

Using Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): A pedagogical approach to teach conflict management across cultures

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Introduction

There is often a gap between conflict management theory and its real-world application for students in higher-education conflict programs. Students can read about conflict styles, discuss frameworks, and even examine case studies from around the world as they relate to conflict and negotiation, but what has become increasingly difficult in traditional classroom spaces is actually experiencing intercultural collaboration and conflict in real time with real stakes, alongside people whose cultural backgrounds are genuinely different from their own. This gap between knowing conflict terminology and best practices and experiencing conflict firsthand is exactly where Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) becomes a powerful tool for instructors.

COIL is a model of international collaboration that connects students from courses at different institutions across countries to work together on a shared academic project for four to eight weeks (Monash University & Penn State University, n.d.). Unlike a one-time guest lecture or study-away trip, COIL is embedded directly into existing courses at both institutions. Hackett et al. (2023) found that COIL participants showed increased intercultural competence and cultural intelligence, and O'Dowd (2023) noted that participation builds transferable skills employers rank as critical, including collaborative problem-solving, adaptability, and effective communication across differences.

COIL, as a program, appeals to most institutions for its affordability and accessibility. In the current climate of higher education, not all students can access international experiences equally. Financial barriers, family obligations, work schedules, accessibility, safety, and many other constraints limit opportunities. Instead of ignoring these concerns, COIL provides the opportunity to bring international learning experiences directly into the classroom at no additional cost, rather than asking students to seek them out on their own. For instructors, it also provides an opportunity to refresh and reimagine course design. While COIL was not created for any single discipline, it is a particularly valuable tool for conflict programs. This chapter offers a practical, five-step guide for conflict instructors to implement COIL, grounded in best practices and the authors' direct experience.

Step One: Know What You Want Students to Learn and Do

Defining Your Learning Goals

Before reaching out to a partner or designing a project, instructors need to identify what competencies students are expected to develop. Vague goals lead to vague learning and weak assessment, making it significantly more difficult to secure buy-in from students and administrators. The clearer the , the easier it will be to design a project that builds those skills.

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For conflict instructors, intercultural conflict competence is the most natural learning goal, though its definition will vary by project. Key factors include course level, disciplinary context, and existing learning outcomes. A few learning goal examples include:

- The ability to recognize when cultural differences contribute to tension in real-time interactions with international partners.
- How to respond without immediate escalation
- How to adapt communication strategies in the moment
- How to reflect on personal assumptions based on experience.

When determining learning goals, instructors should focus on *behavioral* skills rather than *knowledge* claims. Because students bring varying backgrounds and levels of expertise, a shared theoretical foundation cannot be assumed. As Hackett et al. (2023) note, intercultural competence encompasses attributes such as respect, openness, and curiosity, as well as practical communication skills that can only be developed through genuine cross-cultural engagement.

A recommended starting point is to narrow the focus to one or two conflict concepts to anchor the student experience. The following are conflict-specific outcomes developed and implemented by the authors in their COIL course projects, with sample assignment instructions available in the appendices.

- How communication styles in conflict vary across cultural contexts
- How cultural values shape conflict behavior, including attitudes toward tradition, hierarchy, consensus, and confrontation
- Relational versus task-oriented communication and how cultural background shapes collaborative work
- Language and communication barriers, including proficiency gaps, translation challenges, and differing expectations
- How schools, workplaces, and legal systems across countries approach conflict and dispute resolution.

The authors come from backgrounds in communication, conflict management, and business, which naturally shape the focus areas described above. Instructors from other fields, including social work, international relations, peace studies, public health, or education, may find their frameworks point toward different focus areas. The COIL model is intentionally flexible, and the examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Learning goals should be treated as a starting point that evolves as the project progresses.

Preparing Students to Enter the Experience

Once core concepts are identified, instructors should communicate expectations to students early and embed them directly in the syllabus and project instructions. Students benefit from knowing up front that conflict is expected, discomfort and confusion are part of the design, and the goal is not a perfect project but learning through the challenges. It is also worth introducing the difference between productive and unproductive conflict before the partnership begins. Productive conflict includes frustration, confusion, and communication breakdowns that get worked through. Unproductive conflict includes disengagement, personal disrespect,

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inflexibility, and one-sided participation. Students who enter the experience with an understanding of this distinction are better equipped to stay engaged when challenges arise.

