. Internationalization, as de Wit and Altbach (2021)

contend, helps us by “*enhancing the quality of education, research, and service to society*” (31). Internationalization is not a piece of merchandise distributed within V.I.P. institutions and only accessible for a selected few. On the contrary, it is a resource that, in its many forms, can provide students with priceless opportunities to widen their knowledge of the world without leaving their classroom. The world is facing, and has faced, global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, refugee crises, the Brexit, the war in Ukraine, etc. Students are witnessing those crises and educators have the responsibility to show them that a better world is possible. Students are a key factor of the solution, so educators should not lose sight of the fact that Classroom pedagogies that foster global, international, and intercultural (GII) learning across academic disciplines have the potential to reach all matriculated students, preparing them for diversity in their immediate communities, the international reach of their professions, and their responsibilities as citizens in the world. (Krebs 36)

One of these internationalizing strategies does not require any physical mobility. Nevertheless, it still promotes mobilities and may encourage some students to opt for an Erasmus+ experience in another country. Being that as it may, a fully international course without even once asking students to travel abroad can be designed. To achieve that, educators should have digital devices at their disposal.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the digital gap that exists in the world. Therefore, on September 30, 2020 the European Union adopted the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) (DEAP) that aims at a “*high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe*” (<https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>), with the final goal of achieving a European Education Area (EEA<sup>2</sup>) by 2025. The EEA was conceived at the 2017 Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, as a space in which everyone, regardless of where they live, can exercise their right to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning as stated in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR<sup>3</sup>). However, one of many lessons taught by the pandemic was the fact that in the 21st century there are children in countries and cities (presumed to be fully developed) who do not have access to a computer. It exposed that the first principle, “Education, training and life-long learning” of the first chapter “Equal opportunities and access to the labor market” of the EPSR was not being fulfilled. The reality in our own classrooms was that not all

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<sup>2</sup> You can refer to the following link for more details on the EEA: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/the-eea-explained?>

<sup>3</sup> For more information visit: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en)

students were able to connect online because their families could not afford a second laptop, not even one in some cases. Despite that, higher education institutions and schools managed to keep up their pupils' learning process by lending them devices to help them follow online lessons. Consequently, the DEAP was set in motion. Although it is not the perfect solution, it does contribute to providing students with a truly inclusive and high-quality education.

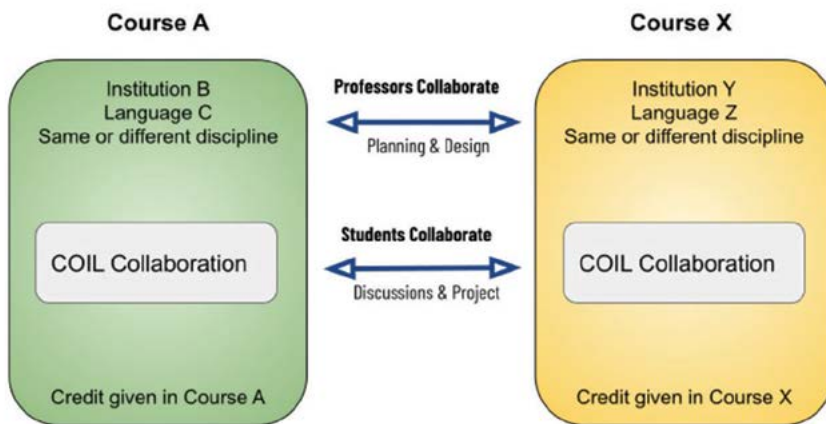
## 5. Internationalization for a comprehensive 21<sup>st</sup> century education

Boosting “Internationalization at home” (IaH) and the “Internationalization of the curriculum” (IoC), the world can be brought to students' doorsteps. Beelen and Jones (2015) define IaH as “*the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments*” (76). Leask (2015) considers that IoC refers to “*the process of incorporating international, intercultural and global dimensions into the content of the curriculum, as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a program of study*” (9). The 21st century has brought about devices and strategies that can help educators make their sessions truly international and intercultural. Therefore, a strategy that does not require a physical mobility and can internationalize lessons and open a window to the world for students will be presented.

### 5.1. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

This learning and teaching strategy was pioneered by the State University of New York, SUNY, in the early 2000s to connect “*students and professors in different countries for collaborative projects and discussions as part of their coursework*” in order to enhance “*intercultural student team focused interaction through proven approaches to meaningful online and virtual engagement, while providing universities with a cost-effective way to ensure that their students are globally engaged*” (<https://coil.suny.edu/>).

The starting point to carry out this kind of project is one single educator willing to go off the beaten path. Then, that person needs to find a partner somewhere else in the world. Content-wise, it does not have to be an exact parallel, just somebody willing to leave their comfort zone to provide their students with an international, and intercultural, learning experience. The diagram below shows the COIL model course provided by the SUNY COIL Center:



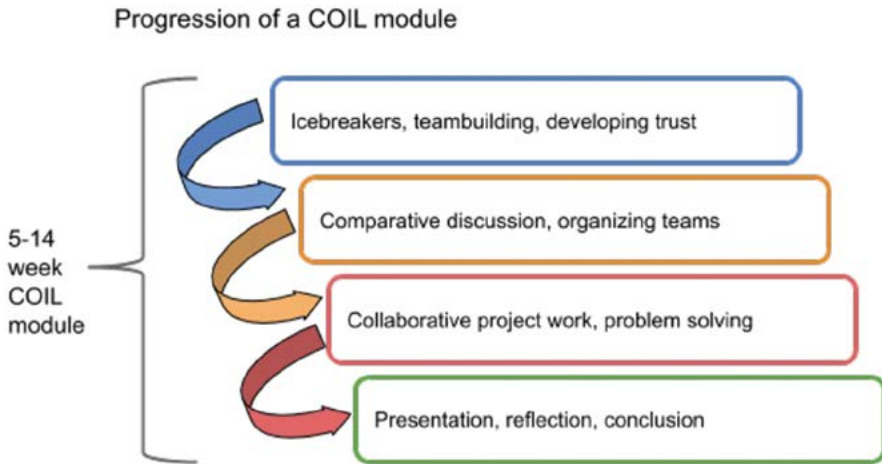
**Image 1.** COIL Model Course (<https://coil.suny.edu/>)

As the COIL model above exemplifies, this internationalization strategy does not require to collaborate with a colleague who teaches the same subject. What really matters is to find a few learning outcomes (1-3) that can be tackled from several perspectives. The following paragraphs show a practical case, a professional experience implementing a COIL in an English language class, B1 level, for year 1 pre-service primary teachers at the Catholic University of Valencia (UCV), Spain.

The other COIL partner was a teacher of Contemporary English Language to English majors with a C1/ C2 level of English at the University of Zadar (UNIZD), Croatia. Both teachers had several meetings via MS Teams to set up their COIL and, during the design stage, the main challenges encountered were the noticeable difference among the participating students' English competency, and the fact that their degrees didn't match: year 1 pre-service primary teachers collaborating with year 3 English majors.

The common ground found to engage the participating students in the collaborative experience was the topic Education Systems around the World; regardless of their chosen degree at university, all of them had gone through mandatory schooling in their home countries. Consequently, their collaborative task was to design a digital poster in which, apart from Croatia and Spain, their home countries, they would present the education systems of two English-speaking countries. This task required them to combine their skills to complete it: higher level of English by the Croatian students for a comprehensive understanding of the materials about education in their chosen English-speaking country with a better understanding of technological tools by the Spanish ones to create their poster. The initial challenges that could have put the project at risk became strong collaboration points because the participating students themselves realized they were complementary.

According to SUNY experts, there are four recommended stages for the successful development of a COIL module:



**Image 2.** Progression of a COIL module (<https://online.suny.edu/introtocoil/suny-coil-what-is>)

To help participating students get to know each other before the beginning of their collaboration, two weeks before the first synchronous meeting, the two teachers set up a digital wall using one of the free resources available online. As an example, the leading teachers posted basic information about themselves on that wall, i.e. name, hobbies, pets, to which each other responded. For example, if one liked Bruce Springsteen's music and so did the other COIL partner, it was indicated as such in each other's posts. The participating students reacted very quickly, and the wall had almost no space left for more posts in quite a short period. Using the information about themselves posted on the wall, the teachers organized the teams, making sure that all teams were balanced regarding the number of students from each country.

The first synchronous session was used to present the project students had to complete, to explain how it would be assessed and its weight in their course load, and to place them in separate break-out rooms according to their corresponding teams. During that first synchronous session, the students in each group exchanged contact information to maximize their asynchronous working time, and, in some cases, even to extend the synchronous one. The second synchronous session was used to check on their progress, to answer questions, and clarify doubts. Both teachers were in touch with their own students via email to help them solve, for example, problems with getting a reply from their partners. The leading teachers also supervised their students' asynchronous collaboration by setting deadlines to complete the sections of their final poster.

For organizational reasons, the presentation of the posters was carried out separately at each university. After the presentations, each group commented on their reflections about the experience. Overall, their conclusions were positive; apart from the content related to education, the participating students had also acquired intercultural competences and life skills. They acknowledged that, at the very beginning, they had tried to make their partners from the other country work not only as if they were in the same country, but as if they had the same schedule. Nevertheless, throughout their discussions, they started to walk in each other's shoes and most of the previous problems vanished. Regardless of the grades they earned on this task, almost all of the participating students truly appreciated the experience and were eager to do it again. Besides, thanks to this collaboration, some of them started thinking about an Erasmus+ mobility. An international experience at home had transformed them and changed their view of the world.

## 6. Conclusion

We are aware that “*all groups and their cultures are dynamic and change over time as a result of (...) interactions with and influences from the cultures of other groups*” (<https://rm.coe.int/the-conceptual-foundations-of-the-framework-reference-framework-of-com/16809940c1>). The international interaction previously described happened among students from two countries after the confinement. Not only did they not make an international mobility, but some of them could also not even leave their homes because of health regulations. Still, that 5-week IaH activity changed their expectations about what an international experience is and enriched their learning process at a time when the idea of traveling abroad sounded extreme.

Educators strive to provide students with the best possible learning process, focusing on their individual needs without taking for granted what they can, or cannot, achieve. Educators should believe in their students' abilities and help them develop their key lifelong learning competences, and a carefully planned COIL can boost all eight of them. Internationalization should be a means to make students become the best possible version of themselves. When students cannot travel, any available digital resource can be used to connect with the rest of the world. When students cannot afford to live a 4-month Erasmus+ mobility abroad, they should be provided with other international experiences in their own classroom. Every challenge is an opportunity to achieve something even better.

“To seek something is to believe in its possibility.”  
The Clone Wars (Star Wars)

## 7. Literature

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