Step Two: Finding a Partner and Aligning Goals

Finding a Partner

Finding a partner is often the most intimidating part of COIL. Knowing where to begin, identifying someone whose teaching style and goals align, and building a working relationship across institutional and cultural lines can feel like significant barriers. Fortunately, COIL is well-established, and there are many reliable strategies for finding strong partners.

One often-overlooked starting point is the instructor's own institution. Many colleges and universities have existing relationships with sister schools, exchange programs, or formal partnership agreements that faculty rarely think to leverage for online collaboration. The authors of this chapter, for example, connected through the longstanding sister-city and university relationship between Southern Oregon University and the University of Guanajuato. A conversation with the international programs office can reveal whether similar relationships already exist, but pre-existing relationships are not required. Several networks exist to facilitate partner matching.

- [SUNY COIL Center](#) pioneered the model and maintains a global network of partner institutions.
- [COIL Connect](#) provides an institutional directory and partner-matching platform used by hundreds of higher education institutions worldwide.
- For those specifically interested in partnerships across North America and Latin America, [PIC-Americas](#) is valuable, as it hosts “speed dating” sessions and COIL design workshops.
- The [AAC&U VE/COIL Initiative](#) supports faculty and institutions in building and scaling virtual exchange programs.
- The [Monash University and Penn State COIL Journey Resource Map](#) offers practical guidance for each stage of the process.

What to Look for in a Partner

The natural assumption is to connect with someone who teaches a conflict-related course, but that is not always the most effective pairing. Some of the best COIL partnerships are interdisciplinary. Partnerships can be built in nearly every area of study, including film, music, international business, communication, peace studies, conflict, hospitality, criminal justice, and more. Taking time to get to know a potential partner matters more than course content alignment, and shifting from knowledge-based to skill-based outcomes makes these interdisciplinary connections easier to identify than they might first appear.

A strong COIL partnership requires that instructors present a united front to students. Expectations around outcomes, participation, intervention, and what success looks like need to be agreed upon early, as one-sided partnerships will not produce positive outcomes. Flexibility is

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essential from both sides. Differences in experience, institutional culture, and pedagogical approach are inevitable; adaptability, compromise, and regular communication are the most important qualities to look for.

Laying the Groundwork

Partner alignment is critical. Five key areas require agreement before the partnership begins.

1. **Project timeline:** Most COIL projects last four to eight weeks, but determining the optimal timing within each institution's academic calendar can be challenging. Calendars vary across countries and institutions, and breaks, holidays, and exam periods differ significantly. Starting too early in a term, before students have built relationships with one another and with their instructor, can limit engagement. Waiting too long creates burnout concerns, particularly in shorter terms. Instructors should map out their schedules and share them with their partner early to establish appropriate deadlines together.
2. **Grading practices:** Grading philosophies vary widely, so taking time to discuss expectations will help mitigate problems later. Considerations include point systems versus pass/no pass, whether both instructors provide feedback or alternate, who grades which students, turnaround time, and whether grading will be rubric-based or holistic.
3. **Student participation expectations:** Highly grade-motivated students can miss the broader objectives of COIL, defaulting to task division rather than investing in the relational and intercultural aspects of the experience. Instructors should balance grading between individual and team work, consider course modality and relevant institutional policies, and agree on a process for addressing participation concerns. The authors recommend that students contact both instructors in a single message when issues arise, with the student's primary instructor taking the lead on follow-up.
4. **Technology platforms:** Access should be the first consideration when selecting tools. Platforms that are free and widely used in one country may be restricted or unfamiliar in another. The authors have found that [WhatsApp](#) or [Slack](#) for team communication and [Padlet](#) for submissions work well, though options will vary by institution and country. Students should not be expected to pay for tools solely to participate in COIL. Instructors should also decide early how much visibility they want in student team communication and avoid overwhelming students with too many new platforms at once.
5. **Language:** In intercultural settings, what is a first language for some students may be a second or third language for others. Defaulting to a single dominant language without acknowledging this can create early barriers. Practical strategies include providing instructions in both languages, ensuring captions are available for large meetings, and reminding students to slow down and pause for clarification. In the authors' partnership with the University of Guanajuato, English-speaking students are asked to complete part of their presentation in Spanish, a small challenge that builds empathy and interdependence.

Step Three: Developing a Conflict COIL Project

COIL projects are flexible by design, but they still need to be well-structured and realistic, particularly when conflict is the focus.

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Project Design and Timeline

The key when developing a COIL project is genuine interdependence. Simply dividing tasks and combining results at the end is parallel work, not COIL. While specific content will vary by course, discipline, and partner context, most COIL projects follow five phases, each lasting one to two weeks depending on complexity and objectives.

Phase 1: Breaking the Ice and Introductions

Before the main project begins, students need time to meet one another. This phase is intentionally low-stakes, incorporating icebreakers, brief personal and institutional introductions, and clarifying questions about the project.

Phase 2: Project Proposals

Once relationships have begun to form, students collaboratively develop a project direction, agreeing on what they will explore, how work will be divided, and how teams will communicate.

Phase 3: Project Development

Students actively research, create, and collaborate while instructors monitor progress through check-ins and respond to team questions.

Phase 4: Presentation

Teams share their work synchronously or asynchronously depending on course modality. Presentations can take many forms, but the most important requirement is that students synthesize their findings rather than report their contributions side by side.

Phase 5: Individual Reflection and Assessment

Each student reflects on the COIL experience and their contributions, and instructors can gather evidence of learning outcomes and project takeaways.

Table 1*Suggested Framework for Structuring a COIL Partnership*

Phase	Timing	Learning Purpose
Phase 1 Introductions & Icebreakers	Weeks 1-2	Building a relational foundation
Phase 2 Project Proposals & Planning	Weeks 2-3	Teams negotiate how they want to work together and what they want to do
Phase 3 Project Development	Weeks 3-6	Teams complete their research and develop their project
Phase 4 Presentation	Weeks 6-7	Teams share their learnings and findings
Phase 5 Individual Reflection & Assessment	Weeks 7-8	Students reflect on the project, their contributions, and overall learning

Note. The five phases above provide a suggested framework for structuring a COIL partnership.

Project Design Tips and Examples

What do students actually do? The following are starting points the authors have used or recommend, adaptable to any conflict-focused COIL course.

- **Interpersonal conflict:** Teams survey community members or peers about a common conflict scenario and compare findings to explore how cultural values shape responses.
- **Organizational conflict:** Teams investigate how workplace conflicts related to decision-making, hierarchy, or feedback are handled in their respective countries, and then propose a cross-cultural conflict management strategy.
- **International relations:** Teams choose a shared global conflict or peace-building issue and explore how history, culture, and media shape the way it is understood differently across countries.
- **Restorative and community justice:** Teams explore how restorative practices are implemented in their countries and collaboratively develop a new model drawing from both traditions.
- **Negotiation:** Teams participate in a real or simulated negotiation within their own cultural frameworks and reflect on where their approaches diverged and why.
- **Environmental and sustainability conflicts:** Teams identify a shared environmental dispute, document key stakeholders and outcomes in each country, and produce a comparative infographic that highlights how cultural values and political systems shape different approaches.

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- **Intercultural conflict and communication:** Teams audit communication norms in local workplaces, schools, or community groups and produce a cross-cultural communication guide for conflict.
- **Youth and school-based conflict:** Teams connect with local schools to explore existing conflict programming, then collaboratively design a new training program that draws on both countries' educational backgrounds.
- **Gender and conflict:** Teams examine how gender shapes conflict behavior through media analysis and produce a documentary-style video or podcast presenting their findings.
- **Public health and community conflict:** Teams select a shared global health issue, document how conflict arose and what resolution was attempted in each country, and develop a culturally responsive engagement strategy.

Step Four: Facilitating a COIL Project

Before launching, it is worth reviewing the project from the student's perspective. Are instructions clear? Are due dates realistic? Do students know how to submit work, who to contact, and what good engagement looks like? Students are already navigating new collaboration across time zones, language barriers, and cultural norms, so detailed and well-organized instructions are essential. Sample instruction documents are in the appendices; once a template is built, future adaptations are straightforward. The following are practical facilitation strategies the authors have found helpful:

- A kickoff meeting is strongly recommended regardless of course modality. Even in asynchronous courses, an optional recorded session to introduce the project and allow students to meet builds early connection and excitement.
- For synchronous courses, a recurring weekly meeting time is ideal, particularly if both courses share scheduling overlap.
- Brief weekly check-ins, through a progress report, survey, or class discussion, allow participation concerns to be addressed quickly.
- Normalize struggle throughout the project and resist the urge to intervene every time students express frustration. Asking questions and offering strategies is usually more effective than making changes.
- When intervention is necessary, address it with the partner instructor first before approaching students directly.
- Acknowledge effort and progress along the way, not just what is not working.
- Build in a moment of closure beyond final submissions. A message or video from both instructors, or a brief closing meeting, helps the experience feel complete.
- Most importantly, students will likely need to reset expectations at some point. Revising timelines, adjusting due dates, or removing requirements are reasonable realities, not failures.

Step Five: Assessment

COIL assessment should not be limited to the final deliverable or reflection. As Hackett et al. (2023) recommend, COIL courses should be assessed through multiple methods at multiple points in the process.

Assessment can be structured around each phase. (a) An early engagement checkpoint holds students accountable for making genuine contact and helps identify teams that may need support. (b) A mid-point progress check reveals emerging patterns and allows for course correction. (c) The final deliverable should be assessed with awareness that work produced across time zones, languages, and cultural differences faces real constraints. (d) An individual reflection asks students to make meaning of the experience and demonstrate skills gained beyond the classroom. As O'Dowd (2023) notes, reflection is the mechanism by which transferable skills become conscious rather than merely incidentally practiced.

Designing a Personal Reflection

COIL reflections should go beyond summary. Prompts should direct students to apply course and conflict concepts to their own behavior rather than focusing on teammates. The following are examples, though prompts will vary based on established learning outcomes.

- Describe a specific moment of tension or misunderstanding in the partnership. What do you think was happening culturally and communicatively in that moment? What did you do, and was it effective?
- What assumptions did you bring to this COIL project, and where do you think those assumptions came from? Were they proven or challenged, and if so, how?
- How did differences in language and communication shape your collaboration, and what did you learn or adapt in your approach?
- Over the course of the partnership, did you tend to prioritize task efficiency or relational communication? What does that reveal about your communication style?

Instructor Assessment

While instructors are skilled at evaluating students, self-assessment is easy to overlook. Building in time for a post-COIL debrief with the partner instructor is important. What worked well? What would be done differently next time? Are there findings, student work, or insights worth developing into a publication, presentation, or shared resource? The authors have used this time to develop presentations, publications, ideas for future projects, and design revisions, and they encourage all participants to do the same.

Conclusion

Conflict cannot be fully learned from a textbook. Students can memorize frameworks, review case studies, and participate in simulations. Still, none of that prepares them for what it actually feels like to navigate a real disagreement with someone whose cultural background and communication norms differ from their own.

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Every COIL partnership will look different depending on the instructor, institution, partner, and students. The model works across disciplines, course levels, and institutional contexts because it is built around a simple but powerful idea: give students a real project, a real partner, and a real reason to work through differences together.

Perhaps most importantly, COIL is accessible. It does not require a travel budget, a study abroad office, or a formal exchange program. It requires a willing partner, a thoughtful design, and an instructor who trusts the process. For students who cannot travel, take a semester abroad, or would otherwise never have the opportunity to collaborate internationally, COIL brings the world into the classroom. In a field built around understanding human difference and conflict, giving every student access to that kind of experience is not just good pedagogy; it is the point.

Programming Examples:

- COIL Assignment Instruction Sample 1
- COIL Assignment Instruction Sample 2

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